

Tracing the Discourse of Migrant Labor in China: Mobility, Fixity, and Displacement in the Workshop of the World

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Since the 1980s, elite and public discourses emphasizing the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the mass movement of labor have been cast and recast in China. Mobility is constructed as a central feature of the marginalized migrant worker population in China. Focused on the relationship between social structures and discursive construction, this article is a critical analysis of the discourse of mobility in the context of migrant labor in China. Mobility has been (a) understood as a necessity to relocate and use surplus agrarian labor, (b) interpreted as a personal opportunity for escaping the rigid urban–rural dichotomy, and (c) mystified as a threat to the privileged, highly subsidized urban form of living. In outlining these themes, I juxtapose the discourse of mobility with discussions of specific social issues such as deindustrialization and left-behind children/elderly, and broader issues of structural exploitation and disenfranchisement. In the discussion section, I propose that the interaction of mobility, fixity, emplacement, and displacement can serve as an entry point for understanding workers' disenfranchisement and marginalization.

Keywords: mobility, critical discourse analysis, migrant labor, China

WIFE: Just now, in the waiting room, the railway police pointed her finger to my nose. Do you know what she called me?

HUSBAND: What?

WIFE: “*Mangliu!*” (盲流; blind flow). Just listen. “*Mangliu!*” Not too far from “*Liumang*” (流氓; rascal). (Huang & Duan, 1989)

On New Year's Eve in 1990, a *Xiaopin* (小品)¹ entitled “Excess-Birth Guerrillas” (“*Chaosheng Youjidui*” [超生游击队]) was aired on national television and quickly introduced the ideologically charged administrative jargon *Mangliu* into popular lingo. The term *Mangliu* was used during the Great Famine in China in 1959–61 to refer to rural refugees flowing into urban areas where food shortages were less severe

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¹ A Chinese comedy television genre.

(Ashton, Hill, Piazza, & Zeitz, 1984; Chen & Zhou, 2007). By the 1980s, in shows like "Excess-Birth Guerrillas," the term was recast to reflect more contemporary concerns around urbanization and industrialization, and the resultant inflow of job-seeking rural laborers to urban centers. The show, evidently set in an urban context, described an itinerant peasant couple with an infant in tow, and the wife in an advanced stage of pregnancy, all hiding from local family planning officials. As the story unfolded, the audience was informed that the couple also had two older daughters and were trying desperately for a boy the fourth time around. Much of the comedic effect emerged from the couple's status as petite outlaws who creatively bent the laws and regulations for their selfish goals. They were portrayed as veterans in evading family planning and other administrative controls, predominantly by being constantly on the move. As the husband summarized at one point, "Our main thing is giving birth along the trip (*Zou Yidao, Sheng Yilu* [走一道, 生一路]), one more child at each stop (*Zou Yizhan, Sheng Yihu* [走一站, 生一户])." The show featured a comedic diorama of Chinese peasantry in the urban context by offering a caricature of their regressive values (gender discrimination), undereducation (demonstrated by their unpolished language and lack of scientific literacy), and questionable personal hygiene (e.g., when the husband lets the baby urinate in his hat). This image was triangulated with the couple's interaction in the urban context and their self-evaluation. "See how the city folks give us those looks," the wife exclaimed in one instance, "to tell the truth, even we find ourselves affecting the *Shirong* (cityscape)." In short, the couple was presented as the epitome of the "blind flow" of rural population that invades the city for illegitimate purposes. Therefore, when the denomination of rural migrants, *Mangliu*, was compared with *Liumang*, the comparison was based on more than the phonetic resemblance; it was also a reference to subculture and criminality that the two terms (*Mangliu* and *Liumang*) have in common.

Since the 1980s, elite and public discourses emphasizing the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the mass movement of labor have been cast and recast in China in the wake of massive nationwide urbanization and industrialization. As such, workers who compose China's "supply chain" have been labeled as *Mangliu*, *Liudong Renkou* (流动人口; floating population), and *Mingong Chao* (民工潮; tidal waves of peasant workers). These terms gained (and sometimes lost) prominence in the changing social contexts (which I will lay out later), but the motif of fluid or uncontrollable mobility has consistently run through the construction of peasant workers.

This construction is consistent with management discourse that highlights the importance of maintaining a stable/sustainable workforce and reducing worker turnover, and the high costs associated with recruitment and retraining. Moreover, even as central and local government administrations have loosened *Hukou* policy² to allow formerly agrarian workers to work in new urban industrial sites, there still exists a skepticism toward, and vigilance of, the movements of the working population. This is demonstrated by both the pervasiveness of technological surveillance systems and the adoption of policies that delimit civil rights and access to social welfare for mobile workers and their families.

The migrant workers who have fueled China's industrialization are recognized as a vulnerable, marginalized group (Chan, 2010; Wong, Fu, Li, & Song, 2007; Sun, 2014; Zhao, 1999). These are people

² A household registration system that was established in the 1950s in China that functions primarily to tie people to their place of birth.

who left agricultural production and traveled across the country to work in the numerous export-oriented manufacturing zones in urban centers, but have never been fully accepted as urban residents. They are occupationally industrial workers but socially and administratively labeled as peasants. As industrial workers, they face deteriorating work conditions and high level of exploitation. As peasants, they are excluded from government subsidies and social benefits that are reserved only for city residents. Therefore, peasant workers' vulnerability differs from that of city-born workers or peasants who remained in agricultural production and cannot be fully appreciated without taking into account the transient and liminal nature of their identity.

In the global context, the relationship between mobility and marginalization has been a well-documented area of research (Ao, 2005; Boer, 1982; Dutta & Jamil, 2013; Ram, 1990). Mobility, conceptualized as the ability to traverse boundaries and expand experience, is often compared with the condition of fixity when movement is restricted or obstructed (Clarke, 2004; Verstraete & Cresswell, 2002). Communication is central to understanding mobility—not only because global mobility of capital, goods, and labor is dependent on communication platforms, but also because the social institutional aspects of mobility are discursive in nature. Mobility is defined by the identification of spaces and boundaries, of notions of the self and the other, and of origins and destinations, particularly in institutionalized discourse about mobility as a form of governmentality (Doughty & Murray, 2014). Because mobility is closely associated with the social institution and politics of governing the body and space, it is therefore of particular interest when mobility is constructed as a central feature of a marginalized group.

Marginalization, as a social process, involves the intertwining strands of material and discursive deprivation (Basu, 2011; Dutta, 2007). The dual structure of disparate access to material and discursive resources creates and sustains a watershed between positions of domination and subordination, as "those with access determine the outcomes of those without access, thus circulating the economic logic of the system and sustaining it" (Dutta, 2007, p. 313). In the context of Chinese industrialization, the process of mass relocation of former agrarian population is pivotal to migrant labor. The industrialization process is dependent on successfully mobilizing and retaining migrant labor in urban industrial sites, even as this leads to steeper rural–urban disparities, greater social inequity, and further marginalization of migrant workers. It is therefore important to interrogate the notion of migrant workers' mobility as the result of (continuing) discursive construction in China.

This article traces the emergence of migrant labor in public discourse in China over the past four decades of reform and opening up,³ focusing on the relationship between the discourse of migrant worker mobility and workers' marginalization. In the following section, I highlight the theoretical framework undergirding my critical discourse analysis (CDA), with a focus on the relationship between discourse and broader social structures within critical discourse analytical methodology.

³ The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of CPC held in December 1978 marks the beginning of China's reform and open-up policy.

Critical Analysis of Mobility Discourse

Despite considerable internal variations, CDA researchers agree on seeing language as a social practice (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Within this broad family of analytical approaches, discourse is viewed in a mutually constitutive relationship with broader social processes, meaning that language use is not only shaped by social structures and situations, but also “constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people” (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 4). Such an approach is interested in “deconstructing ideologies and power” (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 4). In the same vein, I argue that the discursive construction of mobility can be viewed as a strategic process that is constitutive of the social structures around globalized production and labor practices. The particular characteristics of such communication are not only indicative of the broader social context that privileges certain discourses, but also may impact the social practice around migrant labor.

To locate this analysis within the vast literature of critical discourse studies, it is important to first clarify the approach I take to understand the concept of discourse. In this article, it is important for the definition of discourse to serve the purpose of differentiating social discourse from other aspects of social structure (e.g., distinguishing the discourse of excess agrarian labor from the political economy of reducing agricultural production), and at the same time encompassing a wide range of discursive events and activities (from the screenplay of a comedy show, to using the denomination of blind flow in policy documents). Therefore, I define a discourse (e.g., the discourse of blind flow) as part of the social process (e.g., migrant labor marginalization) that embodies the relationship among language (e.g., the term *blind flow*), meaning (e.g., how the term is understood in particular cultural contexts, like they are associated with rascals from the countryside), and the social structure (e.g., the assemblage of demographic control policies and technologies targeting the blind flow).

Another theoretical consideration involves the aspects of social processes that are gauged in the analysis (Meyer, 2001). Depending on the specific CDA approach used, research interests range from the cognitive/constitutive processes of *social actors* in interaction with discourses (e.g., Jäger & Maier, 2009; Van Dijk, 2016) to focusing on broader *social structures* (Fairclough, 1993). This article leans toward the latter—it intends to be a critical engagement with discourse of labor mobility vis-à-vis the broader social structure of industrialization and considers the mobility discourse as part of the broader neoliberal development discourse (Ban, Sastry, & Dutta, 2013) that accompanies China’s industrialization process. I am particularly interested in how the discursive construction of mobility is linked to the very material aspects of migrant worker marginality—in other words, the socioeconomy of cheap labor that fuels the industrialization process.

Methodologically, the research process involved a systematic collection of data and contextual information appropriate for studying historically embedded discourse (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). My approach to analysis followed Fairclough (2009) to bring together social structure, social events, and discourse in the analysis. Specifically, the first step of the research was a systematic survey of literature to gather the historical contextual information concerning the issue of peasant worker mobility. Meanwhile, I compiled a list of key terms used by popular media to refer to migrant workers, which I consider to be central to the construction of their mobility. Among the list were terms such as *Mangliu*, *Liudong Renkou*, *Nongmingong*

(农民工; peasant workers), *Mingong Chao*, *Wailaigong* (外来工; workers from outside), and *Wailaimei* (外来妹; girls from outside). I then conducted archival (government policy documents, popular and news media texts) and secondary research to get a sense of “structure of usages” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 63) of these key terms. My analysis used multilevel coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and took on an iterative (Tracy, 2012) and “abductive” (Wodak, 1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2001) process, in which I traveled back and forth between the discursive construction of mobility and the sociohistorical context featuring peasant workers’ marginalization. For example, several axial codes emerged in the analysis (i.e., restriction of Hukou policies, rural labor surplus, efficiency of individual entrepreneurship) clustered around the relationship between regulation and economy. By juxtaposing the language of peasant mobility and the structural context of neoliberal industrialization, I was able to identify the discourse of mobility as neoliberal deregulation.

Hukou, Mangliu, Liudong Renkou, and Mingong: A Historical Contextualization

In this section, I provide some historical context toward understanding several key terms that are central to the construction of labor mobility discourse in China. *Hukou*, or household registration system, involves a set of regulations and administrative practices instated gradually through the 1950s. A particular feature of the system is the division between the populations involved in agricultural production (农业人; *Nongyerenkou*) and nonagricultural production (非农业人口; *Feinongyerenkou*) based on a “birth-ascribed stratification” (Solinger, 1993, p. 95). There is an inbuilt bias in the *Hukou* system against the agricultural population, and the restriction of physical movement is, for the most part, intended to confine people of rural birth to agricultural production (Kanbur & Zhang, 2005).

The rural–urban divide became more consequential during the Great Famine of China,⁴ with state protection over urban residents through grain rationing and the maintenance of state-controlled stockpiles (Chen & Zhou, 2007). The term *Mangliu* first appeared in government policy documents in 1959, amidst increasing number of “hunger refugees” from the countryside (Li, 2006). The term was recontextualized in the 1980s, the early years of China’s post-Mao reforms, to refer to the exodus of the rural population to township and village enterprises (TVEs) and rapidly expanding industrial zones (Cai, Du, & Wang, 2009). In particular, the term regained popularity in 1989, when the State Council of China issued an urgent notice to strictly control peasant worker outflow (Feng & Yang, 2013, p. 88). Although the legally mandated restriction on movement has been relaxed since the mid-1980s,⁵ the circulation of the ideologically charged derogative term continued until the late 1990s, when it was gradually replaced by terms with less derogative connotations, such as *Liudong Renkou* and *Mingong Chao*.

The concept of *Liudong Renkou* emerged with the establishment of the *Hukou* system to refer to the populations residing outside the *Hukou*-designated residence area. *Liudong Renkou* are the primary

⁴ The Great Famine of China (1959–62) killed more than 20 million people and “stands out as the worst [famine] in human history” (Chen & Zhou, 2007, p. 659).

⁵ Farmers in China were allowed to travel long distances to market their produce beyond local markets as early as 1983, and in 1984, the travel restriction was further relaxed to allow them to work in nearby township and village enterprises (Cai et al., 2009).

targets of a number of antiloitering measures⁶ and are often compared with *Changzhu Renkou* (常住人口; permanent residents) in administrative policies, with the former often stripped of social and welfare benefits enjoyed by the latter (Wang & Zuo, 1999). Although the term emphasizes the transient nature of the denoted social group, research conducted on the population found that the “floating” population often held long-term residences in their new locations and were de facto permanent residents (Zhai, Duan, & Bi, 2007).

The term *Mingong Chao* is often used to highlight the seasonality and magnitude of peasant migration. In its earliest recorded usage of the term, *Liaowang* (瞭望; lookout), a weekly publication by China’s official Xinhua News Agency, published a two-article series in 1989 to “trace the origin” of the tidal wave (Ge & Qu, 1989a, 1989b). In these articles, the “tidal wave” referred specifically to the sudden surge of traffic after the 1989 Chinese New Year, which resulted in massive overflows of passengers at train stations and long-distance coach terminals. The massive overload on infrastructure “by far exceeded the past years in terms of passenger flow and duration of the surge” (Ge & Qu, 1989a, p. 16) and triggered “much concern all over China” (Ge & Qu, 1989a, p. 18). As the size of migrant workforce continued to grow rapidly until the mid-2000s—a 2003 study estimated the peasant worker population at up to 140 million that year (Z. Liu, 2003)—the tidal wave analogy captures the tension between the growing peasant worker population and the limited infrastructure and employment capacity in the cities. Starting in 2004, instances of *Mingong Huang* (民工荒; peasant worker scarcity)⁷ has added the dimension of unpredictability to the discussion of *Mingong Chao*.

The rest of article is organized by a number of significant components of the migrant labor mobility discourse. Mobility has been understood as a necessity to relocate and use surplus agrarian labor; interpreted as a personal opportunity to escape the rigid urban–rural dichotomy in the *Hukou* system; and mystified as a threat to the privileged, highly subsidized urban form of living. While outlining these themes, I juxtapose the discourse of mobility with discussions of specific social issues, such as deindustrialization and left-behind children/elderly (Chang, Dong, & MacPhail, 2011; Jia & Tian, 2010), and broader issues of structural exploitation and disenfranchisement.

Mobility as Neoliberal Deregulation

In the backdrop of China’s reform and opening up, and the recasting of prereform ideas like the “planned economy” as rigid and inefficient, the notion of mobility (both in the narrower sense, involving a change of location, and the broader sense, involving jobs and social mobility) has been constructed as a component of neoliberal efficiency in configuring and managing production. Deregulation—a concept central to China’s neoliberal capitalism reform—advocates that resources (including human resources) flow freely (or with less constraint) for optimal distribution that, in turn, boosts productivity. Therefore, in the backdrop of the household registration system, *Dang’an* (档案; personal files and records), rationing, and various

⁶ For example, a 1991 directive issued by China State Council mandated that transient populations without temporary residence registration and proper work documents were subject to custody and repatriation. The directive was revoked in 2003 (Feng & Yang, 2013).

⁷ The recorded national-scale peasant worker scarcity took place in 2004 and 2010 (Tang, 2017).

other interrelated technologies, mobility emerged as an antithesis to the rigid demographic control, emphasizing the relative ease for members of the workforce to travel as individuals.

Mobility, as a political economic principle, is closely associated with, and largely preceded by, a number of decollectivist policies. The most notable of these was the rural reform in the 1980s, which distributed rural land that earlier belonged to rural communes and collectives to individual farming households for privatized production. The new agricultural production structure allowed for each household to individually decide on production strategies, modes of working, and consumption (as opposed to communal farming and the canteen system before reform). This was intended to provide incentives for farming households to be more entrepreneurial and improve production efficiency. Individual entrepreneurship and the concomitant agility associated with individual decision-making were recognized as a pathway to economic prosperity and an urgent remedy for the "stagnant" and "backward" agricultural productivity. Therefore, flexibility and efficiency were often used to describe the new system that contributes to the "vibrancy" of the "new countryside."

The concept of rural surplus labor was an extension of the ideological construction of agricultural production as entrepreneurial, as members' productivity was evaluated against something similar to the theoretical full-employment benchmark used in industrial labor management. It was also concurrent to the industrialization in urban areas starting in the mid-1980s (Cai et al., 2009) that made China a world factory in less than two decades. It made sense, therefore, to allow and encourage the surplus labor in the rural sector to relocate to newly established industrial centers in urban areas. Despite the doubts over its social consequences, partially lifting the *Hukou* system was discussed by policy makers and experts as a necessary step to repurpose the "excess labor resources" (Ge & Qu, 1989b, p. 12) to fuel China's economic development. The discursive construction of the rural population as a source for the industrial workforce has provided a strong neoliberal argument for the physical mobility of rural residents and their rights to employment in the city. Transportation infrastructure capable of moving industrial workers en masse has been featured as a key attraction for investors in various government promotional materials. Train and long-distance bus stations are compared to the pumping heart of a city, drawing fresh blood of job seekers to factory sites daily. The size and handling ability of its transportation hubs are often seen as hallmarks of the industrial might of a city.

The construction of peasant mobility as the natural consequence of surplus rural labor should be understood in conjunction with what Yan (2003) called the "spectralization of the rural" (p. 586), a large part of which was the result of a nationwide resource tilt toward the city and massive government-led urbanization processes in China since the 1980s. As Yan (2003) noted, "In the overall picture, agriculture's share of capital investment dropped from 10.6 percent in 1979 to . . . 1.7 percent in 1994, and remained below two percent throughout the 1990s" (p. 585). It is therefore important to problematize a naturalizing tendency in the labor migration discourse, wherein the movement of agrarian population is constructed as a consequence of naturally occurring labor surplus in the countryside. I argue that it is more productive to view rural-urban migration in the context of (1) the broader political economic shift in China toward neoliberal industrialization and urbanization, and (2) the assemblage of public administration policies, infrastructure, cultural practices, and social discourse that enables and encourages rural workers to seek industrial jobs in the cities.

Moreover, the draining of the productive-age population from the rural areas creates a vicious circle—farmable land is deserted and thus even less likely to sustain livelihood in agrarian production, resulting in more “rural labor surplus.” As the most productive workforce has left for the city, agrarian production has largely stopped functioning as the main source of income for the peasant population; it is now more of a subsidiary food source and, in many cases, an occupation for the old, the young, and the weak, who are otherwise unfit to explore the opportunities in the city. This has also resulted in less bargaining power for migrant workers regarding higher pay and better treatment at work, because agriculture production is no longer an option to fall back on. In essence, as the migration to the city has changed the relationship between peasants and rural areas, it has delimited the economic plausibility for mobility in the reverse direction. There is no way back to agricultural production.

Even as the “spectralization” of the countryside takes place, urban centers, with their privilege to resources and neoliberal policies, are simultaneously going through a “carnival of accumulation in which national and transnational businesses share in the banquet of profits” (Yan, 2003, p. 586). Kaya (2008) used the term “proletarianization with polarization” to describe similar industrialization process that took place in Turkey starting in the 1980s. The process was characterized by Turkey’s agrarian–industrial transition. Peasant proletarianization was marked by (1) a growing gap between social classes, and (2) peasants’ loss of workplace authority as they sell their labor in the industrial setting. Kaya noted that proletarianization and polarization were often associated with globalization; with the burgeoning export-oriented labor-intensive industries, the social structure was polarized by the growth of the marginalized low-skill labor (rural migrants) class and the new social elites—the managerial, professional, and entrepreneurial classes. In the same vein, the concept of spectralization provides an angle to understand the socioeconomic peasant proletarianization in China vis-à-vis the relationship among material resources, public policies, and social discourses.

Based on the concept of spectralization, peasant mobility is better understood as a conjoined process of displacement (as peasants lose their place in the countryside) and emplacement (as they gain place in the city). Emplacement and displacement are two interrelated concepts associated with broad social processes that simultaneously *enable* and *enforce* movement, as movement involves gaining new territories (emplacement) and losing old habitats (displacement; Ballinger, 2016). In particular, the concept of displacement “generally implies a degree of forced or involuntary migration” (Ballinger, 2016, p. 390), which, rather than conceptualizing mobility as the ability to move, asks questions about the “ability not to move” (Ballinger, 2016, p. 391). Therefore, social discourses that focus merely on emplacement are problematic, in the sense that they construct the city as territory of opportunities for peasant workers without asking how peasants *are compelled* to migrate to the city in search of those opportunities.

The past decade has seen a growing number of Chinese manufacturing facilities move further inland to tap into cheaper labor sources, as the older industrial centers are losing their comparative advantage as the result of urbanization (T. Liu, 2017). Discourses of peasant mobility offer a number of frames to understand the resulting deindustrialization in these areas. First, migrant workers and their mobility are often constructed as being responsible for factory relocation, especially in the contexts of *Mingong Huang*, as factories move further inland for cheaper and “more stable” labor resources. Second, factory relocations also open up discussions on mobility as a prerequisite for economic efficiency. Ironically, the language of

labor retention (strategies to discourage labor mobility) and industry relocation can often be found simultaneously in business discourse, even as the latter typically means laying off majority of the labor force and recruiting at the new factory site. Third, importantly, the duality in peasant worker identity allows companies to lay off a large number of workers without being held responsible for the resulting unemployment, because workers' stay in the city is considered provisional and temporary in the first place. Discourses of mobility, therefore, allow manufacturers to avoid answering questions about labor-related exit policies.

Mobility as Peasant Self-Development

Notwithstanding the fact that the earliest market economy reforms in China took place in agricultural settings, the countryside is nonetheless construed as obverse to China's neoliberal movement toward modernity. For, as Yan (2003) noted, that the countryside symbolized the "moribund Other" in the urban system of representation, and in young rural women's articulations, it became a "field of death." Life in the countryside as a young woman was "inert and meaningless," construed as little more than preparation for the domesticity associated with marital and childrearing responsibilities, an insurmountable barrier to their pursuit of modern personhood. The countryside was regarded, in essence, as premodern. It represents the persistent stronghold of "traditional" (read: anachronist and regressive) and "rustic" (read: ignorant and barbaric) values and practices, things that belong to the past and have no hope for the future. Rojas and Litzinger (2016) noted that the "affective engagement with temporality" worked to drive people to move from one world to another and "shape how they interpret and grapple with social inequalities" (p. 155). As rural youth internalize origin stories of the moribund hometown and invoke yearning toward the outside world and its bright lights, moving to the city stands at the juncture of temporal division of past and future. Mobility, therefore, is understood as the ability to capture a new lease on life from the moribund past, a chance to become part of the meaningful future featured by modernity and civilization.

In the context of the long-standing controversy about *Hukou* policies, which has served as a framework of social fixity, the (albeit relatively) relaxed residence registration administration is largely welcomed and celebrated as a positive step toward social equity. The spatial fixity resultant from earlier *Hukou* restrictions is often used to seamlessly explain social fixity in popular discourses that depict cities as "lands of opportunity." Popular media ran stories about migrant workers turning entrepreneurs, which mixed with TV dramas' depiction of young men and women returning to the village after successful urban work experiences to become catalysts of rural revitalization. Such success stories, although statistically rare, fueled the imagination of rural youth at the crossroads of career decisions. Yan (2003) observed that, contrary to the idea of surplus labor, it was typically youth with higher levels of education (and not those unable to procure local employment) who left the countryside first, largely motivated by aspirations to upward social mobility. Cities were constructed as sites for rural youth's growth and metamorphosis. What is remarkable about this construction is that the "urban encounter" is becoming central to self-development, rather than actual incomes and savings (which have become largely secondary)—for only an encounter resulting from spatial mobility can explain such total transformation:

Shortly after they left for the city, these smart and hardworking girls quickly became a generation of new human beings (*Xinren* [新人]) combining the culture of the city and the

country. When they left the fields, they carried in their bodies a rustic air (*Tuqi* [土气]) and bodily or labor power (*Liqi* [力气]); when they returned they not only brought back capital, information, technology, and market experience but also new ideas, new concepts, and the ability to explore the market economy, none of which folks at home have. (Yan, 2008, p. 190)

Labor mobility is therefore celebrated as “the third liberation” of the Chinese peasantry (Yan, 2008, p. 124), one that liberates their mind, as opposed to their political (1949, national liberation and the land reform ensued) and economic (1979, the breaking down of rural communes) liberations. In this sense, mobility of the rural workforce can be compared with that of international immigration, inasmuch as economic rationality of movement intertwines and collaborates with the ideological construction of the transformative “encounter.” Just as “democracy” and “freedom” are often at the front and center of the international encounter, “modernity” and *Suzhi* (素质; roughly translated as quality) are crucial to the understanding of urban encounter for rural migrants.

Mobility brings the opportunity for the rural populations to elevate themselves by improving their *Suzhi*. The concept of *Suzhi* hinges on a set of qualities that are believed to differentiate an urban resident from the rest. These include varied components, from literacy to personal hygiene, from cultural knowledge to social decorum, from espousing the “right” values to using the “right” accent. The lack of these *Suzhi* qualities deems someone from the countryside unrepresentable and becomes ground for discrimination in and outside the factory compound. *Suzhi* elevation is often construed as a natural result of the urban encounter, at least for the smarter and more conscientious rural youth, and sometimes alluded to as part of the intangible work benefits in the city (Kipnis, 2007). Within this discursive system, the concept of *Suzhi* provides a link between physical mobility and social mobility: As the marginalization of the Chinese peasantry is attributed to their lack of *Suzhi*, physical mobility to the city opens up pathways toward improving *Suzhi* and subsequently increasing one’s earning capacity. Locational mobility thus becomes symbolic of liberation from marginalized peasantry, an analogy to social and class mobility.

Despite the discourse of *Suzhi* as a channel for upward mobility, there is no evidence to support the relationship between *Suzhi* elevation and change in social status. As migrant workers from the countryside take up jobs that are considered to be beneath a typical urban dweller, there is seeming correlation between a rural background and low-income jobs. However, the income disparity can be traced to structural issues, such as difference in education opportunities and employment restrictions, rather than personal characteristics. Indeed, lack of social mobility is often the result of terminating education, undercompensation, and lack of transferable skills—factors more associated with industrial manufacturing jobs.

Rural migrant workers tend to come from the section of rural society that would have stood a better chance for upward mobility. In a meta-analysis on Chinese migrant worker studies, Shen (2003) referred to migrant workers as “a community of better make-up among the Chinese peasantry” (p. 92)—a conclusion based on age composition, capacity of economic activity, and level of education. Ironically, entering the urban job market typically means termination of education, access to higher education being one of the few routes to upward mobility (and urban residency) for rural youth. Moreover, Shen noted that although rural

migrants might experience a raise in income in the city (due to the seriously depressed rural economy), further occupational mobility typically led to a “very slight” overall improvement of social status. This means that even as migrant workers are able to move from one job to another, they are rarely able to move to a higher paying job with better prospects. In a more recent ethnographic study of migrant workers in South China, Y. Liu, Li, Liu, and Chen (2015) noted the inaccuracy of describing the peasant worker community as completely devoid of agency. Some peasant workers inside cultural “enclaves” were able to enjoy social mobility to a degree, although their job mobility was often confined within either small-scale manufacturing or the informal economic sector. Another way to examine social mobility is to see how peasant workers assimilate into urban society. Liang (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of recent migrant worker studies and found that although workers were culturally and psychologically adapted to their urban contexts, their economic and social integration had been slow. More important, the level of integration for the younger generation peasant workers was not much different from their parents’ generation.

Peasant Mobility as Invasion of Urbanity

The efficiency reforms undertaken by state-owned enterprises pushed many urban residents into partial or full unemployment in the 1990s and raised questions of whether rural immigrants were “stealing” local jobs. But even before then, migrant workers were regarded as eyesores, resource guzzlers, and potential criminals. Jacka (1998) described how taxi drivers (typically local city residents at the time) discriminated against migrant workers in Hangzhou, a city in eastern China:

It is the image of the beggar and the petty criminal that dominates. Taxi drivers and others that I talked to in Hangzhou frequently used the word *Luan* (乱; chaos) in relation to the floating population, seeing the influx of transient migrants as both a cause and a symptom of increasing social chaos. Urbanites in Hangzhou and elsewhere also commonly assert that the floating population puts an intolerable strain on public transport and other facilities, that it lowers the tone of the city, and that it is responsible for rising crime rates. (p. 45)

Essential to the discrimination against migrant workers is a cultural urbanism marked by cosmopolitan chauvinistic discourses: Cities are constructed as positive sites of progress and wealth, whereas the countryside and its residents are depicted as “urbanism’s other” (Thompson, 2013) and “cast as backward, unsophisticated, homogeneous, conservative, poor and otherwise lacking in various ways” (p. 161). This cultural urbanism is not only prevalent in urban discourse, but also a powerful component of the overall system of representation in Chinese society, resulting in what Yan (2003) called the “epistemic violence against the countryside” (p. 579). There are limited ways of understanding the countryside and its people outside of this urban chauvinism. The word *Nongmin* (农民; peasant, farmer) has been used as a derogatory term, almost exclusively as an insult, while *Xiaonong Yishi* (小农意识; petite peasant mentality) is used to describe selfish shortsightedness, and *Xiangqi* (乡气; carrying an air of the countryside) refers to things aesthetically outdated and unappealing. These cultural values create “subaltern rural identities” (Thompson, 2013, p. 176) among migrant workers themselves on the one hand, and delimits the imaginations and representations of peasantry in policy-making and other public forums on the other hand.

In the 1990s, state sector reforms had pushed many city residents out of *Tiefanwan* (铁饭碗; iron rice bowls, or secure jobs), and the competition for unskilled work intensified between them and the migrant workforce (Jacka, 1998). The reintroduction of the term *Mangliu* in the 1990s was a significant discursive event, as the influx of migrant workers was recast as spontaneous—and subsequently requiring control. What is remarkable about the construction of *Mangliu* and, similarly, *Mingong Chao* and *Mingong Huang*, is the emphasis on the lack of consistency and commitment to a single location, as is deemed typical with a city native. The elusive tidal wave comes and goes, resulting in a flash labor surplus or shortage. Migrant workers will go wherever they believe they will be paid more, and they are willing to get into any trade, legal or illegal, for more income. In a study on the Guangzhou municipal government's ban on motorcycle taxis in the city, Qian (2014) noticed that the media representation highlighted the relatively higher incomes of the migrant taxi drivers (in comparison to what they would have earned in a factory). These narratives, Qian argued, operated on the hegemonic notion of hierarchical social order. The rise of the migrant rural workers was put in contrast to the emerging urban poor who were gradually losing their privileged position in the society. The construction of peasant mobility, therefore, should be viewed in conjunction with the anxiety toward broader social/economic change in China at the turn of the century.

Prevalent and institutionalized discrimination against migrant workers puts a strain on the relationship between migrant workers and the host city. Shen (2003) noted that "dual communities" exist in Chinese cities, with vast disparities between urban residents and rural migrants in terms of income distribution, job distribution, consumption and entertainment, settlement style, and social psychological features. These disparities, according to Shen's study, stem from the "parasitic nature of the local economy": the urban economy benefits from rural migrants' work, but does not provide them enough compensation and benefits in return. Without access to government-subsidized housing (including subsidized mortgages for commercial real estate purchases), healthcare, or education, and with no prospects for pension and social welfare, the city is still too expensive for migrant workers to settle down, let alone care for their elderly and young family members. The countryside, therefore, becomes a welfare land where the elderly and the children are "left behind." Remarkably, the issues of "left-behind" children and elders entered the urbanist public discourse amid calls for policies to send parents back to the left-behind children. Rural migrants are often depicted as shortsighted parents who believe that money can adequately compensate for not spending time with their children. Alternatively, they are portrayed as selfish deserters who leave behind elderly family members and children in search of monetary gains. Ironically, this image often runs concurrent to the depiction of migrants who do settle down in the city with their families as appropriating urban public resources.

Discussion

Communication scholars interested in issues of globalization, migration, and offshoring have not fully reckoned with the broad-based transformations in labor that have occurred in the wake of China's experiments with neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). Although peasant mobility has largely been singled out as the focus of public discourse about migrant workers, I caution the view that partially lifting the *Hukou* restriction is a sign of peasant "liberation," and I argue that this discourse fails to capture the control of and restrictions on workers' mobility at the institutional and structural levels. Most important, this discourse glosses over the aspects of proletarianization that were central to China's transformation into the "world

factory,” wherein surplus agrarian labor was first tapped into, and then (re)produced (through industrialization and urbanization) to work in various manufacturing sites in the supply chain. My analysis demonstrates that the mainstream conceptualization of labor mobility ignores the degree to which control, manipulation, and exploitation of the labor force occur across a spectrum of mobility and fixity. Therefore, there is a need to conceptualize mobility as part and parcel of the neoliberal globalization (which centers on the free flow of capital and labor) vis-à-vis concepts of fixity and displacement.

This dialectic relationship is manifest in a couple of ways. First, mobility and fixity, emplacement and displacement are at concurrent display in social events. Even when certain aspects of the dialectic are emphasized, one can always observe other constructs at work, albeit suppressed in the public discourse. In the context of supply chain labor in China, mobility and fixity, emplacement and displacement take place simultaneously. Mobility is enacted through neoliberal technique of governmentality—deregulation in residency policies, and resource tilt toward transportation infrastructure building. Their resulting emplacement in the cities is often applauded as opportunities of personal development, and suspected as invasion of urban resources and social order. Although workers have fewer restrictions on physical movement, they are nonetheless fixed in terms of social economic class, their role in the division of labor, and space for personal growth. As workers move from their former agricultural communities, displacement is manifest as the separation from cultural and social resources and support networks, and the gradual loss of agricultural means of production as an alternative to supply chain labor. That peasant mobility (and, to a certain degree, emplacement) is emphasized in public discourse not only fails to capture the complexity of the social issue, but also serves as an indication of the limited peasant voices that are present in the public discourse and policy deliberations.

Second, the concepts of mobility and fixity, emplacement and displacement not only represent opposing ideas, but also grant meaning to each other in specific social contexts. For example, peasant mobility in the post-Mao Chinese society only makes sense when considering the *Hukou* system that creates an impermeable urban–rural divide and fixity of the peasant population. While the remnant of the system is still powerfully restricting migrant workers’ access to full citizenship and the social welfare benefit that it entails, its partial lift is understood as a sign of peasant mobility. Similarly, migrant workers’ emplacement in the urban system of employment is often placed in contrast to the job loss in the urban state-owned business sector, as former urban workers grapple with their displacement and often attribute it to the “newcomers” from the countryside.

Moreover, mobility and fixity, emplacement and displacement are mutually constitutive in the sense that they (re)create conditions for each other within one complex system of contemporary supply chain labor. For example, displacement of rural “surplus labor”—both through curbing economic development in the countryside and by discursively creating a “field of death”—serves as a condition for peasants’ mobility to the urban sites, and their fixity to industrial form of production. Reversely, the discourse of peasant mobility, highlighting the unpredictability, temporariness, and uncontrollability of the mass movement of labor, provides ground and justification for public policies for social monitoring and control; this results in migrant workers’ limited emplacement in the city and, through discriminatory policies, public discourses, and cultural practices, their fixity in the marginalized social position.

Based on a critical study of migrant labor mobility discourse, I argue that migrant workers' disenfranchisement is manifested as lack of ability to negotiate between the dialectics of mobility and fixity, emplacement and displacement. As such, migrant workers' emplacement in the urban system of employment is the result of (and further increases) their displacement of the agrarian form of production, and their spatial mobility is curbed by social fixity and further necessitated by displacement of deindustrialization. Insofar as the current public discourses fail to tap into the limited, relative, and context-specific nature of peasant mobility, there is a need for alternative understandings of migrant labor that view the interaction of mobility and fixity, emplacement and displacement as an entry point for examining workers' disenfranchisement and marginalization.

The practical implication of my study is twofold. First, it calls for migration and labor administration policies that take into account the dialectic relationship between peasant mobility and fixity. This means, at the policy level, not to view issues such as lack of social integration, left-behind children, and deindustrialization as the result of increased peasant mobility, but as the result of their fixity. Specifically, my study suggests the need for policies and programs that help workers to develop more capacity for social and professional mobility. These include, for example, increase in government-mandated minimal wage, access to urban facilities and welfare, and subsidized professional training programs. Second, in the context of labor justice activism and movement, despite the prevailing "industrial labor as mobility" discourse, my study highlights the need to consider the spectralization of the rural as part and parcel of exploitative labor practices in the city. Therefore, I argue that rural economic policies should be another focal area of observation for labor organizations. Moreover, there is a need to explore the possibility of including agricultural production in workers' capacity-building programs.

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