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**In-between Regulations and Authority: Growing up  
and becoming independent in the factory as migrant  
workers in Post-Mao China**

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## **In-between Regulations and Authority:**

### **Growing up and becoming independent in the factory as migrant workers in Post-Mao China**

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Much of the research on young generation in post-Mao China is still framed within an economic model which posits that the individualization of Chinese youth is the direct and inevitable consequence of responses to market development. The perceived generation gap in the post-Mao China era is generally described as the product of on-going processes of individualization within a neo-liberal environment China (Yan 1999; Yan 2003; Yan 2006; Rofel 2007; Yan 2009; Yan 2010; Yan 2011). While the older generation are widely thought to adhere to collective values (e.g. behaving altruistically, valuing the “simple” and “plain” orientation of an earlier era), younger people are said to manifest selfishness, materialism and narcissism (Rosen 2009). In short, more “individualistic”.

However, I believe we should take culture and migration into account when we examine the route of individualization of the Chinese youth. Firstly, market is not universally experienced. How young Chinese people (with their unique moral perspectives, which are a product of their immersion in particular social/cultural environments) actually perceive and respond to the market around them - on the basis of their own (not necessarily money-oriented) "calculations". Such contextualized calculations will of course hugely influence the process of individualization. Secondly, migration, in post-Mao China, became clear that it is not a purely economic activity. It is now an essential rite of passage for young Chinese people, the way they gain full membership in their communities and the wider society. Migration functions as a key mechanism for shifting social statuses and constructing new subjectivities for most of Chinese youth from countryside. Thus, migration arguably reshapes and influences the route of individualization. For the young people who go through it, uncertainty, fluidity, and ambiguity – including in relation to 'who they are' – have become the norm.

My research thus looked at the path of individualization from the viewpoint of young rural migrants. This paper is based on research conducted among young people from the Chinese countryside who migrate away from home to work in urban factories. These young people are sometimes referred to as ‘new generation migrant workers’, and are generally thought to have some different characteristics and behaviour patterns from previous generations of migrant workers (Wang 2001).

In marketised socialist China, the old system has not entirely faded away, but new market logics have been imposed on it. Partly as a result of this, the process of socialization, through which young people should, in theory, learn how to locate themselves properly within society, is filled with uncertainties. Old expectations about interactions with others have become invalid. This is especially so for young migrant workers who face the challenges of multilocality (living between rural and urban settings) and who, as I argue, possess a double social being (i.e. they are caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood).

I choose progression through the life course as my primary focus in my research, since young people perceive the market's power very strongly precisely when they must move through it as they mature, i.e. in the flow of time. I deal primarily with the stage of adolescence and post-adolescence, since a number of key life decisions must be made in these stages. Here the struggles, negotiations and compromises of young people with the inconsistencies of the structure around them is sharply revealed. I will examine their attitudes toward authority of people and impersonal regulations in this paper.

## **AMBIGUOUS VALUES IN MARKETISED SOCIALIST CHINA**

Before I detail my research, I will elaborate the ambiguous values in Chinese context. The regime in contemporary China is officially called a 'socialist market society with Chinese characteristics' (Brandtstädter 2009: 142). That is, China has implemented economic reforms based on market principles but retains its 'socialist' political form, i.e. this is a world of party-led marketisation, involving its own pattern of national development rather than following the Western route. Leonard, for example, states that the Chinese party-state is not willing to see so-called 'western ideology' – even if it emerges naturally from the market economy – to dominate China, even more so after China gained in confidence following its economic miracle (Leonard 2008: 14-16). This shows that 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' can function better than western neoliberalism. In pursuing economic growth, the Chinese party-state embraces neoliberal values selectively. As a socialist regime, its aim is to provide the world with another set of values and ideologies that can compete against the 'universalization of Western liberal democracy' (Leonard 2008: 117).

Since the Chinese party-state has its own agenda vis-à-vis development, Chinese youth are growing up under 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. One consequence is that there are considerable tensions and contradictions between the official ideology that children learn in school and the practices and ideology they experience in everyday life (Kwong 1994). In this sense, as part of growing up, Chinese youth have to 'feel their way towards a functional coexistence of individualistic and collectivist value systems' (Weber 2002: 347). The rapid pace of marketisation in China makes the process of growing up for contemporary Chinese youth somewhat experimental. Because being a 'desiring subject' is a relatively new status for Chinese adults, the processes of 'learning how to express

various longings, needs and aspirations' and 'struggling over how to display and embody the correct class subjectivity toward diffuse lessons on how to become cosmopolitan desiring subjects' are still unfolding (Rofel 2007: 11). There are no firm norms, rules and role models for Chinese youth to follow. This opens a space within which Chinese (urban or neo-urban) youths can negotiate between grassroots values and neo-liberal values (Kwong 1994; Yan 2010) and 'push the parameter of acceptable behavior' (Weber 2001; Weber 2002). This leaves young people in the position of having to figure out almost for themselves 'the definition of self and relation to society' which is the crucial content of youth stage (see Gold 1991: 597). They must achieve adulthood but their own parents are not able to provide them with viable role models and guide them through the rapidly changing realities that confront them (see Fong 2007).

This leads to a significant consequence in relation to new generation rural migrants. The contest of values between marketised China and socialist (and pre-socialist) China often happens in between urban and rural settings. In Fujian, according to Brandstädter, rural villagers actively contest the 'official narrative of improving their quality': instead they insist they want to be *pusu* ('simple and plain') (Brandstädter 2009: 153). Distinguishing *bendiren* (local persons) and *waidiren* (outsiders) they reinforcing local solidarity and re-adopt gift exchange as a way of re-building social relationships (Brandstädter 2009: 143, 153-54). They reject consumerism (Brandstädter 2009: 153) in the name of a 'politics of sincerity' re-deploying 'class politics', to uncover fake goods (Brandstädter 2009: 143) (Brandstädter 2009 According to Brandstädter's study, from rural people's perspective, the values of the market, which to large extent are equal to 'money talk' values, are seen as intrinsically selfish and opposed to the collective good (Brandstädter 2009: 150). Far from agreeing that they are 'backward', peasants criticize richer household as 'money-minded, greedy and without *renqingwei* (moral standards and human feelings)' (Brandstädter 2009: 150). They use Maoist language and traditional *renqing* (moral standard of human feeling) to criticize corruption and consumerism and have 'developed an attitude of general doubt against any official narrative or statement' and were 'always searching for the 'real thing' behind the surface appearance' (Brandstädter 2009: 149). To give another example, rural villagers in Shandong apparently reject the role of individualized peasant-citizen, preferring to remain altruistic peasants (Keane 2001). This leads to a question which this thesis attempts to answer: how do young migrant workers decide what kind of self to become as they try to fit into contemporary marketised socialist China?

## **A MODERN FACTORY**

Soon after I entered the THS factory in Shenzhen, I took part in some induction courses for new workers. Then I went to the shop floor with these new workers. As a newcomer, I gradually came to understand this factory and its culture. The THS factory certainly

seemed to adopt modern<sup>1</sup> management methods and tried to match the standard of a rational and effective organisation. The leaders regularly say, '*Gongshi gongban*' (roughly: 'We are doing official business according to official principles', i.e. 'We do not let personal considerations interfere with our execution of public duty'). They stress that this is a professional and modern enterprise that meets international standards and thus can be clearly distinguished from family-run workshops, with their non-professional practices. The organisational structure of the THS factory, as set out in the regulations, is also very well-defined and looks quite formal on paper. The position of each person and the tasks they are in charge of is clearly spelled out. The owner told me this meets the requirements of the ISO (the International Organisation for Standardisation) very well.

Workers arriving from the countryside, for their part, are given specific guidance on entering into the ethos of the factory. The THS management asks them specifically to do the following: 1) they should give up their peasant dispositions and 2) they should internalise the factory's ideology of 'efficiency' and 'quality'. For example, don't be lazy. Don't be rude. No quarrels. No fights. Be punctual. Be clean. Never throw food waste on the ground when eating in the canteen. Never spit anywhere in the factory. Never clock in and out for other workers. Pay attention to detail in order to avoid making bad products. They were also asked to be 'diligent', which meant they should work whenever the factory wanted them to. Lastly, they were reminded that 'time is money' and that they should be as efficient as possible. I found some workers were conscious of this even when not working. When I ate with workers in the canteen, I found the workers ate very fast. One day, talking to Lotus, I realised that the workers had been taught to do this. Lotus said she used to eat slowly like me. But now she ate much faster because her supervisors laughed at her, saying, 'Look! How slowly you eat. That's fine at the dining table. But do you do everything at this kind of speed? If so, that's terrible. How much time do you need to finish a task?!' Lotus felt so ashamed that she changed her ways and now she is always aware of her eating speed – measuring herself against the others. 'Never be among the last few in the canteen. Your leaders will think you're not a good worker,' she told me.

It seems the environment here is 'modern' and requires a self-disciplined, self-motivated and self-managed work force, as one would expect to find in any contemporary corporation: in 'contemporary corporate situations' of this kind, 'employees are expected to reason and self-manage according to such calculations large and small [e.g. calculations of discipline] in the interest of a common corporate enterprise' (Ong 2007: 223) Moreover, the 'intelligence' required of workers in this setting 'is the capacity to think, plan and act in a "rational" way, according to specific goals such as increasing and maintaining company profit margins' (Ong 2007: 222).

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<sup>1</sup> I can't say Western here because the owner himself and his leadership were hugely influenced by Japanese culture

Therefore, at the beginning, my expectation was that the young migrant workers would gradually give up their peasant disposition and develop what Yunxiang Yan (following Nikolas Rose) calls the 'enterprising self':

*The institutionalised changes in the [Chinese] labour market, education, and career development ... have led to the rise of what Nicolas [sic] Rose calls the 'enterprising self', meaning the calculating, proactive, and self-disciplined self that is commonly found among the younger generations of Chinese labourers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party-state had to guide collage [sic] graduates through educational programmes and new regulations to search for a job in the labour market as they were all used to waiting for the assignment of a job from the state (Hoffman 2001). Since the mid-1990s, however, the image of an enterprising self is commonly shared by Chinese youth who not only actively participate in various forms of self-development but also perceive the social world to be inhabited by autonomous and responsible individual actors. (Yan 2010: 504)*

At the same time as observing this 'enterprising self' among migrant workers, I also expected to find them expressing anti-authority sentiments, in part because of Yan's findings, that young people in the countryside 'demonstrate an anti-authority tendency', e.g. with respect to village leadership (Yan 2009: 115).

#### **'THE MODERN' AS A COVER**

In the quality control room of the KS1 factory in Kunshan<sup>2</sup>, the leaders often yelled at and humiliated the workers, displaying great rage. The leader constantly walked around, surveying workers' behaviour. Her two assistants sat at the front and checked the results of the workers' labour: if the workers themselves failed to identify defective products, the leaders not only asked them to do it again but also shouted at them in front of everybody, using violent and insulting language. Sometimes they even hit workers' hands in order to punish them. The highly personalised angers seem not fit with the idea of the modern factory.

The KS1 factory was not an isolated case. It was the same in the THS factory, where supervisors also typically expressed dissatisfaction through displays of anger, shouting at the workers for the slightest reason. The leaders, it seemed, never tried to suppress their rage in public. On the contrary, they seemed to magnify it deliberately.

In contrast to the supervisors, I often saw subordinates smile. In particular, they often smiled (at least in public) at those moments when I knew that they were in fact frustrated, sad, embarrassed, angry or disappointed. Even when young workers felt badly wronged, they often seemed to suppress their feelings. They sometimes smiled bitterly while expressing their appreciation to the leader. This seemed to me like a 'performance' of emotions rather than a spontaneous emotional reaction. Soon after, I found that workers were actually aware of such performances. The agreed roles in the factory, one could say,

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<sup>2</sup> this factory is operated by a mainlander.

were 'angry supervisor' and 'smiling subordinate'. What is the purpose of such performances?

On the one hand, it seems that the leaders in the factory were using their expressions of anger as a way to control those beneath them. Let us call this 'managerial anger'. These expressions of anger have the aim of making workers humiliated and/or fearful, thus pushing them to work harder. For example, Beihu, a 43-year-old worker from Hubei province, told me:

*Every time I'm scolded, I feel useless. Who doesn't want to do things correctly? Who wants to fail the task? Who wants to have to redo the task? They [the leaders] always say something so unpleasant [name nanting] to make us feel useless [meiyongde].*

In Beihu's case, the leaders' anger is a response to her unsatisfactory work performance: the leader uses anger to complain about poor performance. But I also want to suggest that leaders use their anger more generally to make workers feel nervous, uneasy, and restless and thereby create a tense atmosphere in the workplace. The leaders seem to believe that creating this kind of mental environment can push workers to work harder – and indeed this is explicitly what they told me in both the KS1 and THS factories.

The subordinates' reaction to managerial anger seemed to be to take supervisors' anger as normal, without even asking for a reason. Some of them have an explanation: 'I know when leaders point out my flaws, it is good for me [wewoihao].'

While some workers did believe that a supervisor's anger was actually 'good for them', many seemed to believe that such displays of anger towards subordinates was just what supervisors do. Giant replied to Delicate's question about how many times the deputy manager had scolded him that day by saying, 'It's up to her. She can have a go at me any time she wishes [ta xing zemediao zemediao].' He did not even think that the leader's anger had been triggered by his work performance. Rather, for him, the leader showing anger to him was just because the leader was a leader. As leaders, they can do anything they want to subordinates. Similarly, Tang, a 40-year-old female worker from Sichuan province who sat next to Beihu, always complained while she worked' Tang's reaction to abuse from the leaders was similarly strong:

*We are the ones subjected to daily persecutions [shouqi]. They abuse us as if we are children. I don't earn much money each day. You know, each day I just earn 17 RMB [about 1.64 GBP]. If it is a good day, I can earn a maximum of 35 RMB [about 3.37 GBP]. It's vexing. I want to quit. Fuck it [tamade]! Every day is the same. They never stop abusing me [mage buting].*

These workers do not accept that the leaders' rage indicated that they were actually bad or useless workers. For them, it seems that the leaders would express anger and dissatisfaction regardless of how well they did their jobs. According to Tang, to 'throw anger' at subordinates is in fact the leaders' way of reminding their subordinates of the hierarchical differences between them.

*Shouqi* was felt by the workers to be part of their daily job and a heavy burden. This was true of different levels of workers. Cloud and Silk, both middle-ranking clerical workers, often told me, 'Huo shi buzhong, danshi xinlei [The work – meaning their own clerical work – isn't heavy but it is mentally/emotionally tiring].' Both seemed to feel that they were abused in various ways by their managers. Hence the scene one sees very commonly in the factory: angry, dissatisfied and picky leaders chiding workers who are unhappy yet smiling reluctantly.

Observing workers 'take anger' (*shouqi*) from their superiors gradually helped me see the complicity behind the modern cover of this factory. The entrenched hierarchy seemingly dominates life here, every moment, everywhere, both within the factory and outside it. I did not see any young migrant worker express a genuine anti-authority tendency. On the contrary, it seems to me, they probably believe in authority and reinforce hierarchy.

Aside from taking anger (*shouqi*), other aspects of factory life also show that this is not as modern and strictly professional as it claims to be. Subordinates run personal errands for their supervisors after work. The leaders can ask workers to go and buy them a chicken, noodles or cigarettes, even when workers are off-shift and are meant to have some free time for their own purposes. Normally, the workers do not object – but this does not mean that this kind of labour assistance is done out of friendship between workers and their leaders. If this were the case, the workers would not be subject to such serious criticism when they make mistakes in these personal tasks.

As time went by, I saw more and more cases in which the will of managers rather than impersonal standards determined what happened – without regard to the regulations or written documents. This was by no means restricted to the execution of personal tasks. At THS, I participated in the recruitment process with the deputy manager several times. I found that the deputy manager did not look at the applicants' CVs very seriously; indeed, it even seemed to me that the deputy manager preferred to hire 'incompetent' workers. She told me she believed competent workers were proud and hard to manage. She justified this by explaining, 'What I need is hands, not brains and mouths.' While neglecting potential employees' capability, she paid special attention to personal characteristics and the 'look' (*mianxiang*, her word) of a worker. If she liked the 'look' of a recruit, along with their personality and disposition, she would give them a chance and offer them a position, even if they knew nothing related to the job. A deputy manager explained her theory to me: 'This one is well educated and has impressive experience. She will ask for a very high salary and leave our factory very soon. If she doesn't leave, she will have many opinions on everything. It will cause me troubles.' But how can incompetent workers work in the factory? Does this match the corporate rationality identified by Ong of pursuing 'specific goals such as increasing and maintaining company profit margins' (Ong 2007: 222)?

The question that arises for me here is how young migrant workers manage to cope with the confusing mix of ideologies that coexist in the factory. On the one hand, the factory lectures them constantly to be a professional worker who should care about efficiency and quality and do their job without personal bias. Meanwhile, on the other hand, it tells them – both through ‘performed’ managerial anger and through more subtle, unspoken and implicit practices such as demands for personal service outside the workplace – that the power of authority bears little relation to any official regulations and frequently goes far beyond what such ‘paper’ rules would permit. In other words, young rural migrants encounter a clash of values within the factory culture of ‘modern’ China.

### **BEING COLLECTIVIST OR BEING INDIVIDUALIST**

From an analytical point of view, there are some issues that need to be clarified when it comes to understanding this clash of values. According to previous research, Chinese youth in the 1990s were encountering an ‘ideological crisis’ (Kwong 1994) because they lived under a form of ‘capital socialism’ (Pieke 1995: 496) in which the values they absorbed from formal education were largely inconsistent with the values promoted by the market state (Kwong 1994). As they were growing up, the Chinese government was implementing economic reforms while at the same time maintaining tight political control (Weber 2002: 348; Yan 2010: 508). In the hope that China would have responsible, competitive and cosmopolitan citizens, the party-state encouraged ‘the rise of the individual’ (Yan 2003; Rofel 2007; Yan 2010) and actively promoted this through the mass media and other means (Rosen 2009). However, this individualism (seen as a route to modernisation) had a very particular history (Liu 1993; Yan 2010: 494): government and Chinese elites created the discourse of ‘a Chinese version of individualism’, in which the individual is a ‘small self’ who is part of a ‘big self’, which can be the state, society or the party-state as necessary. The small self should shoulder the responsibility for being healthy, reliable and competitive in order to make the big self it belongs to both strong and powerful (Liu 1993; Yan 2010). As noted above, Yan (2010) argues that in the context of neoliberalism specifically this means the promotion of ‘self-responsible’ citizens – but, in the Chinese version, in order to strengthen the state as a whole. In this version, the individual is part of the collective and therefore individual ‘responsibilisation’ is construed in terms of collective goals. To some extent, this is therefore simply shifting the object of the individual’s loyalty away from the traditional focus on the family and towards the state or society (Yan 2010). In this regard, it should also be noted that the party-state encourages people to be individualistic in some aspects but not in others (Weber 2002).

At the same time, it also needs to be emphasised that the individualisation process that Chinese youth are experiencing today has been rather hastily imposed on Chinese society (Yan 2010) and that its effects are uneven. Growing up under the party-state’s ambiguous attitude toward ‘autonomy’ and ‘free choice’, sometimes these young people may appear

to be completely 'westernised' (and thus individualised) professionals but, at the same time, they can be surprisingly 'Chinese' in orientation (Hoffman 2006: 552; Hoffman 2010).

Whatever the images or promoted ideologies, it cannot be assumed that Chinese youth have just passively accepted western (or global) values and that they are becoming individuals in the western sense. Many anthropologists, such as Sahlins, have shown that non-western peoples do not simply copy western culture and ideals when they encounter them (Sahlins 1999: x); on the contrary, they actively incorporate these into 'indigenous sociologies and cosmologies' (1999: vi), effectively indigenising the ideas and practices of the western world system (1999: x). To cite one highly relevant example: modernisation in Taiwan has not completely erased the traditional emphasis on hierarchy and social roles in organisations (Jiang and Cheng 2008), while meanwhile the practice of filial piety there remains robust, in spite of what could be seen as wholesale westernisation (Whyte 2004).

It is broadly accepted that, when this generation of Chinese youth were growing up, they inevitably faced the challenge of handling both 'individualistic' values (such as ambition for one's own career) and 'collectivist' values (such as responsibility and the willingness to sacrifice for others) (Weber 2002: 348). To put it simply: today's Chinese youth have to negotiate because they typically do not have a clear model to follow. Hence they negotiate to achieve personal and professional goals by mobilising individual and collective values (Weber 2001; Weber 2002). They negotiate 'to push the parameters of 'acceptable' behaviour' (Weber 2002: 347). They also negotiate with the ideal youth culture the Chinese government has 'packaged' for youth consumption (Kwong 1994; Weber 2002: 352). They form their own subcultures (Kwong 1994). Their feelings and emotional reactions, such as guilt or retribution, play an important role when they are negotiating for personal goals, swinging between different value sets (Weber 2002: 347, 365). Thus, as well as the 'enterprising self' and the 'desiring self' noted by previous authors (Yan 2010), the 'negotiating self' may more precisely reflect the actual circumstances outlook of Chinese youth today.

However, much of the scholarly work on these topics has focused on well educated urbanites. This is probably because young urbanites are 'better consumers' and they are certainly 'more visible to the media' (Yan 2006: 260). By contrast, rural youth, although constituting the majority of Chinese youth, 'rarely enter the sight of scholars and journalists' (Yan 2006: 261). We cannot simply assume that rural migrant youth will sooner or later 'urbanise' to become something like their urban counterparts. Chinese youth are not a homogeneous group and because of social context, they might be more diverse than their counterparts in the west (Kwong 1994: 248).

What I have emphasised is the clash of values that young rural migrants encounter within the factory culture of 'modern' China. Is the journey of dagong (working for a salary) the start of new generation migrant workers' experience of individualisation? Or is it in effect the opposite: the start of internalising hierarchy, learning how to display in-role behaviour?

Here I shall show how these young inexperienced migrant workers become 'negotiating selves'.

## **NEGOTIATIONS OF YOUNG MIGRANT WORKERS**

The factory offers workers a contradictory and tricky environment where both modern values (like respecting regulations) and old values (like respecting the exercise of arbitrary power) coexist. Although the factory managers try to impose the hierarchical structure on the workers, the workers' response does not have to be passive acceptance. Thus it makes sense to ask, how do young migrant workers make their decisions and react to the situation they find themselves in? The range of possible reactions might include resistance, accommodation, negotiation or submission. Which do most of them choose?

In my experience, most migrant workers seem to decide to attach themselves to figures of authority. However, I would argue that this decision is not a simple submission to authority or out of giving up on any possibility of resistance as such. On the contrary, in my experience, it is the result of negotiations/calculations with the realities as young workers see them. Beyond offering basic respect and submission to their leaders, some migrant workers also actively try to please their supervisors.

What has happened to the regulations?, one might ask. Or, more specifically, from the perspective of my research, how do the workers answer this question? Young workers told me, 'Only naïve people believe regulations and rules and stick to them.' For them, an adult is one who is capable of understanding the gap between reality and regulations. Such inconsistencies are to be expected. They have no faith that other people will obey regulations. They said that regulations are 'just so things will look good [xie haokan de] – who believes in all that [shei xiangxin]?' Their experience is that the practice in the factory does not follow the regulations and they regard the rules and regulations as merely a matter of keeping up appearances. Only stupid or naïve – childish – people calculate and operate their rationality on the basis of regulations. (Thus, they seem to equate being grown up with having a cynical, or 'realistic' view that understands how things 'really work' behind the appearance of proprieties.) They laugh at an outsider like me, without knowledge of the mainland 'Chinese national conditions' (zhongguo guoqing) and 'social reality' (shehui xianshi) that structures their experience.

If these workers want to achieve labour rights, they will never try to do so directly; they are also anxious not to even want to trigger suspicions. Their assumption is that subtle and tactful emotional performances – offering their loyalty, gaining trust and then persuading supervisors – will function better for achieving their goals. Their conclusion is that learning to behave in this way will lead them onto the right track for establishing themselves in life – *liye* – and growing up to be an adult. They come to know that 'respecting hierarchy' and 'displaying proper role behaviour' are crucial for their future success. They learn that smiling submissively will bring them freedom: to step aside (in deference) and that this is

the first step to go forward. They believe in the power of hierarchy and authority rather than in the power of official documents, rules and regulations.

They also negotiate within the context of their uncertain situation by switching, as conditions require, between 'modern' and 'traditional' values. For example, the workers would sigh as they told me how frustrated they felt working constantly without a 'sense of achievement' (*chengjiugan*): no matter how good they were, it seemed that the boss would still favour someone good at *pai ma pi* (flattering and fawning). Cloud and Silk told me, 'Our boss is swayed by his emotion too much. He puts personal relationships above all and is blind to who is really good at work. Under his management the really good worker will feel frustrated.' However, when Cloud and Silk complained in this way, they seemed to forget that they themselves had been beneficiaries of good personal relationship (*guanxi*) with crucial managers. Silk had already received high pay while doing nothing for several months because she was considered to be sincere and loyal. The manager did not want to let her go even though she was already effectively redundant. Cloud was famous for her skilful emotional performances in front of the deputy manager. If, as seems to be the case, migrant workers are developing a 'theory' that 'you can't go wrong if you obey your leader', they can hardly be said to be en route to becoming 'self-responsible' or 'enterprising selves'. If anything, they are learning that the best strategy is to reduce risk by avoiding responsibility and handing it over to a superior who will care for them.

The main question arising here is thus why the migrant workers I met are deciding to pin their future on subservience to hierarchy and authority? This seems to make them different from other youth cohorts. While it seems that urban youth in China are actually trying to develop themselves into enterprising selves (as in Hanser's (2002) research conducted in 1998), meanwhile, rural youth in China are seemingly critical of unpopular political policies and corruption (as in Yan's (2009) findings). What makes the young migrant workers I met so different from these contemporary counterparts? In the following sections, I will begin to explore some possible reasons, starting with their training into the ideology of the factory, i.e. the attempt to make them 'promising' workers.

### **To be a promising worker**

There were many compulsory training courses (*jiaoyu xunlian*) taken by factory workers. The classes were offered for all workers but they are divided according to their rank. Talks were also regularly given by the leaders to the workers – normally three times every working day. Apart from professional training courses, the rest of these are meant to preach the 'correct mentality' (*zhengquexintai*) to fit into the way of being a successful person. All training courses were followed by exams. The workers had to pass; if not, they were asked to re-sit the exams. If they failed several times, the factory deducted money from their wages.

I quote here some sentences from the dramatically named management document 'Apocalypse' (Qishilu), the manual for employee's EQ (Emotion Quotient) training. One chapter, entitled 'The Revolution of Enterprise', includes the statement 'The real revolution occurs when one revolutionises oneself'. It urges workers to transform themselves into a wholly new person right now. It describes how currently the prevailing mentality among migrant workers is:

*What do we have now?*

*We have a job but we also have resentment.*

*We want to do something, but the criteria don't allow us.*

*We work hard but we earn little.*

*We are working for a boss so we don't have a sense of responsibility.*

*We work for others so we don't work actively.*

*The enterprise is not mine, so I have no loyalty.*

*Then, the manual admonishes workers, explaining that this mentality is wrong and will cause harm to the workers themselves one day. It starts to promote a 'correct mentality'. It preaches the importance of loyalty by saying:*

*Think about it,*

*in this world,*

*entrepreneurs and great men all need comrades.*

*They never work alone.*

*Who is their comrade?*

*The most important criterion for their comrade is loyalty.*

Here loyalty is linked to hierarchy and collectivity: everyone should show loyalty to that great man and the great goal he initiates among us. It interprets that 'feeling inequality' only occurs when the workers have the wrong mentality. It goes on:

*You know it should be equitable, don't you?*

*However, how do you count if it is fair or not?*

*What kind of equity are you pursuing grounded on what you are doing now?*

*'How to count'? Gain = ability + contribution.*

*If you use this formula to count, then the result is always 'inequity'.*

*Inequity = belittle others + overvalue yourself = look for trouble + backward!!*

*Then, it promotes a 'new equity spirit', emphasising that 'spirit' is powerful to overcome the feeling of inequity. It says:*

*In this world,*

*what kind of power can return empty-handed dead people to life?*

*Spirit only!*

*In this world,*

*what kind of power can let people feel happiness without relying on material fortune?*

*Spirit only!*

*The spirit calls for an immense gratitude. The manual continues:*

*Who gave us a job? The boss!*

*Who helps us to grow up? Our supervisors!*

*Who gives us invulnerable will? Our enemy!*

*We should feel gratitude to our leaders.*

*We should treasure our current lives.*

These lessons attempt to inculcate a new mentality in the workers: one should be loyal to hierarchy because it is for one's own good. I found that some workers had copied these sentences in their own notebooks and seemed to take them to heart. Silk told me, for example, that the training actually corresponded with what she learned through her own experiences over the past ten years, even if it looked a bit counter-intuitive at first glance. Since Silk was eager to enter into the neoliberal world, these sentences, and the ideologies behind them, seemed to stir her heart.

### **To be a proper person (hui zuoren)**

Young migrant workers also educate themselves, of course, outside of this formal training, something which they themselves link to the process of 'growing up' (chengzhang). For them, learning proper job performance, skills and the new mentality required for work overlaps with the process of learning to be an adult. When I interviewed them and asked what they had learned during their years working in the factory, more than half of them answered along the lines of, 'The most important thing I've learned during the experiences of dagong is how to zuoren [how to be a proper person]'.

Within the Chinese tradition, and within Confucianism in particular, the discourse surrounding 'proper personhood' is highly developed. In simple terms, however, for these young migrant workers, learning how to zuoren seemingly means that they now have a better understanding of their 'social roles'— which they distinguish from their inner selves — and the sets of behaviour attached to these social roles. For example, Duckweed was a

tough, 24-year-old unmarried woman from Hubei province. She always called her section women *jia* (our family) and her colleagues in her section *zijiren* (insiders, our own people). She adjusted her attitude and behaviour quickly when she encountered different categories of people: subordinates and supervisors, people in the same sections and in other sections. She spoke loudly on the telephone at clerical workers in the production section. She abused her subordinates. Meanwhile, when Duckweed speaks to the supervisor, her tone turns low, submissive and respectful. Duckweed's performance might remind us of Silk, who also 'adjusts' her behaviour when engaging with different people.

Workers who do not know or have not yet learnt how to behave in accord with their position may be judged 'quexinyan' (mindless). Managers from Taiwan sometimes laughed at such workers as 'shaogenjin' ('missing a nerve') and sometimes angrily shouted at them that they were clearly 'blind' (*baimu*). They were felt to be either too innocent to make sense of things (if they are young) or simply useless (if they are older). Workers learnt that dull workers who only follow orders are not desirable. They are deemed to be stupid and overly *laoshi* (simple-minded).

What truly marks a 'smart', ideal worker is that they should be voluntarily paying attention to their leaders' emotions in order to understand the leaders' desires and intentions (*kanren lianse*, literally 'watching other people's facial expressions', meaning to see what others feel/want). Then, they should react quickly. One day, Gold, a manager, stood up suddenly, and walked toward the exit holding his mug. When he passed by Duckweed's desk, he put his mug heavily on her desk. He said nothing. He did not even stop. He kept on walking and left the room. Soon after, Duckweed stood up, took Gold's mug and went out of the room. When she came back, Gold's mug was full of hot tea. She was detecting the intention behind Gold's behaviour and fulfilling his intention in order to please him – although serving tea for Gold is definitely not part of her formal job responsibilities in the official documents.

If workers cannot understand leaders' unspoken wishes, or know who might react to things that happened, they will be punished, sometimes without the matter ever being mentioned. What young migrant workers learn in such cases is probably the traditional doctrine: 'never offend the one who holds power', rather than 'I can be self-responsible'.

What does it mean to be a so-called 'enterprising self' in this context? According to Rose, the enterprising self is the product of advanced liberalism (Rose 1996 as cited in Hoffman 2001: 66), which drives people to be competitive (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) and to try to live up to the ideals of enterprise culture (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008: 389). Yan, for one, claims that the 'enterprising self' is 'commonly found among the younger generations of Chinese labourers' following China's process of individualisation (Yan 2010: 504).

But it is not always clear that this has happened among the workers in the THS factory. Jasmine, a well-educated worker who used to work in a Japanese enterprise, once

proposed to a deputy manager that the assignment of tasks was very confused and inconsistent with the regulations. She suggested that the tasks should be redistributed and that this should be formalised in the regulations in order to make everyone's responsibilities clear. Her request seemed reasonable to me and, indeed, her initiative seemed to be exactly what would be expected of an 'enterprising subject'. However, her behaviour made the deputy manager very angry, as she took it as a challenge to her authority. Later, the chief manager told me in private about Jasmine's 'mistakes':

She is too selfish. She is too calculating [taiaijijiao]. She only thinks about herself. This kind of person lacks a sense of responsibility [mei zerengan]. Who does Jasmine think she is [ta yiwei tashishei]? She thinks she is well-educated and knows everything. She is too proud and really blind [baimu].

Note that lacking 'a sense of responsibility' and 'blindness' are mentioned in this context, as seen from the chief manager's perspective. Jasmine's request was taken as a challenge to the deputy manager's authority. Jasmine's initiative was not applauded but interpreted as a sign of her competing with the supervisors' authority, rather than a sign of being self-responsible or enterprising. More precisely, what Jasmine did could be seen as an attempt to overthrow the hierarchical system in the factory. Therefore, she is labelled as 'blind'. Her 'blindness' to the current hierarchical structure is what earns her censure. The charge that she is 'selfish' comes from her implicit denial that she is part of the collective. In short, Jasmine lacks 'role-based loyalty'. The consequences for Jasmine were serious. The chief manager said, 'She is not suitable for our factory. If I get the chance, I will ask her to leave.' Because of the managerial response to Jasmine, young migrant workers would see that anyone who challenges the hierarchy will get a serious punishment and probably never gain success in 'the modern world'.

Since those social actors who insist on following rules and clarifying job duties and responsibilities are stigmatised as selfish, blind and irresponsible – in effect, childish – the model of responsible adults thus would thus seem to be the opposite side: those who put 'collective first, individual later', those with the capacity to maintain structure, harmony and stability.

From this perspective, in order to be an adult, the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other must be recognised and the emphasis should be on attending to others, fitting in and having a harmonious interdependence with them. Adulthood does not denote fully developing one's individuality or showing off one's distinctive characteristics, in disregard of the wider situation. If people act this way, they are criticised as being naïve or childish. Learning about *zuoren* is thus the socialisation process for young migrant workers, the process of gradually learning how to control one's 'inner self', how to precisely manage one's proper 'social role' in a group, how to fit into a group by behaving 'role appropriately', while giving others clues and cues to adjust their self–other relationships.

The hierarchy thus exists as the point of reference for judging if everyone's behaviour is proper or not. However, I think that there is a further reason, which might be more decisive than ideological reasons in commanding young migrant workers' support for hierarchy and authority and this is connected with the distribution of resources, as I will now discuss.

### **Family, danwei and the distribution of resources**

Zuoren not only prescribes the ideal behaviour that a subordinate should display; it also regulates the leaders. Leaders are also expected to behave 'properly', in quite specific ways. Young workers explain to me that a leader must possess the particular 'stance' (you nage yangzi, literally: gesture). S/he should not be too polite or s/he will fail to make subordinates submit to her/his power and threat. S/he should keep some distance from ordinary workers rather than mingling with them. It is self-evident, they believe, that leaders should be different from ordinary workers.

While the subordinates are keen to please their leaders emotionally and attach themselves to someone in power, they are not totally forced to behave in this way. The ultimate reason for their compliance, in my understanding, relates to their expectations that their leader will take care of them and, more specifically, will include them in any distribution of resources.

This expected relationship between workers and their leaders is somewhat like that of parents taking care of their children or elder brothers/sisters taking care of younger siblings. While the workers 'take anger' from their leaders, they also transfer their anxiety and responsibilities to their leaders, who are expected to take on this burden. When workers need money to build a house or pay back debts, they will ask for help from leaders who are close to them. If they encounter any problems, the leaders are expected to step in. If the workers go out with their leaders, such as to a banquet, the workers never pay: they have the 'right' to be 'treated'. Ding says, 'If I go out with Shan [his immediate leader] he definitely will pay for everything for me. Tachongda, wochongxiao [he plays the big one, I play the small one]. I won't argue over who pays because I am not his equal.'

One day, Future-Coming (a middle ranking manager) came to the Quality Control section to resolve a problem for Virtue-Bright. After it was dealt with, Future-Coming asked Virtue-Bright, 'How will you show your appreciation?' Virtue-Bright replied, 'OK, I'll buy you a drink.' Future-Coming disagreed: 'Only me? How about my brothers [xiongdi, brother in this context denotes his subordinates]? I need to take care of my brothers.' Again, this does not show the fostering of self-responsible, self-managed social actors. The workers expect the owner and close leaders to take responsibility not only for the operation of factory (to grasp/create resources) – which would, of course be consistent

with the idea of the self-responsible subject of neoliberalism – but also to take on responsibilities of taking care of them (to redistribute resources to them).

It seems the case that the relationship between individual and group in the factory ideally should resemble that typical of Chinese families. Migrant workers bring these patterns of relations from rural China to the factories of the SEZ. Chinese households have functioned as economic groups and/or corporations for a very long time (Yan 2003). Families are expected to act as collectives. Reinforced by centuries of practice, Chinese households represent a particular mode for the distribution of resources and responsibilities (Hsu 1971; Fei 1992). Everyone in the household also is bound by implicit contractual obligations and rights. Their agency is constrained to a large extent by this implicit contract. Even though individuals can negotiate their particular situation in their best interests, their bargaining power is pre-defined by household structure and the pre-existing kinship mode (Kabeer 2000). Hill Gates (1996) refers to such units as a 'patricorporation'. She also proposed a dualist model for understanding Chinese economic life, consisting of the PCMP (the petty capitalist mode of production) and the TMP (the tributary mode of production). This helps her to explain the seemingly contradictory characteristics that have puzzled sinologists: on the one hand, Chinese society seems to emphasise morality, personal loyalty, generosity and harmony; on the other hand, the Chinese can be extremely frugal, calculating and ruthless in market competition. Similarly, within the Chinese family, filial piety and self-sacrifice is emphasised but at the same time there is exploitation of family labour (like selling daughters into prostitution). In the light of Gates' research, the co-existing models (i.e. the TMP and PCMP) can be said to have been present in Chinese society continuously throughout the contemporary period (and before). Even through the Communist period, the only difference to the dualist model was that the object of tribute (formerly the imperial centre) was replaced by the Communist Party. Similar patterns may be seen in the factory, although, of course, on a much smaller scale. The leader in each rank is like the male head of a family who controls the surplus value created by the whole family: most of it is given as tribute to his superior, while the rest is distributed within the section.

In this situation, to be fired due to the difficulties of the factory was not seen as acceptable treatment by most of migrant young workers. Obviously they are not being dismissed due to any unacceptable work performance on their part. Nor do they see economic difficulties of the factory operation as an acceptable reason. They saw their dismissal in such circumstances as 'the owner refusing to take the responsibility for taking care of employees s/he is expected to shoulder'.

Here is an example. When orders for products began to plunge and the factory was filled with a fearful atmosphere, what seriously concerned workers and what they kept on discussing was not whether the owner was minimising the risks to the factory but whether he was able to *zuoren* (be a proper person) – meaning in this particular context what his

behaviour towards, and relationships with, those senior staff who had become redundant to the factory's needs indicated about his personal character. One day the workers and I went out for dinner together. Over dinner, Red made the following observation:

If the owner is benevolent and treasures their former relationships [nina jiuqing], he does not ask his 'soldiers' to leave. These people used to do everything to fulfil the tasks the leaders assigned them, even putting their personal life at risk [pinguoming]. Even though you don't recognise their merit [gonglao], you should at least appreciate their hard work [kulao]. How can you ask them to leave just because they can't contribute anything [meiyong] right now?

Red's opinion immediately gained the agreement of many workers at the table. I asked workers what Shan should do if, because of their personal ties to him, he couldn't dismiss workers that had become of little use to the factory. The response was silence. The workers more or less agreed that incapable workers do cause problems. Many senior workers occupied the same positions as before but know little or nothing about the new products that have been introduced into the production lines. The process of trial and error through which they learn what to do wastes huge amounts of money and time. One of the workers finally gave me an answer, saying, 'It's Shan's responsibility to "create" a new position for these senior workers if his management skills are good enough.' Light concluded, 'Bingxiong, xiongyige; jiangxiong, xiongyiwo [If a soldier sucks, only one sucks; if a general sucks, the whole brigade sucks].'

After listening to the workers' logic, I was reminded of what has been said more generally with reference to danwei (work unit) relationships in China. Knight and Song describe 'the paternalistic relationships' within a danwei, which ultimately makes workers, if they are fired, feel betrayed – as if 'they had been kicked out of the family home' (Knight and Song 2005: 29). It is because a Chinese danwei is much more than an employer, in the typical Western sense. As Knight and Song explain:

The work-unit (danwei) refers to the urban, publicly owned organisational unit in which workers are employed. It can be a factory, a school, a hospital, an administrative or party organ, and so on. Danwei have played a pervasive role in China's urban society, binding their employees to them in a culture of dependence. With their many functions, they are not just a workplace but a social institution. They satisfy the basic needs of their employees and their dependants, represent their interests, define their social status, accord them various rights, and control and influence their behaviour. The danwei is a very different concept from that of the employer in the Western sense (Knight and Song 2005).

Knight and Song also argue that a shift to a new market-based regime will therefore 'involve a difficult transition for workers, from being danwei people with a culture of dependency to being citizens with a culture of individualism' (2005: 20). The employees in

THS seem to accord, in some respects, with Knight and Song's prediction. They are still acting more like 'danwei people with a culture of dependency' rather than 'being citizens with a culture of individualism'. They still expect that their employer can guarantee that every employee has a job for life and also derives a certain degree of social support and social security from the job. They believe that, if they are sufficiently loyal to authority, then they deserve protection. The previous practice of danwei 'imposes a mindset on managers, workers, and policy-makers which is far removed from that of labour economists' (Knight and Song 2005: 20). As Bray(2005: 193) argues, although the danwei no longer exists in the same form as in the past in urban China, the mindset and spirit of the collective and the communal still remain key sources for subject formation.

### **Competition for missing social security**

Migrant workers in the SEZ are not entitled to the social security provided to permanent residents. They must therefore rely on informal means in order to get help and support when they need it. As a modern private enterprise, the THS factory does not function like a work unit from the Maoist era - i.e. the workers must normally deal with their own medical, pension, childcare and schooling needs for themselves.

The welfare and social security which, in a danwei, would be offered equally to every employee is here given on a selective and exclusive basis. In the 'modern' factory, it is provided as a consequence of competition for loyalty. It is a privilege-like reward, exclusively offered to some fortunate migrant workers who have shown what they are willing to do for the factory. It is important to note that the limited wage young migrant workers earn is normally not enough to support a normal family life in the SEZ. Their typical coping strategy is to live separately from their family (with their children staying in their rural home town and their spouse in another factory in the SEZ) and travel back and forth between the city and the home town. In this way they transfer the 'reproduction' part of their life (bearing children and also their life after retirement) back to the lower-cost rural home town.

As discussed in the previous section, new generation migrant workers are keen to achieve the status of being independent (duli). However, the lack of social security forces them to seek support from their parents in the rural home town, especially after they have children. The alternative is to find a way to resolve this dilemma within the factory setting through a rewards system distributed on a personal basis (which evidently violates the modern norm of impersonal distribution and reward mechanisms, as written in the regulations). To engage with this 'alternative' system may appear, on the surface, as a 'mindless' or 'habitual' reversion to 'traditional' values and practices. On the contrary: it is based, I want to suggest, on the rational calculation that they should offer their loyalty in exchange for basic social security needs.

## CONCLUSION

Young migrant workers, along with other contemporary Chinese youth, are in a society where contradictory ideologies co-exist: new and old, collective- and autonomy-oriented, equality – and efficiency-oriented. All of these no doubt have an impact on the formation of their subjectivity, which is indeed the consensus of contemporary writers. However, it is arguably the context in which these young people live that determines the weight they give to one or another of these ideologies. For young migrant workers, the factory in the SEZ and the hukou system make them ‘choose’ the relatively traditional values – hierarchy, authority, communal and collective values. This means that the modern standards and practices of the factory are themselves just a performative veneer: only outsiders, failures or naïve children would confuse them with the ‘how things really are’.

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