CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Under the bright fluorescent lights of the Harbin No. X Department Store, a large, state-owned retailer in the northern Chinese city of Harbin, a middle-aged woman sorted through the winter coat options spread about the sales counter. She pressed my fellow salesclerk, Big Sister Zhao, to lower the price. "Can't you make it a little cheaper?"

Big Sister Zhao responded with authority. "We're a state-run operation, we don't haggle over prices here, it's not like with those privately run places," she huffed, referring to the markets populated by *getihu*, small, independent hawkers and merchants. "Buy a down coat from those private merchants and the feathers will come out . . . this store, we have an excellent reputation. There are no fake goods here."

Just a few days earlier Zhao had complained to me about such people, customers who seemed determined to bring the free-for-all of the *getihu* marketplace into the department store. "Such people are of low quality [*suzhi bu gao*]," Zhao explained; "they should know they can't bargain here."

Several months later, a salesclerk from the state-owned store visited me at my new position as a salesclerk at the Sunshine Department Store, a glitzy, high-end department store filled with luxury goods. He complimented my glamorous new surroundings, adding: "The quality of the customers here at Sunshine is much higher than at Harbin No. X. You get all kinds of people at Harbin No. X. I once even had a customer who asked to see a razor, gave himself a shave, and left! I was so pissed off. . . ."

Management at Sunshine would have agreed with this assessment of No. X's customers and extended the judgment to its workers as well.

Upon our first meeting, a store manager explained that I would find the exclusive Sunshine a much better environment than Harbin No. X and its salesclerks far more disciplined. Another manager, in charge of hiring, explained that he would never hire a young woman who had spent any time working in the *geti* clothing bazaars to which Big Sister Zhao had referred, above. "Their whole manner is inappropriate for an expensive department store . . . and there's always the danger that they'll bring bad habits with them, like swearing and using uncivilized language."

Meanwhile, below the very streets where Sunshine's shining edifice sat, young women in gaudy attire hawked their wares from the clothing stalls of The Underground, a labyrinthine, subterranean *geti* market. One young woman in red-and-gold stiletto high heels, Xiao Li, thrust out her hip as she scolded a shopper. "We sell these trousers for 100 yuan retail here . . . they cost almost 400 yuan at Sunshine, they're exactly the same. Go take a look!" The customer seemed unconvinced.

"These are top quality, expensive trousers," Xiao Li added, implying that the customer couldn't tell.

In China, there is a market saying *huo bi san jia*, "compare the goods of three places before making a purchase." In the autumn of 2001, I took this advice to heart and embarked on a three-way comparison of market settings in the Chinese city of Harbin. My goal was to understand how the economic and social transformations of the past twenty or so years are reshaping social relations in urban China.

I began my study as a uniformed salesclerk at an aging state-owned department store, one of Harbin's premier retail establishments prior to the introduction of market reforms and still a major shopping destination for working-class shoppers. I then moved to a high-end private department store that offered luxury goods and solicitous service to the city's newly rich. Finally, I descended into a crowded, low-end clothing bazaar where independent merchants sold inexpensive goods to people from a range of social backgrounds. Each of these sites represented a different social position within Harbin society, and, as I will show, the social distinctions made in these settings are part of a larger story about inequality and social change in urban China today.

China is a society in the throes of rapid transformation. The country has experienced unprecedented rates of economic growth over the past

two-and-a-half decades, traveling rapidly from poverty to relative affluence. Alongside economic changes have come political and social ones: China has shifted from a state socialist system to one that is market-oriented and, in many ways, fundamentally capitalist. These changes to the economic, social, and ideological organization of the country have been accompanied by new sets of social relations and a reconfigured social hierarchy. The rise of new elites has paralleled the fall of the urban proletariat, and China's cities have witnessed the emergence of new social groupings, including a small but comfortable salaried middle class, small-scale private entrepreneurs, and an influx of migrants and laborers from rural areas.

The core argument of this book is that relations among these disparate groups are understood and enacted through a framework of cultural distinctions that interpret—and legitimate—inequality as difference. I argue that a new "structure of entitlement" is being cultivated in China through the marking of such social distinctions. The term "structure of entitlement" refers to the often-unconscious cultural and social sensibilities that make certain groups of people feel entitled to greater social goods. This sense of entitlement extends from seemingly mundane aspects of daily social interactions all the way to more obviously consequential and overt claims to formal power and material resources. At the level of everyday life, this structure of entitlement finds expression in the realms of work, leisure, and daily social interaction. It is a practical expression of one's place in society and a fundamental part of the cultural scaffolding that supports larger systems of inequality.

This study explores China's emerging structure of entitlement and the social distinctions upon which it is built by focusing on one setting where people from different social groupings encounter one another: the sales counter. It is across the sales counter, and in service work settings more generally, that entitlements are expressed and social distinctions are performed and legitimated. Key social divisions—along the lines of class, gender, and even generation—solidify in the course of service interactions. Because the resulting divisions make inequality instead appear to be a question of difference, these social distinctions play a central role in helping Chinese people make sense of—and accept—new forms of inequality.

But given the rapid, ongoing nature of change in contemporary China, beliefs about inequality are not taken for granted. Rather, understandings of inequality and how acceptable it might or might not

be are the subject of struggles and negotiations in the course of daily life. China's "unsettled" context (Swidler 1986) provides a good opportunity to understand how systems of inequality are constructed and justified on a daily basis. In particular, performances of social difference in urban retail settings shed light on how inequality is experienced and legitimated during China's shift from a socialist system to a capitalist-oriented one.

At the same time that new socio-economic conditions reconfigure social relations in China, social inequalities are increasingly understood through a discourse that depicts the rise of the market and market values as both positive and inevitable while portraying socialism as a tarnished, not "radiant," piece of China's past (cf. Burawoy and Lukács 1992). The class, gender, and generational inequalities and distinctions that give form to the structure of entitlement in urban China are understood in reference to this transition from socialism to a market economy. In this context, people and organizations associated with state socialism and its planned economy are viewed as tainted by the past, and their perceived distance from the present signifies a lack of worth in the new market economy. This set of temporalized values is embedded in an emerging structure of entitlement in which some social groups and organizations invest and against which others struggle. This book is about the lives of ordinary people as they cope with—and strategize around—waves of social change and the new social values and entitlements that have arisen.

CLASS, CULTURE, AND THE ECONOMY

A study that deploys terms like "class" and "inequality" must, even if briefly, be situated within some of the larger scholarly debates that lie at the center of the social sciences. Traditionally, class analysis has tended to distinguish between class as a position in the economic order and class as a set of culturally shared meanings and experiences. One of the more contested of sociological concepts, definitions of class are often characterized as falling into various camps. For example, a Weberian-influenced tradition views economic class as just one of many forms of stratification and posits culturally defined status groups as potentially independent from classes. By contrast, Marxist approaches view class

as "a set of fundamentally conflictual relations" (Ortner 1991) rooted in the economic sphere and determining relations in other (including the cultural) realms. Within each tradition, scholars also observe a division between more "objectivist" approaches that view class as a consequence of economic resources and more subjectivist perspectives that locate class in common lifestyle groups or shared identities (Ortner 1991).

Increasingly, this camp-like division has been critiqued as both unproductive and misleading. For example, Sylvia Yanagisako (2002), in her study of Italian family firms, argues that the economy and so-called "economic action" should not and cannot be separated from the cultural processes that produce them. In Mark Liechty's (2003) insightful analysis of the middle class in Nepal, he argues that neither Karl Marx nor Max Weber suggested that class, in practice, was divorced from cultural frameworks and motivations. Both Yanagisako and Liechty contend that treating culture (and the economy) as "process" or practice that is carried out in everyday life rather than static or stable structure provides an avenue for understanding class identities and practices as emerging out of *both* economic resources and cultural orientations (Yanagisako 2002: 6; Liechty 2003: 21–27).

This emerging tradition that treats social life as emerging out of social processes owes much to the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, linking objective structures to more subjective orientations (that is, wedding class and status) lay at the core of his intellectual project (e.g. Bourdieu 1990: 49–50). As Loïc Wacquant has noted, one of the hallmarks of Bourdieu's work is to affirm "the *primacy of relations*" over the "dualistic alternatives" that prioritize either structure *or* agency (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 15–19). Class, according to this formulation, is not reducible to economic wealth, level of education, political position, or cultural knowledge but rather is realized through the interaction between objective and subjective factors and the complex mediation between economy and culture. Bourdieu portrays all of these different resources as setting limits upon one another, resulting in a set of dispositions that are best conceived not as fixed positions in the social structure but as potentials or likelihoods that must be enacted by social actors in real social situations.

THE STRUCTURE OF ENTITLEMENT AND THE PRACTICE OF INEQUALITY

Bourdieu's rejection of what Douglas Foley calls "a false dichotomy . . . between cultural status groups and economic classes" (Foley 1990: 169–70) is echoed in a growing body of research that explores the cultural dimensions of the construction, maintenance, and reproduction of class boundaries.[1] Inspired by approaches like Bourdieu's, this research has explored how social distinctions contribute to the unequal distribution of both material wealth and non-material social goods like status and social esteem. Cultural sociologists in particular seek to understand how what Michele Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002: 168) call "symbolic boundaries"—the perception of groups of people as different or distinct—solidify into "social boundaries"—forms of social closure and exclusion that result in unequal access to and distribution of resources and opportunities.

One of the best-known works on social boundaries is Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), an analysis of the cultural production of taste in France. In a vast investigation of the class-coded nature of everything from dietary habits to hobbies and musical preferences, Bourdieu argues that "taste," in the form of preferences for certain lifestyle choices, represents a cultural counterpart to economic stratification. At the center of this argument is the concept of *habitus*, a term that refers to the largely unconscious dispositions that people internalize through the course of their lives by virtue of their social environment and their positioning in society (Bourdieu 1977, 1984: 169–72). For example, a working-class French habitus might produce a preference for "practical" clothing or "filling" food—what Bourdieu labels a "taste for necessity"—that simultaneously identifies this group outwardly as uncultured and even vulgar (1984: 379–80). Daily habits and practices that appear to reveal "natural" differences in fact reflect social inequalities that are viewed through a prism of both difference and hierarchy.

A host of other scholars have examined the role that symbolic bound-

[1] These range from Marxist-influenced studies of working-class cultures and life experiences (e.g. Thompson 1966; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Willis 1977) to more recent work that tends to focus on the role of cultural consumption in marking class distinctions (most famously Bourdieu 1984; more recently chapters in Lamont and Fournier 1992a, especially Collins 1992 and Hall 1992; Holt 1997; Katz-Gerro 2002; Zavisca 2004).

aries play in the cultural construction of social difference and class distinctions. Michele Lamont's research (1992, 2000) on the upper-middle and working classes in France and the United States demonstrates how class-specific cultural and moral categories create distinct understandings of personal worthiness. Such conceptual categories serve as the basis for strong symbolic boundaries that generate inequality through exclusion and hierarchy (Lamont and Molnár 2002; cf. Tilly 1998). Focusing on the level of daily practice, ethnographic research in schools has revealed how everyday understandings of social difference contribute to unequal outcomes—as demonstrated by Julie Bettie's (2003) study of cultural constructions of racial, class, and gender hierarchies in a California high school, or Paul Willis's influential book on working-class youth in England, *Learning to Labor* (1977). These studies all approach class as an activity or practice rather than as a category—they "processualize" class (Liechty 2003: 21). As such, this body of research not only points to the role of culture in structuring relations of inequality, it also suggests the practical, everyday ways this occurs.

One of the key sites where social distinctions are recognized and practiced is through daily social interactions (Lamont and Fournier 1992b), the realm that Erving Goffman (1983) dubbed the "interaction order." So, for example, anthropologist Douglas Foley (1990) relied upon an analysis of daily social interactions among students in his study of a rural Texas high school to demonstrate that "public face-to-face interactions become highly routinized aspects of a social order . . . reoccurring rituals in which people act out their proper [class] roles" (1990: 179). Similarly, Bettie's (2003) study of white and Mexican-American high school girls illustrates how gender, race, and especially class distinctions are "performed" and become meaningful in everyday life. Bettie, echoing Bourdieu, contends that "structures of inequality are not automatic but must be constantly reproduced in practice" (2003: 55). Recent ethnographic studies of service interactions in U.S. settings like luxury hotels (Sherman 2005, 2006) and toy stores (Williams 2006) vividly illustrate how concrete social interactions provide the stage on which performances of social class and recognition of class entitlements are enacted.

How do distinctions—class, gender, or otherwise—emerge in the course of social interactions like those conducted in a department store or marketplace? Following Bourdieu, I argue that social interactions involve an acting out—though not mechanistically—of our culturally coded habits and preferences. We rely on our *habitus* to tell us what

feels right in a given situation and how we should behave. In a similar fashion, Raymond Williams has argued that lived reality is experienced through sets of feelings that guide social behavior, propelling or restraining action; Williams labeled this link between feeling and action "structures of feeling." Although Williams applied the notion of structures of feeling to literature, the class-differentiated "practical consciousness" (1977: 130) that he sought to describe applies well to daily social life. Much like *habitus*, structures of feeling provide an emotionally charged but often unspoken ordering to social life that emerges and hardens in the course of daily experience. Our habits and dispositions, our sense of what is right and what we are entitled to, not only reflect power relations in society but also create them.

Building on Bourdieu, Williams, Lamont, and others, I suggest that the cultural dispositions and the structures of feeling experienced by various social groups combine to form an overall *structure of entitlement*. Some social groups, by virtue of their elevated or powerful position in society, feel entitled to greater social goods—greater levels of respect and social recognition. The sense of entitlement people carry with them into social interactions with other people becomes a practical expression of social hierarchy and social location. This structure is neither automatic nor unchanging, but it nevertheless can guide and constrain individual action. In China today, a new structure of entitlement is under construction, and it is understood in terms of social distinctions that, while subject to disagreement and contestation, have important implications for the future shape of Chinese society.

THE WORK OF DISTINCTION

One set of key and very public sites where the structure of entitlement finds expression in urban China today is the range of retail settings that now vie for a piece of the consumer market. At the heart of this study lies the idea that the social relations performed in service settings like department stores and marketplaces—relations among managers, workers, and customers, and even relations *among* settings themselves—play a key role in the construction and reproduction of broader social hierarchies.

How does this happen? I suggest that social distinctions are produced in service settings in two ways. First, service organizations like

department stores—especially those serving elite customers—engage in practices of *organizational distinction-making*, relying upon hiring and labor control practices to distinguish themselves from institutions serving customers located further down the social hierarchy. Second, service workers produce social distinctions in the course of *service interactions* by recognizing customer claims to class position and social status. In either case, service settings are spaces where customers seek distinction and thus are important sites for the performance of social difference. Service institutions participate by organizing such performances and managing worker behavior in order to secure customers' loyalty. In this way, organizations like department stores actually become invested in recognizing and reinforcing a wider structure of entitlement.

The drive to produce social distinctions sets retail settings in conversation with one another, as hiring decisions, work activities, and service interactions are all organized in relation to—and in distinction from—other, similar service work settings. After all, something can only be distinguished as one thing if it is clearly *not* something else. An exclusive restaurant or retail establishment is only "exclusive" in relation to other restaurants or retail settings that are clearly *not* exclusive. When the tasks that make up interactive service work (Leidner 1993) are organized to produce social distinctions in such a relational way, the result is what I call *distinction work*. Distinction work is characterized by a *relational labor process*. A relational labor process organizes work activities in order to produce distinctions both among organizations and between individuals—the two levels I identified above. Here again I borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, especially the idea developed in *Distinction* (1984) that the production and consumption of cultural goods—in this case, the "good" of customer service—involve a struggle over symbolic categories that enables groups to define and assert themselves through simultaneously hierarchical and *relational* differences (Bourdieu 1984, 1998). Difference, in the form of the superior marks of "distinction," helps to reproduce cultural categories that create a structure of entitlement and that in turn help reproduce social inequality (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 14–15).

The centrality of class distinctions in service settings has been revealed in a number of studies of service work in the U.S. context. Rachel Sherman's (2006) study of service work in American luxury hotels reveals how these settings serve as sites for the enactment and legitimization of inequality through the appropriation of workers' physical and

emotional labor. Part of what workers do, Sherman demonstrates, is *recognize* hotel guests as entitled to luxury service, an entitlement which is in fact a marker of class privilege. Guests participate in the normalization of this inequality. Similarly, Christine Williams's (2006) study of U.S. toy stores demonstrates how class differences play out in retail settings. Williams found middle-class customers to be especially likely to enact a sense of class entitlement when dealing with service workers drawn from the working class and the working poor. In a China context, Eileen Otis's (2007) research on a Beijing luxury hotel details how new service work regimes are designed to extract worker deference for the benefit of moneyed and elite (and mostly male) hotel guests. All these studies demonstrate that because the *production* of service is simultaneously the *consumption* of service, service settings provide a key space for the reproduction of structures of inequality through the recognition of class entitlements.

INEQUALITY, ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE RETAIL "FIELD"

What these studies tend not to show, however, is the relational nature of distinction work and the ways in which this can create a dialogue among social settings. Relations *among organizations* are, in fact, what gives distinction work its most manifestly relational nature. Organizations like department stores become invested in the production of social distinctions in order to attract customers, but to produce distinction these stores must distinguish themselves, and their customers, from competitors serving customers located further down the social hierarchy. For this reason, the distinction work performed in Chinese department stores makes little sense without taking into account the larger organizational context or "organizational field" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991 [1983]).

A field can be thought of as an environment in which social actors (both organizations and individuals) interact and respond to one another (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97; DiMaggio and Powell 1991 [1983]; Martin 2003; Ray 1999). Relations among organizations in a field are both constrained and enabled by structures of domination and alliance, which shape their interactions. The boundaries of an organizational field are dependent on mutual recognition by organizations and are, as a result, always contested (DiMaggio and Powell 1991 [1983]: 65). The concept of field provides a way for thinking about the specific

context in which distinction work is organized and performed and the concrete organizational forces that help create and maintain a structure of entitlement. Here, the field of interest is what I call the "retail field." Organizations (Chinese retailers) organize their workers' activities (the production of social distinctions) in relation to other organizations that they recognize as being engaged in the same "game" (retailing). This organizational context is a key environment in which the structure of entitlement is publicly constructed and defended.

The retail field is not, however, simply a sphere of economic competition. As I hope to demonstrate—and this is really the essence of the concept of distinction work—the "profits" to be earned and competed for in this field are not purely economic ones. The struggles among, and within, institutional actors in the retail field are as symbolic as they are economic. The symbolic side of business is important in part because it is so closely connected to the broader positioning of individuals and groups within China's changing social hierarchy. Indeed, the retail field in urban China is so interesting and important because it is *not* autonomous from larger social changes taking place in China. It is a field in which the "search for distinction" and the production of social differences tell us much about Chinese society writ large.

THE CONTEXT FOR DISTINCTION: CHINA'S ECONOMIC REFORMS AND RISING INEQUALITY

The economic reforms that China's Communist party-state implemented in 1979 have brought dramatic change to the country. Economic restructuring, and in particular the gradual dismantling of the socialist planned economy and its substitution by market mechanisms, has been a cornerstone of reform policies. The effects have penetrated every facet of contemporary Chinese society, reshaping everything from population movements and employment patterns to family structures and daily consumption activities, but several aspects hold particular relevance for this study. First, China's reform era has witnessed growing levels of social stratification and increasing gaps between rich and poor. Second, new class inequalities are popularly understood through what Lisa Rofel (1999) has called an "allegory of postsocialism," a highly gendered story that rejects the socialist "past" and embraces the marketized "present" in the name of progress, prosperity, and modernity. And third, economic reforms have given birth to a burgeoning con-

sumer culture and a booming service economy where gendered class meanings are produced and performed.

Material and other inequalities did, of course, exist in pre-reform China (Bian 2002). The government's occupational ranking system produced a hierarchy of material wealth, status, and opportunity, and the party-state's class labeling system stratified those from "good" and "bad" class backgrounds (Zang 2000; Zhang 2004). China's *hukou*, or household residential permit system, further segregated the country along rural/urban lines, segmenting labor markets and offering urban dwellers a social safety net largely supported through the extraction of rural resources (Cheng and Selden 1994; Solinger 1999; Wang 2005). The vast majority of urban Chinese found themselves in the role of "supplicants to the socialist state" (Davis 1993), their lives organized by patterns of dependence upon their work units and workplace superiors for a vast range of goods and services (Walder 1986). Individuals' access to material goods and social services was largely determined by their status within their workplace (Walder 1986), the location of their workplace within the state bureaucratic hierarchy (Bian 1994), and their accumulation of *guanxi*, elaborate networks of personal connections (Yang 1994). In Mao's China, educational and especially political capital were the resources of the country's elite (Wu and Treiman 2004; Zang 2000; cf. Konrad and Szelenyi 1979).

In the course of the past two decades, however, economic disparities—and the importance of economic capital—have become increasingly apparent. Researchers have convincingly demonstrated that a growing gap between rich and poor has accompanied economic reforms, both nationally as well as between and within rural and urban areas (Fang et al. 2002; Khan and Riskin 2001; Li 2000; Riskin et al. 2001; Xue and Wei 2003; for an overview, see Nickum 2003). The average urban income is currently about six times the average rural income, while taxes in rural areas average three times higher than in cities (Yang 2005). One recent study found that the incomes of China's richest 10% rose from representing 24% of total wages earned in urban China in 1990 to over 38% in 1998 (Xu 2004: 91). As Riskin et al. have written: "One of the world's most egalitarian societies in the 1970s, China in the 1980s and 1990s became one of the more unequal countries in its region and among developing countries generally" (2001: 3). Khan and Riskin's (2005) most recent analysis of income inequality in China suggests that while national-level inequality remained roughly constant

between 1995 and 2002, the rural-urban income gap grew during this time period. And when the wages of rural migrants working in cities are taken into account, the level of urban inequality grew as well.

Given these dramatic changes to the social structure, ongoing research probes the mechanics of stratification in contemporary China (Bian 2002). While theoretical claims are often inconclusive (Wu 2002), it is clear that both economic and political elites are reaping great profits from China's rapid economic expansion (e.g. Walder 2002; Goodman 1995), and the two groups are often closely allied (Wank 1999). Most of these stratification studies draw upon large data sets and largely focus on the gradational distribution of social actors in China, asking questions such as who gets ahead in reform-era China, what social groups are elites drawn from, and what resources do they rely on for their power, influence, and economic success.[2]

Ethnographic approaches like the one used in this book offer a different perspective. By focusing on the texture of relations of inequality—in Arthur Stinchcombe's words, "what powerful people can get others to do" (Stinchcombe 1965: 180)—an ethnographic approach allows us to frame inequality in terms of relationships among people and enables us to highlight the place of class and other inequalities in everyday social interactions. What does inequality *feel* like? How is it constructed and understood in the course of everyday life? Most importantly, along what lines are social divisions perceived and drawn, and how do these social distinctions serve to create new structures of entitlement in China?

THE POLITICS OF TIME AND IMAGERIES OF POSTSOCIALIST TRANSITION

"The play of difference is highly political," writes Pun Ngai (2005: 131) in her study of women factory workers in southern China. Indeed,

[2] This is an extensive literature, but key publications include: Nee 1989, 1996; Walder 1996; Zhou 2000; Cao and Nee 2000; and most recently Walder 2002 and Zang 2002. These scholars propose different stratification mechanisms and theoretical frameworks for understanding social change in China, often dividing into what have been termed "market transition" and "path dependent" approaches, but this research tends to ask similar sets of questions about the mechanisms of stratification (Zang 2002; Bian 2002).

the categories utilized to convey social distinctions are critical to understanding inequality in China today. In urban China, the "play of difference" is reflected in a cultural conversation about the relationship between the past and the future that rejects the socialist "past" and embraces the marketized "present." This temporal framework is the central context in which social distinctions based on class, gender, and generation get constructed, serving as an interpretive framework in which social distinctions take on significance and power.

In the mind's eye of the Chinese public, the pre-reform years are often characterized as a combination of planned economics and revolutionary politics that left China backward and impoverished. People do not commonly use the term "socialist" to refer to this time—they are more likely to say "when there was a planned economy" (*jihuajingji de shihou*)—in part because the Chinese state still lays claim to the socialist label (now accompanied by the modifier "market"). However, I will use "socialism" and "socialist" to refer to Maoist-era China, its planned economy, politics, and the daily patterns of behavior it fostered. Borrowing Ching Kwan Lee's (2002: 193) formulation, I understand contemporary China to be "postsocialist" in that the planned economy no longer plays a central role in production or consumption. China is also "postsocialist" in the sense that the present is very much understood in relation to, and as a rejection of, a socialist "past" that encompasses both institutional and interpersonal levels of social organization (Rofel 1999; Zhang 2001).

The irony, of course, is that there is no clear dividing line between "past" and "present" or between which social practices should be embraced in the name of progress and which must be rejected. Critical analyses of social change in formerly state socialist societies often involve a complex attempt to separate the legacies of socialism from newly imported influences of the market. What remains? What has changed? In China, given that the dismantling of the planned economy and depoliticization daily life have not been accompanied by the unseating of the Chinese Communist Party, this labeling of "old" and "new" is even more fraught with ambiguity.

Of special importance in this context are the patterns of behavior that are evocative of the socialist past and thus are *perceived* as remnants of China's planned economy. The past, and especially people associated with the past, are cast as "abject" figures against which the future is to be defined (Rofel 1999; Pun 2005). Like workers in other state so-

cialist contexts (Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Dunn 1999, 2004; Kideckel 2002), China's state sector workers have been portrayed as inefficient, undisciplined, and lazy, people unsuited to the demands of a modern, market-driven economy (Rofel 1992, 1999; Won 2004; Lee 2007). In industrial settings, the taint of socialism can even extend to young rural migrants, who never benefited from the security and stability of socialist urban work units but are nevertheless viewed by managers as "socialist" bodies exhibiting the "red" and "lazy" characteristics of a workforce contaminated by the anti-competitive, collectivist, and undisciplined mentality of state socialism (Pun 2005). In a cultural drama reminiscent of other contexts of rapid and dramatic social change, the mapping of a new time schema onto social groups creates distinctions that justify exclusion and inequality. China's urban working class, much like the laid-off autoworkers in Kathryn Dudley's (1994) study of the de-industrializing American rustbelt, are characterized as possessing an "obsolete" set of cultural values; they are a "lost generation" (Hung and Chiu 2003; cf. Dudley 1994: 89), out-of-step with China's progressive forward movement.

Indeed, China's economic take-off has been accompanied by an almost evolutionary perspective on society and social groupings, and other groups in contemporary China are similarly viewed as backward (*luohou*) or even primitive (Yan 2003; Zhang 2001; Schein 2000; cf. Dudley 1994). In China's cities, this is especially true of rural migrant workers, whose poverty and resistance to market reforms get reinterpreted as a lack of *cultural* resources as much as a lack of material resources (Yan 2003: 499). At times, small-scale merchants and their workers are also viewed as operating at a "low level" of capitalism that will be naturally superseded by more advanced forms of business.

The portrayal of the urban working class as trapped in a socialist time warp, and of small-scale merchants and their often-rural employees as located on a lower rung of a ladder of economic and cultural development, represent two ways in which time—and the past in particular—shapes contemporary social distinctions in urban China. But if, as the following chapters will show, the rejection of China's state socialist past serves to produce social distinctions that bolster the sense of entitlement borne by new elites, those claims are nevertheless subject to contestation and struggle. Groups like the urban working class, increasingly marginalized both symbolically and economically, nevertheless evoke the past as a resource in the present (Lee 2000, 2002). For

the workers who were part of this study, China's state socialist history operated as both a cultural legacy that structured a working-class sense of entitlement as well as an object of nostalgia to be redeployed as a source of value—and a mark of distinction—in the contemporary marketplace. Likewise, the *geti* merchants and their hired help reinterpreted their marketplace as a space of dignity and personal development and not as one of chaos and disorder.

SERVICE WORK, THE GENDERED RICE BOWL, AND THE PLAY OF DIFFERENCE

Ideas about gender combine with this powerful imagery of China's transition from a socialist planned economy to a market economy to operate as a key means for marking social distinctions (Hanser 2005). In particular, modern constructions of "proper" femininity map onto class and generational distinctions, associating young urban women with affluence and modernity while working-class, middle-aged women are cast as unproductive and unreformable remnants of the past. Ideas about femininity also lay down distinctions among young Chinese women, and relatively well-educated urban women are distinguished from their uncultured and morally suspect rural and less-educated urban counterparts. In China's burgeoning service sector, these gendered and generational differences often translate into class distinctions on the sales floor, as class meanings are produced for and consumed by status-conscious customers (Otis 2007).

Feminist scholars point to the interconnectedness of class and gender distinctions, reminding us that performances of femininity are always class-coded (Bettie 2003; Freeman 2000; Steedman 1987). Sherry Ortner, writing of the American context, notes that class "is rarely spoken in its own right. Rather, it is represented through other categories of social difference: gender, ethnicity, race" and sexuality (Ortner 1991: 164). In China today, there are a number of reasons why gender has become a powerful way of "speaking" class. First, while discourses about class have not historically been muted or absent in China, during the reform era a new ideology of individual enterprise and achievement has gradually displaced class-based analyses of Chinese society (Hoffman 2001; Hanser 2002; Won 2004; Croll 1991), such that class understandings of Chinese society have come to seem as anachronistic and dysfunctional

as the socialist planned economy. One consequence is that class may increasingly be spoken, as Ortner puts it, "through other categories of social difference."

Second, the rise of a naturalized, biologized understanding of gender in the reform era facilitates the expression of new class differences through gendered meanings. Numerous scholars have identified a trend toward the sexualization and commodification of women's bodies in China (Brownell 2001; Schein 2000; Yang 1999), a trend viewed as a departure from both the rhetoric and social practices of the Maoist era (Chen 2003a; Rofel 1999; Croll 1995) and more traditional conceptions of gender difference rooted in earlier Chinese history (Barlow 1994; Furth 2002). Lisa Rofel (1999: 217) characterizes this rise of essentialized notions of gender as "an allegory of postsocialism" that portrays newly sexualized gender relations as a return to the natural and inevitable. With Mao-era gender neutrality now viewed as unnatural and even ludicrous, this naturalized understanding of gender and sexuality is powerfully associated with everything socialism was not—especially an affluent, market society and a new, modern future for China. In many Chinese work settings, essentialized gender categories become a means to justify and mask inequalities between women and men (Lee 1998; Ong 1997; Rofel 1999; Woo 1994).

In the service sector, this allegory of postsocialism takes shape as the "rice bowl of youth" (*qingchunfan*), a term that refers to a woman's ability to convert her youth and beauty into potentially lucrative employment opportunities (Zhang 2000; see also Hyde 2007, who translates the term as "eating spring rice"). The rice bowl of youth stands opposed to the traditional, socialist "iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan*), once the symbol of the guaranteed employment, housing, and social services of state socialism but today more often associated with the drab poverty and immobility of China's old planned economy—and the middle-aged female bodies of workers in state enterprises. As cultural critic Zhang Zhen has written: "The robust image of vivacious, young female eaters of the rice bowl of youth symbolizes a fresh labor force, a model of social mobility, and the rise of a consumer culture endorsed by current official ideology" (2000: 94; see also Wang Zheng 2000). Young urban women, through their adoption of new, feminized identities and practices, are simultaneously identified with productivity and modernity, while older workers are "marginalized by new imaginaries of modernity" (Rofel 1999: 95; on femininity in the service sector, see Otis 2003

and 2007; for parallels in industry, see Lee 1998 and Pun 2000; on prostitution, Hyde 2007). At the same time, proper urban femininity is defined against lower-class urban and rural versions, portrayed as overly promiscuous or ridiculously unsophisticated (e.g. Lei 2003; Pun 1999).

As a result, the "rice bowl of youth" imagery and its associations with sexualized femininity and capitalist modernity have become a powerful formula for conveying social distinction in China's burgeoning retail sector. These elements of difference—gender and generation—are set within a broader imagery of transition and become the raw material for the production of class and status distinctions in contemporary Chinese department stores, marketplaces, and service interactions. In the service sector labor market, these profoundly gendered symbolic distinctions ultimately solidify into the exclusion of middle-aged and rural women from the most lucrative, high-end jobs.

FIELD SITES AND METHODS

The research on which this book is based began as a straightforward comparison between two department stores—one state-owned, one privately owned. The rationale behind a two-pronged comparison was to explore how retail work and consumer practices were changing in the course of China's economic reforms, and a contrast between an entrenched, state-owned store and a new retailer using more modern managerial practices seemed apt. Once I entered these two field sites, however, it became apparent that not only would I have to expand my comparison to include a third setting—the *geti*-dominated clothing bazaar—but also that these three settings were in no way discrete and separate cases. The people in each department store setting were acutely aware of one another (and of other department stores in the city) as well as of the activities going on in the *geti* marketplaces scattered about Harbin.

Although Harbin possesses a distinctive history, the city's experiences during the reform era are generally representative of large urban settings in the way that reforms have reshaped the city's economic and social structures. A fishing village transformed into an urban base for the Russian development of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the late nineteenth century, Harbin once acted as a center for Russian and East European émigrés in the early 1900s, fell under the control of Japanese imperialist forces in the 1930s, and then was liberated by the Chinese

communists in the 1940s (Wolff 1999; Lahusen 2001). The city has since become an unequivocally "Chinese" city (Carter 2002), and it served as a center of heavy industrial production and state planning in the Mao era.

Today, this city of over 3 million people and the capital of Heilongjiang province in China's far northeast has witnessed innumerable changes, including the rapid rise of private business, the decline of state industry, and an increasingly visible gap between the material circumstances of the city's richest and poorest residents. In this context, Harbin's increasingly stratified retail sector serves as a barometer of broader changes. Although economic reforms came later to China's northeast than coastal areas, in this regard Harbin is similar to the bulk of China's non-coastal provinces and cities and is especially representative of the country's ailing industrial Northeast.

Indeed, Harbin lies in what is sometimes termed China's "rust belt," the northeastern provinces that once served as a center of state industrial production but where a troubled and declining state sector has created high regional levels of unemployment (Hurst 2004; Lee 2000, 2007). Much like the situation in Liaoning province detailed by Ching Kwan Lee (2007), actual unemployment rates in Harbin in the early 2000s were likely double, or more, the official registered unemployment rate of 3.7% in 2002 (*Statistical Yearbook of Harbin* 2006: 29). A city in which the state-employed working class once enjoyed high status and job security, Harbin's experiences of economic and social transformation puts the contemporary social struggles faced by much of China into somewhat starker relief.

My first field site was a state-owned department store that I call the Harbin No. X Department Store, one of Harbin's oldest and largest department stores, employing almost 3,000 people. Since it was nationalized in the late 1940s, the store has symbolized the bounty of state socialism. Physically, the store was a socialist behemoth, a massive structure engulfing a full square block of land in one of the city's central districts. Inside, working-class salesclerks dealt with mostly blue-collar shoppers. Here I worked as a uniformed salesclerk selling down coats in the women's department.

At the top of the retail hierarchy, my second field site was a high-end, privately owned department store that I call the "Sunshine" Department Store. A glistening structure located in Harbin's downtown, this luxury department store first opened in the early 1990s, employed over 1,000 staff, and offered six floors of expensive merchandise to

Harbin shoppers. Run by a private mainland-Chinese business group, Sunshine was generally acknowledged by shoppers and retail industry specialists alike as one of the city's most exclusive department stores. Here I worked as a salesclerk in a cashmere sweater boutique.

My third field site was known as "The Underground," a label mirroring its low status and socially dubious position in the city. The marketplace was literally located underground, sitting just below the Sunshine Department store in a series of converted and later extended air raid tunnels that stretched for several kilometers below the city streets. The Underground was a large wholesale/retail clothing market where small-scale private merchants—*getihu*—rented counter space and sold their inexpensive wares to both rural and urban people. Here I spent time observing and occasionally selling in two separate "rooms" of the market, each housing about ten clothing merchants.

In the chapters that follow, I primarily rely on ethnographic data gathered during thirteen months of field research in China, conducted between March 2001 and September 2002. In each site I spent about two-and-a-half months working seven-hour days, six days a week. I also spent lengths of time observing in a number of other stores, markets, and service work settings in the city. I supplemented ethnographic work with over 40 interviews with workers, store managers, merchandise suppliers, and other industry experts, and I conducted archival research on institutional changes to China's retail sector since the introduction of economic reforms in 1979.

Until the moment I actually found myself on the sales floor at Harbin No. X, suited up in a store uniform, I was uncertain if I would be able to work as a salesclerk in a Chinese store. I was turned away at the first store to which I tried to gain access—a new, private department store in Harbin run by a large, Beijing-based company—by managers who cited fears about revealing "business secrets." It was my good fortune that managers at state-owned stores are unaccustomed to thinking in terms of business secrecy, and so when I approached a manager (a friend's acquaintance) at Harbin No. X, I was received with little hesitation. The store's assistant-general manager agreed to allow me to do an unpaid "internship" (*shixi*), explaining that the store might use me as an opportunity to engage in "a little publicity."

On my first day of work, upper management outfitted me in the striped shirt, tie, and numbered badge of a regular store employee. They then took me down to the sales floor, where they held a "wel-

come ceremony" for me—and where I found not one, but two TV cameras awaiting me, plus a small knot of newspaper reporters. One of the newspaper reporters collared a passing girl, and he made me move the zipper up and down on her coat while he tried to get a "candid" of me at work selling down coats. I appeared in a number of local papers, often on the first page and under the headline "Western Ph.D. works Harbin No. X counter." As my countermates at the store would tell me, "Hey, you're famous now."

For a week or two, all this media attention was disruptive, and I found myself in the position of the observed more than of the observer. But people quickly grew accustomed to my presence in the store. Initially I thought the store might restrict me to simply observing the activities of salesclerks in the store, but I was wrong. My co-workers enthusiastically coached me in almost all aspects of the job—organizing stock, introducing merchandise to customers, and writing out sales receipts for shoppers to take to the cashier for payment. On one occasion, two of my co-workers left me to work the counter alone for an entire morning while they reorganized stock in our storage area.

Ultimately, the media attention I received at Harbin No. X eased my entry into other sites, especially the Sunshine Department Store. My sales position at Sunshine was arranged by a sales manager at a cashmere sweater company, one of Sunshine's suppliers. As the following chapters show, Sunshine was a dramatically different workplace—and field site—from Harbin No. X. At Sunshine, workers were far more anxious about making mistakes and workplace discipline more strictly enforced. It also took me a much longer time to learn the ropes. There were certain tasks—such as writing out receipts—that I never felt comfortable performing. As I note in Chapter 4, my co-workers worried that they would be held responsible for my mistakes, and yet to my surprise the clerks in my sales area, with the exception of one young woman, seemed loathe to instruct me. The first few weeks on the job were excruciatingly uncomfortable, though I eventually came to understand that this was a feature of the workplace and not simply of my personal reception by my co-workers. Unprompted, a number of salesclerks individually expressed to me that they had had similar experiences when they first arrived at Sunshine. By the time I left Sunshine, however, I had become familiar enough with the work that my co-workers had come to rely on my assistance on the sales floor.

Gaining access to the *geti* marketplace, The Underground, was the

most straightforward in the sense that an acquaintance simply introduced me to people operating a sales counter. In this setting I was more observer than participant, largely because selling merchandise involved negotiation and haggling over prices. I was and still am a poor bargainer. Given that the merchants in the market often get by on very slim profit margins, I did not want to negatively impact anyone's business through my incompetence.

If getting myself into The Underground proved very easy, there were occasions when it looked like staying would be more difficult. I received no formal permission to spend time in the market, but as long as I was not selling merchandise the management company that oversaw the market did not seem to care much about my presence. The Underground was also regulated by a district office of the Bureau of Industry and Commerce (*gongshang ju*), whose mandates were theoretically carried out by a group of officers who in practice tended to bully Underground merchants and fine them for minor infractions. On one occasion, one of these men appeared at my sales counter, somewhat drunk, and suggested that I might have to "pay a little something" in order to stay in The Underground. I was extremely angry at the attempted bribe, but I acted as if I did not understand what the man was saying. For a number of weeks I waited anxiously for the man to reappear and either make the demand for money again or force me to leave. I also worried about the negative impact my presence might have on the merchants in the room, especially "Xiao Li," who was my host. But Xiao Li was on very good terms with the management company, and ultimately nothing came of my worries.

In the end, although I never "blended in" in any of my three sites, in each setting my presence achieved a kind of normalcy as I became another fixture of the environment. My foreignness also meant that my research was never covert, that I could take field notes openly, and that I could raise all sorts of issues and questions with my informants. However, as a "white" person in department store uniform, I was without question an oddity. At Harbin No. X, store publicity attracted many well-wishers from the city, and store Communist party officials bestowed a "friendship ambassador" award on me. At Sunshine, customers frequently mistook me for a young Russian woman driven by Russia's weak economy to find employment in Harbin, department store work being a respectable option. By contrast, in The Underground, I was read as a Russian trader—a fairly despised group in Harbin—and

as a result I was frequently the subject of disparaging and even racist comments made by passersby who assumed that I could not understand them. These variable perceptions of me in each site also reflected the gendered and classed nature of the three retail settings and their relative positions in Harbin's urban hierarchy.

Finally, while I want to acknowledge that my authorship of this book has given me the power to reconstruct and frame the words and actions of other people, I want also to note that this rarely reflected the dynamic I experienced on the sales floors. As indicated above, frequently I was observed more than I was observing. Not only was I highly dependent on my informants for almost every piece of information in this study, but they also kept me under their thumb for much of the time I was their companion. In some cases, I felt as if I had become a kind of public property—down to having personal mail opened and read for me by my co-workers at Harbin No. X, being teased mercilessly by raucous merchants in The Underground, and receiving intimate advice on how to improve my figure by a fellow salesclerk at Sunshine. Perhaps this is just as it should be: Where there is deep curiosity on both sides, the researcher can expect to share herself with her subjects, just as they share with her.

THE CHAPTERS THAT FOLLOW

There are many more discrete positions within China's, and Harbin's, retail field than I could possibly attend to in a single book. The range and kinds of retailing businesses found in urban China have proliferated rapidly over the past fifteen or twenty years, with some businesses targeting very small and specific groups of consumers. The three market sites examined here, however, hold special symbolic weight in urban China as the shopping spaces identified with the new urban rich, the working "masses," and rural people and the less respectable segments of urban society. These three locales, and the organization of sales interactions within them, were also very much in dialogue with one another.

But while the clothing retailers I studied conceived of themselves as arrayed along a vertical hierarchy of marketplaces, the image of a ladder is a misleading one. Instead of viewing positions as locations in a market hierarchy, I suggest that these positions were in fact *stances* that retailers took vis-à-vis one another. These stances were translated into

relational labor processes in which workers were expected to distinguish themselves and the service they produced from that found in other settings through gender- and especially class-coded distinctions. In this way, the stances or positions managers and merchants took within the retail field could be literally transposed onto the physical stances workers were directed to adopt on the sales floor.

I explore the broader, historical context in which this particular retail field is situated in Chapter 2, where I describe changes to retailing in China during the course of economic reforms and the accompanying transformations in the lives of workers and consumers. Chapter 3 then explores one site—Harbin No. X, the state-owned department store—in detail, arguing that because this store was originally organized under the conditions of a centralized, planned economy, service work there was *not* organized relationally and was *not* structured to produce class distinctions. By contrast, Chapter 4 demonstrates how work at the Sunshine Department Store, an expensive, luxury establishment, was carefully organized to produce and recognize markers of class distinction. In that chapter, I argue that class distinctions become coded in highly gendered ways, and in direct dialogue with both Harbin No. X and The Underground, as managers sought to mold a sufficiently high-class workforce to serve its elite customers. The store was, as a result, deeply invested in upholding a new structure of entitlement.

Subsequently, Chapter 5 turns to The Underground, the chaotic, subterranean clothing bazaar, economically vibrant but low-status. I characterize The Underground as a space of counter strategies, where merchants and saleswomen challenged the symbolic boundaries produced in settings like Sunshine by blurring the distinctions that separated the "high" from the "low." In Chapter 6, I return to the Harbin No. X Department Store and explore how the market environment—and competition from markets like The Underground in particular—reshaped worker practices in this working-class department store. I argue that Harbin No. X workers themselves began to innovate elements of distinction work as they attempted to convert their store's—and their own—socialist-era symbolic capital into reform-era resources. And finally, I conclude with Chapter 7, where I draw out more clearly the implications the links between production, consumption, and inequality explored in earlier chapters hold for an emerging structure of entitlement in urban China today.