This book is the result of a personal journey of learning and unlearning driven by numerous fellow sojourners’ unquenchable aspiration for a good life. I was born into a working-class family in a small town in southwestern China in the late 1970s, right after Deng Xiaoping announced the economic reform and plan for opening China up for the global market. In the year I was born, the policy of allowing only one child per family was also introduced by the state to reshape the population and facilitate economic restructuring. Marketizing practices started in coastal regions and mainly focused on southern and eastern urban areas throughout the 1980s, and the polarizing effects of neoliberal economy did not fully unfold in my hometown at the time. Like my working-class peers, I enjoyed an array of benefits unavailable to rural Chinese citizens, including good public education; affordable rationed food and medical care because of my urban residential status in the state-controlled registration system of hukou; and free housing, which came with my parents’ state-sponsored jobs. Moreover, the soft, literary masculinity associated with the Confucian tradition that I embodied placed me in an advantaged position at school. These taken-for-granted privileges took me years to realize and unpack, a process that was the starting point of this book project.

China’s marketizing transition started to accelerate in the early 1990s, unsettling my habituated way of living and revealing the brutal facades of the social systems of class, gender, and sexuality that took new forms in neoliberal China. In the wake of the whole country’s opening up, westernized dimorphic gender discourse and discriminatory terminology for homosexuality became prevalent, turning my ambiguous masculinity into a source
of shamefulness and rendering my burgeoning same-sex desire a target of surveillance and disciplining that haunted me throughout puberty. In the late 1990s, with the hope of restoring my so-called normality and changing my life, I left my hometown to attend college in Nanjing, a big city in eastern China. My first attempt at self-rejuvenation, however, turned out to be more disturbing than freeing. As someone from a working-class background and an underdeveloped area, I experienced firsthand the devastating effects of neoliberalism in this metropolitan area. For marginalized students like me, the meritocratic dream that a good education will finally bring you a good life was embraced as the only viable solution to our problems, beckoning us into the self-help neoliberal fantasy by having us invest more time and energy to remake ourselves according to its rule. In 2004, I was admitted to a graduate program in Shanghai, winning a ticket that I expected to help me achieve my goal. However, in the face of soaring housing prices resulting from a rapidly growing market economy, I soon realized that I might not even be able to afford to find a place in this megacity that I could call home. Like other subaltern migrants who persist against all odds, I did not lose hope. In 2008, three days before the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, I boarded a flight to the United States—which I saw as a land of opportunity—looking to revitalize my dream in uncharted places on the other side of the Pacific Ocean.

My learning experience in the United States provided me with a much-needed hiatus and, more importantly, critical tools that allow me to revisit the questions that have defined the dream-pursuing journeys of countless Chinese migrants. Why do we keep returning to our aspirational dreams even after they repeatedly fail us? How do the systems of gender, class, sexuality, and ethno-race shape our dreams and sustain our hope, which often works in opposition to our rational thinking and well-being? How do our self-defeating efforts contribute to the so-called self-serving market subjectivity and neoliberal restructuring that happens as or in the background? What does it take for us to unlearn our intangible yet poignant dreams for a good life and break down the detrimental cycle that these dreams refuel? These questions are at the heart of this book. There are innumerable people who have challenged me to push my inquiry in new ways; provided unswerving support during the process of learning and writing; shared their thoughts, which opened my mind; read my manuscript and offered constructive feedback; and inspired me to continue my journey simply by being who they are. I hope my acknowledgments do justice to their invaluable contributions.
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the manuscript. This book is written in the memory of and dedicated to my mother, Suhua Yan, whose steadfast and unforgettable love has always been the main driving force in my life.