

# MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE PEARL RIVER DELTA

## Discourse and Narratives about Work as Sites of Struggle

Eric Florence

**ABSTRACT:** With the introduction of capitalist labor relations into China certain attitudes, competencies, and values associated with global capitalism seem to be increasingly valorized. This article analyzes the values and principles ascribed to migrant workers as part of practices linked to modes of government. The author confronts the dominant form of cultural construction of migrant workers through the Shenzhen official press with migrant workers' own narratives about their experience of work (*dagong*) in the city as the narratives are mediated through two different sites, namely, participant observation, interviews with rural migrants, and a body of unpublished letters to the editor acquired from several magazines dedicated to migrant workers. The article sheds light on the ways in which migrant workers' narratives confirm or, on the contrary, contest the pivotal elements of the hegemonic construction. Three different narratives that migrant workers produce about their own lives and about Shenzhen are examined. These narratives range from affirmations of dominant discourses about migrant workers and expressions of disillusionment about such discourses, to strategic uses of dominant discourses to justify the claims made by migrant workers.

In this article, I follow Mitchell Dean “in studying the forms of truth and knowledge that “inform and arise from the practices of government,” as well as the formation of collective and individual identities, i.e., the “statutes, capacities, attributes and orientations...assumed of...those who are to be governed.”<sup>1</sup> I confront the dominant form of cultural construction of migrant workers through the Shenzhen official press with migrant workers' own narratives

about their experience of work (*dagong*<sup>2</sup>) in the city as they are mediated through two different sites: participant observation, in-depth interviews with about ten to fifteen rural migrants, short informal interviews in the streets with about seventy to one hundred people, and a body of unpublished letters to the editor of several migrants' magazines. Drawing on James C. Scott's suggestion that the dominant discourse may be considered "a plastic idiom or dialect that may carry an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive to their use as intended by the dominant,"<sup>3</sup> I will uncover the ways in which migrant workers' narratives confirm or, on the contrary, contest the pivotal elements of the hegemonic construction. I will examine three different narratives that migrant workers produce about their own lives. These narratives range from affirmations of dominant discourses about migrant workers, to expressions of disillusionment about such discourses, to strategic uses of dominant discourses to justify protests about the harsh conditions experienced by migrant workers.

From 1958 onwards, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exercised power over the population through the use of "categories." One set of categories differentiated the agricultural from the nonagricultural population (*nongye renkou* vs. *fei nongye renkou*). Those who were designated as agricultural found themselves geographically and socially immobilized. Another set of categories took the form of class labels. The CCP also enacted a series of class-based and political classifications.<sup>4</sup> During the mass movements of the 1950s, these classifications enabled the party to distinguish between those who would benefit from its largesse and those who would become the targets of struggles (*douzheng*). Those assigned the lowest class labels could find themselves relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy, facing statutory or political death. As Jean-François Billeter has noted, for almost three decades after 1949 such classifications exerted tremendous consequences on the position of each individual in the social hierarchy and on the nature of the relationship of each individual with the party whenever mass movements were launched.

But if the functioning of this highly elaborate system of classifications had very concrete material purposes and effects, the system has been bolstered

- 
1. Dean 1999, 32.
  2. The word *dagong* connotes discipline and submission to extremely harsh regimes of work and involves a plurality of meanings ranging from fierce exploitation, loss of control of one's time and space, an intense feeling of precariousness and severe injuries to one's dignity to symbols of modernity and prosperity.
  3. Scott 1990, 102–3. I also draw on Scott's argument that since the "hidden transcript" (i.e., discourse, practices, gestures, etc. that are outside the direct gaze of the ruling elite) is by definition virtually out of reach of the researcher, it is through forms of popular expressions such as songs, poems, tales, and jokes that we may hope to come across elements that stand at the border between the hidden transcript and the public transcript. *Ibid.*, 19.
  4. On the nature of these classifications and the fact that these were not only economic but also political, see Billeter 1985, 127–69; Dirlik 1983, 182–211.

through the mobilization of a series of narrative techniques that aimed at overcoming, inverting, and reinterpreting reality.<sup>5</sup> This reinterpretation has been of critical importance in creating a “new mythos of the polity, a new moral discourse of the nation, and a new hegemonic interpretation of experience.” Some of these reinterpretative techniques (“speaking bitterness,” literary campaigns, scar literature, mass movements, etc.) have been claimed and institutionalized by the state. As Lisa Rofel has argued, in the Mao era, the CCP had posited within workers and peasants a “subaltern consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> By telling their story, using specific categories of knowledge such as class exploitation, individuals were encouraged to locate themselves with regard to the party, and so became conceived of as new socialist subjects. This also contributed, as Rofel has noted, to the creation of a new public discourse about socialist wealth that emphasized egalitarianism and collectivism. These narrative techniques were mobilized repeatedly during the Maoist era, accompanying major social and political transformations such as the collectivization of agriculture in the mid fifties.

Since the beginning of the reform era in 1978, some of the Party-state-sanctioned classifications and concomitant allocation systems (of space, goods, labor, etc.) have been altered considerably. On the one hand, with the trend toward marketization and the progressive incorporation of the Chinese economy into global capitalism, certain institutional and ideological constraints have been relaxed, e.g., the household registration system (*hukou*) and regulations on employment and trade. Simultaneously, a culture of consumption has spread throughout Chinese society as a tremendous variety of goods, ideas, values, and information saturated Chinese cities against a background of socialist institutions.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the party-state has been keen to allow greater freedom within the society by enacting a series of disciplinary techniques toward specific groups of the population such as rural migrants. Michael Dutton has termed this the “double pincer” movement:

Peasants are offered to the market as “free” labour...and simultaneously disciplined into the language of the market by the harshness of the alternative (strict laws against vagrancy, prostitution, itinerant suspects, etc.). This double move is a compact signed under two names: one signs “freedom” (the freedom of movement to places of work, the freedom to buy and sell one’s labour, not to mention the freedom to trade), the other signs “restriction” (restriction upon those who can and cannot remain in the cities, restrictions upon acceptable and unacceptable forms of work).<sup>8</sup>

The relative relaxation of state control over people’s lives has not meant the end of ideological control, however, but rather its transformation both in the organization of ideological work and in its content. Not only have the media changed, but the party propaganda organizations and the nature of the propa-

---

5. Apter and Saich 1994, 13–15.

6. Rofel 1999, 27.

7. Chen et al. 2001, 12–13; Schein 2001, 225–26.

8. Dutton 1998, 9–10.

ganda have diversified to incorporate market culture. As Geremie Barmé has stressed, some of the party's slogans and modes of language have been transformed and its "sign systems have been enhanced and enriched."<sup>9</sup>

Major changes have also taken place in the content of state-sponsored representations and discourse since the beginning of post-Mao economic reforms. The stress on class struggle has been supplanted by a state-sponsored discourse on development that has spread throughout society, taking a variety of forms (scientific, journalistic, popular, etc.). As Ann Anagnost has argued, the language of class has been replaced by a teleological narrative that emphasizes a party-state-led evolution from backwardness to civilization and from poverty to wealth.<sup>10</sup> The notion of the "quality of the population" (*renkou suzhi*) is at the core of this discourse of development. It allows for a shift from a focus on relations of production during the Mao era to a strong emphasis on productivity in the post-Mao era.<sup>11</sup> Rachel Murphy has noted that part of suzhi discourse's power was due to its strengthening of "related systems of valuation already embedded within Chinese development, such as town versus country, developed versus backward, prosperous versus poor."<sup>12</sup> In post-Mao China, suzhi has turned into a core element "in order to enact hierarchization," by measuring and coding people's value and utility for economic development.<sup>13</sup>

Along with the abandonment of the use of the language of class, the historical heroes of Maoist socialism (*gongren*) — formerly represented as the "masters of the country" (*guojia de zhuren*) — have been "decentered" and "reconstituted" as they are now represented on account of their "low quality" as one of the major hindrances to China's quest for modernization. Whereas in the Mao era job stability and predictability were highly valued and constituted a defining feature of the status of workers, with the economic reforms, forms of work, subjectivities, and attitudes related to flexible capitalism have become more and more prized. With this major representational shift<sup>14</sup> and with the popularization of new forms of knowledge that justify social stratification through an essentialization of the self, how do migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta rationalize their successes and failures and how does this relate to dominant forms of rationalization? I address these and other questions in this article.

Considering Lisa Hoffman's Foucauldian argument about the emergence in post-Mao China of "new modes of professionals" (as well as new subjectivities and new forms of labor) "*in relation* to modes of governing" that draw upon a mix of "disciplinary techniques, political education, and market rationalities,"<sup>15</sup> I first pinpoint some key features of the socioeconomic and institutional con-

---

9. See Barmé 1999, 115–16, 252. See also Zhao 1998.

10. Anagnost 1997, 88.

11. Yan 2003, 92.

12. Murphy 2004, 5.

13. *Ibid.*, 78.

14. This goes together with processes of disciplining and individualization of workers.

15. Hoffman 2001, 46–47.

text of the Pearl River Delta and some aspects of the disciplinary controls that the Delta environment allows. I then turn to the politics of representation of migrant workers by analyzing migrant workers' letters to the editor of a Guangdong Province migrant workers' magazine.

### **The Pearl River Delta Environment: Observation, Social Control, and Appropriation**

As the region that has been at the forefront of China's export-oriented development strategy, the Pearl River Delta has witnessed a parallel increase in (foreign) investments — mainly of Hong Kong origin — and of rural migrant workers.<sup>16</sup> According to conservative estimates, at the end of the nineties, the volume of the “floating population” in the Greater Delta alone reached 10 million, with the most dynamic areas attracting the greatest number of predominantly young female migrant workers.<sup>17</sup> In many cities in the Delta, those in the floating population frequently outnumber the permanent population. In 1999, the municipality of Shenzhen had a floating population of 2,850,000 people, against a permanent population of 1,250,000, while in 1980, 90 percent of the fewer than 100,000 residents of Shenzhen were holders of a permanent household registration.<sup>18</sup> Following the incorporation of the Delta region into the world economy, coastal cities and provinces, as well as county governments in the Pearl River Delta, have become important players in cutthroat competition to offer the best conditions to potential investors in terms of land and low production costs.<sup>19</sup> As a result, even in comparison with countries such as Malaysia or Thailand, migrant workers' salaries have been kept at very low level.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that since the end of the eighties the media have focused greater attention on these alarming labor conditions, local governments have struggled to prevent any deterioration of the investment climate.

The sense we get from the letters analyzed below — as well as from much of the sociological and anthropological literature — is that the institutionally induced instability puts great pressure on migrants and pushes them to accept work at lower-than-expected conditions. Migrants are vulnerable both inside and outside the Delta factories. Within the factories, administrative and fiscal decentralization, key components of economic reforms, means that managers have immense leeway in determining working conditions.<sup>21</sup> Scholars who have

---

16. Lin 2001, 4–5.

17. Guldin 2001, 127.

18. Thireau and Hua 2001b, 38. In 1980, 90 percent of the population of Shenzhen held permanent household registration, while in 1993, only 40 percent was registered permanently in Shenzhen. For further details, see Scharping and Schultze 1997, 177.

19. Woon 1993, 588.

20. Shi 1999, 119. Anita Chan noted that while the Chinese economy was going through a period of rapid expansion, the minimal salary kept unchanged in real terms. See Chan 2003, 44–45; see also Chan 2005, 23–32.

21. Chan and Zhu 2003, 563. I am grateful to Rachel Murphy for helping me to frame this argument more clearly.

studied the labor regimes and workplace politics in the Delta factories have depicted the fierce exploitation and often humiliating conditions migrant workers endure in these factories.<sup>22</sup>

I want to stress here, along with Lee Ching-Kwan, Pun Ngai, and Anita Chan, the fact that the macro-institutional features of the urban environment go hand in hand with such disciplinary labor regimes and allow for optimal appropriation of workers' labor. As has been stressed elsewhere, and as confirmed by my own fieldwork and analysis of migrant letters, the environment outside factory walls in the Delta area is highly unstable and precarious.<sup>23</sup> Pun Ngai observes that in Shenzhen the household registration system and labor control mechanisms are well connected. These mechanisms contribute to intensify and conceal "the exploitation of migrant labourers," she argues.<sup>24</sup> Outside factory walls, migrants face two major forms of vulnerability. One pertains to daily necessities such as shelter; another has to do with controls enforced by public security officials.<sup>25</sup> The high costs that living in an urban setting involves, as well as the difficulties of finding a shelter while looking for work, are reportedly major concerns for migrants. Tamara Jacka has stressed that in the interviews she carried out with migrant workers, most of them "were yearning for a little stability and predictability."<sup>26</sup> Several of the unpublished letters written by migrant workers as well as articles published in migrant magazines and in some mainstream newspapers and magazines, describe the feelings of insecurity that migrants confront on the street due to controls, fines, arrests, and the threat of deportation.<sup>27</sup> Anita Chan notes that among ten young migrant workers she interviewed in Shenzhen in 2002, five had been caught by the police, some of them several times, and nine of them knew of people who had been arrested.<sup>28</sup> Many migrants I interviewed in the streets of Guangzhou, Dongguan, Shenzhen, and Foshan from 2001 to 2004, whether legally registered migrant workers, scrap collectors, or wandering monks, expressed frustration about the prejudice they faced in the city. They felt particularly frustrated about having to comply with all sorts of regulations and having to make payoffs. One worker asked, "Are these

---

22. See Lee 1995; Lee 1998; Chan 1998.

23. See, for instance, Beijing daxue, Dongguan mingong keti zu. 1995, 81–87; Lee 1998, 88.

24. Pun 2004, 6. Pun Ngai also makes a strong argument about the "dormitory labour regime," which "generates hidden costs which are borne by women workers." *Ibid.*, 2.

25. I am grateful to Rachel Murphy for helping me to frame this argument.

26. Jacka 2000.

27. Anita Chan points to a similar feature in her analysis of letters of female migrant workers: Chan 2002, 173. One should not however generalize and apply this feature to all cities of the Delta. Most migrants I interviewed told me that the intensity of police controls varied both in time and space. Some explained, for instance, that after the death of Sun Zhigang in March 2003, control checks were somewhat fewer; I have also been told that controls tend to be tighter in Dongguan and Shenzhen than in smaller cities.

28. Chan 2003, 49.



Migrant workers eat their lunch on a construction site in Beijing. Many millions of rural Chinese have flooded into fast-growing cities seeking jobs that pay better than what they can make farming. (AP Photo/Greg Baker, 9 March 2005)

streets not large enough for us? Are they, after all, not ours too?”<sup>29</sup>

The household registration system and the host of formal and informal, institutional, and discursive practices that go with it make possible an economy of power. Through a process of *observation*<sup>30</sup> and social control, hierarchies of citizenship are produced and the Party-state is able to treat categories of people in a differentiated manner.<sup>31</sup> The degree of intervention by the Party-state in people’s private lives in cities varies according to which population category migrant workers belong. Moreover, the category of “rural migrants” ought to be further divided into smaller and more accurate categories according to their status, the kind of jobs they do and the level of prestige attached to their occupations, the nature of their relationship with officials,<sup>32</sup> their “visibility” in the city, etc. In most Chinese cities, each category of rural migrants has been subjected to a high and differentiated degree of state intervention — both formal and informal<sup>33</sup> — in spheres of residence, employment, reproductive practices,

---

29. Fieldwork notes, Guangzhou, January 2004.

30. Let us consider the important bureaucratic machinery designed to collect data, manage, and control the migrant population. Scharping 1997, 28.

31. Chen et al. 2001, 7. This idea that a “virtual layering of citizenship” is taking place against a background of market forces and socialist institutions is one of Solinger’s main arguments in her benchmark volume (1999).

32. See Solinger 1997, 98–118.

33. According to a study in 2000, between one-third and one-fourth of rural migrants in Beijing had had some of their belongings confiscated and had been forced to pay fines to get them back. This proportion reaches nine out of ten of those rural migrants who are more exposed in their work and whose jobs are

etc.<sup>34</sup> By “externalizing”<sup>35</sup> migrant workers, the household registration system and the several certificates and permits required surely help in implementing highly flexible production regimes.

In the remaining section of this article, I analyze the official construction of the “legitimate migrant worker” in three Shenzhen official newspapers<sup>36</sup> with migrant workers’ narratives from a body of forty-one unpublished letters to the editor of a migrant magazine and from fieldwork interviews carried out between 2001 and 2004 in several cities of the Pearl River Delta. I start by describing briefly the main features and content of the unpublished letters. Then I examine in-depth three letters that exemplify different modes of articulation of migrant workers’ narratives with the official construction of migrant workers.

### **Migrant Workers’ Magazines and the Characteristics of Letters to the Editor**

Before examining the unpublished letters, it will be helpful to address briefly the nature and the status of migrant workers magazines in relation to the changes the press and cultural production have undergone over the last decade. Despite a clear trend in transformations toward marketization it must be stressed that the nature of the principles of news and cultural production have not been altered fundamentally: the Chinese media still retain their role as mouthpiece of the Party.<sup>37</sup> Kevin Latham observes that “one of the fundamental responsibilities of news media is [still] to contribute to social change as desired by Party and government.”<sup>38</sup> Still, there has been a tremendous diversification of both the press in its written and audiovisual forms and many daily papers in China nowadays look quite like Western tabloids, with much stress on sensationalism and consumption.

---

low in prestige. Li 2003, 126–37.

34. Zhang Li notes that one of the distinctions between migrants and urban residents is the degree of state intervention in people’s private and public spaces. For instance, she highlights the fact that migrant housing may be the object of unwarranted inspections, while this seldom happens for urban residents. Zhang 2001, 37–38.
35. By “externalizing” I mean that through such mechanisms migrant workers are turned into immigrants in their own country in the sense that their stay in Chinese cities is conditioned on their obtaining residency and work permits, and they are not provided the social entitlements permanent residents usually get. Their pay is also on the whole much lower than that of permanent residents.
36. The newspapers investigated here are the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* (*Shenzhen Tequbao*, hereafter *STQB*), the *Shenzhen Evening* (*Shenzhen Wanbao*, hereafter *SWB*), and the *Shenzhen Legal Daily* (*Shenzhen Fazhibao*, hereafter *SFB*). The papers are all linked institutionally to the Shenzhen authorities and all are under the supervision of the Party propaganda department. The two periods considered here are January to March 1994 and 1998. For further details, see Florence 2004, 42–63.
37. See Zhao 1998.
38. Latham 2000, 638.
39. He 2000, 134.



In press organs directly under the supervision of party or municipal authorities, however, rather bald examples of party propaganda are still common. For instance, in newspapers such as the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* articles on model workers and more generally on spiritual civilization are frequently imposed by party leaders.<sup>39</sup> Zhao Yuezhi shows that even street tabloids that may seem to deviate from dominant or official norms, actually confirm these very norms, even if not in a systematic manner.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, as Barmé has shown, during the nineties, the lines between “the mass culture suffused with ideological traits that may back authoritarian rule and more traditional forms of propaganda” began to blur.<sup>41</sup> Barmé links this blurring to the emergence of young editors, journalists, and writers and to their ambivalent position toward party propaganda. Migrant magazines<sup>42</sup> offer migrant workers space to narrate their own often contradictory visions of migration, life, and work in China’s cities. And they provide a way for migrant workers to build a collective condition and identity. Some magazines are linked to mainstream newspapers or to government or party authorities while others may not have such straightforward institutional links.<sup>43</sup> In a certain sense, these magazines face constraints that are similar to those that more mainstream types of popular magazines and newspapers face: they have to be responsive to the market and be attractive to their readership and advertisers, while at the same time they must stick to, at least not move too far from, the party line, especially on sensitive issues like migrant labor. In my interactions with journalists and editors of such magazines, I could sometimes feel a tension between a sincere desire to remain as close as possible to the issues relating most directly to migrant workers’ lives and concerns, as well as to raise and discuss questions relating to social hierarchy or to the prejudices that migrant workers face<sup>44</sup> and, on the other hand, the political injunctions to stress positive or optimistic dimensions of the *dagong* experience.

Staff of the magazines and political leaders both agreed that the magazines should have a pedagogical function vis-à-vis migrant workers. The authors of several letters I analyzed expressed the thought that the magazines give “a direction to migrant workers” because, as one writer said, “they allow us to better understand how to protect our human rights and our dignity.”<sup>45</sup> Magazine journalists and editors were all conscious of a need to give direction: “to give migrant workers an example of how they should act,” they would tell me. They did this

---

40. Zhao 2002, 130.

41. Barmé, 1999, 235–36.

42. Although in this text I write “migrant magazines” or “migrant workers’ magazines,” it should be noted that these magazines are usually not published *by* migrant workers, but *for* them, even though some of the articles are written by them. Most of the journalists working for these magazines are not of working class background. Thanks to Zhao Yuezhi for highlighting this point.

43. In January 2004, I found nine different titles of such magazines in a small bookshop in Guangzhou.

44. Migrant workers in their letters to the editor did stress this tension very much.

45. Letter 25, see also letters 8, 9, 11, 15, and 28. In author’s possession.

by selecting stories that showed the successes of migrant workers or, as negative examples, their failings. The Party-sponsored ideological dimension of these magazines can be perceived in their efforts to “educate people.” This function they share with the more mainstream media, emphasizing correct attitudes and stressing the social norms associated with them.

The forty-one letters I analyze here describe the writers’ lives and work in Delta cities. Thirty-three unpublished letters I obtained feature poems and short stories that refer more indirectly to the workers’ “dagong experience” (*dagong jingli*).<sup>46</sup> Of the forty-one letters under scrutiny, thirty-five were written in 2001 and six in 2003. The length of these letters varies from two handwritten pages to more than twenty pages: a total of 174 pages. The authors of the letters all work in Pearl River Delta cities such as Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Guangzhou. Thirty-four of the letters were written by male migrant workers.<sup>47</sup> This is worth noting because while most surveys show that labor migration in China is predominantly masculine, approximately 60 percent of migrant laborers in the Pearl River Delta are women.<sup>48</sup> Compared with articles published in other migrant magazines that discuss romance and dating practices of (female) migrant workers at length, only a few letters in my collection focus on romance. The fact that these letters were rejected, and perhaps not read by the editors, does not distinguish them per se from published letters. The explanations given to me for the rejections included “poor literary style,” the content of the letters not conforming to the editorial line of the magazine, and insufficient time to read all of the hundreds of letters received each month.<sup>49</sup> The value of reading these unpublished letters lies in the greater variety of styles and plots they exhibit. The picture they give of the lives of migrant workers in the Delta is also somewhat darker than the one in the published letters, which editors select because they paint a rosier picture of the lives of migrant workers.

Depictions of painful factory labor, long working hours, instances of prejudice and humiliation in the workplace, and other violations of migrant workers’ rights are the central, core elements of sixteen of the letters.<sup>50</sup> Feelings of loneliness, of leading a bland existence, of hopelessness, and fears associated with

---

46. In this article, I have chosen to analyze a body of forty-one letters written by migrant workers and sent to the editor of one of the several migrant workers’ magazines. Altogether, I obtained seventy-four unpublished letters, which were given to me by journalist friends working on the magazines.

47. I cannot account for the fact that most of the letters were written by males. This may be the result of a bias linked to the selection process by journalists.

48. The proportion of female migrant labor is usually even higher among people between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, as in Shenzhen and Foshan where female migrants account for around 75 percent of the total migrant population. This reversed sex ratio has to do with the strong demand for female labor in labor-intensive factories in the electronics, textile, and toys industries. Scharping 1999, 79; Tan 2000, 296.

49. Among the letters collected, about one-fifth had not been opened, hence not read.

50. I have highlighted the main topics of the letters and recorded them in a table

looking for work in a rather unfriendly environment and with potential failure also stand out prominently in most unpublished letters.<sup>51</sup> Two contrasting elements are also reflected upon in several letters: (1) self-achievement or the wish for it through laboring in the city, and (2) disillusionment linked to failure or to the impossibility of fulfilling oneself or one's ideals. Another theme evident in several letters is that of the marginal and precarious conditions of migrant workers in urban settings, including in the dimension of controls (real or potential) by public security agents, fines, and arrests. Some authors also point to rather complex issues such as the relationship between local authorities, the labor inspection bureaus, and the factory managers.<sup>52</sup>

A dimension that emerges in all of the letters is the constraint of China's rural environment. In nine letters the decision to leave the village is explained as being the consequence of one's family being burdened with heavy debts, and with being unable to pay for education or health expenses.<sup>53</sup> Migration, it is clear from these narratives, is not a matter of free choice. Workers are compelled to leave the countryside because of the conditions in which they and their family live.<sup>54</sup> The depictions of these constraints are not general statements about rural conditions but more a *lived reality* that causes intense suffering. In several accounts, the decision to leave the village is explained both as a choice as well as the result of constraints, as suggested by phrases such as "could not help but to leave the village for dagong (*budebu chulai dagong*)."

Let us now further examine three different narrative modes. Each mode exemplifies a specific type of articulation of the narrative with some key elements of the dominant discourse about migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta.

### Self-fulfillment and the Environment

This first narrative mode may be seen as an illustration of a widespread acceptance or "internalization" of the dominant mode of rationalization of social mobility and stratification in post-Mao China. By "internalization," I do not mean to imply complete submission to the dominant discourse.<sup>55</sup> Rather, I suggest that

---

with codes representing each topic. This allowed me to isolate the key topics in the stories told in these letters.

51. Similar elements stand out also in the analysis by Anita Chan of letters written to and by female migrant workers and found after a blaze in a Shenzhen factory. See Chan 2002, 180–82.
52. In one such letter (letter 33) the author refers to the fact that he and his fellow workers did not complain to the labor bureau because the factory boss was a member of the village party committee and was getting on well with the director of the labor bureau. On such issues, see Tan 2000; Lee 1998; and Chan 1995.
53. According to a survey conducted in a rural county of Hubei Province, 40 to 50 percent of rural households' net incomes goes into education when all of the children are enrolled in school. See Unger 2002, 184.
54. Anita Chan makes a similar argument in her analysis of women migrant workers private letters with their families. She states: "The overall impression made

the writers of letters mobilize categories that are central to the dominant discourse and that circulate widely throughout society to explain how (well) they have fared.

In one tale, a young male migrant worker starts by explaining how bitter his first experience of work outside the village has been.<sup>56</sup> After six months searching for work, during which time he almost lost hope, he explains what gave him the strength not to give up: "As I was in the street, I realized that there was nobody to care for me.... I am a man, I have got my dignity, my thought, my hopes and promises. I do not believe that it is not possible to create one's own sky with one's own hands." He then writes that in facing the tough and dehumanizing environment of factory work he found the resources to overcome his difficulties:

To be a migrant worker is really like living a non-human life.... You get tired to a point that you do not know what the day is and which year next year will be. The factory I worked in was like that. What was even tougher was that every day you would suffer different kinds of humiliations. But it is precisely in this environment that my world outlook has undergone a fundamental change.

In the next paragraph, he tells the story of a female worker who befriended him and who managed to get a good job thanks to her own striving and self-education in English. She suggested that he too should learn new techniques and knowledge. This friend, the author writes, "said that although she was not really smart, by doing some extra efforts, she would manage to be successful, she just needed to struggle consciously and she would eventually be able to create her own space." In the next sections, the letter writer describes what has changed in his world outlook. He now knows that "the dagong life is a tempering process and the one who goes forward with courage will manage to go against the tide. The weak one will only stagnate. A person cannot endlessly be angry at others, and keep saying that his lot is unfair."

The author concludes his letter by addressing migrant workers as a whole: In fact, we, "the nation of laborers," start from much lower than many people.... Those who arrive first are those fighters who go forward in difficult

---

by the letters is that the young people would not have gone to the factories had their families not been under such financial strain.... Their apparent freedom of choice needs to be set against the poverty trap they were in at home." Chan 2002, 181–82.

55. In this respect I follow James C. Scott's suggestion to be cautious about any interpretation of the supposed effects of the dominant ideology since it is extremely difficult to distinguish between strategic moves and ethical submission. This is what Scott calls "radical indeterminacy." See Scott 1990, 92. It may be argued tentatively that some authors "frame" their stories, drawing from a repertoire of specific categories, arguments, or plots that they think are likely to concur with either the editorial line or narrative structure favored by the magazine they are writing to. The editors of migrant magazines I interviewed actually confirmed this argument to me.

56. Letter 15. See letter 8 for a strikingly similar line of argumentation.

circumstances. They are the champions who deserve to be truly respected and whom we may proud of. The “dagong” [experience] is a wealth. Struggle! Nation of laborers! Life of laborers.

In this letter, as well as in some other texts, the author brings together a number of elements, drawing upon the dominant discourse about Shenzhen, the South, and migrant workers in general. In particular, the writer places his faith in the officially espoused view that the successful transformation of the self is made possible thanks to individual striving, the will to master useful knowledge and techniques; the fair and competitive environment of “the South” can liberate migrant workers’ potential. Let us discuss these elements and test them against the results of my fieldwork, the literature on the subject, and my analysis of the dominant discourse on migrant workers in the mainstream Shenzhen press.

Several scholars have stressed that despite the fact that factory work very often involves fierce exploitation, prejudice, and injuries to their dignity, it also means opportunities for greater autonomy and potential self-fulfillment, as well as experiences associated with city life and factory work.<sup>57</sup> My own fieldwork shows that migrant workers often depict migration as a chance “to see the world” (*jian shimian*), “to try one’s luck in the world” (*chuang yi chuang shijie*), to endeavor to achieve one’s plan, and to fulfill oneself. The vocabulary often used by migrant workers in such depictions of their hometown is one of the “negative potential” such as “cannot stay [in the village]” (*daibuzhu*) and “cannot earn money” (*zhuang buliao qian*). In such accounts the village or hometown is contrasted with “the outside world,” which is then the site where one may achieve oneself. One of my migrant worker informants nicely summarized this:

“Once out of the valley, there is a sky.” Once I was out, thanks to my efforts, I have been able to find a job in the South....So, I find that in the South, there is a vaster world. This vast universe....When you are in the valley, and you look at the sky, it is so small; once out of the valley, I realize how big this sky is. Then I can fulfill myself.<sup>58</sup>

In my analysis of the representation of migrant workers by the Shenzhen’s mainstream press, I found an even greater stress on self-fulfillment.<sup>59</sup> In many articles in the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* and the *Shenzhen Evening News*, self-fulfillment is associated with the milieu of competition that Shenzhen offers. The idea conveyed in these articles is that self-fulfillment is made possible mainly *thanks* to the adversity found in Shenzhen and its atmosphere of emulation. These two excerpts illustrate this point:

When I arrived in the Special zone, I felt immediately that Shenzhen was a

---

57. Lee Ching-Kwan 1995, 15–23; Jacka 2000; Tan 2000, 303–5. A similar paradox of being faced with new forms of domination and experiencing emancipation through migration has been highlighted by the sociology of international migration. See, for example, Sayad 1991.

58. Fieldwork recording, interview no. 3, summer 2001, Guangdong Province.

59. For a detailed analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream press representation of migrant workers, see Florence 2004, 42–63.

city where competition was widespread; I had the feeling that I was not very capable, that I did not know very much. But the zone gave us an environment to grow.<sup>60</sup>

The South is very fair, it has provided us migrant workers with an opportunity for fair competition, so that everybody can stand on the same starting line....The South is a place that polishes people's determination. Over here, there are people who succeed, while others fail; there is joy and there is sorrow. When I fail or when I am in distress, I really want to go back to my place to spend my peaceful life of the past. But when I think over it: I cannot go back, I should not go back. Because I have understood that I love deeply this warm place the South is!<sup>61</sup>

This idea that Shenzhen offers opportunities that enable the individual to progress and contribute to local prosperity is emphasized particularly in articles on model migrant workers, which have been very prominent in the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*, especially in 1998.<sup>62</sup> In one such article in March 1994, ten temporary workers were praised for their outstanding achievements for which they were given a permanent resident permit. The model workers obtained their permits thanks to their "painful labor (*jiannan laodong*) and the exceptional results they had achieved (*chuangzao chude chuse chengji*)." The next section of the article emphasized that "if, as them, you are earnest and pragmatic [*jiaotabsidi*], if you try to learn and make progress [*qiuzhi jinqu*], if you are steady and industrious [*qinfen nuli*], if you make contributions [*zuochu gongxian*], perhaps then one day you too will possess a Shenzhen green card." In this as in many other articles in the Shenzhen mainstream newspapers, we observe the stress on notions such as "painful labor," the qualities of pragmatism, steadiness, industriousness, the will to "learn and make progress," and to contribute to economic development. These are the necessary sought-after attributes and competences that may decide somebody's legitimate claim for permanent residence. In the last section of this article, the authors note that not many workers will be able to get a residence permit because Shenzhen is such a small place. But this, as the author shows, should not prevent workers "from expressing their capacities in the future." The author goes on to say: "What is most important is to use fully the advantageous conditions offered by Shenzhen, to take advantage of one's best years of youth [*dabao de qingchun suiyue*], to learn useful knowledge and techniques. This is the intelligent attitude." The author concludes: "One may not have a Shenzhen 'green card,' but what one can surely not fail to possess is to have ideals and aspirations (*lixiang baofu*), knowledge and competences (*zhishi caineng*), as well as dignity (*reng zunyan*)." Shenzhen — no matter what its size — is thus a place, full of opportunities and challenges, where people are supposed to make the most of their po-

---

60. *SWB*, 23 March 1994, 3.

61. *STQB*, 15 February 1998, 6.

62. From February to March 1998, six special pages out of nine devoted to migrant workers contained articles on model migrant workers, while other articles presented model factories.

tential.

In the unpublished migrant worker's narrative detailed above and in the *Shenzhen Daily* articles, the mobilization of common or similar values and aptitudes such as the worthiness of the dagong experience conceived of as a tempering process, the will to go forward, make progress, and learn new techniques and knowledge, the importance of industriousness and steadiness, as well as the need to keep struggling on one's own in order to grasp the opportunities offered by this nurturing environment can all be observed. These arguments share an individualization of the reasons of success and failure. They do indeed confer the idea that if one happens to fail, it is mainly due to one's own inadequacy and inability to adapt to the environment, suggesting a quasi-linearity from one's efforts to the possibility of success.<sup>63</sup> Let us note also in the Shenzhen official press a cultural construction of youthfulness as a potential for the development of productive forces and for social mobility that ought not to be wasted away in order to be able to improve oneself and grasp opportunities.

The emphasis on striving, on the individual capacity to take advantage of opportunities, is somewhat characteristic of the kinds of pioneer narratives commonly found among migrants around the world. "Successful" individuals may draw on specific cultural repertoires to make sense, explain, or justify their success and other people's failures. Globalization surely allows for a diffusion of such repertoires around the world, and China is no exception, in the sense that, through the media, through modes of (cultural) consumption, and through migration networks, globalization popularizes models of existence, such as the pioneer or self-made man, that carry strong ethical and symbolic content and may contribute to produce subjectivization.<sup>64</sup> Borge Bakken has documented the vast amount of both Chinese and foreign literature on modernization and on the modern personality, as well as the development of the "study of talents" (*rencaixue*) that has flourished in post-Mao China. Commenting on the Chinese literature on personal improvement Bakken noted the pervasiveness of social Darwinism and the emphasis on values such as striving forward, risk taking, innovation, as well as a necessary and nurturing competition that enhances the will to strive.<sup>65</sup>

Such narratives need also to be considered against the background of great structural disparities between China's coastal regions and the inland areas, as well as between the countryside and Chinese cities. After almost three decades of separation between the countryside and cities,<sup>66</sup> geographic mobility takes on strong cultural meanings, as coming to the city for work also becomes a form

---

63. Xu Feng, documenting the mobilization of model workers within the Party ideological work in a State-owned factory in Jiangsu Province, argued that "model workers are used as examples that one can achieve personal development at any job position." See Xu 2000, 175.

64. Bayart 2004, 262, 272–94.

65. Bakken 2000, 60–62.

66. On these policies and their consequences on Chinese society and development, see Cheng and Selden 1994, 644–68; Cheng 1991; Guo and Liu 1991.

of cultural appropriation of ideas and goods related to the city. In such highly social and spatial hierarchicalization, the city becomes an “intense object of desire” and urbanity is conceived of as an “artefact of popular culture and of consumption.”<sup>67</sup> It is worth noting that in the Chinese case, the Party-state and the urban elite are deeply involved in the reproduction of a discourse of “lack” and in the strengthening of a “hierarchy of desire” and of “cultural hierarchies of opportunity and stagnation.”<sup>68</sup> This discourse of lack needs to be considered as part of the party-state sponsored discourse on development. In addition to this, for young rural females, leaving the countryside may be a means to get away from family control, to gain autonomy and to achieve one’s plans in terms of marriage and education.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, we need to take into account the weight of thirty years of discourse focused on class struggle and on social equality, and the importance of political criteria in deciding limited social mobility. Lisa Rofel observed that as the Maoist class system was repudiated, a new moral discourse on wealth and success that stressed the need to let talents flourish emerged in the reform era. Hence, we need to consider that in post-Mao China, standing behind social comments on and rationalizations of social hierarchy is a criticism of Maoist society. “As a means of radical disengagement from Maoist socialism,” Lisa Rofel argues, “economic reform is also and most significantly a space of imagination.”<sup>70</sup> In this perspective, the rhetoric of “being able to grasp opportunities and learn from challenges” is also very much in line with the ethos of economic reform and more generally with the promotion of market socialism with Chinese characteristics: the process of reform offers opportunities that one ought to be able to take advantage of and there are challenges one should be able to face individually. Some have better aptitudes than others and will benefit more quickly from these opportunities, while those who do not possess the appropriate aptitudes, may still relentlessly learn through processes of migration and work in the city.

The above-cited fragments and many Shenzhen press articles emphasize learning practical knowledge and techniques as a means for self-improvement and social mobility, but in several other tales examined here,<sup>71</sup> the authors explain that the main reason for leaving the village was that they could not continue their secondary school education or they could not afford to enter university. Others explained that they decided to “go out for work” (*chulai dagong*) in order to enable one of their siblings to continue with her/his schooling. Thus, we see how the burdensome constraints of the rural environment bear on the life chances of migrant workers. These letters show that leaving the village for work is not so much a matter of voluntary choice, as it is a question of financial

---

67. Schein 2001, 225, 228.

68. Hoffman 2001, 45.

69. Lee 1998, 74, 84.

70. Rofel 1999, 29, 98, 101, 129. Rofel also notes the heterogeneity of imaginings of economic reform because of great social inequalities and because their eradication was one of the central tenets of Maoist discourse.

71. See letters 8, 13, and 16, for instance.



limits on further study. Feelings of disappointment, sadness, or frustration at being unable to go on studying and having “to go out for work” stand in stark contrast with the rhetoric of migration as a way to acquire knowledge and skills.<sup>72</sup> An overemphasis on the latter conceals the structural obstacles that block the learning process both in the countryside and in the cities. Fieldwork interviews taught me that “time” is a critical factor: migrants who work twelve, fourteen, or sometimes more hours a day simply have no time or energy to study. One worker told me that once he got a job with regular hours then he could start studying.<sup>73</sup> This “acquire knowledge and skills” rhetoric enables some migrant workers to reconcile elements of their reality and to use ideas about the future to make sense of their “dagong conditions.”<sup>74</sup>

The success-through-individual-striving narrative in Shenzhen is linked with the representation of Shenzhen as a model of national economic development. Myth-makers contrast the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with the “economic failures” of Maoism. George T. Crane notes that even if “corruption is real and failure is common, . . . the predominant imagery of the SEZs, and the meaning they convey to China at large, is prosperity, novelty and liberation.”<sup>75</sup> B. Kjellgren contends that as a city built from scratch and as “a laboratory for economic reforms,” Shenzhen has been, more than other areas of China, associated closely with economic reforms, with Deng Xiaoping’s thought, and with migrants.<sup>76</sup>

In interviews I conducted in the Pearl River Delta and in the letters studied here, migrant workers criticized the harsh workplace discipline and the prejudice and dangers they faced in the city. Their “love and hate” relationship to dagong is contradictory: freeing them from constraints, on the one hand, but plunging them into harsh working conditions, on the other.<sup>77</sup> Constant striving and perseverance are defining features of dagong and of migrant workers’ subjectivities. This is no surprise considering their harsh working conditions and the precariousness of their stays in the cities. What is contested, I suggest, and is part of a process of euphemization of class relations, or the naturalization of power,<sup>78</sup> is the idea that hard work leads inevitably to self-fulfillment and social mobility. The feelings of emancipation and self-advancement commonly as-

---

72. I do not mean to deny the fact that some rural migrants do learn a lot or are trying as much as they can to learn things that may help them in their social mobility process. On this point, see Murphy 2002; Thireau and Hua 2001b.

73. Fieldwork recordings, Pearl River Delta, summer 2001.

74. I am grateful to Guy Massart for highlighting this point.

75. Crane 1994, 76, 83, 89; see also Clark 1998, 103–25.

76. Shenzhen is often called the city of “immigrants” (*yimin chengshi*). Interestingly, the term “immigrant” (*yimin*) is usually not used for temporary rural migrants but for state-sponsored migration or for international migrants. Shenzhen, according to Jiang Zemin’s talk in 1993, “could continue as model for the Inland in the strengthening both of the market system, the building of the ‘socialist spiritual civilization,’ and also to find a new role for the Party in this brand new China.” Quoted in Kjellgren 2002, 148.

77. Lee 1995.

sociated with migration and work in the city are, as Lee Ching-Kwan nicely puts it, contrasted with “their identities as transient residents victimized by discrimination....From shop-floor work allocation to harassment in public areas, migrant workers harbor a strong sense of being subjugated as secondary citizens.” Lee concludes: “Against the official rhetoric that personal capacity and effort determine who gets rich first, the standpoint of peasant workers grounded in their experiences is that market socialism does not bring equal opportunity for all. It is not as fair as the state would like to have them believe.”<sup>79</sup>

In the next section, I shall demonstrate how processes of euphemization and concealment<sup>80</sup> manifested through the dominant discourse on migrant workers and “the South” may be contested. I argue that this contestation forms part of a struggle to fix the meaning of dagong.

### The “Song of Dagong”: Acceptance or Disillusionment?

The second narrative mode I explore here is one that emerges in a letter from a 25-year-old migrant worker from Hezhou in Sichuan Province. He starts by saying that he is looking for a better job and hopes to become friends with other migrant workers who, he says, must “surely be in the same situation as me.” He writes that he wants to “end this lonely, sad and tasteless life as a single person” and meet the woman of his dreams. He wishes that all workers be able “to realize their dreams and that the magazine will become more and more successful.” He accompanies his text with a “personal file” (*geren dangan*) that includes his photograph, his area of origin, and his age. The following are the main sections of his song, “The Single Love Song: The Song of Dagong”:

In this world, rich people are everywhere. Why can I not be counted among them? We run around in order to earn money. It is already a long time since we tasted the bitterness of dagong. Among those who dagong, those who fail are everywhere and I am only one of them. Incomes are getting lower and lower and we have to do more and more extra hours. Each worker needs to be aware of this: for money, you should not be scared of having to pay [*weile qian, bie pa fuchu*].

(Refrain) To find a light work, an ideal work, a well-paid work that allows me to get rid of poverty. A job with rights and with a status, a work that would have a name, an advantageous job that enables me to raise my status.

There are so many workers, but only a few are happy. They know nothing but suffering. They have offered and paid their best years of youth [*tamen fengxian le fuchu le meibao qingchun*], but there are only a few

---

78. By “naturalization of power” I mean that the reduction of social stratification to issues of individual psychology is part of a process that aims at turning such stratification into legitimate ones or natural ones.

79. Lee 2002, 70–71.

80. James C. Scott identifies “euphemisation” and “concealment” as two of the four major manifestations of the public transcript, along with “affirmation” and “unanimity.” Scott 1990, 45–63.

fruits.

For money, they are wandering about. It is already a long time since they tasted enough of the bitterness of dagong [*chigou le dagong de ku*]. Among the workers, one finds lost people all around, one can not even find a couple of them who manage to fulfill their ideals. Their burden is getting heavier and heavier, the price we pay is getting higher and higher. Each worker needs to be clear about this: “dagong” means to be unafraid of suffering.

(Refrain)

There are so many workers, those who are well off, one can even not find one among them, while those who have offered and paid their best years of spring [youth] are so numerous. Ah....

(Refrain)

Sad people are so numerous. I have to go through this with courage. One ought not miss the opportunities, having paid, having lost one’s best years of spring [youth] and to sigh with regret. This sad melody of “dagong,” this sincere song of suffering and sadness, who will come sing it with me? Ah....

It is tempting to regard this text as resigned acceptance of the optimistic and often celebratory rhetoric about Shenzhen, the South, migrant workers, and their contribution to the economic development of the region. First, note the repeated contrast between *the rich, who succeed, who are happy* [and] *who are able to fulfill their ideals* and those like himself, who fail and are left with *the bitterness of dagong*. Second, the song’s author contrasts the contribution of migrant workers with the little they earn for their labors. Throughout the nineties, numerous articles and books praised the steadiness of migrant workers, their painful labor, and their contribution to economic development and local prosperity.<sup>81</sup> Media representations of migrant workers in Shenzhen were positive: “without these migrant workers [*dagongzhe*] Shenzhen would be an empty city” and “migrant workers are the ones who have shaped the modern city we live in.”<sup>82</sup> These differ from assessments of the situation in other Chinese cities, where the focus was on the large masses of city-bound migrant workers.<sup>83</sup>

The *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* contains numerous articles that emphasize the sacrifices of migrant workers: they pay with their “sweat and blood” (*fuchu*

---

81. See for example *STQB*, 28 January 1994, 6; *STQB*, 14 January 1994, 6; *STQB*, 28 January 1994, 6; *SWB*, 13 February 1994, 3; *SWB*, 21 February 1994, 1; *Guangzhou Ribao*, 4 February 1994, 1; *STQB*, 4 February 1994, 6; *STQB*, 25 March 1994, 6; *STQB*, 22 August 1994, 6; Liang Yibo 1992, 4–6; Jie and Yang, eds. 1993, 67–71.

82. *STQB*, 25 January 1994, 9; *STQB*, 22 March 1998, 9; *STQB*, 22 March 1998, 9; *STQB*, 29 March 1998, 9; *SWB*, 24 February 1994, 7.

83. Zhang Li described three dominant modes of representation in the construction of the migrant other in Chinese cities: unifying and homogenizing; dehistoricizing and dehumanizing, and, thirdly, abnormalizing. Zhang 2001, 31–33. This would hold true in Shenzhen mainly for those categorized as the “three withouts” (*sanwu*), i.e., all those rural people who have come to cities

*xueban*) and “offer their youth respectfully” (*fengxian qingchun*) to Shenzhen.<sup>84</sup> This latter expression is reminiscent of Mao-era China and the Cultural Revolution (1965–76) when the expression “offering their youth respectfully to the country” (*ba qingchun fengxian gei zuguo*) was used to describe the youngsters who were sent to the countryside to educate the “rural masses” and get educated in return. Articles I studied in the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* described migrant workers having to make sacrifices for their company and for the zone. In one article, for example, the author explains that the Zhonghuaren bicycle company received a large and urgent order from the world’s biggest bicycle retail company in the United States to produce thirty thousand bicycles in three days. Thanks to the perseverance and willingness of the Zhonghuaren workers to endure suffering, the author writes, the factory fulfilled the order on time. The author explains:

[The workers] did not do anything extraordinary, they just offered their youth silently to Zhonghuaren... Yesterday, they suddenly awakened Shenzhen with the sound of their feet; they have created the Chinese miracle [*zhonghua qitji*]. Today, they stepped into the new century. They have initiated a more beautiful and more resplendent tomorrow.<sup>85</sup>

The fact that the company for which migrant workers are striving is called “Zhonghuaren,” meaning Chinese people, conveniently elides the interests of the company and those of the nation.

I would argue that the author’s use of “to offer one’s best years of youth” in “The Song of Dagong” could be an expression of disillusionment or despair tainted with irony. Consider James C. Scott’s argument that “practices of domination and exploitation typically generate the insults and slights to human dignity that in turn foster a hidden transcript of indignation.” It is also possible that the “subordinate” voluntarily strengthens the stereotypes imposed by the dominant, and that such stereotypes may be seen as a form of oppression or, in this specific case, as a kind of epistemic violence, as well as a resource for the subordinate.<sup>86</sup> According to Scott, the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate is a dialogue in which the dialogue “will invariably borrow heavily from the terms of the dominant ideology prevailing in the public transcript.”<sup>87</sup> In my interactions with migrant workers, I have *never* heard anyone use the expression “to offer one’s youth” or speak of contributions or sacrifices for the

---

and have no legal job, no legal residence, and no official identification documents. For a discussion of this category, see Florence 2004, 58–60.

84. It is worth emphasizing that in the “Song of *Dagong*,” the author uses the exact same expression “to offer one’s best years of youth” (*fengxian qingchun*) to describe the contribution he and migrant workers have made.

85. *STQB*, 29 March 1998, 6.

86. Scott 1990, 35–36.

87. Scott goes further into this idea: “For anything less than completely revolutionary ends the terrain of dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle.” Scott’s development of this argument in his book has been most helpful in my analysis. *Ibid.*, 103. The “public transcript” is specific to a social site and represents discourse, but also the practices of the dominant. For a further defi-

zone, for the company, or for the collective interest. On only one occasion did a migrant worker tell me with sarcasm that migrant workers were “making their contribution to the environment” by cycling rather than riding motorcycles, which, of course, they were in no position to buy. By repeatedly contrasting his own condition as well as that of many migrant workers to the dominant discourse about Shenzhen, I suggest that the author of this text is perhaps reacting to an epistemic violence caused by a discourse that celebrates success through individual striving, prosperity and local economic development, a discourse that largely plays down the intense suffering the workers undergo as well as the fact that upward social mobility is far from being the rule in Shenzhen.<sup>88</sup> Pun Ngai and others have observed how much migrant workers’ very bodies are marked by the Pearl River Delta’s harsh working conditions.<sup>89</sup> The unpublished letters under scrutiny here convey a weighty feeling of “suffering applied to the bodies” of these authors.<sup>90</sup> I argue that the author of the “Song of Dagong” contrasts his yearning for greater stability and social mobility, decent working conditions, and revenues with a rhetoric that euphemizes the precariousness and the highly contradictory dimensions of his existence.

I noted that individuals I interviewed similarly address pivotal elements of official or dominant discourse by contrasting them with their lived reality and relating them to structural obstacles.

### **The Achilles’ Heel**

The last narrative mode I wish to examine in this article relates to Scott’s argument about the malleability of the categories of the dominant discourse and the idea that these very categories may be mobilized by subordinate groups and have their meanings changed in order to back the claims or grievances put forward by the subordinates. More precisely, I want to elaborate on Scott’s idea that the “basis of the claim to privilege and power creates...the groundwork for a blistering critique of domination on the terms invoked by the elite” and that any “publicly given justification for inequality thus marks out a kind of symbolic Achilles’ heel where the elite is especially vulnerable.”<sup>91</sup>

In “The cry of a dagongzai,” a five-page letter to the editor, a male migrant worker from Hunan Province describes his efforts to get justice after having been beaten up in the factory in which he was working in Dongguan. He writes about being turned away repeatedly by several official organs such as the police bureau, the village committee, and the labor and management office. As in many other letters, he situates his own experience in the wider reality of migrant workers: He explains that after suffering the beating, he almost got fired

---

inition of the public transcript, see *ibid.*, 14–15.

88. Again, in many other letters, as well as in many of my interviews with migrant workers, I find the expression of suffering and different forms of reactions related to the reality and constraints they experience.

89. See Pun 2002; Yu 2001.

90. I am grateful to Guy Massart for highlighting this point.

91. Scott 1990, 102–3, 105.

by his boss. His workmates suggested that he should take revenge outside the factory or simply swallow his anger and pain. To this advice he replies: "I can't do this because I believe that our society is a society of legality, I need to use the law in order to obtain justice and protect my legitimate rights." In the next section, he explains that after having been turned away by various officials, he eventually decides to go back to the police office only to be told that his case is "just a minor affair that should not be exaggerated." Reacting to this statement, he writes: "But police officer comrades, this is exactly because you disdain to care for so many minor affairs and that you do not treat them rapidly that it engenders revenge by a minority of people and eventually they become the tricky criminal cases of your enquiries and certificate controls."

In the following paragraph, the author explains that he is then dismissed, with his salary unpaid. He writes: "We, the 'migrant workers' [dagongzhe], while we suffer unfair treatments, while we suffer the deterioration of our environment, is there not a single place where we can call for justice when our person has been violated and when our dignity has been injured? I do not believe it and I do not accept it."

He eventually finds a county government official who listens to his plea. "At that moment," he writes, "I was very moved. There are still good officials in our government." He finally abandons his search for justice, since he needs to find work as soon as possible in order to prepare for his daughter's future and ensure that she can continue her schooling. "Although I did not get a satisfactory end in this struggle," he concludes, "at least the alarm has rung for the employer. We, the 'migrant workers,' shall not retreat, scared by your money and your power. As there is a 'truth among the people,' I wish that you treat your employee with benevolence.... One should not abandon one's dignity in order to protect one's rice bowl. One needs to be able to use the law as a weapon in order to protect oneself."

In his final paragraph, the author addresses the attitude of public authorities toward migrant workers:

I am also saying to our administrative organs, to the public servants who educate the people: raise the consciousness of legality, carry out your sacred function with probity, great efficiency, raise your sense of responsibility. For these workers who have left their fields and their families, who have their blood and sweat flowing on the production line,<sup>92</sup> and who wipe their tears silently for reform and opening, and for the wealth and power of the country, please do more real, concrete and good things [*duo ban yixie shishi, haoshi*].

Let us observe first that the letter writer raises a legal issue through calls for the protection of his "legitimate rights." Legality and the rule of law are after all

---

92. I came across a similar expression in an article in the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* on model migrant workers that takes a poetico-ideological form: "The reason why the production line is so beautiful is because it uses youthfulness to dress up. These ranges of youngsters sitting there are the green grass and flowers along the water, they are contending vigorously. The value of youth is



Chinese migrant workers hold up a placard “Return my hard-earned money,” as they march toward a construction site in Hefei, Anhui Province, to demand their pay. (AP Photo/EyePress, 2 January 2006)

tenets of the government’s claim to legitimacy and modernity in the post-Mao era. Even though the labor conditions of migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta have not fundamentally improved and are in many cases harsh, a variety of official, semiofficial and unofficial organs (labor bureaus, trade unions, legal advisors, NGOs, the media, etc.) have all made substantive efforts to better inform migrant workers about their labor rights and to help them claim such rights. Migrant workers’ magazines surely play an important part in calling attention to such issues and they often serve as platforms for migrant workers to express their grievances. In some cases of blatant violations of migrant workers’ rights, the media have even intervened to help migrant workers obtain compensation or redress for unfair treatment.

Second, the author’s description of the attitude of the police concurs with what many studies on migrant workers in urban China have stressed all along: urban authorities require migrant workers to pay fees in order to be allowed into cities, but they provide minimal services in return. Studies show that when problems arise in urban settings, most migrants feel they have no one to turn to

---

flowing away smoothly along the production line.” *STQB*, 8 March 1998, 6. The title of the article is “I sacrifice my youth to the running water,” running water being shorthand for *liushuixian*, which means the production line.

for support and often prefer not to go to the police or other officials for help.<sup>93</sup> This letter is a rare example of an open complaint about public security officers, including migrant workers' magazines.

The last-quoted fragment of the letter uses key phrases from ideology sponsored by the Party-state, including an emphasis on legality ("raise the consciousness of legality"), making sacrifices "for reform and opening" (migrant workers who "have their blood and sweat flow on the production line and who wipe their tears silently for reform and opening"), and national construction and modernization ("wealth and power of the country"). Also included is a reference to a major tenet of Deng Xiaoping's thought, *shishi qiushi* or "look for truth in facts," which in this case encourages officials to adopt a correct and pragmatic attitude and do concrete things for the people. This slogan was first intended to contrast wished-for pragmatic attitudes by officials with Mao-era officials' obsession with ideological factors. In this case, however, looking "for truth in facts" is used to question the way police officers have overlooked the prejudicial treatment of migrant workers.

This migrant letter may also be read as an illustration of some features of what Kevin O'Brien, drawing on James C. Scott, has termed "rightful resistance," or a kind of political contention that entails "an innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy 'disloyal' political and economic elites... to apply pressure on those who have failed to live up to some professed ideal."<sup>94</sup> The author of the letter calls on the Party to take seriously the implications of its rhetoric about sacrifices, rights, pragmatism, etc. Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, in their work on complaints migrant workers have sent to the Shenzhen municipality labor bureau, show how the quest for a sense of justice is articulated around three principles: fundamental justice linked to the human person; fundamental and founding principles of the official ideology; and the 1995 labor rights legislation.<sup>95</sup> Lee writes likewise that, apart from framing their actions in terms of demands for justice, more and more migrant workers use labor regulations set up by the state to further their claims and interests. As she puts it: "These labour regulations and policies offer workers a new cognitive and discursive resource to frame their claims in state-approved idioms."<sup>96</sup>

How are we to relate these narrative modes with larger processes of redefinition of social stratification in late-socialism China? What can we say about the transformation of the Party-state power and about its effects at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

---

93. Li 2003; Wang 1994; Xiang 2000; Solinger 1997.

94. O'Brien 2006, 84–86.

95. Thireau and Hua 2001a, 1283–312; Thireau and Hua 2003, 83–103.

96. Lee 2002, 68.



## Conclusion

In this paper, I have compared different ways in which migrant workers' narratives relate with dominant discourses about them and about Shenzhen and the "South." Such narratives include a "migrant workers' affirmation" of the dominant discourse, a "reversed echo" reacting to the epistemic violence of such discourse, and the strategic usage of pivotal elements of the dominant discourse that serve to back a series of claims made by migrant workers. In the two latter cases, it is worth noting that the illustrations of [rightful] resistance to dominant ideas and representations of migrant workers and their environment explicitly address the elite: they are public and *not* anonymous, "they seek rather than avoid the attention of the elite."<sup>97</sup>

Drawing on some of James C. Scott's insights, I have shown that categories and principles that are part of the dominant discourse may be mobilized and re-worked in order to question the ruling elite on the very enactment of the principles upon which their rule is grounded. One should note however that within this re-working process, it is the *very categories* of the dominant discourse that are used and sometimes contested or reworked by the subordinates, not alternative categories. As Scott has observed, the capacity "to determine (never entirely unilaterally) what is considered the 'public transcript' [in this case the terms that may be debated openly and what they embody] and what is not, ... the ability to choose to overlook or ignore an act of insubordination... is a key exercise of power," hence in this "ideological debate about justice and dignity" migrant workers' speech is checked by power relations.<sup>98</sup> The issue of migrant workers' rights may be discussed in migrant workers' magazines for instance, but to a certain extent and only by using specific terms in the debate.<sup>99</sup> Under the control of the Chinese Communist Party, however, the Chinese media do not dare to frame such discussions in terms of "exploitation" or class, since these categories refer to capitalist societies and the moral foundation of the Chinese Communist regime was grounded on a rejection of exploitation

---

97. O'Brien 1996, 31.

98. Scott 1990, 102, 138. Scott raises here the difficult issue of the definition of an act of resistance by asking: "Does resistance... require recognition by the party being resisted?" For Steve Pile, "one of authority's most insidious effects may well be to confine definitions of resistance to only those that appear to oppose it directly, in the open, where it can be made and seen to fail." See Pile 1997, 3. As stressed above, I remain cautious about interpreting any relationship between a limited ideological critique and the supposed effects of the dominant discourse. See Scott 1990, 92. Another possible effect of power relations may be, as Steve Pile argues, to give the impression that it is everywhere. See Pile 1997, 27.

99. The category of migrant workers' rights may sometimes be dealt with in migrant magazines or in more mainstream media along the line of unfair treatment and harassment by police officers in the Delta, which would correspond to an extension of what the category originally embodied.

and capitalist class relations, as well as on the discursive production of “labor” (*laodong*) as “the principal cultural site for the production of identities.”<sup>100</sup> The Chinese state demands that Chinese media avoid the categories that once were central in the party-sponsored “hegemonic interpretation of experience.” This is why labor issues, and more specifically forms of labor such as *dagong*, are so touchy nowadays, and this also accounts for attempts by the party-state to fix the meaning of this category and the struggles around it.

I have also argued that the very category of *dagong* is an important site of struggle for fixing its meaning to specific referents. In post-Mao China, *dagong* has indeed turned into a site of intense state-sponsored cultural construction partly in order to adapt to the conditions of global capitalism, to try to reconcile such forms of labor with the party-state founding discourse and identity, as well as to shape an acceptable form of relationship between migrant workers and the party-state. This intense cultural construction may also serve to dilute the potentiality of class antagonism by euphemizing the meaning of *dagong* and by expanding the ranges of social groups that are said to *dagong*.<sup>101</sup> In the dominant construction of migrant workers in the Shenzhen press as well as in some instances in migrant workers’ letters, *dagong* refers to a rather linear narrative line or discursive chain: in the face of a tough, competitive *but fair* environment, striving, hard work, self-sacrifice, suffering, enterprising spirit, and self-learning should lead to self-fulfillment and eventually an improvement in productivity and development. The body and soul of the officially constructed migrant worker are fully turned toward production. He is a “legitimate” Shenzhen person only insofar as he contributes to economic development. He embodies the very defining features of the immigrant as underlined by Abdelmayek Sayad, i.e., “mainly a provisional, temporary, and in transit labor force”<sup>102</sup> whose legitimacy is in need of constant justification and defined by how much they contribute to economic development.

---

100. Rofel 1999, 123. See also Chen et al. 2001, 11. Zhao Yuezhi (2002, 129) observes that the category of “class” is taboo and there is no serious analysis of class formation in reform-era China.

101. I am grateful to Rachel Murphy for helping me to frame this argument.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: I am grateful to Jean-Philippe Béja and Zhao Yuezhi, and also my colleagues Hassan Bousetta, Sonia Gsir, Emmanuelle Le Texier, and Marco Martiniello for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this text. Rachel Murphy's very close reading and insightful comments have been very useful in the writing of this article. My thanks also go to Guy Massart for the many discussions we have had on the material presented here and on our respective research interests. I remain the only person responsible for any shortcomings.

## References

- Anagnost, Ann. 1997. *National past-times: Narrative, representation and power in modern China*. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press.
- Apter, David, and T. Saich. 1994. *Revolutionary discourse in Mao's Republic*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press.
- Bakken, Borge. 2000. *The exemplary society: Human improvement, social control, and the dangers of modernity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barmé, Geremie. 1999. *In the red*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bayart, Jean-François. 2004. *Le gouvernement du monde: Pour une critique politique de la globalisation*. Paris: Fayard.
- Beijing Daxue, Dongguan mingong keti zu. 1995. *Zhanlue yu guanli 2*.
- Billeter, Jean-François. 1985. The system of "class status." In Stuart Schram, ed. *The scope of state power in China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press. 127–69.
- Chan, Anita. 1995. The emerging patterns of industrial relations in China and the rise of the new labor movements. *China Information* 9 (4): 36–59 (spring).
- . 1998. The conditions of Chinese workers in East Asian-funded enterprises. *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 30 (4): 1–101 (summer).
- . 2002. The culture of survival: Lives of migrant workers through the prism of private letters. In Perry Link et al., eds., *Popular China: Unofficial culture in a globalizing society*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield. 163–88.
- . 2003. Toujours plus bas! Les effets de la mondialisation sur les conditions de travail en Chine. *Perspectives Chinoises* 75: 43–52.
- . 2005. Recent trends in Chinese labour issues — Signs of change. *China Perspectives* 57: 23–32 (January-February).
- Chan, Anita, and Zhu Xiaoyang. 2003. Disciplinary labor regimes in Chinese factories. *Critical Asian Studies* 35 (4): 559–84 (December).
- Chen, Nancy, et al., eds. 2001. *China urban: Ethnographies of contemporary culture*. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press.
- Cheng, Tiejun. 1991. *Dialectics of control: The household registration (bukou) system in contemporary China*. PhD diss. (State University of New York at Binghamton).
- Cheng, Tiejun, and Mark Selden. 1994. The origins and consequences of

- China's hukou system. *The China Quarterly* 139: 644–68.
- Clark, Constance. 1998. The politics of place making in Shenzhen, China. *Berkeley Planning Journal* 12: 103–25.
- Crane, Georges T. 1994. Special things in special ways: National economic identity and China's Special Economic Zones. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 37: 71–92 (June).
- Dean, Mitchell. 1999. *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage.
- Dirlik, Arif. 1983. The predicament of Marxist revolutionary consciousness: Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci and the reformulation of Marxist revolutionary theory. *Modern China* 9 (9): 182–211 (April).
- Dutton, Michael. 1998. *Streetlife China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Florence, Eric. 2004. Migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta: Between discursive inclusion and exclusion. In Hans Entzinger et al., eds. *Migration between states and markets*. Aldershot: Ashgate. 42–63.
- Guldin, Gregory E. 2001. *What's a peasant to do? Village becoming town in southern China*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Guo, Shutian, and Liu Chunbin. 1991. *Shibeng de Zhongguo*. Tangshan: Hebei renmin chubanshe.
- He, Zhou. 2000. Chinese Communist Party press in a tug-of-war. A political-economy analysis of the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*. In Chin-Chuan Lee, ed. *Power, money, media: Communication patterns and bureaucratic control in cultural China*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press. 112–52.
- Hoffman, Lisa. 2001. Guiding college graduates to work. In Chen et al., eds. 2001. 43–66.
- Jacka, Tamara. 2000. "My life as a migrant worker": Women in rural-urban migration in contemporary China. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 3. URL: <http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au:intersections/issues4>.
- Jie, Pinru, and Yang, Shen, eds. 1993. *Xiongyong mingongchao*. Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe.
- Kjellgren, Bjorn. 2002. *The Shenzhen experience or the city of the good cats: Memories, dreams, identities and social interaction in the Chinese showcase*. Stockholm East Asian Monographs 66.
- Latham, Kevin. 2000. Nothing but the truth: New media, power and hegemony in South China. *The China Quarterly* 163: 633–54 (September).
- Lee, Ching-Kwan. 1995. Production politics and labour identities: Migrant workers in South China. *The China Review* (CD Rom version).
- . 1998. *Gender and the South China miracle: Two worlds of factory women*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . 2002. Three patterns of working-class transition in China. In Jean-Louis Rocca and F. Mengin, eds. *Politics in China: Moving frontiers*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan. 62–92.

- Liang, Yibo. 1992. Mingongmen de sheng yu si [*The life and death of migrant workers*]. *Shebui* 5: 4–7 (May).
- Li, Qiang. 2003. Policy issues concerning the informal employment of rural-urban migrants in China. *Social Science in China* 4: 126–37 (winter).
- Lin, Georges S. 2001. Flexible production in the Hong Kong-Pearl River Delta region: Regionalization of industry and transformation of a local Chinese economy. *CURS Paper Series* 6: 1–29.
- Murphy, Rachel. 2002. *How migrant labour is changing rural China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2004. Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: “Population quality” discourse, demographic transition and primary education. *China Quarterly* 177: 1–20 (March).
- O’Brien, Kevin O. 1996. Rightful resistance. *World Politics* 49 (1): 31–55.
- Pile, Steven. 1997. Opposition, political identities and spaces of resistance. In Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds. *Geographies of resistance*. London: Routledge.
- Pun, Ngai. 2002. Am I the only survivor? Global capital, local gaze, and social trauma in China. *Public Culture* 14 (2): 341–48 (spring).
- . 2004. The precarious employment and hidden costs of women workers in Shenzhen Special Economic Zones in China. *Journal of Oxfam*. <http://www.cwwn.org/download/The%20Precarious%20Employment%20and%20Hidden%20Costs.doc>.
- Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other modernities: Gendered yearnings in China after socialism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rose, Nikolas S. 1999. *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Sayad, Abdelmayek. 1991. *L’immigration ou les paradoxes de l’altérité*. Paris and Brussels: De Boeck Université.
- Scharping, Thomas. 1999. Selectivity, migration reasons and backward linkages of rural-urban migrants: A sample survey of migrants to Foshan and Shenzhen in comparative perspective. In Frank Pieke and Hein Mallee, eds. *Internal and international migration: Chinese perspectives*. Surrey: Curzon Press. 73–102.
- Scharping, Thomas, ed. 1997. *Floating population and migration in China: The impact of economic reforms*. Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde.
- Scharping, Thomas, and W. Schultze. 1997. Labour and income developments in the Pearl River Delta: A migration survey of Foshan and Shenzhen. In Scharping, ed. 1997. 98–118.
- Schein, Louisa. 2001. Urbanity, cosmopolitanism, consumption. In Chen et al., eds. 2001. 225–41.
- Scott, James. 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shi, Xianmin. 1999. Zhongguo yanhai jingji zhongxin chengshi laodongli liudong yu tizhi xuanze. *Shebui* 3: 112–25.

- Solinger, Dorothy J. 1997. Migrant petty entrepreneurs and a dual labour market. In Scharping, ed. 1997. 98–118.
- . 1999. *Contesting citizenship in urban China: Peasant migrants, the state, and the logic of the market*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Tan, Shen. 2000. The relationship between foreign enterprises, local governments, and women migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta. In Loraine A. West and Yaohui Zhao, eds. *Rural labor flows in China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 292–309.
- Thireau, Isabelle, and Hua Linshan. 2001a. En quête d'un nouveau droit du travail. *Annales HSS* 6: 1283–1312 (November-December).
- . 2001b. Ouvriers migrants et “écoles du soir” à Shenzhen. *Perspectives chinoises* 65: 36–48 (May–June).
- . 2003. The moral universe of aggrieved Chinese workers: Workers' appeal to arbitration committees and letters and visits to offices. *The China Journal* 50: 83–103 (July).
- Unger, Jonathan. 2002. *The transformation of rural China*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Wang, Chunguang. 1994. *Shehui liudong he shehui chonggou: Jingcheng, zhejiangcun yanjiu*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe.
- Wang Hui. 2003. *China's new order: Society, politics, and economy in transition*. Ed. Theodore Hutters. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press.
- Woon, Yuen-Fong. 1993. Circulatory mobility in post-Mao China: Temporary migrants in Kaiping County, Pearl River Delta Region. *International Migration Review* 27 (3): 578–604 (fall).
- Xiang, Biao. 2000. *Kuayue bienjie de shequ: Beijing Zhejiang cun de shenghuoshi*. Beijing: Xin zhi sanlian shudian.
- Xu, Feng. 2000. *Women migrant workers in China's economic reform*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Yan, Hairong. 2003. Neo-liberal governmentality and neo-humanism: Organizing *suzhi*/value flow through labor recruitment networks. *Cultural Anthropology* 4 (18): 493–523.
- Yu, Xiaomin. 2001. Kuayue jieji de bianjie: Zhujiang sanjiaozhou shangcan nongmingong “qunti yishi” de poubai. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Universities Centre for China Studies. <http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk>.
- Zhang, Li. 2001. *Strangers in the city: Reconfiguration of space, power, and social networks within China's floating population*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Zhao, Yuezhi. 1998. *Media, market and democracy in China: Between the party line and the bottom line*. Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- . 2002. The rich, the laid-off and the criminal in tabloid tales: Read all about it! In Perry Link et al., eds., *Popular China: Unofficial culture in a globalizing society*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield. 111–35.

□