

Migrant Labour Culture in Post-Mao China

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Against a backdrop of economic growth and growing spate of collective actions, rural migrant workers have developed narratives of migrant labour. This essay studies articles, diaries, poems and online songs asserting their collective subaltern identity and specific norms and values.

A political economy of rapid accumulation, a very harsh labour regime, and the violence — both physical and symbolic — generated by the combination of global capitalism and post-Mao China state socialism are a challenge for a regime whose founding narratives are grounded upon the rejection of capitalist exploitation. The whole social hierarchy of post-Mao China as well as its economy of representations have been reworked, and labour is the field where transformations in societal values and norms have been most important. This is why focusing on the cultural practices related to rural migrant labour provides an interesting vantage point to study processes of workers' collective identification. Examining the political economy of the Pearl River Delta highlights two major features: on the one hand, the combined action of residence and labour permit mechanisms have gone hand in hand with factories' disciplinary labour regimes, imposing a high degree of flexibility upon workers and keeping wages at an extremely low level; on the other hand, a whole body of legislations and regulations has been developed by the Party-state in the face of increasingly conflicting labour-relations. These elements are crucial to understand the narrative practices relating to *dagong*.

The 'household registration system' (*hukou zhidu*), initiated in the mid-1950s but effectively implemented from 1960 on, divided the entire Chinese population between an 'agricultural population' and a 'non agricultural population', thus preventing spontaneous migration within the country. In the post-Mao era this system, reformed several times, has resulted in severe constraints on rural migrants regarding residence as well as access to basic social services and welfare. When working outside their hometown, migrant workers are also required to apply for labour permits (on the 'household registration system' see Wang Fei-Ling 2009). By "externalizing" migrant workers, the household registration system and the multiple certificates and permits required produce highly flexible production regimes, or what Robin Cohen has called a "labour repressive system", since it shares with other such systems the "political [and institutional] means used to organize and perpetuate the supply of labour-power" (Cohen, 1988, 20).

Providing the bulk of manpower in labour-intensive industries, migrant workers from the countryside have had a central economic role within the Pearl River Delta but also in the whole country's economic growth. It is also in the Pearl River Delta that the term *dagong* has been used more and more widely, to be extended nowadays to all areas of the country and to encompass increasingly larger spectra of Chinese society. The term encapsulates a variety of meanings which the term 'work' cannot catch satisfactorily. These meanings include fierce exploitation, loss of control on one's time and space, an intense feeling of precariousness and

injuries to one's dignity, to symbols of modernity and prosperity, as well as a politics of anger and resentment.

In what follows, I investigate the repertoires and narrative categories used by workers by looking at a variety of narrative practices relating to migrant labour such as articles, diaries, or poems sent by migrant workers to magazines as well as more recent online written practices such as song writing. This essay develops the argument that workers' cultural practices help constitute a 'narrative space' for struggle and negotiation around major values linked to workers' identities and claim-making, but also to the major dominant societal norms and values accounting for social hierarchies in today's China.

Narrating *Dagong*

While today various forms of narration of *dagong* experience are quite popular, not only in magazines, but also increasingly within the new media, such narrative practices originally emerged in the Pearl River Delta area at the beginning of the 1990s¹. In the early 1990s, a few magazines such as *Jiaban Bao*, *Dapengwan*, *Dagongmei* or *Wailaigong* started to provide opportunities for rural workers to write texts depicting their experiences of *dagong*. At around the same time, rural migrant workers and the form of labour they performed became the target of an increasingly intense official ideological construction. Such a process has been more pronounced and took place earlier than elsewhere in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Therefore, the practices of narration of *dagong* can be seen as a popular phenomenon which has been accompanied, guided and monitored rather flexibly by the various instances of the State's propaganda apparatus. Through a variety of channels such as magazines, radio and TV programmes, community organizing, and increasingly via the Internet and other new media such as micro-blogs, bulletin boards, etc. there has been an invitation to tell one's tale, a growing exhortation to participate to the collective narration of *dagong* and somehow take part in the constitution of 'networks of practices and interpretations' (Chartier 1989). Therefore it is a whole set of terms, values and more or less patterned narrative structures which have been circulating more and more recurrently within these various channels. Following Jules-Rosettes and Martin, I suggest viewing this circulation of meanings as 'an arena which involves complex fields of forces where polysemic processes of re-creation, negotiation and struggle take place' (Jules-Rosettes and Martin 1997). Within this arena, popular culture and state formation are narrowly intermingled and co-constitutive.

The major themes dealt with in migrant workers' published and unpublished texts as well as in songs depict the hardship of factory life, long working hours, instances of discrimination and infringements of workers' rights and dignity, as well as experiences of leading an existence in the margins of society in a rather unwelcoming environment.

A systematic analysis of a body of 82 migrant workers' published and unpublished texts and of 50 songs posted on the Internet shows that two contrasting sets of values and attitudes are most frequently associated to workers' experiences of labouring and living outside their place of residence: (1) self-achievement or striving for it through conscientious efforts and labour outside the village expressed via a set of keywords such as 'perseverance,

¹ A short novel entitled *There is a person on the coast* focused on the experiences of a female migrant worker as early as 1984. It was published in the journal 'Special zone literature' (*Tequ wenxue*). See 'The marketization of literature magazines and the emergence of migrant workers magazines', in Li 2011, <http://vip.book.sina.com.cn/book/catalog.php?book=183750>. See also Sun 2012.

‘tenacity’, ‘nurturing aspirations and dreams’, ‘sizing opportunities and facing challenges’ by ‘studying knowledge and techniques’ ; and (2) expressions of disillusionment and criticism linked to people facing a gap between their initial plans and the often merciless reality they are faced with. I suggest to first turn to these values linked to efforts and strong will on the part of rural migrant workers which are characteristic of workers’ *agency*. As I will argue at the end of this section, this empowering dimension may in some instances also be conceived of as highly constraining and as somehow strengthening existing social orders.

Determination, Expectations and Optimism

In many texts written by migrant workers, we find a strong emphasis on workers’ capacity to face hardship, on their abnegation, their capacity to make sacrifices through their ‘blood and sweat’, as well as the need to keep an optimistic outlook on their future. Equally pervasive in such writings is the idea that no matter how hard their lot is, people need to remain self-confident in their capacities, keep nurturing ideals and be optimistic about the future. Optimism about the future comes as a conclusion to texts which sometimes constitute a very detailed and rough description of the hardship associated with factory work and city life. Remaining optimistic about the future is also often linked to people’s capacity to take hold of their fate and, in some instances, transform it. This meaning is expressed through the use of expressions such as “to create one’s own blue sky” or “to create one’s own road”. Hereafter are two illustrations of this major feature of migrant workers’ depiction of their experience of *dagong*. The first one is a fragment of an unpublished letter sent to a migrant magazine in the summer of 2003, while the second fragment comes from an online song called ‘*Dagong is fine*’:

‘Eventually our day of labour is over. Exhausted, we go to the toilets, we eat a bowl of rice and after having washed, we lie down with plenty of weighty ideals and we don’t want to move any more. Time goes by like this day by day, time tells our soundless aspirations: to stand the exhaustion, to stand the loneliness, we can stand all that, only because in our heart there is still a dream, because there is still a tomorrow...’ (Unpublished letter, summer 2003)

‘On the road to *dagong* you need to have a spirit of path-breaking on your own.
You need to stand firm and strong (...)
You sweat a lot, but you don’t weep.
WOO... facing hardship, you are not worried.
In difficulty, you do not say that you are suffering.
No matter how hard or how tiring it may be, you are labouring on your own.
Ah...In life you have to have strong determination.
WO...You carve the painful achievements in your heart.
Until you are successful and you can go back home’².

The utterance of the need to be confident in one’s capacities through individual determination needs to be associated with the potential agency of mainly young rural migrant workers which has to be nurtured within a competitive environment provided by ‘the South’:

‘We have intelligence and strength, every fen (cent) we get has been earned in exchange for the sweat of our best years of youth (...) do not confuse us with beggars. I am someone who *dagong*, I want to create my own blue sky’ (*Wailaigong*, November 1996, 11).

‘I have tasted *all sorts of hardship*, on the whole *dagong is really painful*. This is my first experience of *dagong*, but I am convinced that tomorrow will be better, that there will be many more opportunities and that I will have to face many challenges’ (Unpublished letter, summer 2003).

² ‘*Dagong xing*’, http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/1vC2tek_28w/, last accessed 5th September 2012.

In the above-quoted fragments as well as in many other texts, it is workers' individual will which is stressed over and over again, while in the next fragment of a song, a collective dimension is added through workers' capacity to have their voices heard collectively³.

'Dreams are no longer distant, the road no longer vague, stand firm and bravely go forward to try your luck
Carry ones dreams, innocent and yearning, come into this dark and strange world
We may lose our way in this chaotic city, but these hardships can only make us stronger (...)
Hearts are no longer lonely, and you've become as strong as steel, making our voices resonate in song.
Dreams are no longer distant, the road no longer vague, stand firm and our dreams will be Realized (*Bu zai miwang*, New Workers' Art Troup, 2007).

The narrative emphasis on individual efforts and on the capacity to overcome hardship is hardly specific to Chinese rural migrant workers. It is actually found quite pervasively among migrants around the world. Considering the harsh labour conditions and the precariousness which many migrants face in cities, such values are constitutive of the collective identification of Chinese migrant workers. The emphasis put recurrently on individual efforts needs also to be thought against the background of the wide circulation of the kinds of pejorative representations which rural workers have been the object of since the end of the 1980s as the low-quality uncivilized crowd. Moreover, the post-Mao trend of marketization as well as the process of 'disembedding of public ownership and of the planned economy' have had a profound impact on the large process of individualization of Chinese society as Yan Yunxiang has shown. Moreover, it has not been sufficiently acknowledged that rural migrant workers, because of the fact that they have hardly any institutional support to rely on, have somehow become the most emblematic symbols of the new individual values justifying social mobility and hierarchization in today's China. Rural migrant workers are indeed most aware of the merciless competition which characterizes the society they live in and they can only rely on themselves to improve their lot or simply guarantee subsistence.

In addition to this, through their narrative practices, many authors are drawing from a series of highly recurrent meanings such as the need to remain optimistic about the future, the need to make constant efforts when facing adversity, the will to learn from experience or the capacity to 'face challenges and size opportunities'. I argue that drawing from such a repertoire of values and notions which provides some authors with a 'ready-made toolkit' which allows to make sense of highly contradictory dimension of the reality they are facing. Besides, the focus on optimism for the future in many of the tales written by migrant workers conform to what Tamara Jacka characterized as the narrative structure that "dominates post-1949 political discourse, literature, and film", i.e. to criticize the past, but be optimistic about the present and future (Jacka, 2004, 284).

Besides, people ought not to be thought as always turned towards the darkest or toughest dimensions of their experience, nor are they at all times always pitted against oppression. It should also be noted that the need to provide hope and possibly confer an optimistic outlook on one's condition and future may stand prominently in the production and reception of written narratives by people who live in conditions of great adversity. Several informants did explain to me that reading and writing articles within migrant magazines provided them with support in their lives. It had, they said, a function of 'pushing them forward' or 'giving them impetus' (*tuidongli, tisheng jingshen*). For the people I interviewed, it was clear that the very act of writing was linked intrinsically to the idea of making

³ Lau points to this dimension of 'voice' in migrant workers' song writing, performing and consuming by associating it to the notion of 'shengyuan' (to make public or to assist), Lau 2012.

individual progress. When they talked of what writing meant to them, making progress, nurturing ideals, improving one's lot and making efforts stood out prominently. For many of them too, writing was a privileged way to think over what they were going through. Similarly, anecdotal evidence show that migrant workers refer to popular songs as encouraging them.

But, as Jules-Rosettes and Martin have stressed, cultural practices are open-ended processes and they '(...) shape and transmit representations of social realities in which man live, [representations] of their order and hierarchies, in highly symbolic, and hence polysemic languages'. Therefore because of its internal tensions and contradictions, popular culture may express at once "protest, derision, the desire for subversion, obliqueness, acceptance, fascination, and, in order to escape these emotions, it can also provide with the means to dream of utopia (...)" (Jules-Rosettes and Martin, 1997, 25-26) . From this perspective, the highly recurrent emphasis put on workers' individual will, and the way the *dagong* experience is framed as a challenge that will allow to test one's capacities and fulfill oneself, may, I suggest, be conceived of as a sign of the overlapping between individual categories and elite or officially sponsored ones and a form of engagement between popular categories and state-sponsored ones. Hence, the narration of *dagong*, as the authors are drawing from a set of terms and narrative structures which constitute the 'narrative space of *dagong*', may turn into a highly patterned way of framing experiences, which may be summed up as follows: *dagong* allows to learn from experience if one is armed with determination, but it also includes failure and success, ups and downs, joy and sorrow. Similarly, within migrant workers' published and unpublished texts, one finds a very pervasive narrative structure: leaving the village for work, being in search of work or simply working in cities implies being faced with adversity (unfriendly environment, very hard work conditions, loneliness, etc.) that represents a challenge for one's capacities; the change in attitude either turns into an improvement in the situation of the author-worker or generates the hope for such an improvement. Interviews with workers and editors showed that many of the authors seemed *very much aware of what was expected from them* by the editors in terms of how they should frame their tales in order to have their texts published. From this we may infer that, for those magazines which are linked to official institutions, migrant workers who are used to reading and writing to magazines know that they need to put up a certain written performance by sticking to specific narrative lines if they want to get published. Editors, through the reworking they either carried out themselves or suggested authors to carry out, had an implicit influence on the types of tales being written. Besides, when authors frame their tales in such a way, they may draw from a repertoire of highly pervasive and ready-made popular expressions such as 'sour, sweat, bitter and hot' (*suan tian ku la*) or 'dagong is very exciting but also very frustrating' (*dagong hen jingcai you hen wunai*). Such expressions may obviously be viewed as fairly widespread popular resources, not only for workers but also for other categories of people within Chinese society: the great recurrence of such expressions in workers' written narratives turns them into narrative tropes. The following two fragments can serve to illustrate such patterns as frames for experience:

'There should be *no regret to have chosen this road* (...) I said to myself that as I was 18, I had to go out to *try my chance* and see what *the world outside* looks like (...) No matter what happens, I will face it with courage, I cannot escape it (...) *Dagong is very tough*, but I have not had this experience yet and this is still all very new for me. To be able to *give it a try* is a *challenge for my own capacity* (...) *Success and failure* are both going to *test* us. (...) *Opportunities and challenges* coexist, we need to see whether we *can grasp* them (...) I am now ready to go out and *dagong*' (Unpublished letter, 2003).

'Those who *dagong*, who have left their hometown, their friends and relatives, They have brought their hopes and dreams with them. Once they have arrived in an unknown place, they lead a painful life, they let their sweat and tears flow.

They work hard for tomorrow's happy life, they do this hard job conscientiously.
I believe we just need to work conscientiously and there won't be anything that we shall not be able to achieve (...).
Mom and dad, are you fine? You can be sure that I will keep on working hard like this (...)" (*Dagong de ren*, online song)⁴

We may infer that when they are writing their tales, the authors engage somehow with a series of values and of narrative structures – including model trajectories that they know of (through reading books, magazines and through listening or watching songs, etc.) – as well as with the qualities and attributes individuals need to possess as conditions for trying to ascend the social hierarchy.

An important meaning conveyed in the above-mentioned fragments is that if one happens to fail in one's professional endeavors, it is mainly due to one's own inadequacy and inability to adapt to the competitive environment, suggesting a quasi-linearity from one's efforts to the possibility of individual success. Such a linear causality that individual efforts, abnegation and sacrifices necessarily lead to success is a major feature of officially espoused representations of *dagong*. Moreover, the use of such a rhetoric of learning from one's 'failures and successes' and of 'being able to seize opportunities and challenges' point to a patterned and depoliticized way of framing one's experience which individualizes the reasons of success and failure. Similarly to what Zhao Yuezhi had shown for the tabloids' representation of laid-off workers (Zhao Yuezhi 2002), issues of social hierarchy are reduced to matters of individual capacity and personal psychology⁵. Thereby, the class, exploitative dimension of the political economy of migrant labour is, if not erased, euphemized. Again, as stressed above, such rationales are fairly common among Chinese people in post-Mao China, but within the narrative practices related to *dagong*, they become so recurrent that they turn into discursive tropes. Once the *dagong* experience is framed by 'hardship-conscientious work', 'opportunities and challenges' couplets or by the 'learn from experience' rhetoric, it gets *detached* from structural and historic-political forces underlying the subordinate condition of migrant workers. At the same time, it gets *attached* to an urban elite sponsored discourse on rural migrant workers as 'subjects to be'. According to this rhetoric, rural people are supposedly low in quality and may hope to raise this quality by endlessly taking pains and by learning knowledge and techniques. Besides, the highly recurrent emphasis on the link between individual efforts and success similarly permeates the workplace in many factories of the Pearl River Delta and such a narrative is also directed by rural families towards those who have left the village. Hence, upon concrete conditions of constraints linked to their rural conditions and within a living and work environment which is often marked by instability and precariousness, I argue that we find here an illustration of narrative strands which, in addition to being generated by workers themselves, concentrate on them via three intersecting and self-strengthening sources: the party-state, the workplace and rural families⁶.

I suggest now to move on to how the 'space of the *dagong* culture' may allow workers to articulate a major dimension of the subaltern identity of migrant workers: disillusion,

⁴ '*Dagong de ren*', <http://user.qzone.qq.com/1054348001/blog/1226245330>, last accessed 5th September 2012.

⁵ In her work on the representation of rural women in two All-China Women Federation related publications, Jacka similarly notes the emphasis on self-development and on the capacity to work hard as main themes in order to rise on the social ladder. (Jacka 2006).

⁶ I draw this insight from Pun Ngai who argued that female migrant workers were the object of the triple domination of "global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy". Pun 2005, 4. According to the evidence provided by a Foxconn 2010 study carried out in several Foxconn plants, slogans such as 'Spurt the magnificent dream', 'To suffer is the basis for richness', 'You will extend your dream from here to your future' were placated on the walls of the plant. Foxconn report 2010.

frustration, despair, indignation, marginality and precariousness crystalize a more contradictory and critical understanding of *dagong* which is more infused with class relations.

Embodied indignity as criticism

‘Embodied indignity as criticism’ can be defined as a form of critique towards an experienced unfair social order. It echoes Scott’s argument about the collective experience of domination and exploitation which can generate collective narratives of indignation, of redress and of justice (Scott 1990). Within such narratives, rural migrant workers, who often define themselves as ‘people from below’, contrast their yearnings for greater stability with their continued experience of subalternity and with their rather precarious condition. In such narratives, workers’ experiences may also be conceived of as reactions to euphemizing and somewhat triumphant narratives of success.

The ‘embodied indignity as criticism’ narrative mode is linked to expressions of disillusionment on the part of migrant workers who are facing a situation that often turns out to be tougher than what they had expected and heard or read about. For some migrant workers, such a feeling is linked to facing the reality that improving one’s condition will be far harder than expected. This feeling is often expressed by the term *wunai* (无奈) which can either be translated as frustration or being at a loss, not knowing what to do or think. Asked what they meant by *wunai*, migrant workers often referred to being discriminated against in other people’s cities because of their temporary residents’ status. Such a feeling also needs to be related to the growing expectations nurtured by the second generation of migrant workers and their frustration at too often not having these expectations accomplished.

The idea of nurturing ideals and aspirations and of working hard in order to achieve one’s dream is a highly recurrent one within ‘the narrative space of *dagong*’, we have seen. In the next 2009 song by the New Workers Art Troup entitled ‘Our world, our dream’, reference is made repeatedly to this notion of dream but in this case in order to contrast it with very down-to-earth hardship faced by migrant workers, thereby expressing a fundamental dimension of workers’ collective identity. Here is a fragment of this song:

‘Our world is the very long production chain.
We work overtime, completely worn out.
We have paid with our best years of youth, our sweat and our blood.
To save on food in order to send some money home is our dream.

Our world is metal bars and concrete.
The buildings and bridges have been built with our hands.
Labouring day and night, doing the dirty, dangerous and painful work.
To get our pay smoothly is our dream.

Our world is being despised,
Being used to coldness and prejudice (...)

Our world is a battlefield without gunfire.
Only the roaring machines are running crazily;
Injuries, occupational disease, pain and despair.
Our dream is safety, health and security⁷.

⁷ <http://www.chengbiancun.com/2010/0220/1502.html>, last accessed on 14 September 2012.

In this song, one may argue that if the workers' dream is to have such basic rights respected, then this dream becomes a claim aimed at the government to live up to its own fundamental commitments, promises and the legislation it has designed: to provide its people with minimum social and economic wellbeing and not to let them be subjected to exploitative labour.

A central meaning in the 'embodied indignity as criticism' mode is that of sacrifice and painful efforts that are *not* rewarded as they should or that do not pay off at all. This meaning has been circulating very widely via the press, reportage and scientific literature and has become a core narrative category used by migrant workers chiefly when denouncing unfair treatment and putting forward claims. This fragment of a 1995 migrant worker text offers an illustration of this category:

I cannot say what I got from this, I have just kept fighting on this earth full of bitterness and where it is hard to find a shelter, going up and down (...) *Time has taken away the best years of youth and the illusions of those of the same age as us and it has left behind deeper and more painful frustration* (...) I have offered the little blood and sweat that was left in my heart for other people's city in exchange for this meager pay" (*Wailaigong*, July 1995, 26).

In other similar narratives, it is the link between efforts and success or social mobility which is questioned. Within euphemizing narratives, relentless efforts and sacrifices entailed being rewarded (*huibao*) and being conferred a sense of pride. In many texts that belong to the 'embodied indignity' repertoire, however, core elements of the hegemonic representation of social mobility are questioned by pointing at how far removed what migrant workers face in their daily life is from these linear representations. An interesting song in which one finds a similar mix of disillusion and criticism was posted on the web in 2009 in the wake of the economic slowdown caused by the 2008 financial crisis. This amateur song is found on many online Chinese music providers and was acclaimed as the 'one million click song'. It tells the tale of a young man who quits school in order to go to Guangdong to find a job. The whole song is actually a list of disillusion this worker faces once he arrives in Guangdong province. The following fragment of another song by a street singer⁸ provides a rich glimpse into the experience of life and labour outside one's hometown. It also neatly illustrates the articulation of a subaltern identification:

'Wandering all year in the street of this city,
The sunny gardens at once very close to us and so far away.
Nobody wants to know our stories,
And nobody will remember our love.
This city is so cold, I would like to go home.
The tea flowers along the river, on the mountains of my hometown.
(...)
You have nourished so many ideals,
On the first night of the new year,
Alone again in the most prosperous streets of this city,
Without destination, nowhere to go.
Not far, in the tallest of these buildings, in each brick, in each tile: my sweat.
I have left my youth in it, memory of all my suffering'.

Central in this song is the idea of leading a life on the margins, a life marked by precariousness. This is expressed by the notion of 'wandering' in 'so cold' a city and feeling 'alone' and estranged in the streets. It relates to a defining feature of the subaltern condition of migrant workers who, while they have been toiling in the cities often for many years, still

⁸ See <http://blog.myspace.cn/e/408926378.htm>.

experience various forms of indignities both at work and in public space. As Pun and Lu wrote, ‘the longer they [migrant workers] work in a big city, the more aware they are of their exclusion’. Through an in-depth analysis of the plight of a migrant worker laboring in Shenzhen, they argue that this worker ‘made it clear he was not discontent with his working conditions or salary; what worried him was the future, the prospect of neither security, nor dignity’ (Pun and Lu 2010, 15). The impossibility to be accepted as a legitimate and permanent citizen is further highlighted by insisting on the fact that the workers’ voice cannot be heard or perhaps more fundamentally that their history will not be recorded (*Nobody wants to know our stories, Nobody will remember our love*).

The idea of narrating or recording the *real* story of migrant workers runs through much of migrant literature as well as in song writing. In many of the introductory sections or in comments of migrant workers’ writings, the authors express a will to participate to the ‘*dagong*’ narration, to add their story to other people’s tales. This suggests that *dagong* is a collective object that is worth being narrated and is built both individually and collectively. To narrate one’s experience of ‘*dagong*’ seems to provide a space where people, whatever their level of education, may produce a narrative that defines itself as true and sincere. The notion of recording, of providing a ‘platform’ to voice the struggles, experiences and history of ‘people from below’ is a core one in the self-definition of *dagong* culture by migrant workers. As Sun argued, an important stake here is ‘the struggle to reclaim the role of workers and peasants as the legitimate and most authoritative historical speaking subject’ (Sun 2012, 1005).

The last two sentences of the fragment embody a recurrent idiom within ‘the space of the *dagong* culture’: that of the contrast between skyscrapers as conspicuous signs of prosperity and migrant workers’ relentless efforts and suffering. Their ‘blood and sweat’ symbolize here the fact that while they are paying a heavy price for this prosperity – their ‘best years of youth’ have been wasted away –, they still go on leading a life strongly marked by precariousness, marginality and to some extent indignity. Within the above-mentioned video-clip, pictures of the singer with skyscrapers at the back alternate with pictures of ordinary migrant workers who carry their heavy bags and sometimes their children, some of them on the move, while others are lying down on the ground in or near train stations. This alternation of images stresses even further the idea of a condition of underclass still characterizing migrant workers in 21st century China.

Extension

Having thus shown a few instances of reworking and negotiation of a set of notions and values which I have called ‘the narrative space of *dagong*’ and demonstrated how this allowed a process of partial adhesion, engagement and re-appropriation, I should add that there are also more and more instances where further collective categories are being introduced. I have pointed to the strong pattern of individualization in narratives of success and failure and to the fact that within such narratives unequal power relations and patterns of exploitation were hardly challenged. In a number of online songs as well as in magazines, new categories such as ‘justice’ (*zhenyi*), ‘equality’ (*gongli*), ‘freedom’, ‘with fair treatments away’ and ‘struggle together for our rights’ have appeared. In some instances a narrative trope such as ‘confidence in oneself is strength’ is turned into ‘unity is strength’ or ‘struggling to achieve one’s ideals’ is changed to ‘struggling in order to get our happiness and rights’. We also find narratives more imbued with a rhetoric of legal rights and the need to

organize in order to have these rights respected⁹. The increasing circulation of these categories echoes a general trend towards greater awareness of rights among rural workers and more organized collective mobilization. In the following recent text, we find both the ‘embodied indignity as criticism’ mode as well as a narrative more oriented towards collective mobilization:

‘My blood has been splitting, I have been fighting, I have gone through so much hardship for all these years and still no money in my pockets.
We have found out that we do not belong to this world, we have walked so many roads, split so much of our blood and sweat, and still nothing in our pockets.
Shenzhen, whose world are you? Are you workers’ world?
But you are only rich people’s world, why?
You have rejected workers on the margin, why?
Is this society fair? If it’s unfair, what should we do? Everyone should remember, unity is strength’
(*Migrant worker*, February 2012, 5).

Moreover, we find an increasingly explicit rejection of the ‘make efforts – achieve your dreams’ idea. This needs to be related to the fact that the second generation of migrant workers, who have a higher level of education, a better knowledge of the law, are more radical in their demands and have stronger experience of social exclusion, as the recent waves of collective mobilization have shown. According to Pun and Lu, ‘A huge chasm emerged between their life expectation of becoming urban-worker citizens and their actual daily work experiences, which were characteristic of the dormitory labour regime and which involved exclusion from city life. This chasm precipitated anger, frustration and resentment conducive to the emergence of the workers’ consciousness and their shared class position’ (Pun and Lu 2010).

What material, socioeconomic and political relations do the cultural processes documented in this paper reveal. Investigating the everyday narrative practices relating to *dagong* sheds light on various facets of rural migrant workers’ identity, on their condition and on their everyday material and symbolic struggles. It also sheds light on the cognitive and normative background of the subaltern condition of rural migrant workers and, to some extent, of the increasingly larger and more assertive social mobilization revolving around labour.

The space of narration of *dagong* experience has become a highly, however never totally saturated, intertextually constructed and ideologically intense space of struggle. There is indeed a great resonance, a strong intertextuality between the various mediating sites (mainstream media, popular literature, songs, etc.) through which *dagong* is narrated. *Dagong* has become an object that is constituted and re-constituted repeatedly and from which people may locate themselves in relation with a series of norms and values a migrant worker ought to cultivate, and even more crucially in relation with the core societal values and norms accounting for wealth and social mobility in post-socialist China.

Lastly, the human experiences and cultural practices described here reflect people’s capacity to make sense of their reality and put forward claims linked to justice and dignity in often creative ways. But this essay also points to the sheer difficulty to alter, in a substantial

⁹ The rhetoric of the need to protect workers’ individual legal rights by raising workers’ awareness of the law is found in many of the magazines published for migrant workers, including those backed or depending upon official institutions, from the early 1990s on. For a critique of the discourse of ‘legalism’ as self-defeating and as a process of ‘de-ideologization’ in the face of an exploitative sub-contracting system in the construction industry, see Pun and Xu 2011. See also Froissart 2011.

and sustainable way, the politico-institutional balance of power in favor of the plight of rural migrant workers, or to move away from the mix of disillusion and resentment they still face within the specific political-economy of rapid accumulation of post-Mao China.

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For Further Reading

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