‘They Must be Represented’

The (Re)production of Social Hierarchies among Migrant Workers in Southern China

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betreut durch Prof. Dr. Chris Hann (Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung)

Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Chris Hann (Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung)

Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Ngai Pun (University of Hong Kong)

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Abbreviations

ACFTU	All-China Federation of Trade Unions
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CBD	Central Business District
CEIEC	China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPCC	Chinese People's Consultative Conference
CUN	Central University of Nationalities
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
HRS	Household Responsibility System
KOL	Key Opinion Leader
MUC	Minzu University of China
NPC	National People's Congress
OCT	Overseas Chinese Town
PKU	Peking University
PLA	People's Liberation Army
POS	Point of sale
PRC	People's Republic of China
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SOE	State Owned Enterprise
SZSE	Shenzhen Stock Exchange
TVEs	Township and Village Enterprises
VPN	Virtual Private Network
XUAR	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Zusammenfassung

'They Must Be Represented': The (Re)production of Social Hierarchies among Internal Migrant Workers in Southern China.

In der vorliegenden Dissertation beschäftige ich mich mit der Bedeutung der kritischen Schnittstellen zwischen sozialer Klasse und Ethnizität für die Herausbildung einer kollektiven Identität unter inländischen Arbeitsmigrant:innen in Shenzhen. Auf Grundlage meiner in den Jahren 2018 und 2019 erhobenen ethnographischen Daten dokumentiere ich die Herausforderungen, die sich für die Repräsentation von Wanderarbeiter:innen, als dominierte und ausgebeutete Subjekte in der politischen Ökonomie Chinas, ergeben. Binnenmigrant:innen werden mit strukturellen Herausforderungen konfrontiert, die durch die gesetzlichen und politischen Einschränkungen des in ihrem Namen handelnden Staates entstanden sind. Darüber hinaus wird die kollektive Identität der Arbeitsmigrant:innen durch Han – die „Ethnie" oder „Nationalität" (*minzu* 民族), der die große Mehrheit der chinesischen Bevölkerung angehört – monopolisiert. Als „anders" verstandene Minderheiten werden diese wegen ihrer vermeintlichen Bedrohung für das Chinesentum diskriminiert und sogar exkludiert. Diese Dynamiken verleihen dem berühmten Marx'schen Diktum – „Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden" – eine neue Komplexität.

Die Stadt Shenzhen bietet einen hervorragenden Ausgangspunkt für die Beobachtung der im Zuge der Marketisierung stattfindenden sozialen Transformationen. Sie stellt eines der ersten und erfolgreichsten Experimentierfelder für die Marktreformen der Volksrepublik China dar und wird als Beleg für die Weisheit und die strategische Vision der Partei angeführt. Durch ihre Vorreiterrolle in den arbeitsintensiven Industrien erlebte die Stadt einen massiven Zustrom von Wanderarbeiter:innen aus allen Teilen Chinas. Binnen weniger Jahrzehnte wandelte sich die Demographie von Shenzhen. Heute besteht die Bevölkerung überwiegend aus Migrant:innen unterschiedlicher Ethnien aus allen chinesischen Provinzen.

Ich beginne meine Dissertation mit einer breit angelegten Untersuchung darüber, wie Arbeitsmigrant:innen untereinander Solidarität und Ausgrenzung herstellen, und welche Auswirkungen dies auf ihre kollektive Identität hat. Mittels der kritischen Anwendung des Marx'schen Klassenbegriffs beleuchte ich die objektiven und subjektiven Dimensionen, die für eine Neubewertung der Arbeitsmigration in der Volksrepublik China hilfreich sind. Im Hinblick auf die objektiven Faktoren erläutere ich die historischen, institutionellen, politischen und sozioökonomischen Prozesse, die die Migration von Arbeitskräften aus ländlichen Gebieten in die neuen industriellen Zentren der Küstengebiete förderten. Danach beschreibe ich die Subjektivitäten, die die sozialen Hierarchien unter den heutigen Migrant:innen kennzeichnen, darunter die Wahrnehmung von Unterschieden bezüglich *suzhi* 素质 („innewohnende menschliche Qualität"), interethnischen Beziehungen, moralischen Imperativen, technischem Know-How sowie staatlich propagierter Ideologie. Ziel ist es, ein nuancierteres Verständnis der Selbstwahrnehmung von Han-Arbeitsmigrant:innen, ihrer komplexen Praktiken der Repräsentation sowie der Klassenfrage zu erlangen.

Die wichtigsten theoretischen Bezugspunkte werden in Kapitel 1 skizziert. Die Voraussetzungen für die Herausbildung einer aus Arbeitsmigrant:innen konstituierten Klasse sind untrennbar mit dem 1978 von der Volksrepublik China initiierten Reform- und Öffnungsprozess (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) verbunden. Um die Wirtschaft zu modernisieren, wurden ausgewählte Gebiete für transnationale Kapitalinvestitionen geöffnet. Diese sogenannten Sonderwirtschaftszonen nahmen Arbeitskräfte auf, die durch das „System der staatlichen Haushaltsregistrierung" (*hukou* 户口) der damit einhergehenden Transformation der ländlichen Produktion freigesetzt worden waren. Kommunale Verwaltungen hoben die Beschränkungen des 1958 eingeführten Haushaltsmeldesystems – das sogenannte *hukou* – auf, um die Besetzung der neuen Fabriken mit Migrant:innen aus ländlichen Gebieten zu ermöglichen. Obwohl das *hukou*-System mehrfach novelliert wurde, bleibt den Wanderarbeiter:innen der Zugang zu Diensten und Sozialhilfeleistungen in den Städten bis heute verwehrt. Infolgedessen haben Migrant:innen, obwohl sie durch ihre Arbeit zur Entwicklung der Stadt beitragen, keine Möglichkeit, dort ein Haus zu kaufen, ihre Kinder zur Schule zu schicken oder ihren Ruhestand zu genießen. Staatliche Leistungen und Sozialhilfe werden nominell vom Ort des offiziellen Wohnsitzes bereitgestellt. In der Regel handelt es sich dabei um Kleinstädte

und Dörfer, die nur über beschränkte Kapazitäten für das Vorantreiben wirtschaftlicher Konjunktur verfügen.

Die bisherige Forschung über Arbeitsmigrant:innen in Südchina beschäftigt sich überwiegend mit Fabrik- und Bauarbeiter:innen. Meine Studie verfolgt einen breiteren Ansatz zum Thema „Wanderarbeit" (*dagongren* 打工人). Hier wird Arbeitsmigration als eine Form der Subalternität verstanden, in der externe und interne Herrschaftsverhältnisse gelten. Entscheidend dabei ist nicht der spezifische Wirtschaftsbereich, in dem die Migrant:innen arbeiten, sondern die Herrschaftsverhältnisse, die dafür sorgen, dass die Löhne gering sind und dass die Arbeiter:innen entmachtet und untereinander fragmentiert sind. Im Gegensatz zu anderen, ebenfalls auf marxistischen und feministischen Klassenbegriffen basierten Ethnographien über chinesische Wanderarbeiter:innen, beziehe ich mich in meiner Analyse der komplexen historischen und räumlichen Verhältnisse zusätzlich auf Gramscis Konzept der „Subalternität". Ich verweise zudem auf neuere anthropologische Beiträge zur sozialen Klasse, wie etwa die von Kate Crehan, Don Kalb, Ngai Pun, und Ching Kwan Lee.

In Kapitel 1 werden darüber hinaus Ethnizität und Repräsentation als zentrale Konzepte eingeführt. Ethnizität wurde in Studien über chinesische Arbeitsmigration weitgehend vernachlässigt. Der chinesische Staat erkennt 56 *minzu* (Ethnien) an. Dieser Begriff wurde von der stalinistischen Klassifikation der „*narodnost*" abgeleitet. Etwas mehr als 91% der Bevölkerung gehört zur Han-Mehrheit – die allerdings selbst keine einheitliche Gruppe darstellt. Alle anderen Gruppen sind als „*minzu*-Minderheiten" klassifiziert. Während des Maoismus kamen den *minzu*-Minderheiten in ihren Verwaltungsgebieten aktive staatliche Fördermaßnahmen zugute, z.B. um ihre Sprachen und Traditionen zu pflegen und zu schützen sowie den Zugang zu Hochschulbildung zu ermöglichen. Mit der Marketisierung und dem damit verbundenen Ringen um die Integration in nun stärker umkämpfte Arbeitsmärkte wurden *minzu*-Minderheiten jedoch marginalisiert und verarmten zunehmend. Spezielles Augenmerk widme ich der besonders angespannten Beziehung von Han und Uiguren. Nach einer Analyse der Konstruktion von kollektiven Identitäten innerhalb des Nationalstaates argumentiere ich, dass die dominanten

Repräsentationspraktiken der Arbeitsmigrant:innen in Form von internen sozialen Hierarchien reproduziert werden.

Kapitel 2 beschreibt detailliert den Aufstieg von Shenzhen zur erfolgreichsten Sonderwirtschaftszone. Shenzhens sagenhafte Verwandlung vom Fischerdorf zum „Silikon Valley" Chinas ist sprichwörtlich geworden: besonders rasant verlaufende Prozesse werden mit dem Begriff „Shenzhen-Geschwindigkeit" beschrieben. Ich hinterfrage dieses Narrativ, indem ich die frühere Entwicklung dieser Region, die durch langjährige Handelsbeziehungen mit der benachbarten Kolonie Hongkong geprägt ist, genauer betrachte. Die Gruppe von Dörfern wurde bereits in den Status einer Stadt erhoben, bevor 1978 die Ernennung zur Sonderwirtschaftszone erfolgte. Um die Infrastruktur auszubauen und ausländische Investoren anzulocken, gründeten mehrere Staatseigene Unternehmen (SEUs) Niederlassungen in der neuen Stadt. Diese SEUs erleichterten die Übertragung von Kapital und Wissen, die bald eine höchst konkurrenzfähige inländische Produktion vorantrieben. Der Geist dieser frühen SEU-Wegbereiter wird im Symbol der Stadt Shenzhen verewigt: ein Ochse, der das Brachland erschließt.

Als Kronjuwel des Reform- und Öffnungsprozesses wird Shenzhen in letzter Zeit von der Regierungspartei als „Modell der sozialistischen Stadt" – d.h. als Blaupause für sozialistisches urbanes Leben – gefeiert. Aber hinter den Hochhäusern, Hipster- und Künstlervierteln und prächtigen Einkaufszentren schlagen die renommiertesten Marken der Welt Profit aus der Ausbeutung der Arbeit von Migrant:innen. Auf der Grundlage von ethnographischen Beispielen skizziere ich die starken Kontraste in einer von rasanten und radikalen Transformationen geprägten Stadt von Migranten.

Ausgehend von historischen Veränderungen in der Klassensprache in der Volksrepublik China widmet sich Kapitel 3 der sozialen Klasse als gelebte Erfahrung. Obwohl „Klasse" im politischen Diskurs der Reform-Ära als Schlagwort aufgegeben wurde, bleibt sie aus marxistischer Perspektive dennoch eine objektive Realität, wenn auch anders artikuliert. Folgt man Andrew Kipnis, so dient das Konzept *suzhi* in der heutigen chinesischen Gesellschaft als Marker für soziale Hierarchien. *Suzhi*, meistens übersetzt als „innewohnende menschliche Qualität", umfasst eine Reihe von nur schwer auf einen

Nenner zu bringenden Bedeutungen. Unter Bezugnahme auf Ernesto Laclau (der sich wiederum über Jacques Lacan auf Claude Lévi-Strauss bezieht) interpretiere ich *suzhi* als „leeren Signifikanten". Die nähere Untersuchung solcher leeren Signifikanten beleuchtet die Machtverhältnisse und Spannungen, die der Herrschaft innewohnen. Das Wort *suzhi* wird für gewöhnlich verwendet, um auf die vermeintlich mangelnde „Zivilisiertheit" (*wenming* 文明) einer Person hinzuweisen, die der Staat durch Bildungsmaßnahmen zu kompensieren versucht. Unter Wanderarbeiter:innen dienen die unter *suzhi* gefassten Attribute dem Ausdruck von Unterschieden innerhalb der Gruppe. Menschen ländlicher Herkunft oder aus *minzu*-Minderheiten (die in vielen Fällen mit landwirtschaftlichen oder pastoralistischen Aktivitäten assoziiert werden) wird ein niedrigeres *suzhi* zugeschrieben: als ob der „rückständige" materielle Zustand mit der sozialen Identität und dem Verhalten korrelieren würde. Die Ethnographie zeigt, dass *suzhi* als Basis der Generierung von Solidarität und Exklusion fungiert und Klassenwidersprüche und implizite Arbeitshierarchien verkörpert.

Der Fokus von Kapitel 4 ist die Ethnizität als zentrale Trennlinie in der kollektiven Identität der Wanderarbeiter:innen. Die Bestimmung ethnischer Identitäten in der Volksrepublik China ist keine einfache Aufgabe und wurde zudem stark politisiert. Das 1954 initiierte ethnische Klassifizierungsprojekt wendete stalinistische Ideen von „Nationalitäten" auf die Gruppen der damals neugegründeten Volksrepublik an. Die ursprünglich über 400 Anträge auf Anerkennung als Ethnie wurden schließlich auf die Han-Mehrheit und 55 *minzu*-Minderheiten reduziert, die die stalinistischen Kriterien von gemeinsamer Sprache, Herkunftsgebiet, Wirtschaftsform und Geisteshaltung erfüllten.

Diskurse über *minzu* sind eng mit dem Begriff der *wenming* verbunden. Die Han als dominante *minzu* bilden hierbei den Maßstab für zivilisiertes Verhalten, darunter werden die übrigen 55 *minzu*-Minderheiten je nach Assimilierungsgrad in einem Kontinuum eingeordnet. Minderheiten mit starken religiösen Traditionen wie die Uiguren werden als problematisch angesehen. Die über zehn Millionen Menschen dieser turksprachigen Gruppe leben überwiegend im Uigurischen Autonomen Gebiet Xinjiang; sie waren von der Assimilationspolitik der Reform-Ära stark betroffen. In der breiteren chinesischen Bevölkerung werden sie als gute Tänzer:innen und schöne Menschen dargestellt, aber auch als Diebe und Terroristen. Für ihre Küche sind sie berühmt. In einem Abschnitt über

Othering als Profitquelle („Othering for Profit“) beschreibe ich die Ausbeutung von uigurischen Migrant:innen durch die Han-Eigentümer von Gastronomiebetrieben in Xinjiang. Die Ethnographie beleuchtet zudem die „Vorstellungswelten der Exklusion“, die den uigurischen Islam essentialisiert und linguistisch diffamiert und als andersartig stigmatisiert, um die Zivilisierungsmission des Staates zu rechtfertigen. Viele Han-Wanderarbeiter:innen empfinden die Fördermaßnahmen für Minderheiten als ungerecht, weil sie *minzu*-Klassifikationen anstelle materieller Lebensbedingungen priorisieren. Ihre dauerhafte Dominanz führt zu einer Politik der Assimilierung anstatt zur Anerkennung von Vielfalt.

In Kapitel 5 nehme ich das Thema der sozialen Klasse im Zusammenhang mit der Analyse einer neuen Arbeiteridentität auf dem Arbeitsmarkt von Sanhe (einem Ort im Longhua-Bezirk in Shenzhen) auf. Migrant:innen, die als Ausweg aus dem Zyklus immer neuer befristeter Arbeitsverhältnisse ein Leben in der Marginalität wählen, werden auch als „Sanhe-Götter“ bezeichnet. Diese „Lilien auf dem Felde“ kümmern sich nicht um die Zukunft. Sie schlagen sich in der Gegenwart durch – mittels Gelegenheitsarbeit an ein bis zwei Tagen in der Woche. Die „Sanhe-Götter“ sind eine soziale Antwort auf die Missstände der Arbeitswelt. Auf Leiharbeit (*laowu paiqian* 劳务派遣) spezialisierte Arbeitsvermittlungsagenturen finden Beschäftigte für ein ganzes Spektrum von Fabriken. Die Wanderarbeiter:innen schließen ihre Verträge mit diesen Agenturen. Dieser Mechanismus begünstigt die strukturelle Diskriminierung. Darüber hinaus spielen Netzwerke aus der Heimatstadt eine wichtige Rolle. Viele Arbeitsmigrant:innen sind von einem Gefühl der Ausweglosigkeit geprägt und tun sich schwer, ihre materiellen Bedingungen zu verbessern. Der Weg des „Sanhe-Gottes“ ist für manche Migrant:innen – überwiegend männliche Han – eine Möglichkeit, nach Freiheit zu suchen.

Was auf den ersten Blick als emanzipatorisch erscheint, führt jedoch häufig in neue Fallen der Ausbeutung. Viele Migrant:innen verkaufen ihre Personalausweise und können deshalb nur in illegalen Fabriken arbeiten – ganz gleich, wie niedrig die Löhne sind oder wie schlecht der Arbeitsschutz ist. Die „Sanhe-Götter“ werden von Arbeitgeber:innen, Personalvermittler:innen und anderen Arbeiter:innen kritisiert, bemitleidet oder verachtet. Die bloße Existenz dieser Menschen beweist, dass die staatlichen Bemühungen, den Arbeitsmarkt unter Kontrolle zu behalten, nicht wirksam sind, denn das Kapital findet

immer neue Wege, die Rechtsvorschriften zu umgehen. Die Tagelöhner stehen, über die informell institutionalisierten Spaltungen hinaus, exemplarisch für die Fragmentierung der Wanderarbeiter:innen, die durch strukturelle Formen der Exklusion aufgrund von Geschlecht und Ethnizität entstehen.

Kapitel 6 beschäftigt sich mit Praktiken der Selbstdarstellung, in denen soziale Klasse und Ethnizität im Kontext einer, wie Zhiyuan Wang sie nennt, „doppelten Migration" – geographisch und digital – miteinander verkoppelt sind. Durch die Nutzung von Smartphones können Migrant:innen mit ihren Angehörigen in anderen Teilen des Landes in Kontakt bleiben, sie können sich in Online-Communities mit Gleichgesinnten austauschen, mehr über die Welt erfahren und unternehmerische Identitäten kultivieren – zuweilen ganz konkret auch in Form von Gewinn. Das Internet ist ein Medium, um Wanderarbeiter:innen über ihre Rechte aufzuklären und ihren Stimmen und Erfahrungen eine Plattform zu verleihen. Feministische Nichtregierungsorganisationen wie *Jianjiao Buluo* (尖叫部落) gründeten erfolgreiche Unterstützungsnetzwerke, die sich für die Rechte erwerbstätiger Frauen einsetzen. Über ihre digitalen Plattformen bieten sie Rechts- und Finanzberatung, einen Blog mit eindrucksvollen Erfahrungsberichten, Tipps für körperliche und psychische Gesundheit und mehr. Diese NGO beleuchtet feministische Aktionen sowohl in China als auch international. Im Kontrast dazu perpetuieren Arbeitsvermittler auf anderen digitalen Plattformen herabwürdigende Stereotypen über Frauen. Kleinere Fabriken, die ihre Arbeitskräfte nicht über Leiharbeitsfirmen beziehen, inserieren ihre Stellenangebote in Form von kurzen Videoclips auf Apps wie TikTok oder Kuaishou. Dafür werden häufig Videos eingesetzt, in denen attraktive Frauen als Beschäftigte dargestellt werden, um unverheiratete Männer als Arbeitskräfte zu gewinnen. Digitale Plattformen können also sowohl als Mittel für soziale Ermächtigung fungieren als auch vorhandene Formen der Exklusion und sozialer Entfremdung reproduzieren.

Über digitale Plattformen können Menschen sich „neu erfinden", zum Beispiel, indem sie sich in Volkstrachten kleiden oder einen Mitschnitt ihrer Tanzkünste über Videoapps teilen. Andere benutzen sie, um neue Fertigkeiten zu erlernen, die ihre Berufschancen verbessern und ihr Einkommen erhöhen könnten. Die radikalste Verdinglichung dieser Selbstentfaltung ist der Internet-Promi (*wanghong* 网红). Das Gefüge aus Inkubatoren, Förderern, Produzenten und Schöpfern viralen Inhalts wird *wanghong*-Wirtschaft

genannt und unterscheidet sich zum Teil deutlich von den „Influencern“ außerhalb Chinas. Obwohl der Internet-Ruhm für die große Mehrheit der Migrant:innen ein unerfüllter Traum bleibt, setzen viele ihre Bemühungen dennoch optimistisch fort, in der Hoffnung, dass sich ihr Schicksal eines Tages zum Glück wenden wird. Sie konsumieren weiterhin *wanghong*-Produkte, für die sie Werbung betreiben, und geben ihr Geld in bestimmten *wanghong*-Orten, wie Teehäusern oder Bäckereien aus. Ich verwende das Konzept der Verdinglichung im Sinne der Einverleibung von sozialen Beziehungen in das Kapital in Form einer Ware, um eine materialistische Kritik der *wanghong*-Wirtschaft und der durch sie mitverursachten Verhinderung der Herausbildung einer kollektiven Identität unter den Wanderarbeiter:innen darzulegen.

In Kapitel 7 skizziere ich die ideologischen Spannungen zwischen dem Staat und den Arbeitsmigrant:innen sowie unter den Migrant:innen selbst. Mithilfe der Gramsci’schen Kategorien von Hegemonie, Common Sense und subalterner Weltanschauungen bietet die Ethnographie Einblicke in die komplexen Machtverhältnisse, die hier im Spiel sind. Mit ihrem hegemonialen Projekt intensiviert die Kommunistische Partei Chinas ihre „ideologische Arbeit“ (*yishi xingtai gongzuo* 意识形态工作) und wirbt für ihre „sozialistischen Grundwerte“ (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观) wie Patriotismus, Harmonie, Rechtsstaatlichkeit usw. Diese Ideen sind Teil des „Common Sense“ (*senso comune*) aller chinesischen subalternen Subjekte einschließlich der Arbeitsmigrant:innen geworden. Letztere interpretieren das dominante Narrativ gemäß ihren eigenen Weltanschauungen, die in bestimmter Hinsicht vom hegemonialen Projekt abweichen können. Ich identifiziere vier solche Weltanschauungen. Ethnonationalismus und Neo-Maoismus verstärken bestimmte Aspekte dieses „Common Sense“. Ethnonationalismus gründet sich auf den Han-Chauvinismus, der als Patriotismus getarnt ist, und Neo-Maoismus macht von der Nostalgie für die soziale Einbettung in der Mao-Ära Gebrauch. „Proletarischer Existentialismus“ und Christianismus modifizieren ebenfalls Aspekte des „Common Sense“, sind jedoch ironisch geprägt oder weichen erheblich vom dominanten Narrativ ab. Meiner Argumentation zufolge, spiegelt der proletarische Existentialismus die Erfahrungen von Einsamkeit, Entmachtung, Marginalisierung sowie des Scheiterns wider, die in der Ausbeutung von Arbeit als Basis wirtschaftlichen Wachstums verankert sind. Um ihrer Frustration Luft zu machen, nutzen Migrant:innen verschiedene Kunstformen wie proletarische Dichtung und Musik, die

ihnen helfen, besser mit ihrer Situation zurechtzukommen. Zudem sind christliche Untergrundkirchen für viele Arbeitsmigrant:innen eine Quelle der Kraft angesichts der vielen Schwierigkeiten, mit denen sie umgehen müssen. Attraktiv für die Bekehrten ist die Gemeinschaft von Gleichen, die moralische, seelische und materielle Unterstützung als Mittel gegen den Materialismus und Konsumismus der Mainstream-Gesellschaft anbietet. Da viele ihrer Aktivitäten illegal sind, greifen diese Christen auf eine Reihe von verschleiernden Maßnahmen zurück, die es ihnen ermöglichen, von den lokalen Behörden unbemerkt zu bleiben.

In meiner Dissertation beschreibe ich die vielfältigen Wege, auf denen Binnenmigrant:innen Solidarität und Exklusion produzieren, die gleichzeitig eine kollektive Klassenidentität herstellen und soziale Hierarchien reproduzieren. Aufbauend auf kritisch materialistische Ansätze zum Thema soziale Klasse trägt meine Studie zum Wissen über die Herausbildung von Klasse und interethnischen Beziehungen in den am stärksten marginalisierten und von Prekarität betroffenen gesellschaftlichen Schichten in China bei. Ohne die Entwicklungen im Klassenbewusstsein auszublenden, die durch militante Kämpfe in den letzten Jahrzehnten erreicht worden sind, lädt mein Beitrag dazu ein, weiter über die Faktoren nachzudenken, die Gegenbewegungen verhindern und stattdessen einige Migrant:innen dazu veranlassen, ethnonationalistische Ansichten zu verteidigen, die ihre muslimischen Landsleute exkludieren.

Arbeitsmigrant:innen in Südchina haben keine Möglichkeit zur Eigenvertretung. Sie tragen massiv zur wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung bei, sind jedoch nicht in der Lage, eigene Vorteile daraus zu ziehen. Stattdessen wird ihre soziale Reproduktion an ihre Heimatorte „externalisiert“. Dadurch werden ohnehin bereits prekären Gemeinden zusätzliche wirtschaftliche Belastungen aufgebürdet. Die Wanderarbeiter:innen sind wenig bis gar nicht an ländlichen Wirtschaftsaktivitäten beteiligt.

Da arbeitsintensive Industriezweige Shenzhen in Richtung der inneren Provinzen Chinas verlassen, könnten sich in diesen Gebieten ähnliche soziale Dynamiken entfalten. Und obwohl manche der hier beschriebenen Phänomene spezifische, durch den chinesischen Staat bedingte Eigenschaften haben, ist davon auszugehen, dass sich ähnlich komplexe Konstellationen aus einem Zusammenspiel zwischen sozialer Klasse und

ethnonationalistischen Spaltungen auch in anderen Teilen der Welt feststellen lassen. Die vorliegende Dissertation ist ein Beitrag zur Literatur über die zunehmende globale Verflechtung von Migration, Ethnizität und Ungleichheit in unserer Zeit.

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'To make a long story short
We're being left only with the future:
I make a toast
For that day which never comes
But is the only thing
Really left in our control.'

—Nicanor Parra, 'The Final Toast', translated by David Unger.

Note on the Text

Pseudonyms are used throughout the text to protect the privacy and safety of my interlocutors. The transcription and translation of voice-recorded communications was done by me with the help of field assistants in China. Unless stated otherwise, policy concepts and slogans have been presented in English language following official translations. I provide my own translation for Chinese terms and expressions, together with the original Chinese on the first occasion they appear in the text, and whenever I judged it necessary to help the reader. I have used the Simplified Chinese script (*jiantizi* 简体字) and the *pinyin* system of romanisation.

Map 1. Field site in the People's Republic of China.

> ‘Both Han chauvinism and local-nationality chauvinism are harmful to the unity of the nationalities; they represent one kind of contradiction among the people which should be resolved.’

Mao Zedong. “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.” In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, 384-421. Beijing, PRC: Foreign Language Press, 1997. P. 407.

> ‘Insofern Millionen von Familien unter ökonomischen Existenzbedingungen leben, die ihre Lebensweise, ihre Interessen und ihre Bildung von denen der andern Klassen trennen und ihnen feindlich gegenüberstellen, bilden sie eine Klasse. Insofern ein nur lokaler Zusammenhang unter den Parzellenbauern besteht, die Dieselbigkeit ihrer Interessen keine Gemeinsamkeit, keine nationale Verbindung und keine politische Organisation unter ihnen erzeugt, bilden sie keine Klasse. Sie sind daher unfähig, ihr Klasseninteresse im eigenen Namen, sei es durch ein Parlament, sei es durch einen Konvent geltend zu machen. Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden.’

Marx, Karl. “Der Achtzehnte Brumaire del Louis Bonaparte.” In *Marx Engels Ausgewählte Werke (II)*, 307-417. Frankfurt am Main, DE: Verlag Marxistische Blätter GmBH, 1970, p. 407.

I. Introduction

1.1. Research problem

In 2018, the National Museum of China, located in the iconic Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, held an exhibition entitled 'Great Changes' (*weida de biange* 伟大的变革) to commemorate forty years since the launch of the Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) process. In the foyer of the museum, surrounded by models of space capsules, fast trains, and pictures of life in the countryside, was a scaled version of contemporary Shenzhen under the title 'Spring Story' (*chuntian de gushi* 春天的故事). As the crown jewel of China's Reform, Shenzhen is represented as a futuristic, multicultural, fast-paced city. However, just as in the exhibition, the awe-inspiring architecture and cutting-edge technological production of this 'model socialist city' has effaced the role and reality of millions of internal migrant workers who have been the material force behind Shenzhen's global success.

This dissertation peruses the ways in which internal migrant workers produce solidarities and exclusions among themselves and their impact on the representation of a collective identity of migrant labour. It enquires about the issues of ethnicity and class that are involved in their representation. The focus on internal migrant labour allows for an examination of interethnic relations among some of the most marginalised and precarious subaltern subjects in Chinese society. It addresses the elements that stifle working-class solidarity and the tensions at the base of a polity that stresses 'patriotism', 'national unity', and 'harmony' as core values. I argue that the increasing commodification of land and labour in the last forty years has enabled new tensions to arise among internal migrants that promote solidarity and exclusion according to ethnic and home-place networks. These modes of differentiation have created social hierarchies between migrant workers that challenge straightforward definitions and practices of class.

The conditions that enable this situation are intrinsic to the People's Republic of China's process of Reform and Opening. The deepening of China's economic reforms and the persistence of lingering socialist practices and institutions have

produced a polity where internal migrant workers have been exploited in the pursuit of urbanisation and increasing productivity and profits. These migrants are forced to compete in labour markets that favour some collective identities and exclude others, thus fostering division and precarity. In this context, internal migrant workers exercise their agency by producing new forms of solidarity and exclusion as either individual or collective strategies of survival. Given the current position of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the world-system and the complexities of its great transformation domestically, it becomes even more relevant to take a closer look at the potential nodes of conflict among subaltern subjects.

Learning from the experiences of the 'Asian tigers' and the demise of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been cautious in balancing the expansion of marketisation with the concentration of authority in the Party. Voices around the world have praised the Chinese model of authoritarian politics and market-driven economic growth as a 'miracle' that maintained 10% average annual economic growth between 1978 and 2010, characterised by awe-inspiring infrastructural development, and driving millions out of poverty (Naughton 2018; X. Ren 2013). According to Barry Naughton, this trajectory was enabled by four favourable factors: high-quality human resources, the global division of labour, China's 'catch-up' potential, and political adaptability in the 1980s and 1990s (2018, 3). In its more political dimension, scholars have stressed that this movement implied a departure from the socialist social contract by dismantling the socialist employment system, locally known as 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fan wan* 铁饭碗), which released state responsibilities such as job security, pensions, housing, health care, and education to market forces (Lee 2007; C. Li 2016; Shaoguang Wang 2008).

The reasons for launching the Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) process were both historical and ideological. Historically, after Mao Zedong's death in 1976 the CPC needed to reassert its legitimacy after the period of intense political struggle and mass mobilisation known as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Mao's designated successor, Hua Guofeng, was incapable of securing his leadership, as different party factions sought to push their own lines, pitting Maoist orthodoxy against reformism. By April 1976, Deng Xiaoping, who had been purged

himself during the Cultural Revolution, was accepted back into his previously held offices. He then swiftly moved to rehabilitate other party cadres and put them in positions that allowed him to exercise power behind Hua's back (Spence 1990; Vogel 2011). Ezra Vogel recalls Deng's attendance at a football match between the PRC and British Hong Kong, his first public appearance after returning to work on 5 April 1976, when he was received by an 'extraordinarily lengthy standing ovation' (2011, 199). This event is seen as a manifestation of support for Deng Xiaoping, who, unlike Hua, was a popular and revered leader.

The political and ideological struggle between the Maoists and the reformists took the form of a debate on Mao Zedong's legacy. During Hua Guofeng's interregnum, the Maoists failed to consolidate support within the party and came under strong criticism. Hua's position became known as the 'two whatever' (*liangge fanshi* 两个凡是), which called on the Party to 'resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and unswervingly carry out whatever Chairman Mao instructed' (Gardner 1982, 123). Hu Yaobang, one of Deng's protégés in the reformist wing of the party, retorted with an article entitled 'Practice is the Sole Criterion for Judging Truth', published in the *Theoretical Trends* (*lilun dongtai* 理论动态) journal on 10 May 1978, and republished by the *Guangming Daily*, the *People's Daily*, and the *PLA Newspaper* in the following days. The article argued against orthodox views on Marxism and in favour of an approach that stressed the combination of theory and practice, where the success or failure of an experience should determine its adoption or departure, thus opening the door for the reformulation of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought (Vogel 2011, 211–12). Deng Xiaoping was skilful in managing his relationship with Hua while supporting the reformists. He resorted to his knowledge of Marx, Engels, and Mao's own oeuvre to show that Marxism was a practice-centred theory and issued a call to 'seek truth from facts, and make practice the sole criterion of truth' (Lieberthal 2004, 133). Aiming to disarticulate Maoist orthodoxy, Deng sought to 'evaluate' Mao's leadership properly in the building of New China as an antecedent to the present stage, and not as a guide to the future (Karl 2020a, 167). He put forward an assessment of Mao's leadership—based on Mao's own calculations—attributing to it 30 percent of mistakes and 70 percent of achievements, and officially condemned

the Cultural Revolution as 'an error of particular gravity' linked to the development of 'Left' ideology in the party (Deng 1995, 301).

Deng Xiaoping also argued that China was currently going through a protracted transitional period towards socialism where the material foundations were still largely underdeveloped. Therefore, the country had to build up its productive forces through changes in the relations of production and the superstructure, as well as in management aspects, actions, and thinking (Spence 1990, 657). This formula of market mechanisms under the leadership of the Communist Party became the basis for the official label of China's regime: 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* 中国特色社会主义).

In line with this shift, a series of experiments were undertaken in coastal areas of southern China. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were created to receive foreign direct investment (FDI), and the government relaxed the restrictions on internal movement that had been linked to the household registration system (*hukou* 户口), thus allowing the transfer of rural labour to urban production centres across the country. Implemented in 1958, the *hukou* system was meant to restrict labour migration by linking rights and benefits to specific administrative divisions. In the first instance, this meant categorising the population as rural or non-rural, thus producing a dual system of production and social security where rural *hukou* holders could claim the right to exploit land but did not have access to the subsidies and centralised welfare mechanisms of non-rural residents. After the launch of Reform and Opening, local governments in the emerging industrial cities allowed rural labour surplus to move in, but not to settle permanently. Between 1984 and 1985, the central government implemented new regulations to stimulate circular migration. Shenzhen was the first city to issue 'temporary residence permits' (*zanzhuzheng* 暂住证) to enable migrant workers to access urban services while they were working in the city. Those caught without a permit were processed through a system of 'detention and expulsion of vagrants and beggars' (*chengshi liulang qitao renyuan shourong qiansong banfa* 城市流浪乞讨人员收容遣送办法). These mechanisms were ended in 2003, as they were deemed ineffective, and moreover there had been several cases of migrants dying in custody. Since then,

the *hukou* reforms have created a system based on territorial hierarchies. First-tier[1] cities like Beijing and Shanghai have strict quotas for registration permits, while smaller cities are much more lenient in their requirements. Applicants for a change in their *hukou* status have to meet a particular score calculated on the basis of their levels of education, economic situation, type of employment, etc. As a result, there are socioeconomic constraints that exclude so-called 'low-end population' (*diduan renkou* 低端人口), as well as subjective considerations that reproduce systemic discrimination against people of a particular origin. In these cases, ethnic minorities, such as the Uyghur, Tibetans, and Yi, face particularly harsh exclusions (Iredale and F. Guo 2003; Kaltman 2007; X. Ma 2018), which I explore in the course of this dissertation.

The early period of capital accumulation (1978-1984) saw the mobilisation of resources from the countryside to the emerging coastal cities. The PRC's approach to the transition was distinctive in its gradualism, departing from the 'Big Bang' strategy pursued in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Naughton 2018, 99; Weber 2018, 227). The Household Responsibility System (HRS) was adopted to disband collectives by allowing households the right to exploit plots of land. This brought an increase in yields and household incomes, but also the release of surplus rural labour, which was absorbed by Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs)[2], and enabled the provision of basic industrial products demanded by the farmers (Kroeber 2016, 27–29). The accelerated rate of urbanisation was nurtured by land grabs and speculation by local governments, antagonising local communities in many cases (Chuang 2020). Unfortunately, the grim reality of China's 'miracle' rests on the exploitation of rural and domestic migrant labour and speculation in rural land (M. Li 2016; Naughton 2018).

[1] The Chinese tiered city system classifies cities between four tiers according to an average of their position according to GDP, administrative level, and population (South China Morning Post 2016).
[2] TVEs are industries either owned or sponsored by local 'collectives', i.e., a township or village government. They are not considered state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which are mostly circumscribed by urban structures of governance at the central, provincial, or city level. During the 1980s and part of the 1990s, TVEs benefited from government support in absorbing surplus labour and capital, which translated into the expansion of production. After the SOE reforms in the 1990s, TVEs faced increasing pressure to compete with emerging public and private actors. By the early 2000s, most TVEs had been privatised as a response to the new conditions.

In this first period, policy-makers were able to concentrate urban population growth in smaller cities while protecting the larger ones from overflows of migrants (Naughton 2018, 137). As investments in the newly created Special Economic Zones (SEZs) increased, so did the demand for labour and infrastructure. Cities like Shenzhen expanded rapidly, building basic housing facilities for new migrants in former farming areas. The relabelling of land-use rights and the direct seizure of land in exchange for urban *hukou* for local residents were practices adopted generally to accelerate urbanisation and lure private developers to build profitable infrastructure (X. Ren 2013, 57–62). Following the restructuring of TVEs, when many were privatised, closed down or transferred, rural surplus labour moved in greater quantities to fast-growing coastal cities. Generation after generation, these internal migrants were allowed to create value for transnational and domestic capital without being able to acquire urban citizenship (Pun 2016, 33). In the last forty years of this process of the making, unmaking, and remaking of the class of internal migrant workers, new internal and external challenges have emerged that must be brought into the limelight.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives

1.2.1. Migrant labour in southern China

Issues related to internal migrant workers have been given sustained coverage since the 1990s, stirring rich debates about their identity, social relations, and economic and political incidence by scholars inside and outside the People's Republic of China. Works by Dorothy Solinger (1999), Ching Kwan Lee (1995, 2007), and the edited volumes by Frank Pieke and Hein Mallee (1999), and Zheng Gongcheng and Huang Liruolian (2007) were among the first publications to study the realities of Chinese rural migrant workers systematically.

The concept ascribed to this type of domestic labour migration has been a matter of dispute. In the official jargon, 'floating population' (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) has been the preferred denomination. As a statistical term, it encompasses a variety of groups that can represent radically different attitudes and trajectories, therefore, it contains little analytical capacity. In the 1990s, the concepts of 'peasant worker'

and 'rural migrant worker' (*nongmingong* 农民工) became increasingly common, conveying the idea of a double identification, simultaneously rural and urban, attributed to those who had moved out of rural labour and migrated to larger cities to engage in mostly industrial and construction work. This also revealed tensions related to belonging, as these migrants worked in the city but did not belong to it (Fan 2008). Their families were fractured by these economic, social, and institutional limitations, which produced a chasm between areas of production and reproduction. Cities benefited from the contributions of migrant workers while 'outsourcing' the costs of social reproduction, i.e. education and pension programmes. Conversely, the migrants' places of origin lacked the resources and incentives to sustain a welfare system or develop economic opportunities for later generations who might also emigrate (Vortherms 2019, 316; F. Wang 2010, 82).

Most studies of migrant labour in China consider the *hukou* (户口) system to be the 'most fundamental political institution' (Solinger 1999, 3), as it restricts rural migrants' urban 'citizenship' and the treatment of migrant workers as second-class citizens (Pun 2005, 2016; Solinger 1999; H. F. Siu 2007). While the system has undergone several changes, the difficulties in changing one's *hukou* still hinder migrant workers' access to social benefits, thus producing self-reliant subjects (Fan 2008; R. Murphy 2004; Pun 2005; L. Sun 2019; X. Tian 2017; Zang 2016; G. Zheng and L. Huang 2007). Most authors recognise that the problem of migrant labour (*nongmingong wenti* 农民工问题) is associated with marginalisation (*bianyuanhua* 边缘化). According to Hu Jiecheng (2010), seven types of marginalisation are acknowledged by Chinese scholars: marginalisation during the job-seeking process; residential marginalisation; the lack of social security; educational exclusion of their children; alienation of labour rights; insufficient mechanisms of social integration; and cultural and psychological marginalisation. These issues are difficult to solve, given migrant workers' 'double condition' of being simultaneously rural and urban (C. K. Chan and Pun 2009; Jiecheng Hu 2010, 32; Pun and Lu 2010). In his review of the extant literature published by Chinese academics, Hu (2010) reports four factors and obstacles to the social development of migrant workers. Firstly, he identifies the household registration system and other related institutional arrangements as a limitation admitted by

scholars and government officials alike. Secondly, he refers to the tensions between migrant workers and urban residents, where—regardless of the lack of consensus among scholars—some scholars have identified hitches derived from either cultural or institutional differences. Thirdly, there is the important role played by social capital in the survival and development of the city's migrant workers, which ultimately represents a relation of mutual benefit. Finally, he states that most scholars endorse a positive view of investments in human resources, particularly those seeking improvements to their prospects for realising employment opportunities and salaries.

With a greater emphasis on the social consequences of economic reforms, some scholars have incorporated the issue of migrant labour into a wider critique of capitalist development in the country. According to Tiejun Wen (2008), the expansion of the construction industry and the shrinking of rural land has created a class of dispossessed peasants who have moved to the city as cheap labour (2008, 89). This has created a contradictory situation in which China's emerging market economy needs surplus rural labour to populate its factories, while the 'main culture trend' and the system has turned increasingly unfavourable to the labour force, for example, by blaming it for low levels of efficiency (Wen 2008, 91; J. Li 2015; Unger and K. Siu 2019). This continuous disempowerment of the labour force is seen as a possible trigger for social unrest, which, following Wen's formulation, is a direct consequence of the 'three surpluses': financial capital, labour, and industrial capacity (2008, 93). The market economy alone cannot resolve the dual surplus of labour and domestic capital, which leads to an excessive reliance on the expansion of private industrial capital. Therefore, Wen suggests more state participation in the economy and the empowerment of workers' organisations in order to balance the pressure of the labour surplus on salaries and to strengthen labour's bargaining power vis-à-vis the employers.

Another contribution that combines the institutional perspective with the reality of workers under marketisation is the comprehensive survey conducted by Zheng Gongcheng and Huang Liruolian (2007) in Beijing, Shenzhen, Suzhou, and Chengdu. Covering 680 to 750 migrant workers in each city during 2005, the

survey focused on the structural limitations on accessing social welfare. They start by defining 'rural-migrant labour' as workers who, despite having a rural *hukou* identification, are employed in cities or non-rural areas (2007, 4). This corresponds to a contradiction between the continuation of China's socialist household registration system and the country's rapid progress with marketisation. This special situation has configured five obstacles to migrant workers in their quest for equality. Firstly, there is their legal status: migrant workers are classified as a 'floating population' and therefore ineligible for the legal, civil, or social rights enjoyed by those with a local *hukou*. Secondly, there is the peculiar relationship between the central and local administrations, in the form of the difficulties of enforcing the will of the central state. The third hurdle for migrant workers derives from intergovernmental relations, namely the divergent interests of the receiving and exporting communities. The latter might be over-burdened by attending to the requirements of its own local population, leading it to disregard the basic needs of migrant workers from rural areas. Fourth, there is the failure to implement feasible models that can cater to the needs of the migrants beyond local jurisdictions. Finally, employers and employees need to be mobilised to support the extension of social protection to migrant labourers (G. Zheng and L. Huang 2007, 177–79). Zheng and Huang provide a rich and critical assessment of the situation of migrant labour in China, yet they recognise their limitations in providing nuances to their subject of study, namely the need to include ethnic, gender, professional, and other categories that interact with one another within the overarching category of migrant workers.

More recent scholarship has taken these issues into consideration. Grounded in a relational approach to class, Ngai Pun has been one of the most influential researchers on the contentious aspects of the 'new Chinese working class'. She has introduced the concept of 'dormitory labour regime' (Smith and Pun 2006; Pun and Lu 2010; Pun 2016) to characterise the spatial organisation of production and reproduction, where workers live in quarters provided by their employers, usually right next to their place of work, which ultimately acts as a space in which class consciousness can emerge. In a recent forum statement in the journal *Dialectical Anthropology*, Pun (2020b, 2020a) argued that a new working class of rural migrants and urban workers is being created, drawing support from student groups

who are themselves of humble origin. She focused on the struggle for a legally autonomous labour union by workers at the Jasic electronics factory in Shenzhen during 2018. The commentaries on her article celebrated Pun's work but also expressed a few reservations, the boldest of which came from Rebecca Karl (2020b), who questioned the ontological objectivity of the concept of 'workers' under capitalism, as well as the emphasis on unionisation as evidence of resistance. Pun agreed that she had failed to engage with other resistance subjects (2020a, 350), though this in no way prevented her greatest contribution from being widely recognised, that is, her insistence on adopting a materialist approach to class analysis.

Pun Ngai has not been alone in this effort: Ching Kwan Lee (2007, 2019), Chris King-chi Chan (2012; C. K. Chan and Hui 2017; C. K. Chan and Pun 2009) and Elaine Sio-ieng Hui (2018) have adopted similar perspectives in their own ethnographic studies. They all build on Marxian approaches and see class as a relation rather than as a static and self-contained category. This allows them to observe the objective class relations in a system of production and power, as well as the subjectivities that affect its development. These contributions to the debate on Chinese labour, while valuable and highly influential, can be criticised for their optimistic outlook, which is connected to limitations of scope by focusing on industrial migrant labour, and by not considering the tensions that fragment class relations from within.

Departing from class perspectives, I-Chieh Fang sees peasant workers as a 'precariat' with distinctive Chinese characteristics (2018, 265). In her view, other social relations prevail over class consciousness, such as gender, education, and place of origin (Fang 2019, 269). Fang argues that *guanxi*, or networks of reciprocity, are the main practice by which migrant workers cope with precarity. Even if we accept the category of the 'precariat' as ontologically useful, her argument falls short, as the use of a Han-centric trope fails to acknowledge the diversity of expressions under which migrant workers decide to include some and exclude others. Furthermore, Fang essentialises the reality of class in an ideological

expression of self-recognition, which inhibits her from understanding the power dynamics surrounding the creation and unfolding of these networks.

Li Zhang (2001) went beyond the institutional constraints linked to the *hukou* to explore the intersections of space, power, and identity-reformation in the making, unmaking, and remaking of a migrant community in Beijing in relation to the state at a time of increased spatial mobility and marketisation (2001, 2–3). She drew on the work of Henri Lefebvre to articulate the relationship between spatial production and migrant power in China (Li Zhang 2001, 7), focusing on one migrant enclave hailing mostly from Zhejiang province in southern Beijing, which was later also investigated by Biao Xiang (2005).

More recently, scholars have started to focus on emerging forms of marginalisation and exclusion that depart from traditional notions of precarity. For example, Feng Tian and Kaixuan Lin (F. Tian and Kaixuan Lin 2020), sociologists at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, have introduced new developments in the situation of domestic migrant labour in southern China. Writing about 'Sanhe Youth', they describe an emerging and indeterminate social group at the bottom of society, whose mutual interactions are characterised by a double sense of familiarity and deep distrust, being situated in a cultural environment in which they are the victims of discrimination and material exclusion. In their timely contribution, Tian and Lin shed light on the diverse expressions that determine the conditions of migrant labour.

However, the aspect of gender has been studied the most systematically as a social identity. Ching Kwan Lee (1995), Ngai Pun (2005), Leslie Chang (2010), Arianne Gaetano (2015), and I-Chieh Fang (2019) have all described the difficulties faced by rural migrant women in the factories of southern China. Hairong Yan (2008) has added a new dimension to this by addressing the situation of female migrant domestic workers. In her study, Yan elaborates on the notion of *suzhi* 素质 as a critical element in understanding the power dynamics underlying the condition of internal migrant workers. Usually interpreted as an inherent human quality, Yan argues that this concept reveals new forms of neoliberal governmentality that are

constitutive of China's post-socialist reform. Her contribution developed new perspectives exploring the role of the *suzhi* discourse as a tool of social disciplining (Jacka 2009; R. Murphy 2004; W. Sun 2009), a form of territorial discrimination (Stainback and Z. Tang 2019; X. Tian 2019), or an opportunity for new forms of self-improvement (L. Qian 2019), as well as constitutive of neoliberal governmentality (Anagnost 2004; H. Yan 2003) and of a tradition of social governance (Kipnis 2006, 2007; Wu 2012).

I suggest instead a definition that focuses on the practical dimensions of *suzhi*, understanding it as what Ernesto Laclau (2007) called an 'empty signifier.' Laclau borrowed the concept of 'floating signifier' from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan and reinterpreted it by insisting on the elements of ideological struggle instead of fixation (Fair 2015). In this sense, an empty signifier is a 'signifier without a signified' (Laclau 2007, 36). This is not to say that it lacks any signifying function as a mere sequence of sounds, nor that the content of the signifier is equivocal or ambiguous. An empty signifier emerges when there is a 'structural impossibility in signification as such' (Laclau 2007, 37), which places the signifier beyond the limits of signification. That is, it is not a matter of relations of difference or identity, but of a radical exclusion that is included in the system through its detachment from any 'particular signifieds and assume[s] the role of representing the pure being of the system' (Laclau 2007, 39). In concrete terms, empty signifiers provide glimpses into the modes of domination in a given society through the polysemy around these signifiers. This assumes that discursive forms cannot be fixed when social identities are seen as relational. Empty signifiers cannot be articulated to a discursive chain; instead, they absorb new meanings that then penetrate every social identity (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, 99). They provide a theoretical tool with which to understand the transformations in hegemonic discourses. For example, a workers' struggle signifying liberation represents one particular struggle as anti-systemic. While this can be seen as a hegemonic victory, the signifier of liberation can be emptied of its original links and deployed in ways that oppose its previous intention. Analyses of empty signifiers have shed light on the critical transformations around notions like civilisation (Bettiza 2014), corruption (Koechlin 2013), democracy (Laclau 2007),

gang (Richardson and Kennedy 2012), postcolonialism (Choi 1997), and sustainability (T. Brown 2016), among others.

Suzhi is a concept that is specific to mainland China and its discourses of modernity. As an empty signifier, it contains multiple meanings, which vary according to history and social use. Andrew Kipnis and Delia Lin (Kipnis 2006; D. Lin 2017) have tracked its changes over time through entries in the reputable *Ci Hai Encyclopaedia of Chinese Words*. From the 'unadorned nature or character of something' in pre-1970 publications to the 'physical conditions of physiological development', *suzhi* has become connected to development, practice and learning, and cultivation (*xiuyang* 修养) and education (Kipnis 2006; D. Lin 2017). These meanings of *suzhi* evoke the socio-political aspects of a hegemonic project by promoting human characteristics connected to economic productivity and acceptance of the political order.

In general, studies of Chinese migrant labour acknowledge the need for further studies addressing the diversity of its composition, yet publications that do this have so far been rather limited. Much less has been done to explore the interconnections of modes of differentiation, such as class, gender, and ethnicity. This is the gap that the present study attempts to fill.

1.2.2. Class and subalternity

Karl Marx argued that, for the capitalist market to function, at least two roles were necessary: those of the capitalist and the worker. The development of capitalism led to a 'more rigid crystallisation' of the roles of the possessor of money and the possessor of labour power into classes, i.e. of the capitalist and the proletariat. However, the way class features as a role in the market economy does not automatically mean that it appears as a self-evident identity in society. Marx went to great lengths to analyse how collective class interests emerged, developed, and asserted themselves in, for example, the class wars in France. This process of 'class formation' is not straightforward, being full of turns that ultimately depend on human agency. In his analysis of the French coup d'état of 1851, Marx discusses the role of the small-holding peasants (*Parzellenbauern*), who were 'incapable of

asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented' (Marx 1970, 407). Even more important to the study of class as a historical phenomenon is what Don Kalb described, following E.P. Thompson and Rosa Luxembourg: 'class struggle comes before the language of class, chronologically and logically, and struggle in a capitalist context is initiated more often from above than from below' (Kalb 2015, 16).

Kate Crehan reminds us that Marx's notion of class, nuanced and complex as it is, presents a pattern of relationships that does not determine the ways actual individuals inhabit them (2002, 195). Here Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'subalternity' comes into play, as it portends a broadly inclusive totality 'encompassing all those who are oppressed rather than oppressing, ruled rather than ruling' (Crehan 2016, 15). Gramsci always refers to subaltern classes in the plural, as they are by definition 'not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State"' (Gramsci 1971, 52). Until then, subaltern subjects are affected by different relations of domination: ethnic minorities facing a dominant majority, peasants exploited by landowners, women subjected to patriarchal domination, etc. Contrary to James Scott's formulation, not every subordinate group can always produce a 'hidden transcript that represents a critique of power' (Scott 1990, xii). For Gramsci, subalternity encompasses both external forms of subordination, such as those experienced under domination and exploitation, and internalised ones. This relates to what Senett and Cobb (1972) termed 'the hidden injuries of labour', which are ultimately the expression of structural inequalities and the continuous production of ideologies of class inferiority used to justify exploitation (cf. Fraser 2003, 17).

Gramsci integrates Marx's materialist approach to class with an assessment of the relations of power in a social formation. An emphasis on how class is lived goes in hand with Don Kalb's consideration that anthropological approaches to class are less about 'an already-defined position that determines both consciousness and action, and more an invitation to discover people's shifting historical, situated and antagonistic social interdependencies' (2015, 16). The issue, therefore, is not to

search for the specific *Klassenbewusstsein* ascribed to particular roles according to their position in a rigid economic structure. Rather, it is to understand how the experiences of subalternity, the human agency of those subjected to domination and exploitation, produce various forms of solidarity and exclusion, organisation and fragmentation, and the ideas and discourse thus produced. The unfolding of these tensions takes on a particular intensity in the case of Chinese internal migrant workers, for whom several relations of domination are interconnected, such as ethnicity, gender, rural condition, and mobility.

The type of labour migration addressed in this dissertation was enabled by the expansion of marketisation in the People's Republic of China. Generations of peasants decided to 'go out' (*chuqu* 出去), first to work in the emerging industrial rural industries, and then to the larger coastal cities, in search of better incomes. Therefore, I refer to the act of moving from an unindustrialised to an industrialised region within the same national jurisdiction in pursuit of employment and life experiences, but without access to the same rights and benefits as the local urban population enjoys. Those engaging in interprovincial migration usually do so by motivating their relatives or members of their village. Going out is largely a voluntary decision that involves reasonings about motivations and possibilities.[3] Recent findings, including my own, show that these are not only economic (as in previous generations) but mostly aspirational of a urban and cosmopolitan modernity (Fan and Chen 2014; X. Wang 2016). Most commonly, migrants move to the city in search of a job without an immediate concern on their *hukou* status. In fact, most 'low-end' migrants never acquire a new *hukou* in the metropolis they are working in.

In the collective identity of internal migrant workers, diverse forms of domination and discrimination are crystallised. Most notably, because of their rural origin, they are considered less educated and intelligent than the local urbanites (Fan 2008). Similarly, notions of ethnicity or *minzu* within the Great Family of the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) are seen as part of an evolutionary field in

[3] These are also referred as 'push' and 'pull' factors in global migration studies.

which the Han majority represents the standards of civilisation (Harrell 1996). The reinforcement of patriarchal domination, which was to a certain extent restricted during the revolutionary period and in the inchoate stages of the People's Republic, has increased the pressure on women to marry and conceive before they become 'less desirable' (Hong Fincher 2018). However, there is also much pressure on men to marry, have a family, own a house and a car, and be reliable providers (Tan and S. Cheng 2020).

Far from providing an exhaustive list of the different forms of domination that are linked interconnect in the collective identity of migrant workers, at this point is important to note that these are not self-enclosed categories. On one hand, these forms of domination overlap between the different social relations. On the other hand, each subalternity contains its own internal tensions, such as gender issues within ethnicities, or place-of-origin tensions between former peasants. These complex relationships are subsumed by the conditions of labour migration, but not resolved. Part of my argument in this dissertation is that migrant workers reproduce larger relations of domination among themselves in the form of social hierarchies.

As a collective identity, internal migrant workers are represented by different tropes, the most prominent of which have been *nongmingong* 农民工 or *mingong* 民工, translated as 'rural migrant workers' and 'peasant workers'. *Nongmingong* is used in unionisation campaigns led by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and it is also in the title of the weekly section dedicated to issues of migrant labour in the *National Labour and Social Security News* (*zhongguo laodong baozhang bao* 中国劳动保障报), a daily newspaper run by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. The name insists on the 'rural' identity of migrant workers and presupposes their return to their places of origin. However, the expansion of marketisation across rural China has left these new internal migrant subjects dispossessed of the means of rural production. This does not mean that they lack a 'rural identity', but it certainly means they have a different attitude than their predecessors (S. Chen et al. 2010; F. Tian 2017).

Nowadays, the emic category of *dagongren* 打工人 or 'temporary worker' has progressively taken over public debate. *Dagong* 打工 encapsulates the experience of precarity and continuous mobility that some have labelled a 'way of life' (Lee 2007; Pun and Lu 2010; Pun 2016). It also integrates notions of labour precarity that emerged during the Maoist period, such as 'temporary workers' (*linshigong* 临时工), also known as 'contract workers' (*hetonggong* 合同工), who were hired by work-units for periods of high productive intensity (P. C. C. Huang 2013, 352). Unlike *nongmingong*, the concept provides further differentiation through being a gendered concept, for example, *dagongmei* 打工妹 (lit. 'little sister temporary worker') is used for women, and *dangongzai* 打工仔 (lit. 'young man temporary worker') for men.[4]

In this general sense, my use of 'internal migrant workers' conceptually articulates the complexities subsumed in the collective of those who *dagong*. It attests the historical changes in the development of labour in China through the last four decades. It also takes into account the structural changes that have unfolded in both urban and rural areas, such as the use of local policies to discriminate between wanted and unwanted migrants, or the urbanisation of the countryside. And as an emic category, it aims to encapsulate how class is lived through the multiple subaltern experiences, as well as the new practices of a desire for a modern life, the reclamation of individuality, and ways of coping with the lack of opportunities.

The slowdown in the Chinese economy has created a new scenario for Chinese workers. While the central government keeps thinking up new ways to stimulate economic growth in the middle of a trade war with the United States and with private stakeholders keeping pushing for profits, white- and blue-collar workers are forced to work more, in many cases without compensation. Jasic workers' demands for a labour union to defend their interest, the detention of members of Marxist reading groups building labour solidarity among students in Chinese elite universities, and the campaign of IT-sector employees against the '996' work

[4] In historical terms, it is important to note that the concept of *dagongren* is essentially southern. In its masculine form, it uses the character *zai* 仔, which has been adopted into *putonghua* from the Cantonese. I owe this point to one of my interlocutors.

regime (9-to-9, 6 days a week)[5] can all be seen as social responses to what Xi Jinping termed the 'new normal'. However, by focusing on these breaks, we might lose sight of the reconfiguration of continuities. Therefore, using the term 'internal migrant workers', I attempt to capture the variety of practices that do not necessarily portend a political stance. In this case, I engage with those who make do with what they have and who that deploy a variety of strategies to improve their material conditions of existence.

These considerations are relevant when thinking about the (re)making of the Chinese working class. Against the grain of more optimistic views, I focus on the various trends that differentiate internal migrant workers, many of them responding to the different forms of domination at issue. My focal point is ethnic discrimination, which articulates multifaceted forms of solidarities and exclusions, beliefs, aspirations, and desires.

1.2.3. The issue of ethnicity

As we have already seen, the process of capitalist modernisation in China has pushed peasants to migrate to the coastal centres in search of employment and a modern lifestyle. While migrant workers in general have developed their own strategies of adaptation and subsistence to the new conditions of wage labour, little has been said about the reconfiguration of their collective identities through interethnic relations. The edited volume by Robyn Iredale, Nara Bilik, and Fei Guo (2003) spearheaded a much needed debate about interethnic relations in contexts of migration around the PRC, showing the tensions created by the inflow of Han migrants into Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, as well as the impact of socioeconomic relations in the sending areas of Guangxi and Xinjiang. More specific studies can be seen in Yun Huang's (2008) ethnography of the Uyghur community in Guangzhou, Sajide Tursun's (2016) in Shanghai, and Blaine Kaltman's (Kaltman 2007) exploration of 'Uyghur enclaves' in Beijing, Shanghai, Urumqi, and

[5] This case is explored in detail in Chapter 3.

Shenzhen. More recently, Xinrong Ma (X. Ma 2018) has studied the intersection of ethnicity and gender among Yi migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta.

In general, however, studies of Chinese migrant labour have neglected social imaginaries of ethnicity as a constitutive element of class formation, thus hindering the prospects of a more comprehensive assessment of subaltern labour politics in the PRC. My research seeks to highlight the attitudes of Han domestic migrant workers towards those from *minzu* minorities, with an emphasis on the Uyghur, which has become one of the most contentious interethnic relationships in the PRC today.

The PRC recognises 56 *minzu*, of which 55 are ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). The Han majority comprises a little over ninety-one per cent of the total PRC population, which contributes to notions of the homogeneity of Chinese society and the idea of a Chinese ethnicity. Since the early years of the PRC, the government has promoted the preservation of the languages and, to some extent, cultural practices of its *minzu* minorities. It established the institution of 'autonomous areas', ranging from the county to the provincial level, to establish nominal self-rule legally wherever non-Han *minzu* constitute the overwhelming majority. Looking at interethnic relations in Shenzhen allows markers of difference between ethnic groups and those belonging to the Han majority to be problematised.

The Ethnic Classification Project of the 1950s combined modern concerns about 'the nation', political interests to ensure representation of the different subjects integrating the People's Republic, and the Stalinist canon of the 'national question.' The need to think the nation of Chineseness started to emerge in the late nineteenth century (Harrell 1996). Scholars of the Republican era (1912-1949) were influenced by ethnological approaches taught in Japan, through which they introduced the concept of *minzu* 民族, combining the notions of 'people' (*min* 民) and 'descent' (*zu* 族) (Zang 2015, 11). This led to late Qing rulers recognising the existence of a wide variety of 'border people' (*bianjiang minzu* 边疆民族), which were later

marginalised during the Republic (1912-1949), when only the 'Chinese people' (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) was officially recognised (Mullaney 2012; Tapp 2003).

For the Communist Party of China, the *minzu* idea has arguably been politicised as much as the concept of class, both being central to the origin and development of the socialist state. After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the new government sought to establish a system of ethnic classification to ensure the representation of every group in the newly formed National People's Congress (NPC). At the time, Stalin's 1913 'Marxism and the National Question' was taken as the main work defining the concept of '*natsiya*'[6] or '*minzu*': '*a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture*' (Stalin 2015 [1954], 9, italics in the original). The Stalinist definition, although still resounding in the official meaning of *minzu* quoted above, proved impractical, as the number of requests for recognition reached over four hundred (X. Fei 1992).

Consequently, in 1954 the state set up the Ethnic Classification Project (*minzu shibie* 民族识别), which brought together politicians and scholars to draw up a set of ethnotaxonomies that would work not only as one of the criteria of Chinese citizenship, but also as the basis for political representation in the NPC, where, according to the 1953 Election Law, one seat would be awarded to each minority group, regardless of population (Mullaney 2012). The ethnologists and linguists involved had about six months to show results, so they had to build on their previous experiences as 'internal exiles', seeking refuge the during the 1920s and 1930s from the Japanese in the province of Yunnan—which China's renowned anthropologist Fei Xiaotong called a 'cultural laboratory par excellence' (H.-T. Fei and C.-I. Chang 2010, 9).[7]

[6] While in the Soviet Union, '*narodnost'* became the more relevant political concept to refer to nationalities, in China the same translation remained as valid for both words (Tapp 2003, 30). In Chinese-to-English translations, the word 'nationality' is still valid, although the tendency these days is to prefer *minzu*.

[7] In the same paragraph, Fei Xiaotong says that 'in a single day we will have travelled from Polynesia to New York' (2010, 9), referring to the possibility of observing the whole process of cultural development, from headhunting communities to city-dwellers, within one administrative region. If

The first outcome of the Ethnic Classification Project was the formal registration of 38 minority *minzu* (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). However, the number increased sharply to 53 in the second PRC census in 1964. The Lhoba were included as the 54th group the following year, and finally the Jino were accepted as the 55th minority in 1979 (Zang 2015, 16). Together with the Han majority, these 56 *minzu*—the so-called 'Great Family of the Chinese Nation' (*zhonghua minzu dajiating* 中华民族大家庭)—should live in 'unity and harmony.' However, what became a central political discourse of this new 'unified, multinational country' (*tongyi de duo minzu guojia* 统一的多民族国家) presented multiple ethnotaxonomical and social challenges. First, some cases were left in abeyance and never officially taken up (X. Fei 1992). Second, the Project institutionalised diverse groups under a single category. Such was the case for the Han, which consists of eight mutually unintelligible linguistic groupings[8] and various ethnically diverse populations (Gladney 2004, 7). Finally, at a more systematic level, the Ethnic Classification Project was a 'civilising project' that dominated the forms of representations of *minzu* minorities by establishing the Han majority as the standard of civilisation (Harrell 1996).

The process of marketisation deepened the gap between Han and Hanified ethnic groups and those who were geographically and culturally distant and had a poor command of *putonghua*. Autonomous regions like Tibet and Xinjiang saw a progressive influx of Han population, who controlled and profited from better jobs in these resource-rich areas. Overall, economic growth largely benefitted the migrant Han, who enjoyed better financial and political connections and greater linguistic proficiency (Fischer 2014). At least since the end of the 1980s, sporadic protests and public demonstrations of discontent against policy changes became symbolic manifestations against the encroaching of outsiders on local autonomies in Xinjiang and Tibet (Smith Finley 2013; Cencetti 2014). In turn, the state and the

he were still alive, he would probably make a similar observation about Shenzhen, where there is a sharp contrast between the northern industrial areas—resembling early twentieth-century manufacturing regimes—and the futuristic coastal districts of Shekou and Nanshan, where the latest advances in technology mediate almost every aspect of individual and collective life.

[8] *Putonghua* or Standard Chinese, Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Xiang, Hakka, Gan, Southern Min, and Northern Min.

general public turned against Uyghurs and Tibetans, labelling them 'splittists' (*fenlie zhuyi fenzi* 分裂主义分子) and 'terrorists' (*kongbu fenzi* 恐怖分子).

At the time of writing (2021), hardly a week goes by when there is not at least one headline on the re-education camps in Xinjiang or the forced mobilisation of Uyghur labour into factories across China. Attention to these matters has been highly opportunist and has been linked to ongoing tensions between the PRC and the USA, but scholars have been describing the worsening conditions of autonomy in Xinjiang for decades. The general tendency has been to disempower the Uyghur in their homeland, up to the point that the label 'autonomous region' hardly has any meaning any longer (Bovingdon 2010). These tensions emerge from mutual distrust between Uyghur and Han subjects that motivate many Uyghur to make ethnic boundary markers more concrete (Bellér-Hann 2002). As a response, the government has maintained a continuous assault on Uyghur culture and language with pretensions to homogenisation (Hann 2014). The intensification of Han domination and the influence of the Chinese state in Xinjiang have the motivated changes in the forms of resistance deployed by the Uyghur. Moving from negative ethnic stereotypes of the Han, the establishment of ethnic boundaries, the preference for the Uyghur language and endogamy, and expressions of identity through Uyghur songs, the Uyghur have had to reformulate their practices of 'symbolic resistance' through segregation and the 'return to prayer' (Smith Finley 2013). Similarly, young Uyghur in Xinjiang benefit from globalisation and development by favouring products and entertainment that speaks to their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identities, such as those produced in Turkey and other Central Asian countries (Erkin 2009). These tensions are crystallised in the representation of Uyghur cultural identity in the CPC press either as a touristic attraction or as terrorists influenced by foreign forces (Lams 2016).

My focus on the tensions between Han and Uyghur migrant workers in southern China is therefore not at all casual. On 25 June 2009, two Uyghur migrant workers were murdered by their Han colleagues at the Hongkongese-owned Xuri toy factory in the industrial city of Shaoguan, Guangdong province. The perpetrators posted accusations in an online forum that the north-western migrants had been guilty of

raping a couple of Han girls. The confusing quarrel involved sticks and knives, forcing the intervention of the police.

Soon after the clash in Guangdong, on 4 July, more than three thousand kilometres away, protests and ethnic violence erupted in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Two hundred deaths and at least 1,700 injured were reported. The violence started when the police attempted to stop an Uyghur-led rally demanding a thorough investigation of the Xuri toy factory incident (E. Wong and Zuo 2014). Within a matter of hours, the police had apprehended more than a thousand Uyghur suspects (Watts 2009). Other sporadic riots on the following day were quickly controlled by riot police. Along with the militarisation of the city, curfews, identity checks, and the shutting down of internet and phone services ensued. State media accused foreign forces, namely the World Uyghur Congress and its leader, Rabiyä Qadir, of orchestrating the riots (Hann 2009b).

An attack at the gates of Beijing's imperial palace in 2013 and at Kunming's central station in 2014 were further manifestations of the escalation of ethnic violence beyond the XUAR. After 9/11, and within the framework of the 'global war on terror', the Chinese government has implemented of draconian policies of dehumanisation, enclosure, thought reform, and forced labour (S. R. Roberts 2020). However, a *longue durée* analysis reveals that the combination of marketisation and Maoist-Stalinist principles of ethnic classification have exacerbated economic inequalities, which in turn are aimed at forcing the ethnic assimilation of the Uyghur (Hann 2011). Evidence from Xinjiang shows that the Uyghur are marginalised in the labour markets while migrant Han populate urban zones and take the best jobs (Hann 2014; Fischer 2014). By 1978, the ratio of urban to rural incomes in Xinjiang was 2.68%, 4% higher than the national average (Cao 2010, 968). By 2000, boosted by the expansion of marketisation, the ratio increased to 3.6%, nearly 30% higher than the national average, showing a strong bias against minorities in respect of income gaps (Cao 2010, 977). Uyghurs have little room for voicing their discontent, and while they can dictate the rules in some aspects of daily interactions with the Han (Bellér-Hann 2002), they are pushed to constantly

negotiate and redefine their representation in an increasingly repressive socio-political environment (Bellér-Hann 2020).

Assimilation by forced proletarianization is nothing new in Xinjiang. Plans for labour mobilisation were implemented at the beginning of the century to stimulate capital transfers from the richer coastal areas to rural villages in the Uyghur homeland. Notions of an inherently lower quality or *suzhi*, linked to an understanding of 'civilisation' (*wenming* 文明) (D. Lin 2017), position rural Uyghur migrant workers on the lowest rung of society (Watts 2009). In this sense, the Shaoguan incident is a landmark in the challenges that interconnect class and ethnicity in the PRC. On the one hand, it reveals the depth of the tensions between groups of marginalised workers in the country's sweatshops. On the other hand, it triggered an intensification of state territorialisation (Bellér-Hann 2014) and a drastic wave of repression targeting ethnic minorities in the XUAR (Smith Finley 2019; S. R. Roberts 2020).

Here I find Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich's (2004) framing of 'grammars of identity and alterity' helpful in assessing the politics of interethnic relations in the PRC. Baumann and Gingrich critically evaluate approaches to identity and othering in the realms of Cultural Studies and anthropology (Gingrich 2004). They reject disciplinary stances that stress 'difference' or 'sameness' and that approximate to 'strong' definitions of identity, instead proposing a dual category of identity/alterity as being 'multidimensional and contradictory, [...] includ[ing] power-related, dialogical ascriptions by selves and by others which are processually configurated, enacted and transformed by cognition, language, imagination, emotion, body and (additional forms of) agency' (Gingrich 2004, 6). Stemming from this 'weak' definition of identity, Baumann (2004) maps three 'grammars': orientalizing, segmentation, and encompassment. The first structure builds on Edward Said's *Orientalism* to present a dynamic of reverse mirror-imaging where selfing and othering condition each other (Baumann 2004, 21). The grammar of segmentation, conversely, takes the work of Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer as a basis for a logic of fission or enmity at a lower level of segmentation which is superseded by a logic of fusion or neutralization of conflict at a higher level of segmentation (Baumann

2004, 22). Finally, the social grammar of encompassment takes Louis Dumont's description of the Indian system of caste as characterising a dynamic of selfing by appropriating or co-opting selected kinds of otherness. This type is similar to the previous one in being segmented, but it differs in that the subordinate category is subsumed into the identity that is defined and owned by those who do the encompassing (Baumann 2004, 25–26).

What is remarkable in Baumann's framework is that it includes the possibility of negating these three grammars, of producing an 'anti-grammar' that breaks the duality of identity/alterity by pursuing the extermination of the other (and therefore, of the self), as in cases of genocide (Baumann 2004, 42).

In sum, ethnicity is a central practice of difference, otherness, and exclusion that needs to be addressed in new fields of practice, as in the making, unmaking, and remaking of the working class in China. The Shaoguan incident and the PRC's ongoing policies against the Xinjiang *minzu* minorities have made it difficult for researchers to engage with the Uyghur population. Moreover, much of the Uyghur population across the country has been forced to return home and undergo 're-education' in one of the many camps across the XUAR. Yet, there is still an opportunity to inquire how these imaginaries and practices are produced by Han subalterns, which in turn allows the discourse of national unity and *minzu* equality in the current configuration of Chinese socialism to be problematised.

1.2.4. The state and the domination of representation

The ontological interconnection between class relations and ethnic subalternity is manifested in forms of domination and exploitation. As Erik Wright (2015) reminds us, these are central aspects of the Marxian approach to class. In this sense, 'all exploitation implies some kind of domination, but not all domination involves exploitation' (Wright 2015, 9). As Edward Said (1979) rightly pointed out, the whole issue of grammars of identity/alterity portends the challenge of 'representation as domination' and 'resistance to domination'. In the case of modern nation states, the ideological and material triumph of the Enlightenment allowed the formation of 'imagined communities' re-presented in novels and newspapers (B. Anderson

2016, 24–25). The 'nation' embodied the hegemonic project of civilisation, establishing clear spatial, temporal, and social boundaries between 'us' and 'them', and addressing subjects that are both outside and inside the nation (B. Anderson 2016, 6–7).

The representation of the nation in the state poses the problem of political domination in a multi-ethnic society. As noted by Gerd Baumann, most nation states have failed to complete their projects of integration, generating instead a dynamic of privilege and marginalisation in which the diversity of 'minorities' constitutes a deceitful 'multiculturalism' (Baumann 1999, 31). In this sense, the representation of minorities adheres to a particular system of social ranking and asymmetric relations of power. Representation conveys a sense of symbolic domination as well as political hegemony, which emerges from the interconnection of different factors of social stratification, such as ethnicity and class.

Here I acknowledge the materiality and mutability of the representational categories of subaltern subjects. In this sense, an exploration of the domination of representations unveils its embeddedness in the defining pattern of the organisation and production of our late capitalist modernity. Immanuel Wallerstein (2011) has shown how a complex hierarchy within labour creates different proportions of exploitation, of 'lost' surplus value. In this way, an adjudicated class interest comes to be obscured by ethnic and other differences, stifling the ability to resist to domination.

Consequently, the materiality of representation can be expressed as a form of ideological domination that binds the population to a given regime as its obedient subjects (Therborn 1999). Thinkers of the Frankfurt School went to great lengths to reveal and understand the mechanisms of domination in advanced capitalist societies. Theodor Adorno built on Lukács' notion of 'reification' (*Verdinglichung*) to posit a critique of the 'universal domination of mankind by the exchange value' (Adorno 1973, 178). For Adorno and Horkheimer, 'all reification is forgetting' (1997, 230), meaning that the objectification of subjectivities, in this case through representation, implies a reconfiguration of the self. In this sense, dominant

representations can change subjects into 'objects of fetish' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, 197), turning entire social groups into consumable, disciplinable, 'civilisationable' entities.

The whole issue of dominating the representation of 'workers' and '*minzu*' suits well the need to reproduce exploitable subalterns. The maintenance of this type of domination has been central to the hegemonic project of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In terms of general definitions, the Chinese government has been consistent throughout the reform period in defining its model as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* 中国特色社会主义). This can be defined as a sinicized version of real existing socialism, in which the CPC heads a coalition government that is the vanguard of the Chinese working class, the Chinese people, and the Chinese nation, the aim being to build socialism and, ultimately, communism (Communist Party of China 2017).[9] Many observers of Chinese politics have questioned whether the label holds any analytical weight, as the expansion of marketisation increasingly affects social and institutional relations. Insisting on the adoption of neoliberal governmentality in a one-Party system, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) suggest the trope of 'Leninist neoliberalism'. Similar considerations have inspired notions like 'non-capitalist market economy' (Arrighi 2007), 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey 2011), 'market socialism' (Hsu 2007), and 'a mixture of authoritarianism, developmentalism, and corporatism' (Hui 2018). And, in almost the opposite direction, Chun Lin (2006) has emphasised the localisation of contemporary socialist discourses and practices under the category of '*xiaokang* socialism', which for prominent Chinese New Left intellectual, Zhiyuan Cui (2003), portends a form of socialism with higher material standards: 'petty-bourgeois socialism'. Many of these definitions are problematic

[9] Chairman Xi Jinping has been explicit about this point on several occasions, such as in his speech celebrating Karl Marx's 200th birthday: 'We need to have a complete mastery of the worldviews and methodologies of dialectical and historical materialism, and fully understand that realizing Communism is a historical process involving the step-by-step achievement of milestones. We need to bring together the noble ideal of Communism with the shared ideal of Chinese socialism and the endeavours in which we are currently engaged, to remain confident in the path, theory, system, and culture of Chinese socialism, and to adhere to the ideals and beliefs of Chinese Communists. We need to be like Marx, and strive for Communism throughout our lives' (Xi 2018, 16–17). Similarly, in another speech published in the Party's theoretical journal *Qiushi* he says China should 'unswervingly fight for the ambitious ideal of communism and the shared ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics' (Xi 2019).

and contradictory, as they operate under reified ideas of the state, the market, society and their relations, or else essentialise authoritarianism and discard human agency.

Against these holistic tendencies, Frank Pieke (2009) has suggested the term 'neo-socialism'. He is not assuming a continuation of the collective period, but a reformulation of the CPC's socialist mission, understood as an orderly process of socialist modernisation and the engagement of economic globalisation in a multi-polar world (Pieke 2009, 9). Neo-socialism implies more than a Leninist party implementing neoliberal techniques; it corresponds to a modernisation and strengthening of the Party through innovative neoliberal and home-grown governmental techniques. Moreover, neo-socialism highlights the selective, partial and gradual strategy of the marketisation of state or collective assets and functions. And finally, it reflects the CPC's ideological transition from a revolutionary organisation to a ruling party.

Approaching the Chinese polity from the perspective of neo-socialism implies coming to terms with issues of representation and domination. The Party claims representations in its distinctive relationship with structures of power and governance that enable both public policies and social campaigns as instruments of policymaking. For this, issues of ideology are central, but we must adopt a broader conception of ideology that accounts for the behaviour of Party cadres and subaltern subjects alike. Therefore, Pieke's definition lacks an understanding of the state as the locus that disguises the domination of representations. This is a claim that the CPC establishes in the opening lines of its constitution as 'the vanguard of the Chinese working class, the Chinese people, and the Chinese nation' (Communist Party of China 2017).

These claims to identity are made in relation to the perceived totality of the state, which is a self-affirmative fiction (Reinhard 2019). As a fiction, the state appears as a congruent whole, but, following Philip Abrams, 'the state is the unified symbol of an actual disunity' (Abrams 1988, 79). As such, the task of the state is to expand and consolidate its 'collective (mis)representation' in order to make society 'legible'

and, therefore, socially engineered (Abrams 1988; Scott 1998). But while 'the state' in general can be seen as a fiction, it has a material reality of institutional arrangements and bureaucratic agents[10] that interact with internal and external forces to produce and reproduce political misrepresentations and social domination 'in ways that legitimate subjection' (Abrams 1988, 75). In this sense, the state-locus is in a permanent process of expansion and contraction, negotiating capacities of representation and domination with social and socio-economic subjects and forces that seek to impose their own hegemony. This renders the modern state an incomplete project of sovereignty that relies on the tools of coercion and consent, yet its idea is mystified under a veil of unity and cohesion (Abrams 1988; Gupta 1995; Scott 1998; Gramsci 1971; Jessop 2016).

In the Chinese case, the CPC centralises the production and management of the bureaucracy through Party schools, the organisation department, and the State Administration of Civil Service[11] (*guojia gongwuyuan ju* 国家公务员局). Tensions between Party and state emerge from divergences among cliques within the Party[12] and the fact that not all state bureaucrats are CPC members.[13] Not being as monolithic and ordered as it might look, internal Party differences and the tensions between Party and state allow for different forms of representation. When modernising governance was important, the Party base expanded among university graduates; when economic growth was central to national development, the Party opened its door to capitalists. One wonders who will be heard these days when social well-being is in the limelight. These reconfigurations of the Party base have

[10] I use the concept of bureaucracy in the sense of Bob Jessop's 'temporal sovereignty' (Jessop 2016).
[11] Under control of the State Council (*guojia guowuyuan* 国家国务院).
[12] Pekingologists recognise the Shanghai Clique (a relatively formal Party faction organised around the figure of Jiang Zemin), *tuanpai* 团派 (a faction of Party members that started their political career in the Party Youth, such as former Party chairman Hu Jintao and current premier Li Keqiang), Pricelings (a scattered group of the descendants of prominent senior Party officials, such as the current chairman Xi Jinping), and the New Left or New Maoists (Party members critical of the country's embracing of neoliberalism and with a certain nostalgia for communal feeling under Mao's rule. Some of their most notable members have been purged by Xi Jinping, such as the former Party Secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai).
[13] This is not to say that non-CPC bureaucrats actively seek to undermine the Party's leadership, but rather that the Party reserves to itself the right to have the final say on policymaking. In the current state council, Huang Runqiu, a member of the Jiusan Society, is the incumbent Minister of Ecology and Environment. During the Hu Jintao era, Dr Chen Zhu, a member of the Chinese Peasant's and Worker's Democratic Party, famously led the country's battle against SARS as Minister of Health. It is more common to find non-party members as elected local leaders at the village and county levels.

enabled different interests to be represented and reformulated through the social dynamics of domination, but not for everyone. If the capitalist class was able to rebuild itself and raise itself up to the level of the ruling group, the workers and peasants have moved in the opposite direction, from privileged revolutionary classes to subordinates.

The continuous reordering of representations at the centre of domination is better addressed on the basis of Antonio Gramsci's definition of the state. For him, 'the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci 1971, 244). The ruling class maintains its position over society through the functions of direct domination or hegemony. The former is the command exercised through the state (political society) and legal systems, the latter the production of consent through 'civil society,' understood as the 'ensemble of organisms commonly called "private"' (Gramsci 1971, 12). This does not mean that the state is divided between political society (force) and civil society (consent): for Gramsci, this is just a methodological distinction (Crehan 2002, 103). In reality, the tensions of domination and representation unfold in the political society as much as in civil society. This is very evident in the Chinese case. Pan Wei (2011) has shown how the 'social network is intertwined with the administrative network at the grassroots level' in a mode of organisation that he terms *sheji* (社稷). Pan Wei's focus on the local experience of how peasants develop a sense of the institutional arrangement and the role of the bureaucrats is evidence of how the state represents those who cannot represent themselves. In this case, the ideological device is a type of 'people-centred governance' (*minben zhuyi* 民本主义) that assumes a moral duty of representation and justice (Pan 2012).

What Pan Wei identifies as an aspect of the *long durée* of the Chinese polity, Party leaders have codified in different ways. Jiang Zemin spoke about the 'three represents' (*sange daibiao* 三个代表) which redefine the representative role of the CPC as the vanguard of the productive forces (Pieke 2009). Hu Jintao emphasised the 'scientific outlook on development' (*kexue fazhan guan* 科学发展观), which ended up increasing repression and assimilation under the guise of 'social harmony'

(*shehui hexie* 社会和谐) (Fewsmith 2005; Hann 2014). And then there is Xi Jinping's 'national rejuvenation' (*guojia fuxing* 国家复兴) and the 'China Dream' (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦), a congeries of desires that ultimately convey the idea of a powerful and assertive China (Schell and Delury 2013). For decades Chinese leaders have sought to keep social conflicts local and when necessary to elevate them as national policy (X. Chen 2012). In recent years, however, more efforts have been made to create rule by consent (to build hegemony) and to exercise domination against the defiant subjects of civil society (Hui 2018).

1.2.5. The market and the boundaries of exploitation

Critics tend to define socialism as a distinctive economic project of state centralisation, but this is not that evident from a historical perspective. Countries under the aegis of the Soviet Union experimented with different interpretations of the 'collective ownership of the means of production'. Big debates were held over the international line to be adopted by the socialist movement. The People's Republic of China had its own approach and global followership. In the middle of Sino-Soviet tensions, Mao Zedong wrote that 'Stalin emphasized only technology, technical cadre. He wanted nothing but technology, nothing but cadre; no politics, no masses. This too is walking on one leg! And in industry they walk on one leg when they pay attention to heavy industry but not to light industry. Furthermore, they did not point out the main aspects of the contradictions in the relationships among departments of heavy industry.' (Mao 1977a, 129).

This spirit of self-reliance and independence has remained a constant of PRC history. In fact, the CPC has gone to great lengths to justify the continuity from the collectivist era to the period of marketisation by arguing that they are still in the 'primary stage of socialism' (*shehui zhuyi chuji jieduan* 社会主义初级阶段). This means that China already has a socialist society but will remain in an inchoate state for a long time to come (Meng 2017). It is important to consider this statement in order to visualise internal ideological issues linked to legitimacy, but we need more substantial analytical categories to understand China's political economy.

The trope of neoliberalism has been used, sometimes interchangeably with post-socialism, by very reputable scholars (H. Yan 2003; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; H. Wang 2011; Harvey 2011). These approaches have stressed that changes in the economic and social order since 1978 signal a structural epochal shift that departs from what is understood as the historical experience of Chinese and global socialism. Therefore, they position the PRC in a similar historical trajectory to post-socialist eastern European countries or Washington Consensus' Latin America. The opposite has also been held true, namely that the PRC is a socialist country in its own right. It has been a trend among pundits of the *poputchik* type, 'fellow travellers', to argue that China's anomalies are those of a country undergoing 'primitive socialist accumulation' (S.-K. Cheng 2020; A. Hu et al. 2018).

These are two opposites that either reify the market's role in society or essentialise the state's presence in the economy. Yet, the PRC's economic trajectory has been much more subtle, due to both debates within the CPC and pressure from civil society and its organic intellectuals (Weber 2018). This is not to say that no neoliberal policies have ever been implemented: after all, markets have been created for commodities, resources, and services, including labour, capital, insurance, housing, education, health care, and land (Pieke 2009). Rather, it is to suggest that socialist imperatives have not been abandoned by sectors of either the ruling party or civil society.

The Reform era created a less obtrusive state that allowed the restoration of 'moral communities' (Hann 2009a, 265). Chun Lin (2006) has described the pendulum-like movement between socialist marketisation in the 1980s, the expansion of privatisation in the 1990s, and the reaffirmation of socialist goals in the early 2000s. More generally, Shaoguang Wang (2008) has applied a Polanyian analysis and argued that, after a brief encounter with the 'market society', the Chinese government has implemented a 'social market' by re-embedding the market into social and ethical relations (Shaoguang Wang 2008, 47). In this sense, the pendulum has swung continuously between partial privatisations of state assets and the strengthening of state or grassroots organisations to contain it. The manifestations of this re-embedding may be legal or socio-political. The Labour Law

of 2008 is a good example of progressive legislation designed to protect the rights of workers over capital, though it has proved difficult to implement in a situation of widespread informal employment (Hui 2018; P. C. C. Huang 2013). Some state-led socio-political efforts to contain marketisation can be seen in campaigns to build Party branches in domestic and foreign enterprises and to unionise migrant workers into the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) (McGregor 2012; D. Roberts 2020).

Certainly, centralised efforts to re-embed the market through government institutions have not always been effective. Many workers do not feel persuaded to use legal channels to defend their rights, an image promoted by the ACFTU's role in demobilising workers and supporting management (Friedman 2014). But things would look very different across the board if neoliberalism had been left to lure on its own. At the end of the day, the state has several overt and covert mechanisms at its disposal to curtail the power of capital. Zheng and Huang (2018) have called this approach 'market in state', i.e., the domination of the market by the state. In their characterisation, Zheng and Huang highlight the state's role in stimulating grassroot market actors, the emergence of large flagship enterprises, control over money, and the centralised control over SOEs. These are all important elements of a distinctive political economy of China's Reform, but they miss a very important factor in all this, namely exploitation.

From a Marxian perspective, exploitation is at the centre of the process of valorisation. Capitalists organise production in the most efficient way in order to extract surplus value from the workers (Krätke 2020). The exploitation of labour, or the appropriation of economic benefits from the labouring activity of those who are dominated (Wright 2015), becomes evident to workers in struggles around the working day. Karl Marx revealed the unequal conditions under which the sellers of labour power face their buyers: 'between equal rights, force decides' (1990, 344). This implies that capitalists assert their rights as purchasers by enforcing extensions of the working day, many times with the help (or neglect) of the state apparatus. As will be seen throughout this dissertation, the experience of Chinese migrant workers falls along these lines. The 996.ICU issue (chapter 3), when IT-

sector workers voiced their concerns about overwork and unpaid hours, has not led to any solutions, as the current legislation protects the worker's interests but is hard to enforce. The 'Sanhe Gods' (chapter 5), a group of migrants who engage in temporary day-jobs (once or twice a week), pretend to escape the cycle of production but fall prey to hyper-exploitation, working twelve-hour shifts in illegal factories. And migrant workers in general, in factories or in restaurants, take extra shifts or a second job to make ends meet, as working full-time is often not enough to cover the costs of social reproduction. All this while the country is celebrated for its high growth and grand victory in eradicating rural poverty.

Being unable to represent themselves, migrant workers have been marginalised from the Polanyian countermovement. Not hearing the voices of migrants has led to the implementation of policies that they do not favour. One such example is *hukou* reform, in which experiments with temporary residence permits have failed due to a lack of incentives and poor enforcement (Wing Chan and Buckingham 2008; C. Chen and Fan 2016). Furthermore, increasing rural urbanisation has alienated migrants from land-use rights, promoting the further commodification of land and labour (Chuang 2020).

In this scenario, it becomes all the more relevant to observe the production of solidarities and exclusions between migrant workers, as they provide hints of subaltern initiatives to rebuild the type of 'moral communities' that Hann (2009a) observed among Uyghur peasants in Xinjiang. Expressions of dissatisfaction through Maoist language, the proliferation of underground Christian communities, and even the revival of ethnonationalist identities can be seen as expressions opposing the commodification of labour. These emerge in parallel to raising labour militancy and even state initiatives from progressive sectors of the CPC.

Migrant workers, unable to represent themselves, exercise their agency at their levels of interaction. The state, acting as their vanguard, has established a series of mechanisms to contain the expansion of marketisation, but these hardly take into account the reality of migrant workers' lives. In this scenario, recognition alone is not enough. As we have seen, unionisation campaigns have not improved the living

and working conditions of labour in the country. At this point, it becomes relevant to think, with Nancy Fraser (2003), about the need for recognition *and* redistribution in the pursuit of social justice. In the Chinese case, this implies empowering labour organisations, raising salaries, reducing working hours, improving welfare systems, and restoring the dignity of labour.

1.3. Fieldwork

Field research was conducted in 2018-2019 in the southern metropolis of Shenzhen. The choice of field site was determined by Shenzhen's historical role in spearheading China's reform and its demographic composition as a migrant hub. Located in the Pearl River Delta (Map 2), the country's fastest growing region, Shenzhen is home to over thirteen million people, of whom at least 8.4 million are non-registered migrants from across the country (Statistics Bureau of Shenzhen Municipality and Survey Office of the National Bureau of Statistics in Shenzhen 2019). Thus, it could be expected that issues of class, ethnicity, and gender, associated to labour migration, would be prominent in this region.

I spent my first month in China at the East China Normal University (ECNU), the institution I was officially affiliated with during my field research. The Research Institute of Anthropology at ECNU was initiated by Nicholas Tapp, a prominent anthropologist of the Hmong, who led it until his death in 2015. Today, under the leadership of Professor Jianbo Huang, the institute remains strong in its approach to ethnicity and social development. I profited from the advice of professors and researchers at the institute and participated in a few of their seminars. At ECNU I was able to use their library resources to trace relevant information in newspaper archives, read local ethnographies relevant to my research, and collect statistical data. I also conducted a few exploratory conversations with migrant workers in the southern districts of Shanghai. Once my documents had been processed and my permits issued, I took a train ride to Shenzhen.

Upon arrival in Shenzhen, it took me two days to rent an apartment in the industrial Longhua district. I used a trendy mobile application called ZiRoom (*ziru* 自如), which specialises in providing affordable and fully furnished apartments or bedrooms in shared units to workers. The agent in charge of my account was a young woman from Heilongjiang, in China's northeast. She had come to Shenzhen to major in the Chinese language at Shenzhen University, where she had also met her current boyfriend. For her, living in the city felt like living in a different country, and she had found it hard to get used to it.

Map 2. Pearl River Delta.

Although this was my first time living in Shenzhen, initial access to the field was not difficult. I sought to establish several points of entry, which enabled me to obtain a wider and more diverse sample. I started by chatting with the elderly

neighbours in my compound, many of whom were migrant workers themselves. Most of my neighbours worked in the service industry, many as shop clerks or in the logistics industry. Some claimed to have local registration, but most of my neighbours did not. Many of them had side businesses to boost their household incomes. Someone sold chillies from Hunan, other offered apples from Yunnan, another took broken home appliances to sell for scrap or worked carrying people around on his motorbike.

While Shenzhen is a metropolis that attracts people from all over the world, life in its northern districts differs greatly from that in the flashier southern districts. Older people in the area were surprised to find a foreigner there, let alone one with good command of standard Chinese (*putonghua* 普通话). Through them I learned more about the activities of migrant workers in the surrounding area and its daily routine. As a long resident of the country's capital, many of the social dynamics in Shenzhen were new to me, most noticeably the lively outdoors activities and those happening in the many tea houses that populated the area.

Most of my ethnographic work was performed by 'hanging out'. I used to sit in restaurants that provided regional food around the factories, which attracted migrant workers from those regions. This was a good way to initiate contacts with communities of ethnic minorities and to learn more about their history in the city and their interactions with other ethnic groups. Informed by the migrants, I visited the Sanhe labour market regularly, where I met many jobseekers and even came across the Sanhe Gods (Chapter Five). Advised by neighbours, I started to explore the many tea houses around the area, mostly small family-run shops that always seemed to be open. These places were rich with neighbourhood gossip and lengthy discussions about politics and economics. I even became a regular at one such tea house located a few blocks north of my apartment, where many Hakka migrants used to spend their evenings. One of the patrons became my 'sponsor' and taught me about varieties of tea and how to pour it properly (the southern way, which I soon learned to interpret as 'the civilised way'), and even turned me into a 'VIP' in the parlour by paying for my exclusive cup. With some new acquaintances, I also spent many late nights in a pub where young migrant workers came to play dice,

drink cheap beer, and smoke fruit-flavoured tobacco from the *shuiyandai* 水烟袋 (*hookah*). This was a great place to get in touch with the 'proletarian existentialist' youth (Chapter Seven) and the youngest generation of migrant workers in general. I also entered a few small factories with the approval of the manager or disguised as a business representative.

A second strategy was to make use of my own network. I arrived in Beijing in 2012 to work as a business representative for a Chilean foreign trade agency, and later I attended Peking University for my master's degree. I built an extensive network of valuable contacts across the country, many of which were instrumental in my ability to access relevant sites in Shenzhen. This proved convenient in securing access to factories, interacting with workers in the logistics sector, and getting closer to groups of activists operating in southern China.

Another very important strategy was using popular mobile apps. WeChat, the country's most popular communications and payment platform, was critical for exchanging contact information and joining discussion groups. Through *Kuaishou* 快手, a short-video sharing app popular among migrant workers, I contacted many people through its georeferencing function. Some of these interactions turned face-to-face, others did not. Yet, it was a great resource to learn about forms of self-representation and how my interlocutors used digital services. I also used online forums known as *tieba* 贴吧, which are common spaces for public debates on a variety of matters, such as the working conditions in different factories or the living situation in Shenzhen or other cities. This was a great source of information about things that were not covered by the press. While most of my physical interactions occurred within Longhua district, using social media I was able to establish contact with people in other parts of Shenzhen and expand the scope of my research.

I spent most of my time chatting with people, joining in their routine as much as possible, eating and drinking, strolling around, and often carrying on with conversations from the street to WeChat. When possible, I recorded semi-structured interviews with my mobile phone or recorder. In most cases, recording became a deterrent in establishing a rapport, so after a conversation I would

immediately find a place where I could sit and start writing notes on what had transpired. In the evening I would revisit my notes and provide more details and clarity. Initial shyness and suspicion made building trust a slow process. Once trust had been established, though. many informants were undisturbed by my jotting down notes while we chatted, which sometimes led to them making interesting interventions on my field notes.

Data security, anonymity, and the safety of my interlocutors were paramount concerns. I followed recommendations given in a preparatory workshop at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle and the suggestions of other researchers to keep my contacts and data safe. Some of the measures concerned the use of redundant devices and encryption services. Virtual private network (VPN) software on my laptops and mobile phone allowed me to keep WeChat interactions somewhat protected. If a WeChat conversation went beyond making an appointment, I was sure to transcribe it in my field notes and delete the chat history and associated data as soon as possible. I collected many digital resources, such as images and video and voice recordings, which I needed to store safely for later use. For this, I kept two laptops with me, one encrypted and disconnected from the internet in mainland China, the other for my daily use. I regularly travelled to Hong Kong with the encrypted laptop to connect to the internet over a VPN and upload the resources into a cloud service provided by the Max Planck Society. During these visits I would also make any work-related communications. Additionally, I took all field notes down in paper notebooks. My assumption was that it would be easier to monitor digital devices remotely, whereas it would be necessary to enter my apartment physically to read my notes. I purchased sets of pocket size journals that, once filled up, I kept in a safe location in Hong Kong. All the names in my notes were pseudonyms, and I wrote in a variety of languages so as to keep them concealed from any external reader.

Although it might sound a bit paranoid on my part, this security strategy proved useful. Starting in May 2019, my interactions attracted the attention of the local authorities. Promptly, the police office in charge of my compound started paying me more regular visits with the pretext of checking my documentation ‘for my own

safety' (*wei nide anquan* 为你的安全). In early June, three security officers in plain clothes knocked loudly at my door after midnight. One of them was filming with his phone, while another looked at my place from the door, and the last asked for my documents while trying to push the door fully open. It was a scary situation which I did not know how to handle, but given that they had no uniforms or badges I tried my best to keep them outside. After showing them my documentation and asking them whether they were police officers, the more communicative of the group told me that this was a regular check 'for my own safety' (the usual pretext). Since then, I started noticing either one or two of them following me around. After that, I became much more cautious with my arrangements, especially as I was interviewing labour activists and lawyers. On more than one occasion I exited Shenzhen by one port and entered it by another port at the other end of the Hong Kong border, just to safely meet with a politically sensitive interlocutor.

I grew increasingly concerned with security between June and July, as the protests against the extradition bill in Hong Kong started to develop. For the most part, Shenzhen remained oblivious to the developments across the border. The hours put in befriending one of the security guards at my compound, over several bottles of *baijiu*, were helpful in keeping me informed about the growing attention to my activities. It was also emotionally important to be able to count on the support of my supervisor.

During fieldwork, I constantly reflected on my privileged position compared to that of my informants. From the very beginning it was important to devise tactics to avoid biases linked to my gender, physical appearance, beliefs, and prejudices. When things moved in an unexpected way, I allowed the field to guide me, often into positive serendipitous experiences. In the end, the variety of my sources, the depth of the data I collected, the long-standing and intimate relations I built, the constant dialogue with my interlocutors, the whole range of material, emotional, cognitive and sensuous experiences, my constant awareness about my positionality in the field, and the critical perspective I took to analyse the data give me confidence that I have avoided deliberate distortions and misconceptions, and that my writing does justice to the trust these migrant workers deposited in me.

1.4. Outline of the chapters

Chapter Two provides a detailed description of Shenzhen's past and present. It balances the mythology of a fishing village turned global metropolis with historical research. I also describe the implications of the north-south divide along the former borders of the Special Economic Zone. Through a few ethnographic vignettes, I describe the stark contrasts in a city that has experienced rapid and radical transformation in a short period of time.

Chapter Three delves more deeply into the issue of class. I examine historical changes in the language of class in the People's Republic of China, from its central role in the Maoist era to its abandonment in the last forty years. I elaborate further on the material conditions of class in contemporary China and how these are expressed in the language of *suzhi* 素质. Usually translated as 'inherent quality', *suzhi* conveys a multiplicity of meanings that are difficult to reconcile. Therefore, I propose to understand *suzhi* as an 'empty signifier', that is, a signifier to which meaning is ascribed, instead of one that emanates meaning, and whose use unveils aspects of domination. In this sense, *suzhi* is deployed as a marker of difference by highlighting a subject's lack of 'civilisation' (*wenming* 文明). In social practice among migrant workers, *suzhi* articulates distinctions of rural origin or ethnicity at the basis of the production of solidarities and exclusions. These are manifested as class contradictions and implicit hierarchies of labour.

Chapter Four focuses on ethnicity as a principal cleavage in the collective identity of migrant workers. I elaborate on how ethnicity is defined in the PRC and the socio-political implications of *minzu* discourse. I emphasise the tensions between the Han majority and *minzu* minorities, paying special attention to the Uyghur. The ethnography then reveals the unfolding of the grammars of identity/alterity in the imaginary and social relations between Han and minority *minzu*.

Chapter Five returns to the issue of class by investigating a new labour identity in the Sanhe labour market. 'Sanhe Gods' is the name used to describe migrants who decide to escape cycles of temporary employment by embracing a life of marginality. They engage in casual wage labour (one or two days a week) as a response to the

abuses of the employment system. Many migrant workers feel trapped and find it difficult to improve their material conditions. Choosing the path of a 'Sanhe God' is a way some migrants, mostly Han men, opt for freedom. The Sanhe Gods are criticised, pitied and despised by employers, recruiters, and other workers. Their very existence shows that the state's efforts to control the labour market are ineffective, as capital always finds new ways of circumventing legislation. These day labourers exemplify the fragmentation of migrant workers beyond the divisions that are informally institutionalised through structural forms of exclusion based on gender and ethnicity.

Chapter Six addresses practices of self-representation in which class and ethnicity interconnect in the context of what Xinyuan Wang (2016) has called 'double migration', both geographical and digital. Mobile phones allow migrants to keep in touch with their loved ones in other corners of the country, join online communities of like-minded people, learn about the world, and cultivate entrepreneurial selves, sometimes in a literal, profit-making sense. In this sense, digital platforms can be tools of social empowerment, but they also reproduce exclusions and social alienation. In its most radical reification, some migrant workers use platforms in the hope of becoming internet celebrities (*wanghong* 网红). The matrix of incubators, sponsors, producers, and creators of viral content is known as the *wanghong* economy. I deploy the concept of reification, understood as the subsuming of social relations under capital in the form of a commodity, to articulate a materialist critique of the *wanghong* economy and the ways in which it inhibits the development of a collective identity among migrant workers.

Chapter Seven centres on the ideological tensions between the government and migrant workers, as well as among migrant workers themselves. Thinking through Gramscian categories of hegemony, common sense, and subaltern conceptions of the world, the ethnography reveals the complex power relations at stake. On the one hand, the hegemonic project of the CPC has looked to secure the Party's standing in history while asserting its role in the world. To this end, the Party has intensified its 'ideological work' (*yishixintai gongzuo* 意识形态工作), promoting concepts like 'Core Socialist Values' (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观), the

'Great Rejuvenation' (*weida fuxing* 伟大复兴), etc. These ideas become part of the 'common sense' of Chinese subaltern subjects, who face them through their own 'conceptions of the world', which are not self-enclosed systems of thought, but dynamic ways of looking at the world where overlapping is not only possible, but common. I have identified four relatively coherent 'conceptions of the world' from my ethnography. 'Ethnonationalism' and 'Neo-Maoism' are two conceptions of the world that take elements of common sense and reinforce them, one building on Han chauvinism under the guise of patriotism, the other on national history and the nostalgia for the social embeddedness of the Mao era. 'Proletarian existentialism' and 'Christianism' also use elements of common sense, but in a way that is ironic or divergent. The former is a reaction to the economic and professional stagnation faced by many migrants who make use of different artistic expressions to come to terms with their precarious conditions. The latter refers to newly converted migrants who join underground Christian churches, where they find a community of equals where moral, spiritual, and material support are promoted as a remedy against the materialism and consumerism ailing Chinese society.

In Chapter Eight, I summarise the main findings of each chapter and provide a general reflection on the results of the dissertation. I elaborate further on the implications of my research in the wider Chinese context, as labour-intensive industries expand into the interior provinces. I also compare the Chinese experience with other transformative processes across the globe before speculating on the present and future of social countermovements in the PRC and elsewhere.

II. Shenzhen: City of Sweat and Blood

2.1. Introduction

Migrant workers in Shenzhen tell the following joke: 'When you come to Shenzhen, you become a Shenzhener.' This is an ironic reference, in the sense of expressing commonalities and acknowledging differences between 'communities of complicity' (Steinmüller 2011), to a common expression among more affluent and more highly qualified migrants. For those populating the factories and services in the city, Shenzhen is expensive, segregated, and a difficult place in which to acquire a local *hukou*. The joke is usually followed by expressions of these inequalities: 'Shenzhen is a rich city, but for us, it's a city of sweat and blood' (*hanxuezhicheng* 汗血之城).

Shenzhen is a megacity in the south of Guangdong province. Its demographics are largely a mystery, but over thirteen million people call this place home, with at least eight million being non-registered migrants, and another five million uncounted residents (Statistics Bureau of Shenzhen Municipality and Survey Office of the National Bureau of Statistics in Shenzhen 2019; X. Lin 2019). Shenzhen's 2,050 square kilometres are divided into nine districts and one new area: Futian, Luohu, Yantian, Nanshan, Bao'an, Longgang, Longhua, Pingshan, and Guangming districts, and Dapeng New Area (Shenzhen Government 2017) (Map 3). Until 2010, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ) consisted of the first four districts, where most of the administrative, financial, logistic, and high-tech innovation activities are now concentrated, leaving industry in the new northern districts.

Shenzhen borders the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) to the south and the industrial towns of Dongguan and Huizhou to the north. It is located at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, a thriving economic area that links Guangzhou (the provincial capital of Guangdong), Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, Huizhou, and Zhaoqing with the Hong Kong SAR and the Macao SAR. Recently, Premier Li Keqiang has pioneered an effort to integrate the financial, industrial, infrastructural, logistic, scientific, and innovative

capacities of this sub-region under the umbrella concept of the Greater Bay Area. In order to become a leading global economic subregion, which by 2017 was already producing 1.2 trillion EUR of China's gross domestic product, significant efforts have been made to integrate the political and legal orders (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau of the HKSAR 2019). These transformations have been met by waves of social unrest. In Shenzhen, new forms and scales of labour activism have kept the state's security apparatus on its feet, while in Hong Kong a massive social movement has erupted against the erosion of the rule of law and the autonomy of the Special Administrative Region by the central government in Beijing.

Map 3. Administrative map of Shenzhen.

References to Shenzhen usually make use of several epithets: China's 'Silicon Valley' (F. Murphy 2017), 'tech megacity' (Bennett 2018), 'city of the future' (Nylander 2017), 'instant city' (Du 2020), etc. These are all imaginaries that evoke hyper-modernity and a fascination with its technological development and productive capacity, which are attributed to the city's 'lack of history or local characteristics' (Du 2020, 2). But Shenzhen is more than that: it is a palimpsest with layers of past transformations that conform what the local government considers 'the vigour and bright future of socialist China' (quoted in Kho 2017, 171). Are these views helpful in characterising the city? What is it like to live in the lowest

social echelons of Shenzhen? And what can it tell us about the epithets that are used to talk about the city?

In this chapter I describe my field site. First, I explore the history of Shenzhen with the intention of demystifying the myths around it. Second, I present the voices of migrant workers in order to convey their experiences of life in this city. Lastly, I focus on the problem of inequality, bringing to the fore the chasm between spaces for production and spaces for consumption, the role of transnational capital in shaping the city, and how low-end migrant workers are continually being displaced and relegated to the city's margins. I insist throughout the chapter on the idea of the divided city. The administrative division between the area of economic experimentation (inner city) and the new industrial areas (outer city) was abolished 2010, yet local residents still use it as a reference that embodies several discursive dichotomies: old/new, developed/underdeveloped, clean/dirty, modern/not-modern, rich/poor, civilised/not-civilised. I argue that acknowledging this imaginary boundary is fundamental to understanding the development of the city, especially in how capital and labour are distributed geographically.

2.2. A modern city

'From a fishing village to a global metropolis', runs the official mantra about Shenzhen's transformation. Residents, journalists, and scholars unabashedly repeat the story of the city's cosmogony, of how a backwater village became a utopia of the future. Even in 2020, during the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the Shenzhen SEZ, Xi Jinping stated that 'Shenzhen is a brand-new city created by the Party and the people, working hand in hand, during the period of reform and opening. It is a wonderful expression of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics drawn on a white piece of paper' (Xi 2020).[14] In this line of thinking, Xi revealed two aspects that many link to the city's success. First, he highlights the strategic wisdom of the Party in its collaboration with the people. In the accounts of many international observers, the political aspects of Shenzhen seemed displaced in favour of a purely technocratic and technophilic description. Entrepreneurialism,

[14] The original section in Chinese states: '深圳是改革开放后党和人民一手缔造的崭新城市，是中国特色社会主义在一张白纸上的精彩演绎.'

innovation, and a can-do attitude are key concepts that people bring up when talking about the city. For the Party, this works as a counternarrative to dated prejudices that link socialism with the Soviet type of command economy, emphasising instead the creative spaces that the Sinicized version of socialism has enabled (W. W. Y. Wong 2017). The second aspect is the 'white piece of paper', a clear reference to Mao Zedong's motto popularised during the Great Leap Forward: 'On a blank sheet of paper, free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written, the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted' (Mao 2020). Mao referred to the spirit of self-reliance and cooperation between the cadres and the members of the cooperative, who between them managed to transform a landscape usually affected by drought and floods into paddy fields. Following a similar narrative, the cooperation between the Party and the people converted a rural backwater into a metropolis; a land without a past became China's 'instant city' (*like shichang* 立刻市场) (Du 2020). Many migrants favour moving to Shenzhen because it provides them with an opportunity to reinvent themselves, maybe trying a new career path, or attempting to come to terms with their gender identity or sexual orientation. These narratives are ideological constructions that mystify the history of Shenzhen as a highly controlled process, where the creativity and adaptability of human subjects in navigating a long transition becomes invisible.

2.2.1. Building the Special Economic Zone (SEZ)

The situation of the People's Republic of China at the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was dramatic. In the space of four years, between Mao's death in September 1976 and Deng Xiaoping launching the process of 'Reform and Opening' (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) between 1978-1980, Chinese socialism took another radical turn. This implied changes in politics, political economy, social management, and ideology, to a point that the whole idea of socialism was redefined. The language of class struggle was abandoned, as socialism did not seek to transform the relations of production in pursuit of social equality, but rather would now to serve modernisation and develop the forces of production to achieve wealth and power (Karl 2020a, 168).

The events of the Cultural Revolution shook the whole social, political, and economic structures of the PRC. At the grassroots level, young people followed the call to organise self-defence groups of the revolution. The two biggest factions across the country were the Red Flag and the East Wind. The former were more often 'have-not' intellectuals and 'bad class' rebellious youngsters, while the latter consisted mostly of the children of officials, workers, and soldiers (Vogel 1989). At the top, the 'Gang of Four',[15] a clique that attempted to reinstate Mao Zedong in power, made continuous calls to oppose anyone attempting to take China along the capitalist road, like as country chairman Liu Shaoqi and the General Secretary of the Party Deng Xiaoping.[16] Although Mao Zedong declared in 1969 that the Cultural Revolution had been a great success, the general crisis into which the country had plunged in 1976 gravely undermined the CPC's legitimacy (Vogel 1989, 82).

The deaths of Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Mao Zedong in 1976 weakened the power of the Maoist clique. Appointed by Mao on his deathbed, Hua Guofeng did not enjoy the prestige and political acumen of his predecessor (Spence 1990, 651). With growing pressure from within the Party to create stability, Hua Guofeng detained the Gang of Four and put an end to the Cultural Revolution, while still calling on the Party to 'obey whatever Mao had said and to ensure the continuation of whatever Mao has decided' (Spence 1990, 676). In order to maintain his position as country leader, Hua also had to accept the return of Deng Xiaoping, who became the de facto leader. Under the concept of *boluan fanzheng* 拨乱反正, 'eliminating chaos and restoring normality', Deng and his faction changed the political constitution of the PRC by eliminating references to the continuation of class struggle under socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat. They also rehabilitated victims of the Cultural Revolution and declared the whole process a political mistake. The education system and university examinations were reinstated, as were academic

[15] The Gang of Four (*siren bang* 四人帮) were the core leadership in charge of the Cultural Revolution. They are widely regarded as the initiators and promoters of radical political actions that affected members of the political elite, as well as Chinese society in general. Its four members were Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, the organiser of the Shanghai commune, Wang Hongwen, the political theorist Zhang Chunqiao, and the literary critic Yao Wenyuan.

[16] During this period, Mao Zedong remained chairman of the Party and paramount leader of the country.

and scientific activities. Unlike de-Stalinisation in the Soviet Union, historians of China have pointed out that the logic behind Deng's actions was not directed against Mao—whose oeuvre Deng qualified as being 70% good and 30% bad—but in salvaging the Party from the wreckage of the Cultural Revolution (Schell and Delury 2014, 264; Vogel 2011, 199). This Leninist loyalty to the Party is central to understanding the changed institutional arrangements after 1978 (Pieke 2009; Y. Zheng 2010).

'Reform and Opening', *gaige kaifang* 改革开放, the buzzword of contemporary China, is an umbrella concept for a series of policies and practices aimed at enriching and strengthening the PRC in the world system. Deng's formulation was cautious. By 1979 the paramount leader had proposed that China could benefit from the experience of capitalist countries. However, to avoid succumbing to these forces, it was crucial to abide by the 'four cardinal principles' (*sixiang jiben yuanze* 四项基本原则): 1) upholding the socialist path, 2) upholding the dictatorship of the proletariat, 3) upholding the leadership of the CPC, and 4) upholding Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong's Thought (Vogel 2011, 262 ff). Under this frame, the Communist Party embarked on the creation of zones of experimentation with the market economy that could eventually be implemented in the whole country, a tactic for policy implementation that is still in use.

In order to balance internal Party debates, the central government has pursued a gradual strategy of transformation based on targeted experimentation. Four initial 'special export zones' were established in 1979: Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shantou in Guangdong province, and Xiamen in Fujian (Vogel 2011, 398). These areas, later renamed 'Special Economic Zones' (*jingji tequ* 经济特区), aimed at attracting investments, experts, and knowledge from neighbouring territories: Shenzhen from the former British territory of Hong Kong, Zhuhai from the former Portuguese colony of Macao, while Xiamen and Shantou looked closely at Taiwan (Vogel 1989, 126 ff). The Chinese diasporas in southeast Asia and the United States also played an important role in investing and developing productive infrastructures in the PRC.

Shenzhen's strategic location next to the international financial hub of Hong Kong provided it with certain advantages. Cantonese-speaking Hong Kongese capitalists were steadfast in mobilising their knowledge, capacity, and interests across the northern border. Many of them had kinship connections as Guangdong natives who had escaped from the PRC in times of turmoil. Industries of all sorts started to migrate from the British colony to the PRC, capitalising on the cheaper and skilled Chinese labour (Liauw 2012). By 1986, Shenzhen's total industrial output was slightly larger than that of the other three SEZs combined, making it an integral part of global value chains that received transnational capital while operating with Hong Kongese logistic and financial infrastructures (Vogel 1989, 129). In this sense, the establishment of the SEZ allowed a dynamic of capital accumulation through the import in bulk of intermediary goods via Shenzhen and the reexporting of finished products to the markets of North America and the European Union through Hong Kong (W. Huang 2017, 76).

The original Shenzhen SEZ comprised the inner districts (*guannei* 关内) of Nanshan, Futian, Luohu, and Yantian. Only after 2010 was the SEZ border completely eliminated, integrating the outer districts (*guanwai* 关外) of Bao'an, Guangming, Longhua, Longgang, Pingshan, and Dapeng. The inner districts then concentrated the logistic, financial, and administrative functions, while most of industrial capital and labour moved to the outer districts.

2.2.2. The ox that opens the wasteland

One of the most iconic locations of Shenzhen is the giant poster of Deng Xiaoping with the city's skyline next to Lychee Park in Futian district (Figure 1). With big red characters reading 'adhere to the Party's line unshakeable for a century' (*jianchi dang de jiben luxian yibainian bu dongyao* 坚持党的路线一百年不动摇), it reminds those stopping by of the historical transformations in the area since the launching of the Reform and Opening in 1978.

Like a palimpsest, the different layers of Shenzhen's development are visible to the naked eye. After going for a walk with one of my interlocutors, we stopped outside

her office building. 'This was the city's first high-rise; can you believe it?' With only twenty storeys, it looks humble when compared to the Ping An Finance Centre or the iconic KK100, the world's fourth and twenty-second highest buildings respectively (Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat 2020), standing just three hundred metres from Deng Xiaoping's poster. Wang Feifei is a young woman whose family moved to the city from China's northeast when she was a baby, more than thirty years ago, making her a terrific tour guide around Futian and Luohu districts. Her father came first, as a migrant worker, and ended up working for the local subsidiary of the China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC), where he did many jobs.

Figure 1. Family next to Deng Xiaoping's Poster.

Feifei took me across the park on the way to the former city government buildings. With every step, she kept recalling stories of her childhood, accompanying her father to dance in the evenings or walking around with her family. She felt a strong nostalgia for the 1990s, and this area, with its lower buildings covered in colourful tiles, made her feel at ease. Yet, she fears that this place too will be transformed.

We exit from the east gate of Lychee Park and, after a few turns, we reach a small square surrounded by small white government buildings. No big politics are conducted here these days, but some minor services remain: a branch of the city's publishing house, small shops, a subsidised dining hall, a hotel for Party members, and a retirement house for Party cadres. The current city hall or civic centre (*shimin zhongxin* 市民中心), depicted in the middle of the Deng Xiaoping poster, is a large and modern-looking building in the central business district (CBD) in Futian, at the heart of the city. It is flanked by the world's largest bookstore, the recently opened Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning (Figure 2) and a complex that houses the concert hall and the city library, designed by Japanese architect Isozaki Arata, where I spent many hours reading local government publications and historical documents. Behind it stands the Lotus Flower Hill Park (whose main attraction is a statue of Deng Xiaoping overlooking the city), while in front are the Shenzhen Stock Exchange and other corporate high-rises of the Central Business District (CBD).

While walking through Shangbu middle road, Feifei became excited. This was her street, that was the bookstore where she spent hours reading on the floor, that was her favourite restaurant which her family would visit on any of their birthdays. While the restaurant is still running, the former bookstore now hosts Amway, a multi-level marketing company from the United States. All the buildings in this street belong to SOEs. After setting up the Shenzhen SEZ, the central government sent key leaders to establish branches of national corporations and develop the city. In the 1980s, CEIEC took the lead in building new infrastructure by reinvesting capital from the export of electronics.

Soon enough, we reached her work unit: *shenzhongdian* 深中电 or CES, one of the local branches of the CEIEC. This 38-storey high brutalist building, standing right next to the city's first high-rise, is part of a complex of four towers, each one a different branch of the main company. Put together, they cover a wide range of investments: electronic information technologies, foreign trade in electronics, high-tech investments, financial security, and commercial and industrial real estate. Its historical head of sixteen years from1984 to 2000, Shen Zhengzhong, was a well-

known and charismatic leader who followed a simple and humble lifestyle. A high-level engineer from Jiangsu province, Mr Shen was the CEO, Party secretary and president of the board of CES. For his work in Shenzhen, he received the 'May 1st National Labour Medal', the 'National Prize for Outstanding Business Managers', 'Guangdong Province's Outstanding Party Secretary in the Industrial Sector', and the provincial 'Model Worker' recognition (J. Xu 2016).

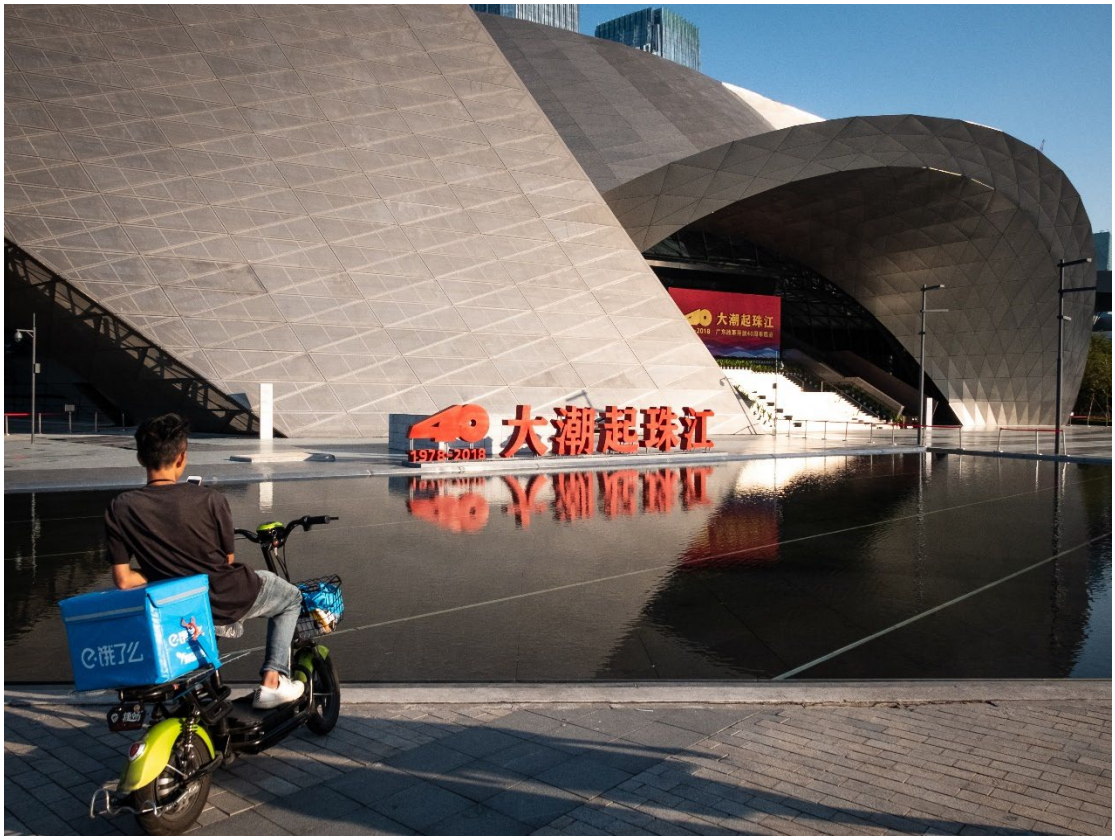

Figure 2. Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning.

Stories abound about Shen Zhengzhong's almost heroic dedication to work. In one account, he came in the middle of the night in his pyjamas, a coat, and an umbrella to secure all the windows in the building during a typhoon. On another occasion, he used his own money to pay a bonus to his workers after a particularly gruelling task. According to Feifei, even today many look up to him as an example of good leadership, especially in times of frequent visits by watchdogs enforcing Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign.

Shen Zhengzhong's story is the perfect embodiment of the spirit of the city: building a successful company out of nothing, and opening virgin soil with great effort where new crops can be planted. That is why, perhaps, the local branch of the CPC has put a figure of a *tuohuangniu* 拓荒牛 (Figure 3), the ox that opens up the wasteland, outside their offices, together with another in the financial district, close to Deng Xiaoping's poster. That is Shenzhen's 'spirit animal', its totem. And according to Feifei, in a city without a long tradition, the *tuohuangniu* embodies what it means to be a Shenzhener.

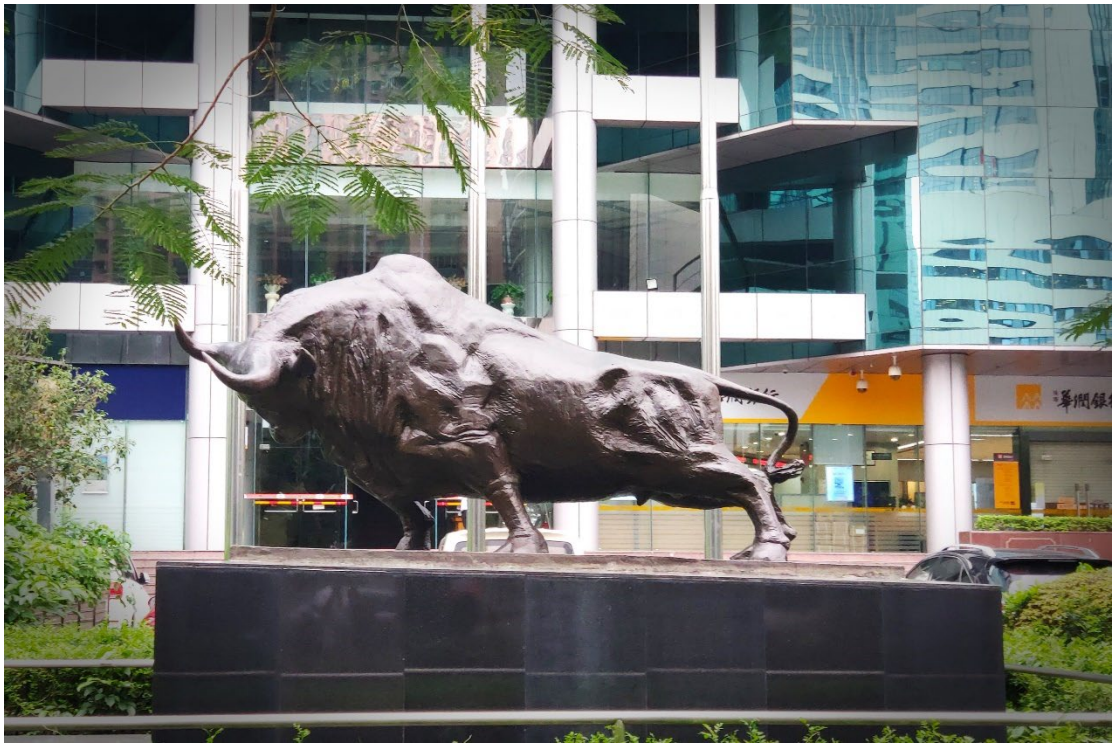

Figure 3. Statue of the ox that opens up the wasteland.

It is easy to recognise this entrepreneurial spirit walking around the high-tech park in Nanshan district or among the multitude of small hardware stores in Huaqiangbei, where Scotty Allen, a Silicon Valley software engineer and now tech entrepreneur in Shenzhen, managed to obtain the parts to build his own iPhone 6S in 2017 (Allen 2017). Today Shenzhen is home to some of the most innovative and valuable Chinese companies: Tencent (fourth largest internet company by market cap), DJI (world's largest manufacturer of drones), BYD (world's largest maker of electric cars), and Huawei (one of the largest manufacturers of mobile devices and a leader in 5G technology) (Nylander 2017). Each of these companies

has been ‘opening the wasteland’ of their respective industries, a massive task that has required massive amounts of capital and labour power.

2.3. A migrant city

A massive red banner with big yellow characters stands in front of Shenzhen North railway station’s main gates. This is the way the city has chosen to welcome newcomers: ‘Deeply loving talented people, Shenzhen is waiting for you’ (*shen ai rencai, zhen deng ni lai* 深爱人才，圳等你来) (Figure 4). Groups of migrant workers can be seen going to and fro, carrying their bags, squatting and chatting, looking at their phones, buying tickets or grabbing a bite to eat, while sharp-dressed executives rush to catch the express train that will take them to Guangzhou South station in thirty minutes or to Hong Kong’s West Kowloon station in just twenty.

Figure 4. Banner at Shenzhen North Station.

Shenzhen North is an axial point in the northcentral division between the inner and outer cities. Going south from here, one finds skyscrapers, expensive real estate, and the utopia of a modern socialist city. To the north are the industrial areas where new migrant workers battle for precarious employment. Arriving software developers and engineers catch the metro towards Nanshan or Futian districts,

while low-skill migrant workers queue for the northbound buses towards the Sanhe labour market or the Foxconn industrial complex in Longhua.

Shenzhen has earned itself the title of the 'migrants' favourite city'. Its initial prospects as an industrial town were attractive for rural workers looking to increase their incomes at a time when the Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) across the country were being restructured. The demography of Shenzhen quickly changed (Figure 5), from almost 60,000 people in 1980 to almost thirteen million people by 2020. Most of Shenzhen's inhabitants are migrants from all the provinces of China, and from 55 of the 56 different ethnic groups.

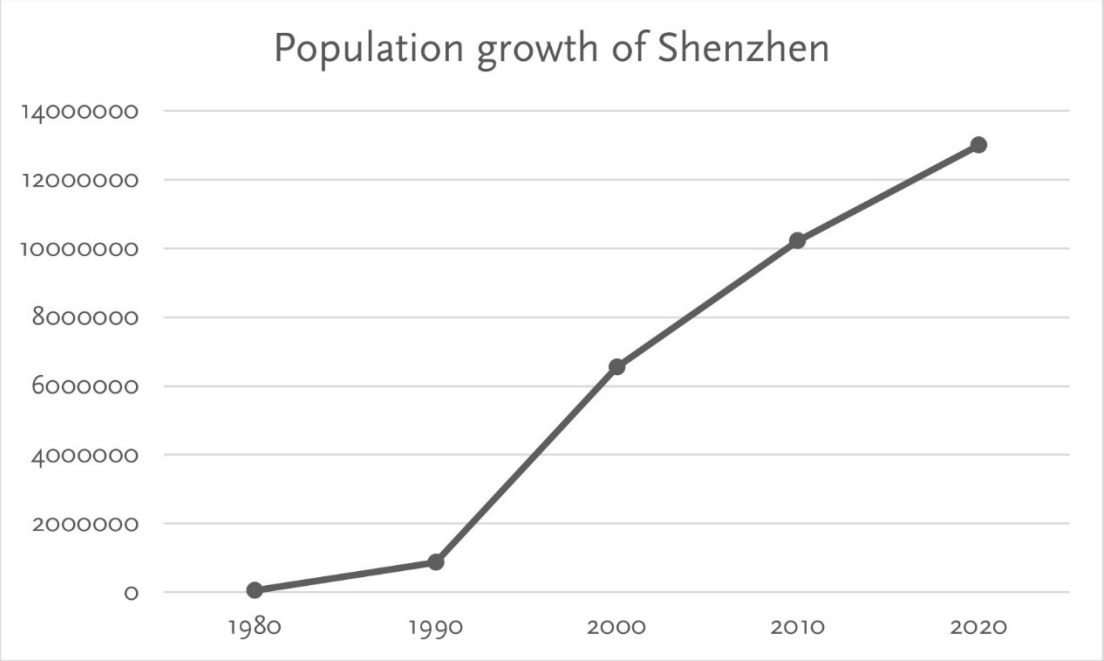

Figure 5. Population growth of Shenzhen.

While the Yue, Hakka or Shaozhou languages prevail in other parts of Guangdong province, Shenzhen stands out as a linguistic oasis. Standard Chinese (*putonghua* 普通话)—as standard as it can be in this context—acts as the lingua franca. Migrants from other provinces do not need to learn any of the regional dialects, but local Guangdong and Hong Kong people must have some fluency in *putonghua* to be able to trade in the city. One might also successfully communicate in English in some of the more developed areas of the city, like Nanshan or Shekou, where many foreign nationals have come to reside and join the local 'start-up scene,' or in Luohu,

home to a growing 'maker' community connected to the world's largest electronic components market around the Huaqiangbei metro station.

Not all migrants have had the same opportunities. One of the central aspects of this dissertation is to show how critical matters of ethnicity have been in defining the lifepath of migrant workers in Shenzhen. The most evident case is that of the Uyghurs, who migrated to the city during the 1990s. Shenzhen does not have a 'Uyghur enclave' like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou (Baranovitch 2003; Tursun 2016; Yun Huang 2008; Kaltman 2007), but a number of communities have established themselves around Nanhu in the Luohu district and Nanyuan in Futian. Due to language differences and the negative stereotypes that characterise Xinjiang people as unruly and prone to criminality, they found it hard to secure jobs in the city. Therefore, they have been relegated to working in Xinjiang food restaurants, either as cooks or dancers, reinforcing other stereotypes that are ascribed to their ethnicity (Tursun 2016). Most restaurants are Han-owned and offer Xinjiang brands of beer and dishes with pork. Just a handful of places were small family-run eateries for Uyghurs themselves. In my observations, Uyghur communities were fragmented and limited by kinship ties. This population has drastically declined in the last years, mainly due to ongoing political constraints affecting the Uyghur population and other Muslim ethnic groups across the PRC.

The reputation of Shenzhen as an open-minded, rich, and meritocratic city continues to attract new generations of migrant workers. 'Dedication' said Ma Xiaoming; 'that's all you need'. After working for several years in factories in Dongguan and Shenzhen, Ma now runs a popular restaurant specialising in Lanzhou noodles in the northern district of Longhua. Instead of sending remittances homes, Ma tried to save as much money as possible to establish himself and his family in Shenzhen. He is part of a generation of Chinese who rejected rural life and strove for urban modernity. Born in a Hui family from Shaanxi, Ma does not consider himself to be a peasant, as his primary economic activity has never been connected with working in the fields. He left for Xi'an when he was sixteen years old, where he initially mainly in restaurants. Two years later, he followed some of his childhood friends to the industrial town of Dongguan and

soon afterwards went to Shenzhen, always looking for better paid jobs. He opened his restaurant in 2018, making use of his savings of four years plus a loan from a cousin. Ma drew inspiration from upmarket restaurants in the many luxury shopping centres of Shenzhen. 'If the place looks luxurious, I can charge higher prices', he boasted. He has an open kitchen where two Hui cooks work simultaneously, providing meals to the emerging middle class of mostly young IT employees living in newly built apartment buildings with façades that freely interpret European architecture.

Ma presents us with a story of success. He has managed to buy a small apartment, where he lives with his wife and daughter. But he is aware that his story is harder to repeat these days. Every few months he has to hire a new cook, as migrants constantly move between jobs, industries, and cities looking for better income opportunities. Settling in Shenzhen as part of the 'low-end population' is considerably harder these days, as the city is in the middle of a new transition favouring capital-intensive industries over labour-intensive ones. While the industrial landscape keeps changing, migrant workers reinvent themselves. Those who have gained knowledge of electronics manufacturing later move on to open mobile-phone repair shops or retailing of refurbished products (just in my block, five of these stores operated), those who cook might open a small eatery, and those without the abilities to start their own business might join the vast army of delivery workers, seek employment in the retail sector, illegally move people around on the back of their motorbikes, or reject regular employment altogether and become 'Sanhe Gods' (Chapter 5).

2.4. A divided city

A place of thriving diversity and with great potential for innovation, Shenzhen has cemented its position in the world while simultaneously containing the world in Shenzhen. 'Window of the World' is an entertainment park founded by real-estate developer Jian Di'an, a prominent Uyghur businessperson and local political figure from Hunan province.[17] Here one can find scaled down replicas of recognisable

[17] Hunan has the largest population of Uyghurs outside the XUAR, who are also known as Taoyuan Uyghurs from the toponym where most of them reside. They are still considered members of the

international buildings and monuments, such as the Eiffel Tower, Cologne cathedral, and the *moai* from Easter Island. Some companies take their low-end migrant workers to the park as an end of year treat, where they can get a sense of cosmopolitanism. Unlike Kimberly Chong's (2018) information workers in Dalian, who realise their cosmopolitanism by living overseas and returning to work for international consultancies in the PRC, these low-end workers might never go abroad. Their sense of the global consists of aspirations to share the local experiences of that type of returned middle class. Observing a 3:1 version of the Eiffel Tower in the middle of Shenzhen is no less meaningful. In this sense, questions of authenticity and origin are less relevant than having an object that resembles the original.[18] Internal migrant workers experience the world around them in qualitatively different ways than the more affluent social groups of young professionals or entrepreneurs. These differences relate to the problems of inequality that are caused by accelerated capitalist development.

Since the beginning, Shenzhen has followed a model of urbanisation based on enclaves (W. Huang 2017). During the city's first decade, SOEs dissected areas for development on a human scale, with self-contained industrial, residential, and consumption functions. A good example of how capital has transformed the social landscape of Shenzhen is the division of the twelve-square kilometre Shahe Farm in Nanshan district, which in 1985 was divided into the Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), an industrial area of transnational capital, and the Baishizhou urban village. Over the years, the factories moved away from OCT, which became a trendy area for creative industries and theme parks (one of them being 'Window of the World'), while Baishizhou grew into the largest urban village in the inner city, providing cheap housing to migrants, low-end and young professionals alike (O'Donnell 2017). Starting in 2012, the local government initiated the process of redeveloping

Uyghur *minzu* minority, although they do not speak the language, nor practice the religion of their fellow nationals in the northwest (Shih 2002).

[18] The production of counterfeit products in China can be seen from two dimensions. In legal terms, it means an infringement of intellectual property and the provision of commodities of inferior quality. In a more social dimension, the emic concept of *shanzhai* 山寨 implies an homage to the original product and the development of a commodity with similar aesthetic but improved functionalities at a much lower price tag. Analyses of *shanzhai* have treated it part of a local type of creative industry (Kloet, Chow, and Scheen 2019), part of larger artistic and philosophical tradition in East Asia (B.-C. Han 2017).

Baishizhou by transferring land-use rights to private corporations. After years of resistance, in July 2019 Baishizhou's 150,000 residents, most of them without local *hukou*, received eviction notices, enabling their houses to be demolished and replaced by high-rises, hotels, and shopping malls (Du 2020, 299 ff).

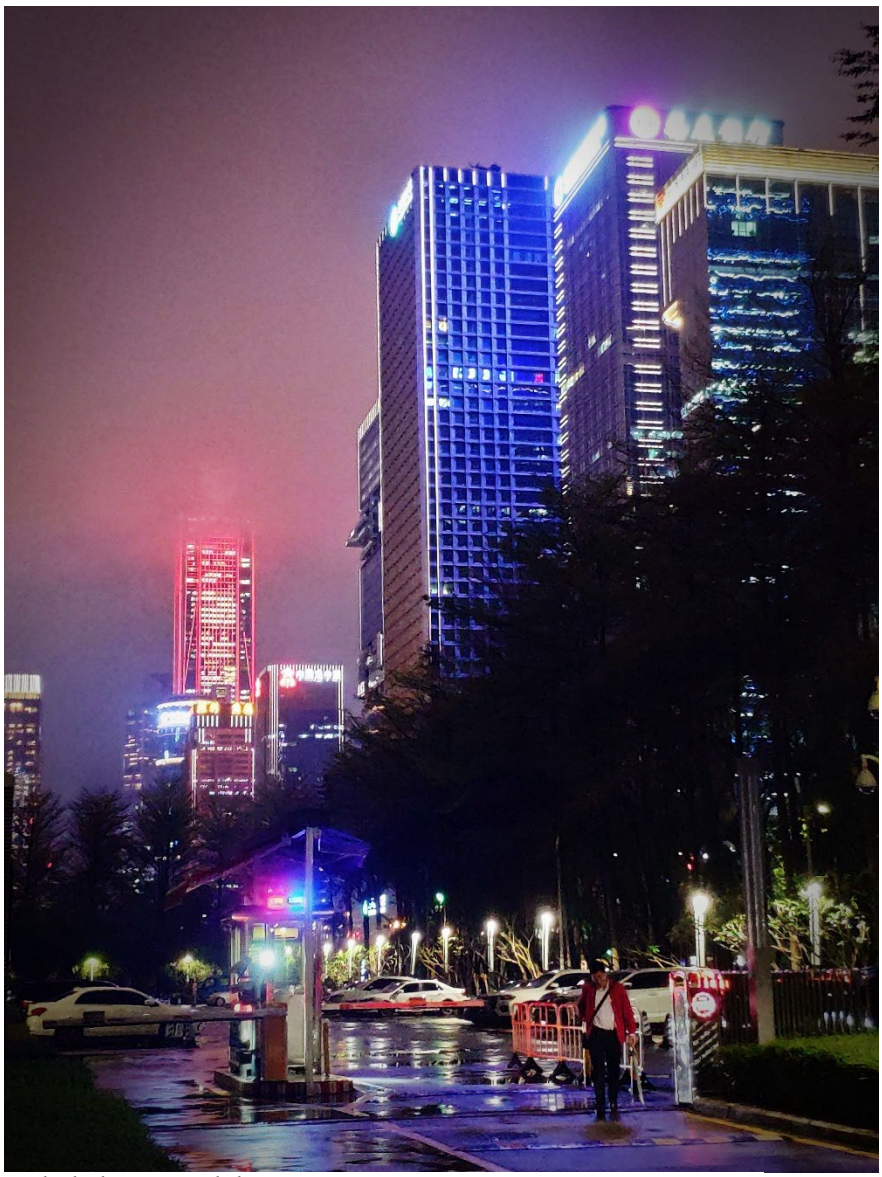

Figure 6. Night lights around the CBD.

The encroachment of the working poor has increased the social and urban chasm. Many of the migrants I met in the northern districts have never been south of Shenzhen North station, nor have they seen the 'Window to the World' or the high-rises of the central business district (CBD). For many of my interlocutors in the Longhua district, the city looked completely different from the postcards, much less intimidating. Theirs was a city of factories and affordable housing, small shops

selling off brand products, street vendors, and unlicensed motorbikes working as taxis.

On one occasion, I took Xiaofeng, a young migrant worker from rural Guangxi province, for a stroll around the commercial area of the CBD (Figure 6). Once we came out of the Exhibition Centre metro station, she just stood there and looked around with her eyes wide open. She had been in Shenzhen from more than a year, but never needed to come to this area. 'Is China really this developed?', she asked me, still distracted by the surroundings. That day, we visited some shopping malls and the big bookstore, and enjoyed the light show looking at the LED lights in the CBD from the bridge that connects the City Library with the Concert Hall. By the end of the day, Xiaofeng had developed a new image of the city and of her country. She saw the lasting contrast between the inner (*guannei* 关内) and outer city (*guanwai* 关外), with the different brands in the shopping malls, the architecture, and the people. At the same time, she became aware of what her country looks to the outside world and how rich and developed it is.

Social divisions can also be observed in the patterns of consumption of internal migrant workers. An interlocutor working in the service sector texted me from his new mobile phone inviting me over to see it. The day before, he had purchased the latest iPhone in one of the many non-official retailers around our neighbourhood. With great excitement he started boasting about the device, that it was the largest iPhone in the market, that it took fantastic photos, that it was extremely fast, etc. He questioned my Chinese-branded phone, arguing that iPhones have better cameras. He had just paid a fraction of the market price and completely disregarded the origin of the device. I took it in my hands, pretending to reveal its illicit nature, but I could not tell whether it was refurbished, fake, or stolen. That afternoon it was all about showing off the iPhone. We spent hours at a trendy tea house receiving friends and testing the device's capabilities. It was a great disappointment when the next day I receive a call from my interlocutor. 'The iPhone doesn't work anymore… I'm using my old phone again', he said. Sad, disappointed, and a couple of hundreds of yuan poorer, he told me that he was really looking forward to going back to his village with the device. In this way, the dead phone meant that he could

not stand out from his peers, that he was just another migrant worker, and more importantly, he felt as if he was not moving into a higher social position.

A similar sentiment can be observed in transactions involving cosmetic products. Many female migrant workers prefer to use foreign brands of cosmetic products, arguably for their quality, but also as a prestige goods (Bosco 2014). A common practice is to engage in *daigou* 代购, or 'buying on behalf of someone else'. The way this works is that person A contacts person B, who promotes herself (it is usually a woman) as a *daigou*[19] over WeChat and asks for the wanted goods. Person B travels to Hong Kong and acquires the products in the Duty-Free shops at the border or in any number of shops in the city offering tax exemptions. During the shopping spree, person B keeps in touch with person A over WeChat, having direct negotiation over brands, products, and quantities. Upon return to Shenzhen, person B delivers the products and gets paid for them and her services. One of my female interlocutors learned that I regularly visited Hong Kong and asked me whether I could bring her some products. It was not much, just one lipstick of a renowned brand from the US in 'auntie red' colour, a face lotion, and a serum from a South Korean producer. I offered the products to my interlocutor as a gift, which was a good excuse to learn more about this phenomenon. She heard that many international products sold in China are more expensive and of inferior quality, but not in Hong Kong. She was aware that these goods were luxurious and expensive, but she was ready to spend the money as an investment in herself, as a way to show that she was not a common rural migrant, but a young woman with knowledge about brands and a higher 'human quality' (*suzhi* 素质, Chapter 3).

The cost of living in Shenzhen is quite high, yet migrant workers still regard it as a good location for job hunting. Expectations of higher salaries, more opportunities,

[19] In this context, *daigou* 代购 refers to the act of bringing a small quantity of goods from Hong Kong to Shenzhen. What I describe here is what I observed in my interactions with low-end migrant workers. However, there is a larger industry with agencies that recruit mostly older women with active permits to cross the southern border. Each woman brings a suitcase of products just under the legal limits to avoid taxes. The products are then offered on WeChat or the e-commerce platform Taobao with the label *xianggang hanghuo* 香港行货 (genuine product from Hong Kong) or simply *ganghang* 港行 and a copy of the receipt is kept in order to show that they have been brought across the border.

and participation in an imagined modernity are among the most relevant pull factors. These expectations are, in most cases, hardly met. It is usual for migrants in the service sector to have more than one place of employment or to ask managers to sign them up for double shifts. Employers in general provide housing for a reasonable fee, a mode of the organisation of production and reproduction that Chris Smith and Ngai Pun have termed the 'dormitory labour regime' (2006). From the perspective of employers, this practice addresses two prevalent problems: it provides them with control (and power) over workers' shifts, and it deters workers from changing employment without any warning. For employees, it is a convenient way to remain physically unattached while one keeps job hopping.

The effects of this divided city oppose the interests of real estate speculators from the mainland and Hong Kong looking to re-develop former urban villages into upscale housing projects, office space, or shopping centres, and migrant households struggling to find affordable housing and being continuously pushed further away. On 6 May 2019, the *South China Morning Post* published a story about local government plans to adopt Singapore's housing policy and drop the Hong Kong model (P. Liu 2019). The Shenzhen city government has been concerned with the rising cost of living and its impact on driving away skilled workers. Therefore, it has considered providing a million subsidised homes by 2035 to lessen the economic burden on the working poor facing a privatised real estate market. Moves in this direction reveal the tensions between capital, the importance of migrant workers in Shenzhen's economy, and the state's effort to (partially) re-embed the market into social and ethical relations (Shaoguang Wang 2008).

Finally, another layer of division is determined by what Helen Siu called the 'politics of difference' (H. F. Siu 2016) in South China. Long-standing tensions between north and south China come to life in the migration hub of Shenzhen. Well known is the adage that 'the sky is high and the emperor is far away' (*tian gao huangdi yuan* 山高皇帝远), a reference to the problem of exercising domination in remote areas, but Shenzhen, though geographically distant, is not too far from Beijing's control. In social interactions, a claim to Chineseness based on a southern cultural identity prevails as a marker of difference. Shenzhen's tea and coffee shops become

crowded every day between 15:00 and 17:00. The practice of 'afternoon tea' (*xiawu cha* 下午茶), where varieties of Pu'er tea or Hong Kong-style milk tea are enjoyed with sweets and gossip on the side, is a precious social activity of migrants from southern China. Here too there are differences between the inner and outer city. Around the CBD or the hi-tech park in Nanshan, tea shops are, for the most part, large and impersonal. These are locations for meetings or even work. In Longhua, by contrast, I was astonished by the number of small family-run tea houses, where no more than four or five patrons shared the same table while the host prepared tea, the southern way, or *gongfu cha* 功夫茶. Treated by one of my interlocutors, I even became a VIP at one such place, with a cup bearing my name located in a display behind the host. 'It's not the same now' said Huang Chao, the host at the tea house. 'We used to live in Futian, but now it is too expensive. Our shop was demolished for re-development, and now there is a big shopping centre there. Many people prefer to go to Starbucks or The Alley;[20] there is no place for a small shop like mine anymore'. Places like Huang's are not like those big tea houses in Hong Kong or more affluent areas of Shenzhen, where people sit around large round tables and consume rounds of dim sum while sipping tea. At Huang's, tea, gossip, and banter is all one can get. Everybody knows each other, creating a sense of community in which I also felt integrated. Patrons enjoyed mocking my northern pronunciation and tried to teach me 'proper' tea etiquette. 'People in Beijing drink tea like savages—they put the leaves in a cup with hot water, and that's it. Here in the south, we are more civilised, we drink the *gongfu* way'. Huang showed me this rite, how water must be boiled, how the tea must be handled, how cautious one has to be in pouring the water into the warmed-up container, how important it is to discard that first pour, and how silky and intense the tea should taste on the second and third pour. Hakka people, like Mr Huang, usually shared the table with Han, Yi, Miao, and even a foreigner like me. Around this table one became family, something increasingly harder to find in the hectic metropolis of Shenzhen.

[20] A popular 'bubble tea' chain of teashops from Taiwan.

2.5. Conclusion

In 'Low Sky', the Xinjiang writer Ding Yan tells the story of a female migrant worker from Xinjiang who is fighting her way through the 'cycle of casual employment' in the Pearl River Delta. In a passage where the main character is struggling to comply with the work rhythm and the hierarchies in the shopfloor, she says: 'In this system, migrant workers have very little power. Inside the factories, workers do not exert their physical and intellectual abilities freely, nor felt joyous for their work, but felt that their bodies were torn down and their spirits devastated. Only after leaving the factory did the workers feel free' (Ding 2016, 52). Ding's insights reverberate among new generations of migrant workers who are not willing to submit to the labour regimes of their predecessors. High mobility, job-hopping, double shifts, and a continuous cycle of labour migration are pressing issues that foster a sense of emergency, anxiety, and permanent struggle. These feelings remain for the most part unacknowledged in the imaginary constructions or the ongoing re-development of Shenzhen. When mentioned, the experiences of migrant workers are portrayed as heroic sacrifices for the sake of the city, the people, or the country. What does this tell us about Shenzhen's economic prowess or about the idea of it being a model for socialism?

Historical narratives of Shenzhen have mystified its origins and situated the Party and the technological industries at the centre. The truth is that the city grew out of a multiplicity of villages with people on the border with Hong Kong. Shenzhen's development owes much to the abilities of its workers to make-do despite the transformations being pushed by the state and capital. Up to this day, the remaining urban villages act as proletarian microcosms of life, where migrants engage in labour, business, conspicuous and other forms of consumption, religiosity and other forms of sociality, etc. The formalisation and gentrification of the southern districts have pushed migrant workers into the northern industrial areas. Many of the activities that the local government thought were eradicated, like the motorcycle taxi-drivers, street food vendors, mobile hawkers selling counterfeits, etc., now flourish in Longhua, Longgang, or Pingshan. In delving through the following chapters, we must keep in mind that there is much more happening behind the high-rises and electronics markets than the mainstream discourse acknowledges.

As an essentially migrant city, Shenzhen remains as an attractive place for migrant workers. Beyond economic expectations, there is also a sense of open-mindedness and freedom that is hard to find in other places, especially in the more conservative rural areas. The opportunities here allow migrants to engage in practices of labour or consumption that embody an imagined modernity. When education is not plausible, these mechanisms are deployed to perform a higher *suzhi*.

My appreciation of Shenzhen as an unequal city does not deny its admirable historical trajectory nor its position as a global technological hub. Rather, it is a call to exercise critical caution when assessing of how 'development' and 'growth' have very real and tangible foundations, i.e. human lives. Therefore, accounts of Shenzhen should depart responsibly from notions of 'miracle' and restore the rightful position of internal migrant workers and their sweat and blood in building the infrastructure, populating the factories, and providing the services of this global city. In the specific context in which Shenzhen is labelled the model city of (reform) socialism, an even greater effort is necessary to understand the human dimension underlying a self-ascribed socialist political economy.

III. Class Relations and the Politics of *Suzhi* Discourse

3.1. Introduction

The language of class and class struggle was abandoned by the Communist Party of China after Mao's death. During the reform era, it was replaced by ideals of national unity and promises of economic development that have been central to sustaining the legitimacy of the Party. However, the disappearance of the language of class does not mean its material reality vanishes with it. Historically, class struggle precedes the emergence of the language of class (Kalb 2015, 16). In this sense, a different discourse is deployed to convey the type of social relations that are enabled by class.

This chapter focuses on the production of and limitations to solidarities among internal migrant workers in Shenzhen. It engages with the concept of class and *suzhi* discourse as relevant tropes that reveal the transformation in social relations among migrant workers during the process of marketisation. I pay special attention to *suzhi* 素质 as a civilising narrative deployed as an 'empty signifier', that is, a signifier to which meaning is ascribed by different subjects and whose use unveils aspects of domination. Among migrant workers, *suzhi* discourse is used as a marker of difference expressed in notions of 'civilisation' (*wenming* 文明). I start by charting the interconnections between class and *suzhi*, showing how the transition from the language of class to the language of *suzhi* has proceeded in tandem with the fragmentation of the Chinese working class and the expansion of the market economy. I highlight the existing mechanisms deployed by migrant workers in producing solidarity through collective identities representing different aspects of the *suzhi* discourse and its impact on the fragmentation of labour identities and the emergence of hierarchies among migrant workers.

3.2. The rise and fall of the language of class

Class is a contentious trope with a complex history of theoretical and political debates; however, it has been central to understanding the social and political transformations of 20th and 21st century China (Goodman 2014). For this research,

I have employed a relational and materialist approach. The intial consideration is that class is not a position observable in social reality, but a historical phenomenon (Thompson 1966) that has developed from the 'critical junctions' of place and space, local time and world time, production and reproduction, among local pasts, presents and futures and their interconnections in the rituals of everyday life (Kalb 2015, 19). In this sense, class is not about set positions and predetermined forms of consciousness and social practice, but about how common experiences articulate collective identities that form historical, situated, and antagonistic social interdependencies (Thompson 1966; Kalb 2015).

These social interdependencies are connected, more often than not, to the production and reproduction processes of the market economy. Erik Wright (2015) brings to the fore the tropes of 'exploitation' and 'domination' as central aspects of Marx's relational approach to class. In this sense, domination alludes to the ability to control the activities of others—e.g. prison guards controlling prisoners—while exploitation refers to the acquisition of economic benefits from the labouring activities of those who are dominated (Wright 2015, 9). For Wright, these relations are not restricted to causalities of privilege and exclusion, as for Max Weber: they also suppose historical, economic, and political developments that are contingent on the agency of the dominant/exploitative and dominated/exploited (Wright 2015, 45).

This materialist approach to class presents us with a nuanced and complex understanding of class as a pattern of relationships that do not determine the ways actual individuals inhabit them (Crehan 2002, 195). In order to comprehend the social practice of class and how it is *lived*, it is necessary to consider the various experiences of 'subalternity' as expressed in ethnic identities, gender differences, property relations, etc. According to Antonio Gramsci, the subaltern classes, understood as 'all those who are oppressed rather than oppressing, ruled rather than ruling' (Crehan 2016, 15), are by definition fragmented and need conscious socio-political action in order to unite (Gramsci 1971, 52). Therefore, subaltern subjects live class through their own experiences of subalternity, encompassing forms of domination and exploitation, as well as internalised subordination, such

as the feelings of shameful failure and personal inferiority that are connected to the 'hidden injuries of labour' (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Fraser 2003).

The concept of class arrived in China through translations in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Li Dazhao, a peasant from Hubei province who put himself through a modern education, became interested in socialist and sociological writings as a student of political economy in Japan between 1913 and 1916 (Meisner 1970). At that time, Chinese translations of some chapters of Marx and Engels' oeuvre were being circulated through radical journals. More attention was given to Marxist ideas after the triumph of the Bolshevik revolution. In 1918, Li, working as the librarian of the prestigious Peking University (PKU), started a reading group to discuss politics and theory. The 'Marxist Research Society' brought together students and intellectuals who started discussing Marx's *Das Kapital* and thinking about Chinese reality from a Marxist point of view (Spence 1990; Meisner 1970).

On 1 May 1919, a special issue dedicated to Marxism was published by *La Jeunesse*, a literary magazine edited by PKU's dean, Chen Duxiu. Between articles analysing Marx's concepts or criticising his methodology, Li Dazhao's contribution, entitled 'My Marxist Views' (*wode Makesi zhuyi guan* 我的马克思主义观), provided a stern defence of Marx's notions of class and class struggle by highlighting the importance of conscious human action in the making of history (Meisner 1970, 140–41). This conception was reflected in the entry on 'class' (*jieji* 阶级) in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (*shehui kexue dacidian* 社会科学大词典) published in 1929: 'The characteristic of a class is that its constituent members are united around common economic interests. Generally speaking, antagonistic class interests emerge from the struggle for the distribution of national wealth. In the persecution of class interests and growing confrontation, political antagonisms ensue. Therefore, class can be described as follows: class is a group that combines economic and political interests' (quoted in R. Li and R. Guo 2012).

In these inchoate years of the early socialist movement, Li was well aware of the limitations of Marx's class struggle in a largely rural country with a minor urban working class. Hence, he formulated the idea that China was a 'proletarian nation,'

as the Chinese people as a whole were exploited by international capitalism (Meisner 1970, 152). This definition needed to be reinforced, however, by implementing class analyses in the countryside. After the foundation of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921, big debates around the revolutionary class divided different strains of socialist thought. The strongest chasm was between the factions that advocated a working-class led revolution and those insisting on a proletarian-peasant alliance. As a representative of the latter, Mao Zedong opposed alliances with the national bourgeoisie, much of which was associated with the ruling party, the Guomindang. Mao believed in the revolutionary potential of the peasants, whose rebellious actions had toppled dynasties throughout the long imperial era.

The publication of the article 'Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society' in 1925 quickly became the charter of Maoist class analysis (*jieji fenxi* 阶级分析). Mao Zedong's goal was to 'make a general analysis of the economic status of the various classes in Chinese society and of their respective attitudes towards the revolution' (Mao 1967, 3). In his analysis, Mao recognised six classes: 1) the landlord class and the comprador class, composed of big landowners and local representatives of foreign capital; 2) the middle bourgeoisie, also called the national bourgeoisie; 3) the petty bourgeoisie, including owner-peasants, master handicraftsmen, and low-level intellectuals and professionals; 4) the semi-proletariat, composed of semi-owner peasants, poor peasants, small handicraftsmen, shop assistants, and pedlars; 5) the proletariat, essentially urban and industrial; and, 6) the lumpen-proletariat, which included peasants without land and handicraftsmen without work. After describing the composition and vested interests of each one of them, he concluded that the semi-proletariat and petty bourgeoisie, and maybe leftist sectors of the 'vacillating middle bourgeoisie', are possible allies of the industrial proletariat (Mao 1967, 9). The relevance of Mao's analysis of class was essentially political (Goodman 2014, 11), enabling him to assess potential class alliances depending on contingent primary contradictions (C. Lin 2015).

This type of class politics remained critical in the post-1949 period, as the goal of the new People's Republic was to protect the triumph of the people's revolutionary

movement against 'the imperialists and domestic reactionaries' (Mao 1977b, 5). However, class definitions were difficult to define; social class was a matter of political loyalties and had little to do with economic relations (C. Lin 2006, 76). Through constant social mobilisation, Mao sought to weed out 'class enemies', which at different times could mean remnants of the old exploitative and reactionary classes, anyone with connections in Taiwan, people with advanced degrees, and even ambitious party bureaucrats.

Mao's death in 1976 put an end to a period that Chinese reformists characterised as radical and chaotic. The jailing of the Gang of Four and the rise of Deng Xiaoping to core leader were symbolic turning points. During the third plenary session of the eleventh Central Committee of the CPC, held in December 1978, the Reform and Opening process was launched, starting with the modernisation of industry, agriculture, defence, and science and technology, and establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). The country experienced fast economic growth and a deep social transformation that motivated a reformulation of the language of class. In 1979, the government announced the elimination of discriminatory class labels given to the families of the former exploiting classes, as long as they could prove they were law-abiding citizens (Goodman 2014, 23).

The progressive dismantling of the Maoist-socialist state was accompanied by the privatisation of public institutions and the depoliticization of society, which separated the CPC from the new exploited subjects (H. Wang 2011). The language of class (*jieji* 阶级) and class struggle (*jieji fendou* 阶级奋斗) faded away, and the apolitical Weberian tropes of 'strata' (*jieceng* 阶层) and social stratification (*shehui fenceng* 社会分层) took its place (C. Lin 2015; Anagnost 2008).

In the last thirty years, class politics have been hollowed out (Pun and C. K. Chan 2008; Pun 2016; H. Wang 2011). Social scientists and policy-makers favour the language of social stratification, seen as an analytical category of objective and quantifiable differences emptied of any political potential (Y. Guo 2016; H. Wang 2016, 188). The social transformations linked to the expansion of marketisation

needed new categories of differentiation. In Chinese political discourse and social practice, the *suzhi* discourse took its place. This old concept, used to describe an inherent human quality, a predisposition manifested at birth that could be transformed through education and labour, became imbued with the ethics of the market and a code of worthiness for the development of individual subjects (H. Yan 2008, 136).

This ideological departure from the 'radical' past cannot conceal the material class configurations of the present (C. Lin 2015, 32). Even when the state proclaims ideological devices (Chapter Seven) such as living 'Core Socialist Values,' 'Chinese Dream,' 'social harmony,' or even *suzhi* education, subaltern social practices find new ways to give expression to inequalities.

3.3. Capitalist development and the politics of suzhi

For several decades, China specialists have been discussing the meaning of the concept of *suzhi* 素质. Usually translated as 'human quality', *suzhi*, a once rarely used word, has become a common trope in the political and social language of the reform era (D. Lin 2017). According to Tamara Jacka, 'it is both a common, taken-for-granted word and a 'difficult' term whose meaning and function vary and are much contested but which nevertheless seems to distil a set of values that are central and specific to particular historical and social conditions' (2009, 524). Most studies of *suzhi* hitherto have aimed to identify its meaning and practice as part of the particular context of China's 'neoliberalism'.

Yan Hairong (2003, 2008) and Ann Anagnost (2004) pioneered an approach that focused on the self-disciplining of bodies, which was central to the country's neoliberal governmentality and global capitalism. Yan builds on Marx's notion of value and the fetishism of the commodity to see *suzhi* as coding the value of human subjectivity, understood as a 'crucial force for Development' (2003, 511). From a poststructuralist standpoint, Anagnost states that, 'if bodies are read as expressions of value—as human capital—then we must approach these expressions as a kind of text and attend to the complex politics of representation that gives value its embodied forms' (2004, 192). She argues that *suzhi* discourse appears to be more

consistent in relation to the body of the rural migrant, which exemplifies *suzhi* in its apparent absence, and the body of the urban, middle-class only child, which is fetishized as a site for the accumulation of *suzhi* (Anagnost 2004, 190). Both anthropologists agree on the existence of a '*suzhi* gap' between 'low quality' and 'high quality' individuals, and the strategies necessary in each case to 'raise' their respective *suzhi*, for example, through nutritional supplements and education in the case of urban children, and through disciplining, training, and labour for migrant workers (Jacka 2009, 525; Anagnost 2004, 192; H. Yan 2003, 502).

These studies have provided valuable contributions to the understanding of *suzhi* in contemporary Chinese society. However, as noted by Andrew Kipnis (2007), their reliance on the Foucauldian notion of 'neoliberal governmentality' operates as a reifying narrative that dismisses longer historical trajectories and reduces all *suzhi* discourse to neoliberalism. Kipnis engages with this debate from two sides. First, he draws on Raymond Williams' 'keyword' approach in the understanding of *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006). Tracing its history, genealogy, and socio-political context, he concludes that there are three structuring circumstances determining the rise of the *suzhi* discourse in the post-Mao era: (1) the authoritarian linguistic environment of the PRC, where party members and media are expected to reproduce the key slogans of the central leaders; (2) the reform-era birth-planning and education policies, which shaped the discourse and even transformed the meaning of *suzhi*; and, (3) the link between *suzhi*, a concept arising from a state with long-standing cultural traditions of cultivation, and concerns at being left behind in the competitive society of the present (Kipnis 2006, 312–13).

Second, Kipnis questions the reduction of *suzhi* to the status of a pure manifestation of neoliberal ideology. He starts by rejecting the two predominant approaches to neoliberalism in anthropology: the Marxian ideological critique provided by Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) for attempting a holistic narrative; and the 'governmentality school', for being disingenuous (Kipnis 2007). His point is not to reject the idea of neoliberalism completely, but rather to be cautious in its use in the Chinese context, recognising the relevance of Maoism and post-Maoism in the shaping of the *suzhi* discourse. Kipnis' preference is for a narrow definition

of neoliberalism as 'those economic policies that are designed to increase competition in labour markets' (Kipnis 2007, 394), and proposes that the *suzhi* discourse and neoliberalism should be seen as belonging to the same general theoretical category: 'circulating forms of governmentality each with a range of associated techniques and practices, sometimes sincerely and sometimes disingenuously applied' (Kipnis 2007, 395).

Subsequent works addressing *suzhi* in contemporary Chinese society build on the findings of these scholars, either agreeing with Yan and Anagnost in seeing *suzhi* as completely subsumed by neoliberalism (W. Sun 2009; Sigley 2009; Stainback and Z. Tang 2019), or charting the different epistemologies that determine its historical development with an emphasis on current approaches to *suzhi* education (D. Lin 2017; Wu 2012; Woronov 2008; Tomba 2009). Other works connect *suzhi* with Bourdieu's idea of 'cultural capital' (X. Tian 2019), a contested interpretation for reducing *suzhi* to just one of its dimensions (L. Qian 2019).

My approach to the issue of *suzhi* draws on the notion of the 'empty signifier' (Laclau 2007), which accounts for the polysemy surrounding the concept. As a hegemonic discourse, *suzhi* conveys ideas and practices of internal self-regulation and acceptance of one's place in society. For the CPC, these are central tasks in order to 'civilise' the population and build a 'harmonious society' of 'shared prosperity' (D. Lin 2017). In this sense, *suzhi* reflects the larger ideas of civilisation and modernity that become part of what Gramsci called 'common sense.' In social discourse, however, s*uzhi* has been used as a device that conceals the reality of class. It separates those who act alike for having high or low *suzhi* from those who do not. *Suzhi* discourse is closely related to formal education and the pursuit of relevant social models, encompassing matters of knowledge, behaviour (politeness), diet and nutrition, and one's physical presentation (height, weight, clothing and make-up). It also discriminates against people based on their origins (rural vs. urban) and ethnicity, whereby the urban Han represents the standard of civilisation (D. Lin 2017). In this sense, the *suzhi* discourse frames the identities of the poor, who are relegated to manual labour, against the capacity of the affluent to cultivate themselves (Anagnost 2004). However, since workers can overcome their 'hidden

injuries of labour' and fight for their dignity (Sennett and Cobb 1972), so the *suzhi* discourse can be an instrument of empowerment, as it allows the 'inferior' to articulate new strategies of social improvement beyond established practices of cultivation and education (L. Qian 2019).

3.4. Networks and the production of solidarities in the city

For many migrants, life in Shenzhen is a permanent struggle for jobs. This pushes people like Jinxiu, a 24-year-old migrant from Jiangxi, to devise strategies to navigate the competitive labour market. Jinxiu came to Shenzhen following her brother Chaozhen, who was working in an electronics factory in the industrial district of Bao'an. Jinxiu and her brother grew up in the fields of Jiangxi province, not far from the famous town of Jingdezhen. Their parents and grandparents have toiled in the fields all their lives, and even though Jinxiu and her brother used to play at farming, they never engaged in proper farm labour. After Chaozhen went to Shenzhen, he started to send money to his parents, which was used to build a sturdier house and provide for Jinxiu's education. That is how Jinxiu managed to finish middle high school and decided to move in with her brother. She took a production line job, which she dreaded, in the same factory where Chaozhen was already a group leader. Most of the people in the factory came from northern Jiangxi, roughly the same area where Jinxiu and Chaozhen grew up. According to Jinxiu, they are part of an extensive interprovincial network that has existed for generations, through which information and resources are shared to assist its members. These networks of cooperation are articulated through traditional practices of *guanxi*, familiarity, and trust, where reciprocity within the network helps to keep it alive (Fang 2019). In this sense, Jinxiu added that she could ask for advice or money when needed, which is not expected to be given back to the individual, but rather to be made available to help others in the future.

Chaozhen had secured himself a junior management position in the factory. Without higher qualifications, he knew that he had reached the height of his possibilities at his current place of work. Yet, he was satisfied as he was earning a decent salary that allowed him to purchase an apartment, where he lives with his wife and child. 'My brother is very smart, he likes to learn about business and

management, I think his bosses appreciate his *suzhi*', said Jinxiu while we were discussing her own life projects. Unlike her brother, Jinxiu wants to leave the cycle of labour migration. Concerned about her parents' health, she considered going back home and becoming a teacher or starting her own online business. She had started taking English lessons in a language school nearby the factory: 'maybe I can work in a foreign company or become an English teacher in the village.' Her plan was already underway when we met. Jinxiu joined a foreign-owned manufacturer of party paraphernalia as an assistant in supplier relations. Jinxiu claimed that her success was due to her acquired language skills and the fact that several factory managers working with her current company were from northern Jiangxi.

Figure 7. Migrants in Shenzhen North Railway Station.

Jinxiu followed a thrifty lifestyle against what she deemed a 'meaningless superficial lifestyle'. Following the example of her brother, she felt compelled to invest her time and resources in improving her credentials. 'In my current job', she told me at our first meeting, 'I have to meet a lot of managers from different factories. They see that I am working for a foreign company, that I can speak English, and they ask me how much I make. Then they offer me more money to come and work for them. [...] They want to cut out the middleman and sell directly

to the USA. Maybe I can do that, but I don't think I will have the life I want working in a factory, even in a management position, you know? I can still go higher in this foreign company, maybe even move abroad. Then I would be able to start my own business, be my own boss in Jiangxi and travel to different places.' Jinxiu's plan is to *cultivate* her professional skills to improve her material conditions and pursue a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Jinxiu used the home-place network to boost her possibilities as a migrant worker in Shenzhen. In her account, to benefit from the network, one must have good *suzhi*, demonstrate devotion to work, be loyal, and reciprocate. Failing at that, one would be considered untrustworthy and be excluded from the network. In this sense, *suzhi* is related to a 'good' work ethic, reproducing hegemonic ideas of 'civilised citizens' and 'social harmony'. In a different dimension, her idea of *suzhi* manifests home place-related divisions that are inherent in the fragmented identity of the Han *minzu*, finding their relevance in Han-to-Han interactions (Joniak-Lüthi 2017). In Jinxiu's case, working among both Han and foreigners, the categories of distinction were the home-place when addressing her interactions with other Chinese nationals, or national when referring to matters between the China and the US. For example, she would resort to home-place differences to explain someone's behaviour, like the time a junior manager of a supplier started texting inappropriate messages to her: 'He's from Sichuan, you know?', hinting that his place of origin explained his 'low *suzhi*'. Similarly, when discussing her work at the foreign company, she told many stories stating the different ways in which Chinese and Americans performed their tasks or developed their lives. Further interconnections between *suzhi* discourse and *minzu* identities are explored in the following chapter.

Other indications of *suzhi* are provided by religious communities. I met Xiaofeng when she was distributing flyers promoting the recently opened fitness centre where she was working as a receptionist. She was short, slim, and young-looking; I found it difficult to believe that she was 26 years old. In that warm and humid Shenzhen afternoon, Xiaofeng was wearing a colourful summer dress that protected her arms and legs from the sun, red plimsolls, a black cap, a thick layer

of white make-up base, and intense red lipstick. It was an unusual look for her job, especially after I noticed that her colleagues wore sportswear. 'I am not a trainer like them, I am a host', she said while handing out the brochures. Fearing that I could get her into trouble, we exchanged contacts to arrange a visit to the establishment the following day.

Xiaofeng stood out among her colleagues for her lively personality, not being shy of starting a conversation with anyone. For several days we watched in the lobby of 'Fire Ants' Fitness', which later turned into strolls around the neighbourhood, lunch, and even visits to the underground Protestant church of which she was a member. Little by little, I learned more about Xiaofeng's world, about her life experiences and choices. 'It's *suzhi*, you know?' she said when I asked her about her outfits. 'I was very bad at school and had to work from a young age, but I don't want to be treated like a country bumpkin'.

Xiaofeng's father passed away when she was just five years old, leaving her to grow up alone with her mother in rural Guangxi. Without a main provider in the household, Xiaofeng had to help her mother in the fields, growing vegetables and raising the pigs. Things became worse after her mother was diagnosed with a serious illness that stopped her working. They decided to sublet the land and combine that income with selling lunches to local labourers. Xiaofeng took her mobile phone and started showing me pictures of the Zongzi (sticky rice dumplings filled with pork meat and bamboo shoots all covered in lotus leaves) her mother prepared for the last dragon boat festival. She showed me how she used to pack and delivered them across three villages, a job now taken over by her younger cousin. The income was inconsistent and barely enough for their subsistence. After several years of combining work and school, Xiaofeng decided to 'go out' and look for better paying jobs in the larger industrial cities of Guangdong province.

She arrived at an electronics factory in Dongguan, where she joined a former classmate, both seventeen years old at the time, in the production line. Xiaofeng spoke fondly of that time, of how she used to chat with her friends during work, of the small get-togethers in the dormitories and the overall sense of camaraderie. 'It

was like being at school. We had to work a lot, but I was always with friends, which made it fun'. Certainly, this first experience provided Xiaofeng with important lessons about how to navigate the cycle of labour migration. Part of the cycle is the constant movement between workplaces and cities. Xiaofeng, like her friends before her, eventually moved away from the factory into others, and finally to a completely different industry in Shenzhen.

Her motivation for seeking employment in Longhua district was connected to the opening of a branch of her Christian church. Already in rural Guangxi Xiaofeng had heard about God and the Bible, but it was in Dongguan that, persuaded by an older lady in one of the factories where she worked, she decided to join.

Xiaofeng had been a regular churchgoer for less than a year when we met. She had many questions about Christianity, but also some reassurances. Here Xiaofeng has found what Friederike Fleischer (2011) calls 'church-community'. With a radiant smile, she told me how people care about each other, how they learn and take part in each other's lives, and how everyone strives for the common good. In this underground church, which meets in an office building, all its members were migrant workers from different provinces, ethnicities, and occupations. The church-community operated as a network where people found friendships and even life partners, exchanged information about neighbourhoods, schools, and work units, had access to economic and material resources, and—maybe the most important aspect—members enjoyed the emotional and affective support of other fellow migrants.

For Xiaofeng, the church-community also offered the possibility of increasing her *suzhi*: 'I was not good at school, but I liked it because I could chat with my friends. I never thought of going to university… I am not smart, and we didn't have money. In the church I have learned so much, our brothers and sisters are very intelligent. Maybe the church is like a school. I have certainly made a better person of myself… in the church you don't need money to raise your *suzhi*'. In her words, Xiaofeng

conveys an idea of *suzhi* as a manifestation of moral behaviour connected with other general aspects of *suzhi* as 'corporeal politics' (Anagnost 2004).

Figure 8. Protestant church in a residential building.

Even in the industrial area of Longhua, Shenzhen is an expensive city. Xiaofeng shared a flat with three other colleagues in a run-down compound a few steps away from her workplace. Her boss owned a few flats which he rented out to his employees, following a similar logic to the 'dormitory labour regime' of the factories (Smith and Pun 2006). For Xiaofeng, this was a convenient way to save money on rent and transportation. Still, after paying for her share of the rent and setting aside some money for her monthly expenses, she could barely put together 500 CNY for her mother (around 60 EUR), and even that was becoming increasingly difficult. Through the church, Xiaofeng became aware of the materialism ailing Chinese society. She used to say that 'having money does not make one a good person.' For

her and her friends in the church-community, many of them with similar experiences, believing and pursuing a good life were much more important than money or material possessions. In this sense, their pious morality was the instrument for raising their *suzhi*.

One Sunday, as usual, I sat together with Xiaofeng for the collective lunch after the service. She was a very sociable, and I was a bearded foreigner with Chinese language skills, so it was not hard to start a conversation group with people of all ages. A small crowd gathered to meet newcomers, catch-up with friends, and more importantly, discuss the sermon. Brother Shao had talked about being good people and living a good life. He went over some biblical readings and told some stories that highlighted humility, devotion to god, and responsibility as moral traits that secured one's success in life. I asked Xiaofeng about her reactions to the sermon. She started by saying that she was not a good person yet because she had failed to study the Bible regularly. She felt compelled to overcome her main weakness—i.e. being a bad student—through more spiritual work. For Xiaofeng, the Christian community provided her with a positive space for 'spiritual development', in the sense that she could improve her life prospects through God instead of formal education. Most people in the church are very critical of the ambition for material consumption promoted in Chinese society: 'everyone wants to look like they have money, but it doesn't mean anything,' she said, to the agreement of those around us. Instead, she emphasised the moral aspect of *cultivation* (*xiuyang* 修养), demonstrating her *suzhi* through moral behaviour and a clean appearance. She insisted that joining the church had helped her find 'better jobs' through which she was able to move from the assembly line to a receptionist's desk. Also, she has lost her fear of leaving her job, as she counted on the support of the community.

Jinxiu and Xiaofeng represent two cases of solidarity in the city, one through home-place networks, the other through a grassroots organisation. While the language of class is not present in their narratives, these forms of solidarity are integral parts of how class is lived and of the complex expressions of subalternity. Jiangxi migrants, recognising their common origin, have built a network that strives for the collective improvement of material conditions among its members, in which those who have

made it, like Chaozhen, help those in need with resources and advice. In the case of the Christian church, located in the industrial Longhua district, 'low-end' migrants come together in the recognition of common moral and spiritual aspirations. In these cases, *suzhi* is deployed as a marker of class differences where subaltern subjects are aware of their low *suzhi* and manifest a desire to raise it. To this end, different strategies are pursued, some conforming with hegemonic ideas, like in the case of Chaozhen and Jinxiu, and some going in a different direction. Therefore, these narratives produce solidarities within the network while fragmenting collective class identities.

In stressing *suzhi*, imaginaries of a sense of existence (e.g. place of origin or religion) become social boundaries. That is to say, Jinxiu's aspirations for social mobility are consistent with the hegemonic narrative of material success among many migrants in the city and are opposed to Xiaofeng's anti-materialist and spiritual stance. What is circulated through these networks of solidarity is experienced as representative of larger social chasms. In this sense, *suzhi* is usually deployed as a negative, enhancing one's position vis-à-vis others. As a mode of distinction expressed in networks of solidarity, *suzhi* discourse articulates solidarities while simultaneously codifying exclusions that challenge the idea of an overarching working-class identity. However, as shown above, the expansion of marketisation in the PRC has gone in tandem with the consolidation of class differences (C. Lin 2015).

3.5. Emerging class contradictions and the limits to solidarity

Understanding the complexities of the *suzhi* discourse as an empty signifier around class is better illustrated by the interactions of different types of workers. White-collar workers usually had a positive image of peasants, linked to bucolic rural images, but a negative image of migrant workers. Professionals in the IT sector and white-collar workers in public enterprises connected the countryside to their family's places of origin and highlighted the virtues of the people: honesty, naivety, trust, dedication to work, etc. The narrative changed drastically when referring to rural migrant workers, highlighting their low level of education, low *suzhi*, bad hygiene, proclivity to criminality or other illicit activities, etc. Conversely, most

migrant workers saw themselves as rural subjects, many of them longing for life back in the village. In the cases of young migrants without offspring, they wanted to stay in the city and improve their lives through education. In their view, the urban middle classes had higher *suzhi*, and they connected cultivating *suzhi* with being deserving of a higher social status.

As shown in the previous chapter, the expansion of capital-intensive industries and the retreat of labour-intensive ones has worsened the prospects of migrant workers in Shenzhen. These migrants still make use of their networks to learn about possible jobs and the reputations of companies. In order to increase their income, many low-end migrants undertake additional shifts or secondary employment. According to a nineteen-year-old migrant working in the kitchen of a pizza parlour, 'if the city pushes all the migrant workers away, who will cook their food and bring it to their house?' While these migrants feel the need to rely more on their networks and even engage in protests, the city facilitates the conditions for professional workers to establish themselves in Shenzhen. However, low-end migrants and highly qualified workers are subject to the same type of exploitation, yet considerations of *suzhi* generate different responses.

In April 2019 a new repository was created in Microsoft's GitHub. The website is well known among the global IT community, as it provides a platform for development, collaboration, and the sharing of computer programs. In this case, the repository was not sharing any piece of software but denouncing practices of labour exploitation in China's big tech companies. The name of the repository (996.ICU) stands for a twelve-hour working schedule (9-to-9), six days a week, which is characteristic of companies like Huawei, Xiaomi, and Alibaba. The letters ICU, or Intensive Care Unit, refer to the high rate of deaths connected with overwork and the constant pressure put on programmers. The site denounced bad employers, informed workers about their rights, and provided information about how to migrate to jobs in countries with better conditions, like the United States, Canada, Germany, and Sweden.

Figure 9. Propaganda by the 996.ICU movement. The caption reads: 'Come on! Just another 11 hours to be off work'.

The GitHub repository quickly expanded its blacklist of bad employers and the testimonies provided by current employees. Soon enough, the Chinese and global press started paying attention to the denunciations. In China, the tech magnate Jack Ma called 996 a 'virtue', claiming that employees are like a family and that everyone should make an effort for the benefit of the company. His defence took the form of a corporate speech circulated from Alibaba's official WeChat account on 11 April 2019, which was forwarded to me by an interlocutor working in a gaming company with the comment 'can you believe this?' In his speech Jack Ma defended this labour regime as desirable because it was a demonstration of commitment: 'In this world each one of us strives for success, we all wish to have a good life, we all want to be respected… I ask everybody: if you do not invest in surpassing other people's dedication and time, how can you achieve your desired success?' (Y. Ma 2019).

Both management and employees highlighted individual responsibilities. In my conversations with professional tech workers, they saw little chance of success by openly protesting and distrusted their labour unions, which were associated with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Their preferred strategy was to leave the country: after all, moving to Europe or the United States would not be any more challenging than living in Shenzhen, where they were already far from their families. When the discussion moved to consider the situation for low-end migrant workers, they showed empathy but saw no connection between their respective claims. 'They are used to working longer hours,' 'farming is much worse,' and 'they have to work harder to have a better life because they are uneducated' were common phrases used in comparison. The disdain in their discourse relates to well-established ideas of 'civilisation' (*wenming* 文明) and 'transformational citizenship' (D. Lin 2017), where the more cultivated deserve better treatment than those with 'low *suzhi*', who are relegated to hard labour, constant disciplining, and shaming.

Low-end migrant workers recognised the common situation of exploitation but also noted some caveats. In our conversations there was a clear idea that low-end jobs were essentially 'demanding' (*xinku* 辛苦), and that those who have reached a higher social status should not be affected by the same sorts of hardship. It was their understanding (and desire) that upward mobility would be accompanied by lighter work, not the opposite. That is what they looked for when they reached out to their connections looking for advice and information about companies' reputations. For people like Xiangxiang, a migrant working in quality control, there was no point in moving elsewhere if working conditions were no better.

Born in 1990 in the eastern town of Chaozhou in Guangdong province, Xiangxiang has been working in Shenzhen for the last five years. Her dream was to go to university and become a professional, but her family was too poor, so she ended up as a migrant worker, first in Huizhou, then in Dongguan, and finally in Shenzhen. Xiangxiang has made use of her home-place network to move around: most of her family members are migrant workers in different places in Guangdong province. Before getting her position in quality control in a telecoms infrastructure company,

she worked as a production line worker, a waitress, and a shop clerk. She is particularly fond of her time in an electronics factory in Dongguan, where her salary and treatment were good. After a year, the company folded, and Xiangxiang decided to join a group of colleagues taking jobs with the mighty Foxconn corporation in Shenzhen. She thought that living in the big city and working in a bigger company would allow her to study on the side. Yet, life was never harder: she felt trapped, was frequently forced to do extra hours, faced sexual harassment, and did not have enough time to socialise, let alone being able to visit her ill mother in Chaozhou. After six months, and with the help of an uncle, she joined her current factory, where in three years she moved from production line to group leader and now quality control. She is still working extra hours, but the treatment is much better. She had grown frustrated with the cycle of labour migration, as good jobs were hard to find, and people with little education and 'low *suzhi*' like her do not have many chances, so she was considering returning home where she could be with her family, even if that meant earning much less.

When we discussed the 996.ICU problem, she said that the situation for low-end migrants was much worse. She had worked in 897 regimes (8-to-9, 7 days a week) and could not stand it. 996 was the standard in her current workplace, but at least once a month everyone had to work extra hours for very little compensation. Yet, Xiangxiang did not see any link between their respective struggles: 'Those 996 people only care about themselves. They think they can go to the United States or Germany, and that's it. Maybe they can do that. For us migrant workers, there is no option. Nobody cares about us. We have nothing other than family.' Xiangxiang saw a clear difference: the 996 people have the means to move abroad for better living and working conditions, a privilege of those with high *suzhi*.

The IT workers in Nanshan were not only geographically separated from the manual workers in the factories in the northern districts, they also felt isolated by their different roles in the productive chain. Assembly-line workers hardly ever interacted with programmers, designers, or marketing staff, either because they were in different parts of the complex or because they saw no common interest. On the one hand, assembly line workers are aware of their position at the bottom of the

system. On the other hand, employees with higher education fall prey to their own aspirations for social mobility, becoming highly individualistic. According to Xiaoyu, a 32-year-old female employee in a gaming company, 'in our company there are no people, only goals to achieve. Nobody cares if you drop dead from overwork: we have to keep the leader happy so we all get the bonus.' Xiaoyu came from an emerging middle-class family in Xi'An, where her parents run a humble eatery opened with the money they had saved as migrant workers in Beijing. Feeling trapped by living with her parents and having graduated from university, she moved to Shanghai, where she worked in the digital marketing department of a Franco-Chinese joint venture. She grew tired of a job that involved long hours, low pay, and very few benefits, so she moved to Shenzhen after landing an interview with a gaming company. After seven years in the city, she sees herself like a local, one more among the masses of migrants from all over China. 'People are more open-minded here, even more than in Shanghai. Nobody cares how I dress or what I do,' she claimed. Yet, being part of the IT sector, she felt directly affected by the country's censorship: 'there are a lot of things that get rejected, they are too sensitive, so we end up making the same games over and over again. It's so boring. Actually, in our office we never play our games but foreign ones, like Fortnite.'

Xiaoyu, like others in her industry, closely followed the publications in the GitHub repository. Planning to leave China to work in Germany, she had already started taking language lessons. She had never been abroad, but the testimonies shared in the repository made her optimistic. 'I feel like I'm wasting my time here, and I hate to waste my time. At work, sometimes I have nothing else to do, but I still have to stay late because our team leader said so. Then the programmers and designers have a really tough time, because they do all the work.' Xiaoyu's position is called '*youxi cihua* 游戏磁化', or 'game magnetiser'. As she explained it to me, she is in charge of creating chances that make the game addictive to the players. 'We are not making games, in my opinion, it's more like electronic drugs than games.' She is convinced that working conditions in Western countries are far better than in China, where not only is the state experienced as a heavily oppressive structure, society also pushes the individual into compliance. 'I don't want to marry; I don't want to have children… life is very difficult in this country for a woman like me.'

Her current company adopted the 996 regime in September 2018. Xiaoyu recalled that one day the CEO rang her manager saying that he felt stressed after talking to a friend in another gaming company where the workers did overtime every day. Since then, everyone had had to stay late, even if it meant playing video games or catching up with video streamers in TikTok or a similar application. Moreover, even though Chinese labour law regulates compensation for extra hours according to international norms, the standard practice has been to pay a nominal fee of 50 RMB in total, regardless of the number of extra hours worked, plus the taxi fare, which goes against existing regulations. Xiaoyu was aware of the contradictions involved. She told me how profitable the industry is, and how much money the managers and engineers can make in stock bonuses at the end of each project. 'The struggle for the bonus is what keeps everybody going', she explained; 'we all get something, but then we have no time to spend it.' In her position, the salary is comparatively low, the bonuses are smaller, and free time is scarce, with no chance to appeal. The union representatives are insignificant for employees, as they have been known to side with employers. These challenges stifle collective action and, just as suggested in the 996.ICU repository, they promote the use of individual strategies to cope with or escape from this regime of exploitation.

People like Xiaoyu have little to worry about in terms of *suzhi*. Their levels of education and career paths are widely seen as manifestations of high *suzhi*. Their aspirations aim to maintain or improve their material situation, either by reaching better positions in their industry or by leaving the country. These differences prevent people like Xiaoyu from finding commonalities with Xiangxiang's struggles. The latter's strategies to navigate the cycle of labour migration depend heavily on social networks and concerns about her *suzhi*, but Xiaoyu is convinced that her skills 'can be useful in the West. We can bring something interesting because we are Chinese, and now China is the biggest gaming market, but those workers in the factory… anyone can do that.' In this sense, the contradiction does not oppose labour to capital, but one group of exploited workers to another group, based on ideas of social stratification and differences in *suzhi*. In Xiaoyu's interpretation, *suzhi* discourse is a marker of class differences based on a social division of labour, where intellectual labour is qualitatively different from manual labour. In other

words, the disconnection between more and less educated groups of workers favours the increasing exploitation of subaltern subjects through despotic labour regimes.

In sum, the production of solidarities among migrant workers in the PRC is fragmented. Professional workers in the IT sector are subjected to intense exploitation by having to work long hours without full compensation. As a solution, IT workers have set up a website where they list good and bad employers and post detailed plans for migrating to North America or western and northern Europe. Separated by a '*suzhi* gap' between high and low, IT professionals see commonalities with the struggles of low-end migrant workers but are not willing to articulate them together with them. Therefore, the empty signifier of *suzhi* becomes a marker of perceived class differences, between those who are 'civilised' and those needing 'civilisation', which hinders the articulation of nodes of common struggle (Laclau 2007). This type of exclusion relates back to the urban-rural chasm and what Ann Anagnost (Anagnost 2004) called the 'corporeal politics of *suzhi*'. In the eyes of the educated employees working in IT companies located in the centre of Shenzhen, the migrant workers in the factories are not their equals, making the idea of uniting their respective grievances into a common struggle against the exploitation of capital hard to conceive.

3.6. Othering and the implicit hierarchies of labour

In the words of Auntie Zhao, a sanitation worker for a residential agency, 'nobody helps you when your *suzhi* is low—they think you can't be trusted.' She moved to Guangdong province more than thirteen years ago together with her husband, leaving their recently born child in the care of her mother in Hunan. Back then she took a job in a textile factory in Huizhou, and her husband worked in construction in Shenzhen. She felt grateful to land that job, which provided her with a new source of income for the family. A sense of loyalty pushed her to stay put for a decade while many friends were advising her to change factories. Eventually, the company went broke, and she was left without her last three months of salary nor any compensation. One of the managers encouraged her to go to another factory in Shenzhen, where she could join her husband and enjoy the opportunities of a much

bigger and more dynamic city. 'I was a good worker, so he helped me to come to Shenzhen—he knew he could trust me,' Auntie Zhao explained to me with great pride.

However, living costs were expensive, and the work was hard and poorly paid. So, when she went back home for the Spring Festival 2018 and a friend from the village told her about work cleaning residential buildings for an up-and-coming online apartment rental company, she was persuaded. As a 46-year-old rural migrant with a heavy Hunanese accent, employment opportunities were increasingly scarce. In this new job, she was not bound to any specific place or schedule. Over the years, Auntie Zhao has learned other facets of *suzhi,* such as knowing how to manage her resources. Eventually, some of the couple's savings were invested in a small *jiaozi* stall, where her husband makes and sells frozen and cooked dumplings. This had been a long-standing project of the couple: 'I hope our son does not have so many hardships (*chiku* 吃苦). It has not been easy for us; we cannot stop working,' she said. Auntie Zhao hopes that these efforts will help her teenaged boy attain a good level of education that will improve the situation for the whole family.

Auntie Zhao was adamant in establishing her comparatively higher level of 'cultivation' (*xiuyang* 修养). She claimed that her main source of information on how to improve one's *suzhi* was a WeChat account with recommendations about how to talk, how to dress, how to walk, how to save money, how to use foreign cutlery, etc. She grabbed her phone and showed me a few of the publications on the account, which combined brief written descriptions with video and additional images. On one occasion, Auntie Zhao declared that, although she has never been to a Western restaurant, she thought she would be able to eat with fork and knife. She disdained people who did not seek any self-improvement, like the Sanhe Gods (Chapter 6). In this sense, *suzhi* was deployed as a marker of individual difference within the reality of class, an individual strategy of material improvement that differs from the collective production of solidarities seen in the examples of church-communities (Xiaofeng) or home-place networks (Jinxiu and Xiangxiang).

For most of my interlocutors, calculations of status, the '*suzhi* gap', were an automatic reflex upon meeting a new person. In part this was due to social codes of respect and decorum linked to age and profession, as well as to the potential benefits that a new connection could bring into an individual's network (Fang 2018; M. M. Yang 1994). Outfit, accessories, skin colour, accent, and use of language were critical giveaways in forming a first impression of a person's *suzhi*. This was particularly relevant for migrants moving into the service sector, like Xiaofeng, where these characteristics were important criteria in landing a job. Over and over, I was told that the first thing to do when one joins a new workplace is to establish good connections (*gao hao guanxi* 搞好关系). Most connections were established through people from the same place of origin. For instance, a majority of my Han interlocutors claimed to have no or very few connections with *minzu* minorities. In the cases where they had, these were mostly Hakka or Cantonese Yue, which are considered a subgroup of the Han *minzu* (Gladney 2004). Many people claimed not to have had the chance to establish connections with other *minzu*. When pressed, they said they were open to forming closer ties to people from diverse origins, citing utilitarian interests as their reason (e.g. they come from places with good regional products, or they could assist them in finding an attractive spouse). Exploring this theme further, I identified different layers that justified the lack of interethnic networks: problems of language and communication, prejudice and distrust, and the lower utilitarian potential of the connection. These three dimensions are integrative of *suzhi* in one of its darkest dimensions.

Suzhi is a Han concept linked to the historical experience of the Han people. As the ethnic majority and self-recognised 'cultural core' of the Great Family of the Chinese Nation (Chapter 4), the Han monopolise the potential of high *suzhi* (D. Lin 2017). Along these lines, my interlocutors—after great trust had been built between us—would convey the idea that some ethnic groups cannot reach the same level of 'civilisation'. Religion, understood as an unscientific creed, was seen as the most contentious issue determining the glass ceiling that is *suzhi* for *minzu* minorities. I came across many anecdotes alleging a lack of morality, improper social behaviour, cognitive limitations, and even genetic inferiority as being the natural endowments of the allegedly more pious ethnic groups. In two cases where the issue of the re-

education camps in Xinjiang came up, Han migrant workers had no doubt that this was the best way to improve the quality (*suzhi*) of 'those people'. In other cases, my informants claimed ignorance about the situation in Xinjiang, yet would reveal that 'Xinjiang people' were more prone to immoral behaviour (including petty thievery, religious fanatism, and terrorism) than the Han because of *suzhi* differences. The implication was that, in order to achieve 'social harmony', these contentious groups should become more like the Han.

These distinctions are manifested in the possibilities of labour outcomes, which foster a hierarchy among migrant workers. In order to unveil the tensions between structural possibilities and internalised inequalities, I provided my acquaintances with a set of eleven cardboard cards, each one with a different trade determined by the frequency they appeared in previous interviews: factory work (*gongchang* 工厂), food and drink (*canyin* 餐饮), health (*jiankang* 健康), hospitality (*binguan* 宾馆), delivery (*kuaidi waimai* 快递外卖), beauty (*meirong* 美容), sports training (*tiyu yundong* 体育运动), sales (*lingshou* 零售), driving (*siji* 司机), construction (*jianzhuye* 建筑业), and farming (*nongye* 农业). Then I asked them to arrange the cards from the most desirable to the least desirable. After capturing the results with my camera, I asked them to rearrange them from their most likely next position to the least likely. Finally, we had a conversation about the discrepancies between the two lists and their opinions about the different jobs. In total, I collected 32 responses, 23 from Han migrants and nine from other ethnic groups, of whom five were Hakka and four Uyghur. Most of these interactions happened in restaurants, public squares, or labour markets. While I was able to maintain a conversation producing comments on the results with most participants, this was not the case for some Han migrants in the labour markets, who were under pressure to continue looking for employment.

The responses of the Han migrants stood out for their optimism, represented by the small degree of variation between most desirable and most likely outcomes. They were currently jobseekers (8), factory workers (7), construction workers (5), or restaurant servers (3), yet their preferences placed sales, food and drink, beauty, and sports training at the top of both lists. Some differences were observed among Han

migrants that were related to their place of origin: those from Sichuan (9) listed construction and food and drinks as they most likely outcomes, those from Guangxi (6) listed factory work, and those from Hunan (4) listed hospitality and food and drink. In conversation it was revealed that migrants over forty years of age found it hard to get jobs in Shenzhen, with many planning to return to their home villages. Younger workers did not have a strong attachment to village life and were more open to establishing themselves in a bigger city.

Conversely, ethnic minorities had optimistic aspirations but settled for mostly low-skill positions: food and drink, construction, driving, and delivery services. While Uyghur workers recognised the catering industry as the most likely outcome, Hakka workers listed driving. In follow-up conversations, the intentions and structural limitations behind the listings were made clear. Uyghur workers were not open to talking much about the matter, but they mentioned issues connected with language, the lack of a network, and discrimination, which kept them out of the more profitable positions. Hakka respondents were mostly affected by levels of education and access to relevant networks. In both cases, informants were pessimistic about outcomes in Shenzhen and saw other cities in the Pearl River Delta as more promising. The main reasons for their remaining in the metropolis was the stability of their current situations.

This method made visible the patterns of differentiation and exclusion that form the basis of the production of social hierarchies among internal migrant workers in Shenzhen. In this sense, *suzhi* discourse articulates distinctions of home-place origin and ethnicity which are seen as fitting better in different industries (e.g. Sichuan migrants in construction and Uyghurs in catering). The underlying premise is that Han migrant workers, as members of a subaltern class that is simultaneously the standard of civilised *minzu*, have a larger set of options to pursue a life strategy to improve of their material conditions of existence than many of their compatriots among the minorities.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the production of solidarities, exclusions, and hierarchies among migrant workers in Shenzhen. The disappearance of the language of class from the post-Maoist political lexicon does not mean that material class relations have vanished as well. In the process of marketisation, the restructuring of social relations created new social classes, such as migrant workers, that have yet to develop a language for themselves (Kalb 2015; Thompson 1966).

Avoiding the type of class militancy of the Maoist era, the political discourse of the last forty years has insisted on notions that highlight harmonious social relations. In terms of class, this has meant deploying the more apolitical Weberian approximation of class as a theory of social stratification (C. Lin 2015). However, in social practice, migrant workers have used different meanings of *suzhi* discourse to articulate social differences and the production of solidarities among them. As an empty signifier, *suzhi* can reflect different meanings whose deployment reveals glimpses of the relations of domination. In this sense, *suzhi* discourse operates at the base of collective forms of solidarity, as in communities that seek embeddedness through grassroots religious institutions or home-place networks. It can also serve as a marker of difference through individual aspirations for self-improvement that stifle the solidarities between different types of workers. Finally, it can also stand as a category of othering and exclusion through the differential criteria of 'civilisation' that are attributed to different social groups (D. Lin 2017). These uses of the *suzhi* discourse reveal the different relations of domination that affect subaltern subjects and their impact on how class is being *lived* (Crehan 2002).

Following Kipnis (2006) and Delia Lin (2017), *suzhi* cannot be reduced to an approach to education or the instrument of a reified idea of neoliberalism, but also its polysemy cannot be contained in a single definition. Instead of making sense of the word, by using the notion of the empty signifier, issues of power in the social relations that deploy it can be revealed. In this sense, the *suzhi* discourse fragments the collective identity of migrant workers into several smaller collective and individual identities, with limited interactions among them. Rather than challenge the hegemonic discourse, in some cases they reproduce it.

IV. Disparities among the Zhonghua Minzu

4.1. Introduction

One day, Xiaofeng texted me out of the blue: 'can you take my photo?' She knew about my experience as a photographer and had seen the equipment. 'Sure, what do you need?' I asked back, trying to see what I should prepare in advance for the job. 'I want to wear Hanfu and need someone that can take good pictures.' Xiaofeng wanted to join the growing trend in wearing traditional Han dresses, which has become a common practice among young Han in order to celebrate and show pride in their ethnicity. '*Minzu* minorities always wear the beautiful dresses in Guangxi. I feel Han people are so uninteresting now, but we have gorgeous costumes that people used to wear in the past.' While foreign readers might be familiar with the *qipao* or *cheongsam* used in historical films, like the one worn by Maggie Cheung in Wong Kar-wai's 2000 Hong Kong romantic drama 'In the Mood for Love', Hanfu lovers reject them, as they represent the fashion canon of the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Instead, these young enthusiasts celebrate a garment allegedly dating back to the 'euhemerized' Yellow Emperor (26th century BCE) (Kwang-chih Chang 1983), whose development was stopped under Mongol rule under the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and by the Manchu during the Qing era.

Despite the political rhetoric of the Communist Party of China, ethnic harmony is far from being a reality. Shenzhen, one of the first Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in the country, is a city of migrants that has received people from all over China with the goal of making money. Very quickly, Guangdong province became a hub for industry and labour, connecting China with global capitalism. Problems between managers and workers are frequent across the province, but much less attention is paid to the tensions among migrant workers themselves. With regard to the latter, one of the worst examples occurred in a toy factory in Shaoguan, Guangdong province, in 2009, when Han workers levelled accusations at their Uyghur colleagues. This led to a big quarrel that ended with several injured and two Uyghur workers dead.

This chapter focuses on the problems of ethnicity and ethnic discrimination among migrant workers in Shenzhen. It addresses the complexities of working as *minzu* in the PRC and shows how its political nature affects interethnic relations in the country, especially between the Han majority and the Uyghur. I then present several ethnographic cases that can be classified into three types of practice of the othering in Han–minority relations, paying special attention to the Uyghur as a targeted minority: othering for profit, the imaginaries, and the language of exclusion. I use Gerd Baumann's (2004) concept of 'grammars of identity/alterity' to analyse identity construction and the practices of exclusion between the Han majority and the Uyghur people.

4.2. Situating the *minzu* discourse in the PRC

The conception of *minzu* 民族, a word that combines the characters for 'people' (*min* 民) and 'descent' (*zu* 族), was introduced to China from Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century (Zang 2015, 11). Nowadays, the authoritative, unabridged and comprehensive *Cihai* dictionary defines a *minzu* as 'a group bound together by natural forces, namely, a common lineage, common life, common language, common religion or common customs.' Until recently, this word used to be translated as 'nation' or 'nationality', but in 2008, China's *Central University of Nationalities* (CUN) decided to change its English name to *Minzu University of China* (MUC), thus stressing the differences in the meaning of these concepts in English and Chinese. On this occasion, the university gave four reasons for the change: 1) in consideration of China's 'rise and strengthening', many institutions are adding Chinese elements to their names; 2) to motivate other national universities with the word *minzu* in their names to do the same; 3) the fact that the English concept of 'nationality' means 'ethnic groups forming part of a state,' which is seen as excluding the Han *minzu*; and, 4) the polysemy of the English notion of 'nationality' as 'state citizenship, state, nation, and tribe', where the idea of nation comes in third place. This change was intended to avoid translation issues inadvertently renaming the institution as a 'state citizenship university' or a 'tribal university' (Xinjingbao 2012).

While the MUC's statement sheds some light on how to translate *minzu*, it does not provide a clear answer to what it actually means. In practice the concept seems to depend on context, for instance, when deploying the concept as 'ethnic minorities' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) in relation to the 'Chinese nation' (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族). While the former builds on the idea of minority ethnic groups, the latter implies an overarching unity that mirrors Western ideas of the nation state. But that is not all: *minzu* is also the Chinese word for 'race', and *minzu zhuyi* 民族主义 has the double meaning of 'nationalism' and 'racism'. These complexities have been noted by some Chinese anthropologists, who have called for certain conceptual changes that have not yet been accepted by the country's academia or political figures. For instance, Ma Rong has called for the use of *zuqun* 族群, a concept already in use in Taiwanese and Hong Kong's anthropological literature, to refer to ethnic groups as a 'cultural' alternative over the more 'politicised' *minzu* (R. Ma 2017).

The development of the concept of *minzu* in the PRC is arguably as politicised as the concept of class, both being integral parts of Soviet orthodoxy and therefore fundamental to the origin and reproduction of the Marxist-Leninist state. After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the new government sought to establish a system of ethnic classification to ensure the representation of every group in the newly formed National People's Congress (NPC). At the time, the Stalinist definition of the '*natsiya'* or 'nationality' remained in place, although without promoting the establishment of republics but gives autonomy status to safeguard the national integrity (X. Fei 1992).

In this sense, the objective of the Ethnic Classification Project of the 1950s was to integrate the diversity of the *zhongghua minzu* into the new socialist system. The first enquiries presented the team of researchers with hundreds of claims, which would have been a significant political force in the National People's Congress, where one seat was reserved for each *minzu* minority (Mullaney 2012). By 1979, the final figure of 56 *minzu* was decided, not without complications, mainly due to the dynamic ethnic diversities among these *minzu* categories, including the Han (Gladney 2004).

4.3. Problematising the *minzu* discourse: Han and Uyghur

While the narrative of the harmony and unity of all ethnic groups has been central to the political discourse of the Communist Party of China, the idea of a Chinese Nation is Han-centric. In his famous 1988 Tanner Lecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Fei Xiaotong argued that the history of the development of the Chinese nation is one of 'plurality and unity', with the Han 'nationality' becoming, at an early stage, a 'nucleus of integration' (X. Fei 1988).

These subtleties in the discourse of ethnic unity have been critical in the emergence of conflicts with groups that have historically resisted attempts at their acculturation and Hanification, such as Tibetans and Uyghurs. Focusing on the latter, recent literature describes the increasing estrangement between the two largest ethnic groups in Xinjiang following the provincial government's implementation of 'counter-terrorism' policies (see Byler 2018; and the special issue edited by Smith Finley 2019). Most scholars who have investigated Han–Uyghur relations in Xinjiang agree that the Chinese state has accelerated its penetration or 'domestication' of the province since the 1990s, with attempts to secure its control over resources, communications, and people (Bellér-Hann et al. 2007, 3). Moreover, these efforts for the 'harmonisation' of Xinjiang were led by the idea of 'nation-making', which in practical terms meant expanding the use of standard Chinese in the educational system. Many Uyghur perceive this as a state effort to assimilate them to Han culture, thus putting their own language, which is predominant in many areas of Xinjiang province, in second place (Hann 2014).

In recent years, Chairman Xi Jinping has launched a project of economic and infrastructural expansion across Eurasia, Africa, and even Latin America, called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this project, Xinjiang plays a key role in ensuring connectivity across Central Asia, making its stability a political and economic priority. Sent to re-education centres, the Uyghur and Kazakh populations have been forced to learn standard Chinese (*putonghua* 普通话), renounce their Islamic religious practices, and repeat songs and mottos that celebrate the Communist Party and its core leader, among other things (Zenz 2019). The BRI not only runs through Xinjiang, 'it runs through Uyghur autonomy; it runs through Uyghur

grievances about Han high-handedness, Han repression, and Han enrichment at Uyghur expense; and it runs through religious and cultural opposition to both assimilation and marginalization' (Karl 2020b).

At the local level, there is an obvious tension stemming from the domination of representations by the Han and the establishment of ethnic markers by the Uyghur. The reorganisation of Uyghur identity due to cultural restrictions imposed by China's policies in Xinjiang has pushed them to pursue cultural identification with Turkic cultures in Central Asia and Turkey, to the detriment of China proper (Erkin 2009). This argument tallies with Lutgard Lams' (2016) analysis of the representation of the Uyghur in the CPC press. The official discourse on Uyghurs is twofold, describing Uyghur cultural identity as a touristic attraction, and depicting Uyghurs negatively as terrorists connected to foreign influences. These tensions also appeared in my interactions with migrant workers in Shenzhen, reflecting internal contradictions within the ideal of the 'great family of the Chinese nation', just mentioned, in a way that highlights either ethnic loyalties or submission to domination. However, while security approaches frequently insist on top-down repression and the imposition of cultural norms—starting from the classification of *minzu* groups—it is important to emphasise the agency of Uyghurs themselves in setting internal and external ethnic boundaries by emphasising real or imagined differences (Bellér-Hann 2002, 59). While this is not the focus of my research, keeping these aspects in mind is fundamental to understanding the agencies at work in the history of Han–Uyghur relations.

4.4. The practices of othering: Chinese Muslims

It was not difficult to talk about ethnicity in Shenzhen. In fact, most of my informants were quite open in wanting to let me know about the history and spirit of the Chinese nation. In most cases, this was a history of peaceful cooperation, liberation, and development that provided little room for explaining either past or present conflicts. Moreover, when the issue of Han–Uyghur relations came up, most of my informants had no more than a few sentences to say, echoing state propaganda. Still, my experience in exploring these issues was very revealing of the attitudes of Han and Hanified groups about the ideal of the Chinese nation. More

importantly, it illuminated dark spots in the imaginary of inter-ethnic relations, for instance, the hideous ways in which some Han refer to Uyghur Muslims. Above I have classified three levels of othering that emerged from the coding of my interactions with migrant workers in Shenzhen. These are presented through relevant and representative ethnographic cases and organised from the most 'inoffensive' to the most 'conflictual'.

4.4.1. Othering for profit

I met Jiaxin in October 2010. She came from Huaihua city in Hunan province. Her parents were migrant workers who had spent most of their adult lives working in Shanghai, her father in construction and her mother in restaurants. In 2005, her father purchased a taxi in Huaihua and moved back there, expecting his wife would follow. However, Jiaxin's mother stayed in Shanghai for one more year, eventually returning to Hunan in early 2007. Jiaxin grew up with her paternal grandparents, who lived off the remittances her parents sent them. Eventually, she moved to Shanghai when she was twelve years old, where she continued her studies in a school for migrant children located on the outskirts of the city.

At 17:00 one evening I picked her up from the Longhua metro station. It was getting dark already, and the weak warm breeze made the high levels of humidity tolerable. Jiaxin came out of the turnstile with a whole load of workers returning home. She was glad to see me, as she had had to travel all the way from Shenzhen Bay, where she works as a waitress in a restaurant. From the station, we walked around the block looking for the restaurant I had chosen. Previously we had eaten Hunanese food, which was Jiaxin's preference, so we agreed that on this occasion the decision was mine: Xinjiang food. I had a double motivation for this: on the one hand, to enjoy some of my favourite dishes, and on the other, the hope that the location would enable Jiaxin to talk more about ethnicity in general and the Uyghur in particular.

Lianxiang Xiyu is one of the few Xinjiang food restaurants in Longhua that do more than barbequed skewers (*kewap* in Uyghur or *chuan* 串 in Chinese). They advertised their specialties at the entrance in big lit-up Chinese characters:

barbeque, big chicken plate (*dapanji* 大盘鸡), and *tandoor kewap* (*nangkengrou* 馕坑肉). Right next to it, bright red neon lights read 'food from northern and southern Xinjiang', 'we are looking forward to seeing you in Xinjiang', 'Xinjiang people', and 'ingredients brought from Xinjiang'. All these messages were in Chinese characters and, unlike in many other Uyghur-run Xinjiang restaurants, there were no traces of Arabic calligraphy. The absence of the word *halal* in either Arabic or Chinese struck me as highly unusual.

Inside, the décor of the establishment was a congeries of arabesque architecture, black-ink depictions of life and landscapes of the 'Western frontier', cute stuffed sheep made of wool, and colourful drawings of cartoon-like representations of Xinjiang ethnic minorities in dancing positions. As it was still early for supper, the host managed to find us a table. We followed her from the entrance almost all the way to the back. A long open kitchen took up most of the wall to our right, while seats surrounded by a wooden structure resembling what one would find in a yurt were on our left. Videos of people eating in Urumqi's Grand Bazaar were being streamed on large television screens located all around the restaurant. The place felt modern and pretentious, and it used orientalist ethnic symbols as decoration without any concern for their origin. In fact the restaurant itself, which claimed to be a Xinjiang food establishment employing 'Xinjiang people', had only one worker who was not Han: Ma Rushi, the noodle maker, a Hui migrant from Gansu.

The menu offered a comprehensive selection of regional dishes: big plate of chicken, different cuts of lamb, a variety of nan bread, hand-pulled noodles, filled rolls, etc. All dishes were named and described in Chinese only; no other languages were available. Jiaxin ordered sautéed vegetables, some yoghurt and fruit, and a soup. I added *tandoor kewap* and the delicious *nangbaorou* 馕包肉, stewed beef with vegetables served on nan bread. To my surprise, the restaurant had two types of Xinjiang-brewed beer on offer: Wusu 乌苏 (a pale lager) and Sinkiang (a stout). Both brands are brewed by the Xinjiang Wusu Brewery Company, which, until 2015, had been a joint venture between the Carlsberg (China) Group and Xinjiang Hops Co. Ltd. That year, Carlsberg acquired complete ownership of Wusu and a 30% share

of Xinjiang Hops. The food was very tasty, but overpriced, as it was neither generous in quantity nor spectacular compared to other, less pretentious places.

'Are there any Xinjiang people here, as advertised?' I asked the waiter. 'The chef is from Xinjiang', she says. 'Uyghur from Xinjiang?', I asked; 'No, Han from Xinjiang'. In the People's Republic of China, the concept of *xinjiangren* 新疆人 (Xinjiang people) can be confusing. Taken literally, it is a demonym of those born or with legal residence in Xinjiang province, and is generally linked to the Uyghur. However, it is regularly deployed as a politically correct term that avoids ethnic differentiation in discourse but not in practice, as the imaginary of the *xinjiangren* changes according to whether the Han or the Uyghur are being referred to.

Since the 1980s, the Chinese central government has relaxed restrictions on religious expression and promoted minority languages, while simultaneously fostering efforts to 'dilute' minority culture (Dwyer 2005, 29). Arienne Dwyer (2005) argues that the country was subjected to a monist linguistic policy that overtly pursued the standardisation of language for the economic benefit of its citizens, while covertly marching towards a monocultural and monolinguistic transformation of its peripheries. In this context, phrases like *zhongguoren* 中国人 (person of China) or *xinjiangren* 新疆人 ('new territorian' or 'person of Xinjiang') were used as carefully curated, overarching notions stressing homogeneity and concealing ethnic differences (Dwyer 2005, 30).

'They have all left', said Ma, the noodle maker. He turned his face down with a simper on his lips and his eyebrows raised in concern. 'I don't dare to say anything; life is not easy for them,' he added, ending our interaction. This Xinjiang food restaurant was very symptomatic of what was happening to the Uyghur population in the country: suddenly, they have disappeared from the urban landscape. Not only the people, but also their language was being removed from public sight. Ma did not feel like talking any more about the issue, so after exchanging our WeChat contacts, I went back to sit with Jiaxin.

The conversation was lively and relaxed. We caught up with each other's week and then jumped from topic to topic. Jiaxin had arrived in Shenzhen less than a year ago, looking to restart her life after a bad break-up. In Shanghai, she had worked as a shop clerk for designer brands she could never afford. 'I could get a fake LV bag or wallet, but that is very low class (*tai tu le* 太土了). It doesn't mean anything if it's not original,' she said with pride. Although I have heard the expression '*tu*' as an insult on many occasions, this time it prompted me to reflect on its meaning. The noun *tu* means soil or land, and it was used by the anthropologist Fei Xiaotong in the title of his seminal work '*Xiangtu Zhongguo* 乡土中国'[21] to denote the rural foundations of Chinese society. As part of China's Great Transformation, especially when capitalist class structures started to emerge, *tu* was used as a derogatory term for the unrefined and unenlightened behaviour of rural migrants. I clearly remember my early days learning Chinese, when one of my friends taught me my first 'insult': *tubaozi* 土包子. Literally, it refers to humble and good-hearted people from the countryside, but nowadays it almost exclusively means 'country bumpkin'. In a similar tone, the word *tuhao* 土豪, which originally meant 'local tyrant', came to represent the unrefined taste and behaviour of the nouveaux riches. As a final anecdote, a large part of the story of the 'peaceful liberation' of Xinjiang by communist forces during the civil war is the fighting against bandits, *tufei* 土匪. The same word is used today with reference to the agents of Urban Management and Law Enforcement (*chengguan* 城管), famous for their thuggish tactics.

Jiaxin was telling me about her life in Shenzhen and how well she has been feeling in the city. She is very critical of the way Chinese society puts pressure on people and how gossiping can play a very bad role in one's well-being. She has been looking for a partner through dating apps but claims she does not get along with Chinese men, as they act mostly in accordance with the social pressures she is seeking to reject. Suddenly, the blasting sound of a voice announced—in Chinese—that a show was about to commence: 'They come from Xinjiang and will perform Xinjiang dances for the ladies and gentlemen.' The lights of the restaurant were dimmed, and a group of dancers in Uyghur-inspired garments crossed the room and reached

[21] Translated in English as 'From the Soil' (X. Fei 2018).

a stage located by the open kitchen (Figure 10). The troupe was composed of six dancers, three men and three women, all of them very tall and certainly not Uyghur. Their dances were a perplexing blend of orientalist moves and K-pop choreographies. Moreover, the opening song was an oriental remix of Ricky Martin's 'Livin' la Vida Loca', and none of the other songs were in the Uyghur language. For the closing act, they grabbed people from the audience to dance with the troupe to an excessively upbeat version of Tarkan's 'Şımarık', known in Chinese as 'the Indian kiss song'.

Figure 10. Dance show at a Xinjiang food restaurant.

The visual elements of the decoration in this restaurant are commonplace in representations of the Uyghur, showing an orientalist gaze that reduces their existence to food, dancing, arabesque architecture, and the Islamic religion (and its connection with radicalisation). This vignette illustrates what I experienced during hundreds of visits to Xinjiang food restaurants, a symptom of a much more

complex structure of ethnic discrimination that situates the Han as a modernising force, among other things managing attractive, seemingly clean and profitable restaurants that use the imaginaries of ethnic minorities—and not only Uyghur, Kazakh, or Hui—as a marketing strategy. Hence, Han Xinjiang food restaurants are pretentious in their décor, offer pricier food and even entertainment, while disregarding religious iconography and *halal* food practices. This type of appropriation seeks to depict Xinjiangness in a reified way that opposes Han modernity to Uyghur backwardness and secular civilisation to religious barbarism.

4.4.2. Imaginaries of exclusion

Probably the most common way of orientalising the Uyghur other is by means of stereotypes and prejudice. Chen Weili, a worker in an antenna factory serving telecommunications infrastructure, has a complicated status in Shenzhen, as he was technically born in the city, but to migrant parents. He grew up on the city margins, always being carried in his mother's three-wheel truck while she went around doing odd jobs. Weili's father was a crane-operator and, according to Weili, a good reader and accomplished independent poet. After his parents retired they returned to the countryside, but Weili kept working and living in Shenzhen, hoping to start his own business and marry a beautiful woman at some point. I was always struck by Weili's knowledge and curiosity. He was a big fan of computers, and through reading and experimentation had developed a talent for fixing electronics and even doing some basic programming.

One day, after a long walk in Luohu district, where we wrongly thought it would be easy to find a traditional seal-maker, we decided to sit down and enjoy some delicious bubble tea. Weili was curious to know about the 'perspective' of my research. This was a staple question when I needed to introduce my project to potential interviewees, and their expectations revolved around situating my discourse as being either for or against China. As usual, I attempted to deflect the inquiry by saying how much I loved the country and its people and how China is no different to any other nation on earth, with its lights and shadows. He seemed satisfied and moved on to discuss the bias of Western media in its coverage of China, which usually targeted his country for being evil while governments like that of the

United States do horrible things across the globe. Weili is not a blind nationalist, nor a gullible person; in fact, he is a regular user of VPN software to access news from sources in Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, he has grown concerned with the reputation of his country abroad, a regular theme in China's state-censored media, and with how these criticisms affect him as a Chinese citizen.

Weili was aware that many aspects of life in China can be criticised; however, he questioned why foreign media had no positive reporting about, for instance, the country's achievement in alleviating poverty. He thought that there was a bias in focusing on the negative aspects, such as the workers' protests in Shenzhen, industrial espionage, or the re-education camps in Xinjiang. At that point in the year, news about the 'counterterrorism campaign' in the north-western province was already public, with reports in the national media defending the government's efforts to achieve peace in 'the main battlefield of China's antiterrorism and de-radicalisation struggle' (Xinhua News Agency 2019). Weili knew about the situation and, after a quick search on his phone, told me with conviction that 'these are not "concentration camps" but training centres to control terrorism and extremist behaviour and ideas.'

In spite of his scepticism regarding Chinese politics, Weili's views about the Uyghur were the product of long-standing stereotypes intertwined with the discourses of anti-terrorism and de-radicalisation. In this way, he was able to recall experiences of inter-ethnic interactions that stretched back to the Shaoguan incident of 2009.

> 'I was in a migrant school in Dongguan that year. I had Uyghur classmates, and they were all very rude to us, Han people. In fact, I think many minority *minzu* don't like us, like the Uyghur and the Manchu. The Manchu could be because of the Qing dynasty. They used to be very important, and now they are very poor, like Puyi.[22] About the Uyghurs… maybe religion, I don't know. They don't have a good reputation. They are very impolite. When I was at school I used to go to a Muslim eatery because I really like the food… polo (*shouzhuafan* 手抓饭), big chicken plate

[22] Also known as Xuantong, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty. His reign lasted from 1908 to 1912, when the emperor abdicated in favour of the foundation of the Republic of China (1911-1949, and thereafter on the island of Taiwan). During the Japanese occupation of the north-eastern provinces of China, he served as Emperor of Manchuria from 1934 to 1945.

(*dapanji* 大盘鸡)! I was always very nice to them, and once I asked a kid my age working there how he was, and he just said 'Han!' and left'.

The Shaoguan incident was claearly a turning point in Han–Uyghur relations in Guangdong. What we learn from Weili's experience is that there was an evident shift in attitudes that challenged the ideas of ethnic unity and harmony.

> I'm sure it wasn't a language issue. They just don't like us. You know, many people think Uyghurs are thieves. I have heard of many cases when friends got something stolen, and then they found out the perpetrator was a Uyghur person. This has not happened to me, but I know it's common. At work I had Uyghur colleagues, and I think they were good people. Maybe only those with low levels of education would do bad things to society, and then it's OK to put them in a 're-education centre'. I hope they only take guilty people and that the government educates everybody in the countryside better.

While Weili has had personal interactions with Uyghur people, he has not befriended any of them. Even at work, he would claim, there is a 'wall' between the Han and the Uyghur which is hardly ever crossed. He and others attribute this chasm to linguistic and cultural differences that are mutually incomprehensible. For instance, culinary practices like not drinking alcohol or avoiding pork would repeatedly be given as reasons to avoid eating together. Moreover, I frequently heard the word 'Islamic people' instead of 'Uyghur' or even 'Xinjiang person', an illustration of how the Uyghur population have increasingly been judged by their piety over any other category, thus fuelling notions of terrorism and 'chaos'.

4.4.3. The language of exclusion

In more intimate conversations with my interlocutors, the existence of a whole world of language discriminating against and excluding the Muslim population in general and the Uyghur in particular started to become more evident. The first person to reveal this to me was Luo Shun, the server in a teahouse I used to visit regularly, when she told me about her experiences with 'the Islam people'. She had been overhearing my conversation with Mr Wang, a 38-years-old Hakka entrepreneur who ran a small technology company in Shenzhen. Mr Wang had allowed me full access to his small factory, where I was able to interact freely with the workers in the assembly line. Mr Wang was very happy to have a foreigner as a

friend and regularly used to invite me for dinner or tea. He told me that southerners represented the most refined aspects of Chinese culture, as unlike the northerners they preferred tea to alcohol. His favourite tea shop was located right under his building, in Longhua Renmin Road. After introducing me to the ritual of tea-drinking, Mr Wang purchased a 'VIP teacup' of my choosing, which would later be placed on a stand with my name next to the tea server. Mr Wang enjoyed going to the movies and on many occasions would suddenly announce his departure and run off to the cinema, leaving me free to chat with the servers and other customers.

The teahouse was a very lively place. This was not a family-run teahouse, of the sort that abounds in the area, but part of a chain. It was located in a shopping centre in the middle of a residential area of the otherwise industrial Longhua district. It was always busy with local people from all walks of life, from entrepreneurs like Mr Wang to migrant workers from the construction site across the street. It was a fascinating place to catch up with the latest gossip and engage in lively debates about local politics, the economy, world affairs, and football. The place had two tables, a smaller one that sat up to five patrons, and a larger one that could accommodate seven. If one were by oneself, it was common to chat with the server; when there were other patrons, collective interaction was expected. The place did not charge for free pours, and one could even ask for different types of tea to be served. However, regular clients would purchase tea leaves or discs of compressed tea—Mr Wang explained to me that green tea leaves where appropriate during the day, while a compressed *pu'er* tea was better during evening—which would be kept in a locker in the customer's name behind the server. In this way, patrons could invite others to try their selection of tea and exchange comments on it.

Luo Shun is a shy Zhuang migrant worker from Guangxi province. She is nineteen years old and has lived in Shenzhen for a little over a year, working at the teahouse being her first job in the city. She was very curious about my research, as she was aware of the more privileged position of the Han in relation to the ethnic minorities. 'I know that Han people don't like the minority *minzu* being allowed extra points in the university entrance examination, but overall the opportunities for us are much less. Education in Guangxi is very bad: I didn't finish school and I don't have

any friends that went to university,' she told me during one of our first conversations. Shun is not allowed to use her phone during working hours, but more than once I found her discreetly watching videos on the short-video app *kuaishou* 快手 or following a thread on an online forum.

On this occasion, Mr Wang and I were chatting about the Uyghur. He was telling me how several Xinjiang restaurants had closed and how the Uyghur population had suddenly disappeared. 'They were called back for re-education, I think, but I can't say more, I don't know,' he told me, bringing the topic to an end. After he left for the cinema, Shun and I were left alone in the shop. She looked at me and said: 'They called them "little greens" (*lülü* 绿绿)[23] online, you know?' What was until then unknown to me suddenly started to appear everywhere on the internet. It did not take long before I discovered WeChat groups dedicated to discussing Han supremacy and linking the Uyghur with Islamic radicalisation. I quickly gathered a collection of rather offensive anti-Islamic 'stickers' used on WeChat to mock the words *halal* and depict cartoon-looking characters fashioning a beard and a *huamao* 花帽 (*taqiyah*/*doppa*)[24] in a threatening attitude—whether to explode or shoot with a machine gun—and a caption in Chinese characters condemning something for not being *halal* (*qingzhen* 清真). There is a cruel irony in the mockery of *qingzhen* in Chinese language discourse, as it is linked with the erasure of the Arabic word *halal* from restaurants across the country.

Shun's characterisation of 'affirmative action' policies as a contentious issue in Han–minority relations was confirmed in my conversations with Han nationals. Moreover, her contrast between the existence of these policies on paper and actual ethnic bias in the labour market was very revealing, as it helped me make sense of the hierarchies of labour I discussed in the previous chapter. It became evident that Han people considered ethnicity in a qualitatively different way because their encounters in society—at least in Shenzhen—are not mediated by ethnicity but by other factors, such as place of origin, language, or religion. Conversely, Zhuang, Yi,

[23] The colour green is usually connected to Islam.
[24] In this case, the same Chinese word is used in reference to a rounded skullcap usually worn by Hui men (*taqiyah*) or one that is squared at the top used by Uyghur men (*doppa*).

Uyghur, Hui, and others are categorised initially by their *minzu*, which is charged with notions of 'civilisation' (and *suzhi*), implying levels of ethnic assimilation, political loyalty, and even economic productivity.

On another occasion, Shun told me something I heard many times during my fieldwork: 'I don't like the "Islam people", but I support their freedom to practice their religion, in a good way.' A similar opinion was expressed by Xiaofeng and her Hanfu friends. However, on many occasions, Han interlocutors would express contempt for all religions, which they considered irrational and unscientific cults. One of Mr Wang's employees on the assembly line told me that 'not all Muslims are the same, but the trend of those in Xinjiang is getting worse. In Xi'an the situation is different, and there are a lot of Muslims there, but they are more like us, Han people. In fact, they are very similar to me.' Zhang Chao is from Shaanxi province, and before coming to Shenzhen he used to work in the provincial capital of Xi'an. He expressed something to which many other interlocutors also referred, namely that there is a drastic perceived difference between Hui and Uyghur Muslims: the former are standard-Chinese speaking Muslims with physical features similar to the Han, while the latter share language and looks with the Turkic peoples of central Asia. This issue has most recently been noted by David Brophy (2019), who presents the difference between 'good', sinophone Hui Muslims, who are not being forced into 're-education' camps in Xinjiang, and 'bad' Uyghur, who are being targeted by the 'de-radicalisation' campaign not so much for their religion, but their ethnicity.

4.5. Identity/alterity in inter-ethnic relations among migrant workers

In addition to Han perceptions of the Uyghur, which became evident quite early in my stay in Shenzhen, I was interested in how definitions of identity between Han and Uyghur migrant workers fluctuate in discourse and practice, how they relate to the overarching narratives of ethnic unity and class solidarity, and most urgently, how they perceive recent violent outbursts and their political responses. These concerns led me to Gerd Baumann's three categories of 'grammars of identity/alterity' (2004). Baumann proposes three 'grammars' based on three

distinctive approaches to identity/alterity. The grammar of orientalism in Edward Said's concept presents a dynamic of reverse mirror-imaging where selfing and othering condition each other. The grammar of segmentation takes Evans-Pritchard's work on the Nuer as a basis for a logic of fission or enmity at a lower level of segmentation, which is superseded by a logic of the fusion or neutralization of conflict at a higher level of segmentation. Finally, the grammar of encompassment uses Louis Dumont's description of the Indian system of caste to characterise a dynamic of selfing by appropriation or co-opting selected kinds of otherness. This type is a form of segmentation in which, instead of being fused or neutralised at a higher level, the subordinate category is subsumed into the dominant one (Baumann 2004, 21–26). Baumann also envisioned the possibility of anti-grammars, which break the duality of identity/alterity by exterminating the other, as in genocides (Baumann 2004, 42).

The main grammars in Han–Uyghur interactions are the first and last, the grammars of orientalising and encompassment. The former is clearly evidenced in the case of othering for profit, where the orientalist gaze of the Han reproduces an imaginary of the Uyghur that combines culinary practices with dancing and the beauty of the landscape and its people. The Uyghur other possesses aspects that the Han desires: eroticised beauty and dances, interesting architecture, delicious food, etc., and justifies their 'civilising mission' with reference to notions of 'backwardness'. While these intentions are not explicitly present in the scholarly and political discourse about ethnic unity, they were expressed by my interlocutors. Ideas about the necessity of re-education centres to develop a 'modern mentality' among the Uyghur, direct connections between 'backwardness' and the propensity to engage in terrorism, and the naivety of poor and uneducated Uyghur that made them easy prey to 'foreign forces' were repeated over and over.

The grammar of encompassment is manifested in the way Uyghur ethnicity is subsumed into the overarching narrative of the 'Great Family of the Chinese Nation'. The political construction of the *minzu* discourse is heavily Han-centric, mainly because the mainstream categories and historiographical narratives that shape this 'imagined community' (B. Anderson 2016) are mediated by the Han's

language and historical experience. Furthermore, the political imbalance of power is experienced ethnically. The CPC's main leaders[25] have historically been Han, and effective political authority in Xinjiang is held by the Secretary of the provincial Communist Party—currently, Chen Quanguo, an ethnic Han—not the Uyghur Chairman of the province, since 2015 Shohrat Zakir. These are well-known facts, even to migrant workers at the other side of the country. To put it in the words of Mr Ma, the noodle-maker at *Lianxiang Xiyu:* 'The Party always has the last word.'

A good example of the overlapping of both grammars is observable in my experience with Xiaofeng. When the day came, she brought some of her Hanfu friends to the photoshoot. One after the other, they took it in turns to pose, giving me directions about angles and perspectives that replicated images from social media, always looking nostalgic and performing graceful hand gestures. Their faces were covered in a thick layer of white-coloured foundation, their lips standing out with bright 'auntie red' lipstick. None of them had ever heard of Fei Xiaotong's theory of the 'centripetal core' of the Han people, yet they were convinced that it is Han rulers who have been the most beneficial for the development of the Chinese nation. This was proved, in their view, by the Hanification of 'foreign' invaders, as in the Yuan (1271-1368) and Qing (1644-1911) eras.

Xiaofeng and her friends were not interested in talking about other ethnicities. Theirs was an effort to revive a sense of pride in being Han in a way that echoed the orientalising gaze over ethnic minorities. They desired otherness connected with wearing 'ethnic' garments and posing in a 'classical' way, thus inventing a tradition (Hobsbawm 1984), just as they reinvent how to be the ethnic majority. One of them told me something I heard many times during my fieldwork: ethnic minorities have so many benefits, they get extra points in the university entrance examination, sometimes even have special food for them in the work unit, or the boss has to hire some people from the ethnic minority, etc., and sometimes they even can't speak standard Chinese. In their eyes, this does not disqualify them from being an integral expression of Chineseness, but rather deprives them of the ability to

[25] I refer here to the fact that the members of the Central Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China have historically been Han, and no Uyghur has ever reached this position.

embrace all of its aspects. 'They are all Chinese, of the Chinese nation, but some of them try to break away and split the country', she added. Immediately Xiaofeng intervened, saying that, although she has never been to Xinjiang, she thought it might be like Guangdong, where 'we all come here and live together, but people from here don't speak standard Chinese, they speak Cantonese. But because we need standard Chinese to work and travel, then we all speak it. I think Xinjiang people should also speak standard Chinese.' Quite explicitly, at this level of interaction the necessity to co-opt or subsume Uyghur ethnicity into an overarching idea of Han-sanctioned Chineseness is seen as conducive to development and national integration.

Another dimension of identity/alterity is related to the articulations of ethnic and home-place identities as categories of differentiation and exclusion in Chinese society. These differences are exacerbated in contemporary Shenzhen, given its history of domestic labour migration (Gao, J. Qian, and Yuan 2018; Hess 2009; Y. Liu et al. 2018). During my visits to the labour markets around Sanhe, I regularly came across a variety of accents, dialects, and languages. Most jobseekers had a thick regional accent or had difficulties in differentiating their dialect or language from standard Chinese (*putonghua* 普通话). The need to use *putonghua* in a predominantly Cantonese-speaking region (an issue also affecting neighbouring Hong Kong) encapsulates a criterion of ethnic discrimination (Hann 2014; Joniak-Lüthi 2017; Smith Finley 2013; W. Tang, Y. Hu, and Jin 2016). All my interlocutors agreed that *putonghua* proficiency was a requirement for employment, although some knowledge of Cantonese could be helpful in establishing better relations with local colleagues. Accents and the connections to their home-place can be determining, not only because of the networks linked to specific trades, but also due to the perceived talents associated to them. According to brother Xi in the Sanhe labour market: 'Someone from Sichuan like me can get a job in construction, maybe someone from Guangxi or Hunan can enter a factory, someone from Xinjiang, I don't know, could maybe become a cook or a model.'

These dynamics of exclusion are informed by long-standing prejudices and by an encompassing grammar of 'Chineseness' that produces social hierarchies of labour

based on *minzu* and home-place identities. As I focused my enquiries on Han–Uyghur relations, the existence of these issues became very evident. A Uyghur family running a small noodle restaurant said that most of their members of their community ended up in restaurants because companies do not hire them. I could not get much information from Uyghur informants, as, understandably, they were not so keen on talking to this bearded foreigner. I learned that this family came from Aksu and had been living in Shenzhen for over a decade. The father had worked in Guangzhou, where the Uyghur community was more numerous (Yun Huang 2008). Through the network of Uyghurs in Guangdong, they were able to raise funds and open the restaurant. Now this is the family's only source of income, an issue of concern, given the state's re-education policies, which might force the family to leave their business behind.

The use of migrant networks consolidates the differences between social groups by strengthening the orientalising grammar. Many migrant workers believe that people of a certain origin are better suited to doing particular jobs. I was frequently told that Uyghurs were a better fit in restaurants or as models to promote products on e-commerce platform Taobao. It seems that preconceived ideas of a person's 'natural dispositions'—what I previously addressed as *suzhi*—underpinned the production of hierarchies and the distribution of labour between migrant workers. What is more, ethnic stereotyping mediates social relations in the workplace and pushes social groups that are perceived as prone to conflict towards marginalisation. Recalling the case of Chen Weili, for example, Han migrant workers find it hard to build trust with Uyghur colleagues, who are represented as petty thieves. In these situations, the subordinated group keeps closer to their community, strengthening the sense of difference.

Subsumed into an idea of 'civilisation' (*wenming* 文明) that favours the Han language and way of life, many minority *minzu* migrants have been relegated to jobs that enhance their subordinate position. At the same time, young Han from all social strata have felt compelled to assert aspects of their *minzu* tradition (Carrico 2017). Xi Jinping's concept of 'national rejuvenation' has explicitly called for a feeling of pride about the nation's achievements, which in many ways pits the

interests of the Han majority against those who are resisting Hanification. In these cases, harsher policies have been implemented, such as those in Xinjiang under the labels 'transformation through re-education' (*jiaoyu zhuanhua gongzuo* 教育转化工作) and 'de-extremification' (*qu jiduanhua* 去极端化). These campaigns of coercive social engineering through state terror can be seen as emerging 'anti-grammars' that seek to do away with alterity (Zenz 2019; Smith Finley 2019).

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored dynamics of exclusion among migrant workers in light of ethnic tensions, focusing in particular on the Han and Uyghur. For analytical purposes, it has highlighted those processes that were triggered by the foundation of the People's Republic of China and its subsequent transformations. In terms of the *minzu* discourse, this means understanding the challenges of establishing a system of ethnic classification in which the state deployed linguists and ethnologists to fulfil an eminently political task. The early interest in curtailing Han chauvinism and empowering the different minority *minzu* in maintaining their traditions and languages was supported by policies of 'affirmative action', which were received positively during the early years of Maoism. However, the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution and, more recently, waves of marketisation have gravely damaged ethnic relations. At this point in time, the central government is apparently sparing no effort or resources in 'harmonising' the Uyghur, even if it means forcing people into re-education centres with little or no domestic or international oversight.

At the micro-level, conversations with migrant workers in Shenzhen revealed three levels of othering, two of which were clear manifestations of exclusion. The first of these levels was the appropriation and imposition of representations of Uyghurness and Xinjiangness as a method of profit, exemplified in the case of a restaurant. The second level showed the latent imaginaries about the Uyghur that depict them in a negative and conflictual light as posing a threat to the country. Finally, there was the level of language, which presented the emergence of vocabulary mocking perceived elements of Uyghurness, such as Islamism and culinary practices. I argued that elements across these levels correspond to expressions of Gerd

Baumann's grammars of orientalization and encompassment. These practices operate as systems of Han identity, which reveal the underlying power imbalances between the two ethnicities.

The Chinese government has no intention of addressing the foundational issues of *minzu* policy, instead pursuing further politicisation of ethnic tensions by implementing policies of forced detention and re-education. In Baumann's terms, these efforts are dangerously close to an anti-grammar that opposes the 'civilised' and 'secular' majority to a 'backward' and 'pious' minority. The reality in Shenzhen is that a large section of the Uyghur community has disappeared, together with their linguistic presence in the form of restaurant names or Arabic *halal* signs. These actions further alienate Han–minority relations and feed into the growing trend of Han ethnonationalism.

V. Exploitation and Marginality in the Sanhe Labour Market

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter addressed ethnic distinctions underlying the production of social hierarchies among migrant workers. Delving further into the dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation, this chapter describes the practices of representation and identification among migrant workers in labour markets. To this end, it explores the interactions between job-seekers and labour agencies, and between those pursuing wage labour and those living on the margins of the productive system. Special emphasis is given to the clash of labour identities around the Sanhe Human Resources Market. Here I engage with discussions about class-formation and collective working-class identity among groups of precarious migrant workers. The chapter also addresses the survival strategies of subaltern groups that are affected by different relations of domination, such as women and the ethnic minorities. Lastly, it addresses the Sanhe Gods (*sanhe dashen* 三和大神), individuals who reject the imperatives of wage labour to pursue a life of leisure on the margins of society. I conclude by assessing the theoretical implications of these expressions of labour around Sanhe, situating them in the larger context of the contradictions between capital and labour in China.

5.2. Migrant workers and labour markets

One Thursday morning just like any other, a dozen migrant workers get off one of the many buses that stop at Jingle Market, men and women, some by themselves, some with friends or relatives. Some are pulling colourful suitcases, others have rucksacks or just papers in a plastic folder. They are all rural migrant workers hoping to find a job in Sanhe.

The block after Sanlian Road along the East Ring 1st Road is a vibrant one. Located right in the heart of the Longhua district of Shenzhen, this area hosts the oldest and largest labour market in the city. There is nothing glamorous about this place: it is

the meeting point for rural migrant workers looking for employment. The iconic high-rise buildings and fancy shopping centres around Shenzhen Bay are far away. Cheap restaurants and urban villages dominate the place. The area popularly known as Sanhe has the city's highest concentration of human resources agencies—or 'talent markets' in the preferred local idiom—that attract job-seekers and recruiters alike. On any given day, large groups of rural migrant workers come here with their luggage and queue up at the different agencies flanking both sides of the street. The Sanhe Human Resources Group (*sanhe renli ziyuan jituan* 三和人力资源集团) and the Hua Hui Human Resources Company Limited (*huahui renli ziyuan youxian gongsi* 华辉人力资源有限公司) are among the most popular. Boards with job offers abound. Most ads announce positions on assembly lines, mainly at electronics factories in Shenzhen, Dongguan, and some even in Zhongshan. Lonely wanderers weigh up their options, and sometimes small groups of friends or couples stand for a while looking for a place that would take them together. There is a sense of urgency in this place. Most of those present are eager to find a job right there and then, but as the big factories move away, this is not always easy. At 60 yuan (8 EUR) per night for a room and around 10 yuan for a cheap meal, time becomes a very real concern.

The street is testimony to Shenzhen's transformations. With the exception of the two biggest agencies, all the others operate out of the front of what was once a shopping centre: the Southern Computer and Electronics Market. Its massive modernist architecture stands high above the street, dusty, broken, and dilapidated. These massive buildings are surrounded by dozens of so-called urban villages (*chengzhongcun* 城中村), the remnants of proto-urbanisation during the decades of primitive accumulation and the unleashing of productive forces in 1978. Today, these run-down structures, five to eight storeys high, covered with small colourful tiles, and with heavily protected windows and gates, offer cheap housing alternatives to rural migrants.

Across the street, a small furniture store is the only survivor of another shopping centre. At its feet, dozens of job-seekers sit on the wheel stops in the parking lot waiting to be called for interviews or training sessions (Figure 11). Some are chatting

with their companions, others are looking incessantly at their phones. Cigarette smoke seems to come from everywhere. Walking back towards San Lian Road, we find long queues of people outside the Sanhe and Hua Hui agencies. Most of them are waiting their turn to photocopy documents—resumés, identity cards, *hukou* registration permits—outside the only printing shop in the block. A few assistants wearing red coats help potential applicants sort out their documents, while in the background names are called out by megaphone. Those standing around are approached by so-called 'black factory recruiters' (*heichangzhaoren* 黑产找人), representatives of illegally operating factories with a bad reputation among migrant workers. Right next to the Sanhe agency, there is a police station and fire services. Violence—mostly retaliation against recruiters due to unpaid salaries—is not uncommon. Trucks with riot police are ready to be deployed at a moment's notice.

Figure 11. Job-seekers sitting outside labour agencies.

Legal and illegal operations meet in Sanhe in the process of recruiting workers. On the one hand, human resources agencies provide employment according to legal regulations, dispatching job-seekers to licensed companies. On the other hand, black factories deploy 'person-seekers' (*zhaoren* 找人) who approach mostly inexperienced and elderly migrants and offer them employment with promises of

working conditions that are hardly ever met. It is hard to differentiate between formality and informality in this corner of the human economy: in fact, most people seek ways to combine different sources of income, wherever it may come from.

While the central government has pushed for the increasing formalisation of employment, the informal sector has experienced much faster growth, especially after the amendments to the Labour Contract Law in 2013 (Cooke 2008; G. Liu 2014; F. Xu 2009). When the government tried to curtail the excessive reliance on 'labour dispatch' (*laowu paiqian* 劳务派遣) and regularise the role of employment agencies, ambiguous legalese prompted the growth of even more precarious conditions of temporary, auxiliary, and substitute employment, much of it driven by the demands of migrant workers, who would have seen their income negatively affected by formalisation (G. Liu 2014; Liang, Appleton, and Song 2016).

5.2.1. Brief historical outline of labour markets in China

The evolution of labour markets in twentieth-century China is inextricably linked to its socio-political development and is one of the most challenging tasks facing the government and CPC today (Fleisher and D. T. Yang 2003, 427). The era of turmoil that ended with the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1912 saw the rise of a model of foreign labour migration, mobilising *coolies* to work in Southeast Asia and the emerging republics of South America and the Caribbean through European trading houses in southern China (Ong 1995). The emigration of labour continued throughout the Republican period (1911-1949), as power vacuums, Japanese imperialism, and civil wars eroded the government's efforts to stabilise the economy (Rankin, Fairbank, and Feuerwerker 1986). Ultimately, the CPC introduced an economic structure inspired by the Soviet system that centralised its control over the factors of production (C. Lin 2006; Worsley 1975; Spence 1990; Naughton 2018).

Scholars have distinguished three stages in the development of labour markets in socialist China (Cooke 2008; Fleisher and D. T. Yang 2003). Initially, the party-state sought to establish a regulated or controlled labour market with a sharp

distinction between urban and rural labour. In the cities, the *danwei* 单位 ('work unit') system was enforced. This was a system of social organisation centred on one's place of employment, which offered a variety of social services, including housing and social welfare, health and recreational facilities, canteens, and nurseries (Whyte and Parish 1984). In many cases, facilities linked to ideology and behaviour were introduced in the form of reading and discussion groups, criticism and self-criticism sessions, and organising the security of the compound (Bray 2005; Kevin Lin 2019). The second stage was characterised by the movement towards marketisation, from state-planning to a socialist market economy, between the 1980s and 2000s. The necessity to create the conditions for the primitive accumulation of capital required the deregulation of labour markets, which channelled the mobility of millions of farmers and former state-sector workers through new private and public institutions for employment. Finally, in the current stage of re-regulation, the government has sought to offer better employment and protection for workers beyond the state sector by increasing the formalisation of labour markets (Cooke 2008, 2). These efforts have seemingly empowered local institutions to oversee the implementation of regulations, despite which capital continues to find ways to circumvent legal accountability (F. Xu 2009).

Indeed, the regulation of labour markets and employment contracts has backfired through legal loopholes and practices of informality derived from the unrealistic representations and resistance of migrant workers in a capitalist labour regime. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security has implemented a policy of 'active employment' (*jiji jiuye zhengce* 积极就业政策), whereby workers are free to seek jobs and the government promotes formal employment, though the latter is mediated by the market (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo laodong he shehui baoxian bu 中华人民共和国劳动和社会保障部 2002, 15; Guowuyuan 国务院 2018). This institutional arrangement cannot effectively enforce the regulations, as workers directly face the privatised labour market in structurally unequal conditions. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the country faces an 'abnormal prosperity' of informal employment (G. Liu 2014, 20).

Employment agencies have flourished as a consequence of the market transition. During the 1980s, collective and state-owned enterprises, as well as government labour bureaus, were the first entities to establish employment services (G. Liu 2014, 11). Gradually, the government opened up spaces for private actors to set up job agencies. During the 1990s, the crisis of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) pushed masses of laid-off migrant workers into the booming coastal cities. Domestic and international employment agencies have helped to absorb, train, organise, and dispatch workers where they are needed (Cooke 2008; G. Liu 2014). Nowadays, most job agencies are privately owned and regulated by the Employment Promotion Law of 2007 and the Labour Contract Law, enacted in 2008 and amended in 2013. The new legal framework establishes three forms of employment: a) full employment, subject to all the rights and duties of the legislation, such as the 44-hour week, health insurance, inclusion in the pension scheme, unemployment insurance, and paid holidays; b) partial employment, which is part-time and paid per hour, per project or per task, with proportional coverage by health insurance, contributions to the pension scheme and unemployment insurance, but without paid holidays; and c) sub-contracting, formally contracted by the agency to perform non-core duties at another place of work, without any type of social welfare. There is also d) no contract, usually the product of an agreement made on the spot, without any insurance coverage or legal protection.

While the regularisation of employment seeks to establish clear types of contractual relations, migrant workers continue to flow with ease between formal and informal employment. This contradiction between legal representation and the identities of labour is further complicated by practices of 'labour dispatch' (*laowu paiqian* 劳务派遣), through which migrants are hired by an agency and sent to factories. This externalisation of employment forces migrant workers into relations of domination and exploitation that make their lives even more precarious.

Therefore, there is an inherent tension between the push for formalisation and the needs of precarious workers. In the Chinese case, as in many others, the implementation of regulatory frameworks is met by a reshuffling of the informal

practices of employment relations and wage hunting, as in a cat-and-mouse game (Feng 2019).

5.3. Employment agencies and 'labour dispatch'

The first contact for those looking for employment in Sanhe is with assistants wearing red coats. Outside the building, people like Ms Wu help the jobseekers with information and the submission of applications. The migrant workers I met were sceptical and would usually ask about the conditions in the factories and the benefits (*fuli* 福利) they would receive, including the provision of a bed, a uniform, and social security (*shehui baoxian* 社会保险). The few lucky ones will be hired directly by a company and become workers with access to social benefits, but the vast majority of these men and women will be hired as labour dispatched through the agency. This mechanism of employment operates as follows. Job-seekers queue up outside one of the employment agencies. The staff help them sort out their documents, such as copy of their ID card and *hukou*, copies of different educational and professional qualifications, sometimes resumés and references. After all the documentation has been prepared, job-seekers go through the turnstile to enter the building. An assistant guarding the door hands them a number, and then the applicant waits to be called for a brief interview. After submitting the documents and answering a few questions to prove the veracity of the information provided, the newly hired workers go upstairs for training (*peixun* 培训), which consists of a thirty- to sixty-minute session explaining their upcoming working and living conditions. Finally, they get their uniforms—usually a polo T-shirt with the corporate logo—board either a bus or a van, and are transferred to the factory. Those unable to secure employment through agencies might join a 'black factory' through one of the many recruiters who wander about.

5.3.1. The Sanhe Human Resources Market

The Shenzhen Sanhe Human Resources Market is a subdivision of the Shenzhen Sanhe Industrial Development Limited Corporation (*shenzhenshi sanhe shiye fazhan youxian gongsi* 深圳市三和事业发展有限公司). The chain was founded in 1992 with its headquarters in what was then the larger Bao'an district (nowadays

Longhua). It was one of the first and most comprehensive businesses to provide human resources services in the country. The company currently employs more than 10,000 people distributed among the following subdivisions: Shenzhen Sanhe Human Resources Co. Ltd. (深圳市三和人力资源有限公司) (Figure 12), Shenzhen Gongming Sanhe Xing Human Resources Co. Ltd. (深圳市公明三和兴人力资源有限公司), Shenzhen Longgang Sanhe Feng Human Resources Co. Ltd. (深圳市龙岗三和隆人力资源有限公司), Shenzhen Sanhe Advertisement Co. Ltd. (深圳市三和广告有限公司), Shenzhen Sanhe Network Technology Co. Ltd. (深圳市三和网络技术有限公司), and Shenzhen Sanhe Yuan Labour Dispatch Co. Ltd. (深圳市三和源劳务派遣有限公司). The group cooperates closely with domestic and transnational corporations such as the online retailers Alibaba and Jing Dong, the electronics

Figure 12. Sanhe Human Resources Market.

producers Foxconn, Lenovo, and HP, the car manufacturer BYD, and logistics companies, among many others.

Its founder and CEO is Dai Jinghua, an engaged member of the city's business and political communities. As a businessperson, he has built a large-scale organization integrating human resources services, labour dispatch, advertising media, commercial investments, and the IT industry (Hailu Shangjia 海陆商家 2019). As a politician, he attended the 5th conference (2014-2017) of the Shenzhen Chinese People's Consultative Conference as a representative of the 'economic circles' (*jingji jie* 经济界) (Zhengxie Shenzhen shi Weiyuanhui 政协深圳市委员会 2014) and 6th conference (2017-2020) as a 'specially invited public figure' (*tebie yaoqing renshi* 特别邀请人士) (Zhengxie Shenzhen shi Weiyuanhui 政协深圳市委员会 2017). He is also vice-chairman of the Shanwei Chamber of Commerce in Shenzhen and vice-president of the China Employment Promotion Association.

According to Jiang Wei, owner of a small supplier of telecommunications infrastructure for Huawei, it is mostly the larger corporations that hire the services of the employment agencies. In the case of his factory, this would be superfluous because his employees bring him new workers from their own networks. While the contractual relationship is more direct, Jiang complains about the high turnover rate, which means that a group of workers leaves the factory at once and a new inflow of employees has to be trained and put to work. Sanhe Human Resources bridges this gap by externalising contracts, training workers, and dispatching them once trained.

From the perspective of those queuing at Sanhe Human Resources, labour dispatch is like a 'lucky draw' (*choujiang* 抽奖). Some of the larger companies offer better salaries, living and working conditions than the smaller operations, and more even than 'black factories.' Migrants recognise that their chances of success in the agencies are determined by age, ethnicity/place of origin, previous experience, or gender. Full employment status is almost unattainable. Most of the workers I met during my fieldwork had been hired as partial (seasonal) or sub-contracted labour. Those over forty years old, people with criminal records, or those considered to belong to a dangerous social group would be very unlikely to find employment through labour dispatch. Not much is left for these groups of people, some of whom

might return to their places of origin, join illegal operations, or become self-employed.

'One bad job after the other—that's the life of migrant workers,' said Wang Xinmin while sitting on his motorbike waiting for potential passengers to come out of the metro station. Fifty years of age, with more than twenty of them spent in Shenzhen, this Hunanese migrant has grown tired of the continuous uncertainty of employment. Therefore, he decided to use his motorbike and join the group of riders outside the metro stations in Longhua. A practice that used to be ubiquitous in the country is now considered illegal, yet in the proletarian neighbourhoods of Shenzhen, it is a common way for older migrants to secure an income.

The Sanhe Human Resources Corporation plays an important role in capitalist exploitation. It advertises job offers and provides basic training to new workers, allowing industries to focus on production. Yet, its priority is to reduce costs for those factories through labour-dispatching services. This means that assembly-line workers in factories and services are not employed where they work but have an employment relationship with the Sanhe Human Resources Corporation. The latter provides workers on either fixed-term contracts or task-based contracts, which not only alienate the workers from their workplace, but also curtail the corporate responsibilities for social and health insurance and exempt the factory from observing any and all of labour rights. This legal separation between labour and capital also restricts the chances of collective action against the factory in cases of abuse and reduces the influence of the labour unions in defending workers who formally employed elsewhere (Y. Chen and Z. Xu 2017; Liang, Appleton, and Song 2016; G. Liu 2014; Feng 2019; Lu Zhang 2018).

5.4. 'Black factories' and the marginalisation of migrant workers

In many ways, the experience of informality in China resonates with what Keith Hart documented during his fieldwork in Ghana. The informal sector cannot be seen as relegated to a place, a class, or particular groups of people. In Shenzhen, as in Accra, people try to combine multiple sources of income (Hart 2010), mainly by

devising strategies that bring together different types of income for a shared household, such as appropriating products from the factory and selling them online or in the street as a complement to wage labour. While a stable source of income with benefits is generally desired, many migrants in the manufacturing sector find that being able to move between workplaces is more relevant to their needs. Job-hopping is seen as a strategy of accumulation which eventually translates into the establishment of their own small business.

The most explicit face of the informal economy is the 'black factories'. These are embodied in the several recruiters, or 'person-seekers' (*zhaoren* 找人), who roam around the parking lot and the Jingle Market bus stop. They do not wear any uniforms or distinctive signs but rather blend in with the masses of migrants. They are up-front and even aggressive in their interactions. The following is an entry from my fieldnotes:

> *A man in his early forties took two migrants who had just arrived and* invited *them to join his factory. The two men were reluctant and asked about salary and benefits. The older man—now joined by two others—assured them that they would receive their salary after the second month and that it included social security. The migrants were not convinced. The older man then became more aggressive, talking loudly about the lack of options and the urgency of finding a job. He asked if they had all their documents ready, to which they answered positively. He then pushed them to make a decision. They asked whether the factory was legitimate. The man said that it was and that its name was Huasheng.*
> *A: Do you know Huasheng?*
> *B: No, we don't.*
> *A: How don't you know Huasheng. It's on Gongye Road. Do you know Gongye Road?*
> *B: No.*
> *A: Also, don't know Gongye Road! Look for it on your phone. We are Huasheng in Gongye Road. Look for it!*
> *[...] The old man made mean remarks about the ignorance of the migrants to his colleagues.*
> *The workers did not comply, thus the man kept calling them out because of their ignorance.*
> *A: It's by Dianxin Tower; do you know it?*
> *They* shake *their heads negatively.*
> *A: Aya! How come don't you know Dianxin Tower?!*
> *One of the migrants told him to wait, that he needed to ask someone else. 'Hurry up and come back!' The old man got on the phone. After a couple of minutes, the migrant came back and they both took the offer. The old man asked for their ID cards to photograph them with his mobile phone while he kept talking about the salary and benefits. 'You will get a bed, our rooms are big and clean, there is hot*

water…' A car was parked next to them. The man told them to get in, because they were heading to the factory. The car's license plate had the xiang *湘* [26] *character.*

These job-seekers were intercepted by the *zhaoren* right after getting off the bus at the Jingle Market stop. They did not visit the formal employment agencies. Both were young and naïve, easily falling prey to the disingenuous recruiters. While a legally registered factory relies on employment agencies or migrant workers' networks, recruiters for 'black factories' negotiate directly on the curb with possible workers. However, the conditions promised in these negotiations are seldom fulfilled. I was repeatedly told about unpaid salaries, unsanitary living conditions, and hyper-exploitation. 'Many brothers can't take it and just leave, you can't do anything else, you can't complain, they have thugs (*dashou* 打手) who hit us if we ask for our money', said Xi Guoqing, a 48-year-old job-seeker from Sichuan.

Xi Guoqing came up to me while I was speaking to a circle of 'black factory' recruiters. 'Don't pay them any attention—they are thugs!' Brother Xi confused me with a Uyghur job-seeker, probably due to my beard and somewhat Turkic features, and was kind enough to warn me off. 'Are you looking for a job? Better go into the agency!', he said. After explaining that I was not a Uyghur but Latin American, and that I was not looking for a job but rather doing research, he became very outspoken: 'Why would you do research here? This place is not interesting!' He held what Ching Kwan Lee (2007) has termed the socialist 'social contract' in high regard: 'In the times of old Mao there were good things and bad things. The Cultural Revolution was a very bad thing, many people died back then. But I think people were also happy. Certainly happier than now. These days we eat a lot of bitterness. Life is very hard for the common people. Of course, we also have good things now that China is more open and developed, but we must work so hard and always fight for money.' He was adamant that at 48 years of age it would be very difficult for him to find a good job and that eventually he would have to become self-employed: 'Sometimes I drive people on my motorbike. I am saving money to open a shop in

[26] In the People's Republic of China, license plates for cars and motorcycles reveal the place of registration of the vehicle, among other relevant information. Those registered in Guangdong province start with the *guang* 广 character, those in Hunan with *xiang* 湘, in Shanghai with *hu* 沪, in Beijing with *jing* 京, etc.

my homeplace. I would do anything, but not work in a "black factory" again.' Other migrants chimed in with their own testimonies. Younger voices raised the issue of a lack of trust. 'Black factories take you and then don't pay. No one can help you then. It's like this. You work for them and then go back to the street with nothing,' said He Yong, raising his head over my shoulder trying to make eye contact. For other migrants like him, 'black factories' are an employment opportunity for those without special qualifications or relevant experience.

The contradiction between capital and labour is at its crudest in the labour markets. Offers for employment are diverse, but they do not extend to stable jobs. Many migrant workers go into 'black factories' when the opportunities offered by established agencies are not open to them. This pushes newcomers and older migrants alike into relations of hyper-exploitation in illegal operations or away from the labour markets and into informal opportunities of self-employment. Alternatively, some might decide to escape the social and economic imperatives to work by embracing a culture of poverty. These are the so-called *sanhe dashen* or 'Sanhe Gods.'

5.5. The *Sanhe Dashen*: challenging capital and labour

After the screening of a documentary by the Japanese broadcaster NHK in 2018, it did not take long for tech-savvy Chinese to put subtitles on the Japanese narration and start sharing it online. The documentary was a sensation among migrant workers in Shenzhen, as it showed a layer of the city that many had heard about but never seen. The documentary was called 'Sanhe Human Talents Markets' (*sanhe rencai shichang* 三和人才市场). It focused on the lives of a group of people whose collective name represented a carefree life at the bottom of China's labour market (NHK 2018). The concept is a grandiloquent and tongue-in-cheek name for a group of mostly men who have chosen a life of leisure and marginality with only minimal, sporadic engagement as informal day labourers. On the one hand, the label of Sanhe Gods celebrates the audacity of breaking away from social conventions and following a life of self-indulgence. On the other hand, it is a sarcastic and contemptuous expression that regards such life as naïve and irresponsible.

While the concept might have been ascribed to them, the Sanhe Gods have adopted it as their own, mainly to distinguish themselves from other precarious actors engaged in day labour (*linshigong* 临时工). As a form of day labour, becoming a Sanhe God comprises an identity that is deeply rooted in the present, against the imperatives of an economic and moral regime that insists on productivity and social duties. These attitudes resonate with the 'lilies of the field' (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999). In the volume edited by Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart (1999), London prostitutes, Hungarian gypsies, and Aegean Greeks fit into this biblical metaphor[27] as people living in poverty on the margins of society and treated with contempt by the majority. What they have in common is that, 'instead of adopting mainstream notions of work, productivity, and long-term economic planning, they appear to take a "natural" abundance for granted and to forage for their subsistence' (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999, 1). For the Sanhe Gods, this means that employment is not a necessary condition for existence, but a secondary necessity for subsistence. What the authors call as an 'anti-economic' stance is constitutive of a specific set of attitudes towards time, personhood, and community: such individuals live 'in the present' and develop a sense of identity from embracing a 'culture of poverty'. It is a present that can vary in temporal extension and a poverty that is related to the limited access to resources, mediated by the physical space where social, economic, and even political life unfolds.

The Sanhe Gods, immersed in this precarious life, are a form of 'virtual pauper', a person for whom the selling of labour power is accidental and indifferent to their organic presence (Denning 2010, 97). The accidental character of their engagement with wage labour works to create a cleavage between the Sanhe Gods and other types of wage labour among migrant workers. In this sense, a case could be made for the *sanhe dashen* being a type of subclass—e.g. a lumpenproletariat or reserve army of labour—at the risk of overlooking their agency in embracing a culture of poverty. Instead of representing a side effect of capitalist labour relations, these Sanhe Gods have negotiated a space in society where they can subsist without the

[27] 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these… Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself' (Matthew 6:28-29, 34).

stressful imperatives of economic production and social reproduction, a rejection of what Karl Marx called the 'real subsumption of labour under capital' (Marx 1990, 1034–35).

Similar cases can be found around labour markets in urban China (Xingkun Wang 2018), as well as in Jan Breman's (2010) 'lumpen' in India or Tom Gill's (2001) 'men of uncertainty' in Japan. These are people who 'not only lack all means of production but also do not have the labour power and stamina needed to be able to meet their daily minimal requirements in full' (Breman 2010, 223). In Japan, Gill unveils the stories of failed professional careers that push men to become casual day-labourers and who, in some cases, '[carry] a rich set of cultural associations: with poverty, struggle, loneliness, failure, vagabondage, and, like Hope at the bottom of Pandora's Box, freedom' (Gill 2001, 3). These subjects present an abortive expression of the ethos of wage labour, where the unwillingness to work drives them to become virtual paupers.

Away from employment, the Sanhe Gods make sporadic appearances in the productive system—about twice a week—which provides them with a feeble social identity, a sense of belonging, or even, the possibility of socialisation. They live mostly by themselves, spending most of their time roaming the streets around the labour market. They are known for sleeping in internet cafes for 30 yuan (4 EUR) a night and for selling their ID cards for a bit of money. Without an identity document and with very limited income, these 'deities' are trapped in a cycle with few if any possibilities of escaping, given that IDs are necessary to enter a factory, check in at a hotel, or take a train or bus to another city.

'Why would I work for others when I can barely make money for myself?', said brother Hu. A 31-year-old man from Hunan province, Hu Luguan came from Hunan to Shenzhen almost five years ago looking for employment. I sat next to him on a small staircase leading to the closed-off shopping centre right across from the Sanhe Human Resources Market building and offered him a cigarette—an offer in exchange for a conversation. During his time in Shenzhen, brother Hu has worked mostly on construction sites, while his wife moved to neighbouring

Dongguan to work in a textile factory. His answers were dismissive, and I was afraid of losing rapport with him, so I invited him for a meal. Over noodles and beer, Hu started to smile and relax:

> 'People are very hardworking, but nobody cares. Why should I work for others when I can barely make money for myself? My wife did not believe me that the boss did not pay our salaries, she kept scolding me, but there was nothing to do. She does not understand. The boss had hitmen that come with sticks and hit us, so we do not make trouble for him. It was exhausting to eat so much bitterness.'

After that, Hu tried his luck in a machinery factory in Shenzhen, where he was promised 4,000 CNY (520 EUR) a month working twelve-hour shifts without free days. While these hyper-exploitative regimes are illegal under Chinese law, they are not uncommon in either the public or private sectors, and many workers must accept them to avoid of unemployment and poverty:

> 'They kept pushing us to work more, and I could not take it any longer. Some people left because they knew the factory was bad, that the boss would not pay the salary they had said. It was all very confusing. So, after two weeks I asked for my money. It should be 2,000 CNY, right? After a lot of fighting, I just got 200 CNY! Shit! Really nobody cares for us migrant workers. What can I do with 200 CNY here! Rent a hot bed, 50 CNY; eating, taking the bus… It's not enough. I met other brothers in the internet café. It is cheaper to sleep there, and I can also play videogames. It was good, no need to worry about getting paid. I can go to work for one day and get money. Then I play videogames or drink baijiu[28] until the money is gone. I have no ID, so I do not exist. I am a ghost!'

The selling of identity cards for cash is a common practice among the *sanhe dashen*. Other common practices, in which Hu did not want to go into detail, include pickpocketing and petty thievery, especially to get a new identity card:

> 'Now I am free. Sometimes I call my wife, I know she is working. I do not talk to my parents anymore, but I know they are doing fine. Maybe someday I will see them. I don't know, I am free now, I have no responsibilities, nobody bothers me. Another person can enter a factory with my ID, I do not care. I do not have things I must do, I can drink, I can smoke, I can work, I can rest. What else do I need? If I go back to my hometown, people will put pressure on me. Buy a house, have children, give money to my parents. But who cares about me? Nobody!'

Just as in the 'lilies of the field', the Sanhe Gods assume there is a 'natural' abundance of employment opportunities. Hu Luguan's concerns are mostly immediate, with little thought being given to the future. He has seen many fellow

[28] A type of distilled liqueur made from sorghum, millet, or barley.

brothers die on the streets, so his temporal space does not go beyond the day's end, or *rijie* 日结, a keyword repeatedly used by the Sanhe Gods. This 'living in the present' posed methodological challenges to my research, as it complicated arranging new meetings or keeping in contact. Hu does not know whether he would have another meal later in the day, let alone whether he would spend the night at the internet café or on the streets. Without a routine, the future is always an open question.

Becoming a Sanhe God is not a solution to the ailments of precarity under capitalism, but rather a rational decision to live outside the system, outside responsibilities. On one occasion, failing to find Hu at his regular internet café, I came across one of his friends, Zhao Qingming. He was Sichuanese man, ten years younger than Hu Luguan. He was wearing a bright yellow T-shirt with a corporate logo—a 'souvenir' from one of his previous jobs—blue trousers, open shoes, and stylised hair. He was more outspoken and more willing to talk. He was still in possession of his ID document but did not discard the idea of selling it. Even at his 21 years of age, Zhao embraced becoming a Sanhe God as a way to adopt a condition of poverty which is not possible to overcome. 'Chinese society is very harsh—there are a lot of expectations, a lot of things we must do. I don't know what I want because I always have a duty. For me, becoming a Sanhe Dashen is the only decision I have taken in my life,' he said. I see this agency in embracing a culture of poverty, where leisure predominates over the identity of labour, as a moral regime that is distinct to this group, putting them at odds with other migrant workers.

> 'If I want a good wife, I need to buy a house. Who can buy a nice house working from a factory? You have to work so hard. I will always be poor. I do not want that. I do not have to. I am a *sanhe dashen*, I can do what I want. I like to play videogames in the internet café. I do not have other problems. I know other people do not agree with me, but I do not care. They can work hard and eat bitterness, I am free, I am really fucking free.'

The eloquence of Zhao Qingmin's words contrasts with the narratives of sacrifice related in the previous subchapter. Zhao told stories of friends and acquaintances who worked very hard and got laid off without compensation, or who lost a limb and were left unemployable, or who lost their families. He drew lessons to be learned from them, which motivated him to avoid their fate and embrace the

condition of a Sanhe God. Hu, Zhao, and many more in Sanhe agreed about the repressive character of Chinese society, which had many social and economic duties that they chose not to follow.

Other migrant workers looking for employment in the Sanhe labour market have ambivalent attitudes towards the Sanhe Gods. For the most part they consider them outcasts, irresponsible, and weak. Yet, for many young migrants the idea of freedom from duties and the autonomy of living in the present moment makes sense. Yuan Fen, one of the many job-seekers at the Sanhe Human Resources building, was sceptical of my interest in the Sanhe Gods. For him, they were not free but lazy and selfish, thinking about themselves instead of their families: 'I do not work for myself but for my son. I do not want him to eat bitterness like his parents,' he said to me while waiting in line for a copy of his documents. In other accounts, migrant workers in stable position, like the sanitation worker Auntie Zhao, said that 'these *sanhe dashen* have low *suzhi*. That is why they cannot have good jobs.' In this case, Auntie Zhao recalls a marker of differentiation that fragments the collective identities of migrant workers (Chapter 3).

The attitudes of these virtual paupers recognise their agency in going against the social expectations of working for individual and household accumulation, marrying, reproducing, purchasing a house and a car, or even owning a small business. The Sanhe Gods have no savings, nor do they send remittances to their family in the countryside, and they are also unconcerned about their social responsibilities or abiding by the law. They live in a present where leisure and freedom are seen as opposite to the 'dedication to one's work' (*jiuye* 就业), one of the key concepts of ubiquitous party propaganda about 'Core Socialist Values' (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观). Part of the freedom enabled by their embracing of marginality is expressed in their political criticisms. Many politicised *sanhe dashen* are sceptical of the government's intention to improve the lot of the poor, and some were even nostalgic for the type of social embeddedness experimented during the Mao era (Chapter 7). There were also a few individuals with a complete disregard for the political order. They freely used the word *zhina* 支那 (pronounced *shina* in Japanese) to voice their frustrations about a country for

which they care little. The trope is a highly derogatory and offensive term that was used by the invading Japanese army during World War II (Chao 2018). When used by foreigners, many Chinese consider it a racial slur, but when used by local subaltern subjects, it represents a form of political critique.

The Sanhe Gods, particularly those without a valid ID document, do not seek employment through the established agencies. Instead, they make arrangements with 'black factory' agents, working for just one day, getting paid in cash at the end of the shift, and without bureaucratic requirements. While writing down some notes sitting at the Jingle bus stop, Xiongxiong came up to me for a chat. He was a friendly 'black factory' agent with whom I spent many hours chatting. This tall and overweight man came from a locality in eastern Guangdong and now lived in Shenzhen working in legally questionable activities which he was reluctant to disclose to me. He was more open to talking about 'his factory', which he did not own but managed. For Xiongxiong, the Sanhe Gods were irresponsible and weak people incapable of dealing with the challenges of hard work. He has met many of them during his life, both as a migrant worker and a recruiter: 'They are not good workers, but we have to take them.' 'Black factories' and Sanhe Gods have established a symbiotic relationship which allows both to exist.

While many Sanhe Gods relied on a single particular agent or factory for their casual employment, they might spend days or weeks freely wandering between these occasions. This creates problems for people like Xiongxiong, who have to provide training every day for new casual hires. In the eyes of the 'black factory' recruiter, these virtual paupers are an expendable necessity: 'Other workers do not want to come to my factory, so I can only take day labourers; they are cheaper and can do the job, but I do not know if they will come back at all.'

For the Sanhe Gods, the relationship with the 'black factories' can be risky, so having some recurrent places to reach out to when employment is needed is a strategy for survival. 'Revenge society' (*baofu shehui* 报复社会) was a commonly used term among migrants around the Sanhe labour market to characterise the frequent knife attacks on illegal recruiters who fail to pay the arranged salary to day

labourers. On one occasion, I was stopped from entering in the area by police special forces because an attack had taken place the previous day. Feng Pinyuan, a job-seeker in the area, shared with me a gruesome video of a brawl in which a Sanhe God had attacked a 'black factory' agent. I was informed that the victim had been treated by paramedics and then taken to hospital, while the perpetrator had run away. According to my interlocutor, it would be better for the man to go to jail, as the agent would most probably send his thugs to kill him. In fact, violence, together with excessive drinking, are the leading causes of death among the Sanhe Gods. I asked him about the reasons for the attack, and he said: 'The guy cheated him with money, so he came back and stabbed him'. Afterwards, Pinyuan told me, 'The ambulance took him, but the brother ran away. Nobody reported to the police. Here no one reports. Still, these last two days the whole place has been covered with police officers and riot police. I do not understand why the recruiter stole from the brother? He had nothing already, not even one *fen* of money! Nothing to his name!'

The contrasting narratives of the Sanhe Gods and those of other migrant workers go beyond a consideration of inadequate opportunities to engage directly with the problem of the value of labour. 'Every day is a struggle here. I go to work, one day for 50, 80, or maybe 100 yuan. What can I do? I bear the hardship and don't receive enough, but I know that my value is much more.' Brother Yuan was laid off from a big factory after an accident in which he lost two fingers of his left hand. With the compensation paid by his employer he barely managed to cover hospital fees. 'For them I am worthless. They can just throw me away if I get hurt. Look, I lost two fingers! A lot of brothers can't tolerate it and take their revenge.'

The Sanhe Gods are misfits of the 'China Dream' (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦), a group of people who see no point in trying hard to live in the same misery. This kind of rejection of the working-class ethos questions the fundamental social values promoted by the Chinese polity. Their attitude celebrates prodigality instead of frugality, recklessness instead of responsibility, selfishness instead of selflessness. In this alienated condition, the *sanhe dashen* are far from representing a 'technology of the self for resistance' against neoliberalism (Gong 2019, 227). If anything, the mode of production profits greatly from the hyper-exploitation of this

constant flow of occasional day-labour, as they can work for lower wages than other migrant workers and can do so in illegal factories.

5.6. Conclusion

A closer look at the Sanhe Human Resources Market enables the tensions between state efforts to formalise labour and the responses of precarious migrant workers to be understood. This dynamism and the dialectic of relations between capital and labour have set the conditions for the emergence of new mechanisms of precarious employment, as well as new social identities. While many migrants still aspire to gain regular employment, individual and household strategies are deployed to improve the material conditions of their existence by combining different sources of income. However, in the case of women and certain ethnic minorities, the labour markets are not the best option in finding employment. For these groups, their reliance on networks is much more relevant, but it also stimulates the segmentation of trades based on ethnicity or place of origin.

Increasing disappointment with the limited rewards for hard labour has been the leading reason for the emergence of a new identity, the *sanhe dashen*. Their form of casual day labour is characterised by an 'anti-economic' stance in which leisure prevails over social duty and economic accumulation. That is not to say that their life is easier: in fact, although they claim to be escaping social and economic imperatives, they are in fact stranded in a regime of hyper-exploitation where the 'black factories' pay very little for their labour-power in order to maximise their profits.

In sum, the Chinese state has fallen prey to a cat-and-mouse game in its efforts to formalise employment practices, as shown by the new contractual relations and the reconfiguration of informal practices favoured by migrant workers. These limitations can be linked to the expanding commodification of labour in the PRC. I argue that the distinctive ways in which value is created in the Chinese political economy are not challenged by the re-substantiation of the market, nor by actors

like the Sanhe Gods. Here, the recruitment agencies maximise corporations' profits at the expense of human lives. The free market in labour reproduces institutionalised discrimination against vulnerable groups, fostering a milieu of exclusion, segregation, and scarcity in order to drown any sense of opportunity. The forces of capital in Sanhe have deep implications for the lives of migrant workers, who in many cases see formal employment as a burden and favour informality. This dynamic atomises the working class further, which goes along with the rationality of the market economy, namely 'to subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market' (Polanyi 2001, 75).

VI. Self-Representations and Economic Aspirations through Digital Media

6.1. Introduction

New generations of Chinese migrant workers are avid users of mobile applications that allow them to share their daily lives, learn about working conditions in other places, comment on relevant issues, look for a partner, or simply entertain themselves. The specific conditions of the internet in China, which is heavily censored and blocked from accessing several international websites, have fostered the development of platforms tailored to the national context.

Rather than differentiate the virtual from the real world, it became very evident that my interlocutors regarded social media as an integral part of their lives, being a medium for communication as well as a vital source of information and entertainment. My ethnographic observations confirm understandings of social media as 'another place in which people live' (Miller et al. 2016). In previous chapters I have explored how my interlocutors made use of the internet in their interactions, such as looking for jobs or connecting with members of their ethnic or place community.

This chapter explores further aspects of social media that are linked to the sociality of migrant workers. I focus on the way my interlocutors made use of these platforms, mainly through interactions with others, and the production and consumption of content. The apps and sites[29] I consider are those my interlocutors used, notably WeChat (communications and payment ecosystem), Baidu Tieba (internet forum), Zhihu (Q&A site), and Kuaishou (short-video sharing app). Building on Miller's definition, I argue that these are not only places where people live, but also where they must represent themselves and others, unveiling the

[29] An app or mobile application is a software used on mobile devices. A site or website is a set of web pages that are accessible under a domain name, usually through a browser. Many sites have a corresponding app that offers convenience of access to its user. In the case of the PRC, recent years have shown a clear preference towards the use of apps (especially WeChat) to share content over websites.

tensions that lie at the core of social relations concerning ethnic, gender, and economic inequalities.

Together with a variety of forms of socialisation, collective and individual identifications are also articulated and performed through virtual spaces. In the Chinese case, Yang Guobin (2009) has drawn attention to the contentious character of the internet where online activism takes place. He emphasises the connection between the array of practices of resistance and the expansion of civil society. In respect of Yang's integrational approach, the Chinese case should be contrasted with other forms of contentious identification, such as the nationalist and racist discourses of North Atlantic right-wing populism (C. Zhang 2020). Looking at content shared on Zhihu, Zhang Chenchen (2017) has argued that people publishing and sharing these contents see their superior ethnic/national selves as being threatened by the 'Western white left'[30] and the perception of increasing Islamic radicalisation in their country.

Less contentious practices of collective identification have been analysed by Wang Xinyuan (2016), in her ethnography of social media use among migrant workers (part of a larger research project led by Daniel Miller). The 'dual migration' trope put forward by Wang is especially helpful in understanding the larger context in which migrant workers use social media. These subjects of rural origin have moved to an urban life while simultaneously shifting their space of sociality from offline to online. The latter enables them to live out their personal aspirations to a modern life and identity, which are often denied by the local urban population (Xinyuan Wang 2016). These cases of collective representation position the internet as a central place in which to raise claims for recognition of the diversity of identities among migrant workers and to foster forms of solidarity.

In terms of individual representations, social media are a space for interpersonal communications and instruments for self-promotion. In its most reified form,

[30] 'White left' (*baizuo* 白左) is a Chinese neologism used to describe Western liberal progressives who champion immigration, identity politics, and political correctness. These are commonly seen as cynical stances that draw attention away from the real problems (C. Zhang 2017).

individuals seek fame and money by becoming internet celebrities. *Wanghong* 网红 is a neologism that combines the word for 'internet' (*wangluo* 网络) with 'famous' (*hongren* 红人), to produce 'internet celebrity'.[31] Originally the concept referred to those who pursued a naïve, superficial, and materialistic lifestyle of cyber fame, but its meaning was transformed as the economic potential of this profession, linked to e-commerce and social media advertising, grew. These days, the *wanghong* prefer to move beyond the original negative connotations of the word—depicting young people obsessed with social media—and preferred to be addressed with the English acronym 'KOL' (key opinion leader), which situates them closer to the global phenomenon of 'influencers'. However, the concept of *wanghong* is so widely used, both online and offline, that major e-commerce corporations have identified the '*wanghong* economy' as the new frontier of the internet industry (X. Han 2020).

While most studies of the *wanghong* economy have highlighted its e-commerce aspects, in this chapter I show how it is often used as a label to promote products or establishments at street level as well. What do a *wanghong* meal set, a *wanghong* tea shop, a *wanghong* promoter have in common? I tackle this issue by building on the materialist notion of 'reification' (*Verdinglichung*). This concept was popularised by Georg Lukács' essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (1971). He criticised the uncritical use of objectivity in 'historical materialism', which was, in itself, a category of bourgeois thought that distorted interpretations of reality. Instead, he eschewed taking the categories of reality for granted and went to the root of the problem, which in advanced capitalist societies is the 'commodity-structure' (*Warenstruktur*), Marx's own starting point in *Capital*. Lukács stated that the essence of the commodity-structure is that 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a "phantom-objectivity", an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' (Lukács 1971, 83).

[31] In many ways, the *wanghong* phenomenon can be related to that of the 'influencer', but it differs in the ways it is financed. While influencers become monetised through the number of viewers, donations, or sponsorships they have, the *wanghong* are part of an ecosystem in which incubators and venture capitalists play a crucial role.

After being stranded in relative obscurity due to political and scholarly polemics, the concept gained new attention in the new millennium. In an effort to rehabilitate and update Lukács' notion of reification, Timothy Bewes (2002) suggests that, in an increasingly reified society, representations displace reality, stifling the ability to find meaning or produce meaningful statements, and ultimately creating a state of 'cultural anxiety' that can be identified in all discursive forms. In a more political tone, Anita Chari (2015) offers a materialist perspective that goes beyond the ideas of intersubjectivity advanced by third-generation scholars of the Frankfurt School. She suggests that reification is a useful category with which to understand the relationship between forms of subjectivity and the structure of capitalism, which can in turn be deployed as a theoretical tool for social emancipation (Chari 2015, 5–6). In anthropology, the concept of reification has had an ephemeral existence. Most notably, Michael Taussig applied it to the subfield of medical anthropology, arguing that the human relations embodied in symptoms, signs, and therapy become mystified in medical practice and ultimately reproduce a political ideology that is disguised as a science of apparently 'real things' (Taussig 1980; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1986).

These definitions agree on the political consequences linked to the 'thingification' process, where social relations become subsumed in capital in the form of a commodity. In this sense, I argue that *wanghong* is a reified form of labour in the guise of individual entrepreneurialism. The practice of *wanghong* involves self-reification in the direction of commodification and the reification of ideas of capitalist modernity embodied in practices of consumption and sociality. My approach combines explorations in the extant literature that position the *wanghong* economy as a new frontier in the internet industry with experience at the street level, where shops promote some of their products under the *wanghong* label. While in the first case a self-reified subject promotes articles online under his or her own name, in the second case the concept of *wanghong* congeals ideas of modernity and cosmopolitanism—of a bourgeois capitalist lifestyle, therefore—to which many migrant workers aspire. In both cases, the implication is that *wanghong* is a transactable commodity.

In what follows, I explore different possibilities in the offline-to-online migration of migrant workers. First, I address the development of online communities that strengthen the production of solidarities. Second, I focus on the level of the individual to see how migrants present themselves online. Finally, I focus on the *wanghong* economy and a mystification of relations of exploitation and domination through the reification of the individual.

6.2. Building online communities

'Add me on WeChat' is a common call for a widespread ritual after making a new acquaintance. Unlike WhatsApp or Telegram, this app concentrates a variety of services that include personal and group chats, video and audio calls, a semi-public feed to share content, internal mini-apps for services and entertainment, and a powerful payment platform that allows online and point-of-sale (POS) transactions. Becoming WeChat friends is relevant, as it allows one to learn more about the other person through what they share on their respective profiles. Users are able to form or are invited to join groups of interest of all sorts, as well as 'public accounts' where independent users or organisations can publish news and columns that anyone can find and subscribe to through a simple search. WeChat is such a ubiquitous aspect of everyday life in China that one of the official measures of controlling the Novel-Coronavirus outbreak in 2020 was the implementation of a 'green code', a mini-app lodged in WeChat and AliPay[32] that showed a person's PCR test results and that was officially required for many offline services. It is not surprising that organisations of all kinds use WeChat as a key resource for community building.

'Pepper Tribe' (*Jianjiao buluo* 尖椒部落) is a popular Shenzhen-based organisation dedicated to promoting the rights of female workers. 'Pepper Tribe doesn't sell pepper, we just want to amplify your voice', reads their website. 'We provide a platform for female workers to shout their voices; that way, their issues and struggles become more visible', I was told by Zeng Xiaoqing while sipping tea. They accept stories written by female migrants, which are commented on and shared by others. From recipes to cook on a budget to financial advice, from stories of sexual

[32] AliPay is the payment ecosystem of Ant Financial (since June 2020, Ant Group) and is affiliated with Jack Ma's Alibaba.

harassment to discussions of the role of women in society, Pepper Tribe has become a platform for the construction of solidarities based on female empowerment.

Figure 13. Image share by *Jianjiao Buluo* in their social media for the Year of the Pig.

The political environment has been hard on the emerging feminist movement, as Leta Hong Fincher (2018) notes. Through a careful and creative use of social media, including a 'public account' and a 'customer service' chat, Pepper Tribe has been able to create a space for the socialisation of female migrant workers and has linked them to global struggles. As promotional material, they usually share drawings of colourful pepper characters with a short message, but a more direct message of female emancipation could be sent that draws on the example of other groups, such as the women's movement in Rojava (Figure 13). Their activism has allowed the

emergence of a collective consciousness of female workers that is critical of the marginalisation of their gender under capitalism. 'In the time of Mao there was a campaign called "women hold half of the sky". Now women are expected to be obedient and silent, to marry and have babies. I want to live independently; I don't want to marry and then be quiet. That's not a life for a human being', said Xiaoqing. After having their Weibo account deleted by the censors, the online activities of Pepper Tribe have relied largely on WeChat, where their contents spread quickly among generations of female migrant workers.

Other politically sensitive organisations, such as underground Christian churches, profit from this type of sociality as well. When in December 2018 the Chinese central government launched a campaign against influential Christian churches in Sichuan and Guangdong, WeChat became the prime place for their mutual interactions. Uneasy church members used the app in two ways: first, as their usual channel of communication for upcoming plans and bible-reading homework; and second, as a way to share news about the ongoing crackdown. They manifested received knowledge about the workings of the technologies of censorship. Instead of sharing links or typing information, they would take a screenshot of a report, flip the image ninety degrees, and then share it in the chat group or the WeChat feed. They were convinced that the application's automatic scan is unable to identify text that has been flipped. I cannot tell whether this information is true, but at least the group was not affected by the crackdown during my stay.

Similar knowledge is displayed by groups of labour activists. Politically sensitive information is usually shared through flipped images or videos under an inoffensive thumbnail. Some young activists among migrant workers showed me videos of a recent protest of veteran Sichuanese construction workers asking for compensation from the city of Shenzhen after developing silicosis. The thumbnail was the face of a girl with a beverage in her hand taken from a random publicity campaign. After pressing play, the image disappears and only stitched videos of the protest and its suppression could be seen. One of the activists told me that some videos without the inoffensive thumbnail do not come through to the recipient,

while another joked that it was easier to share pornography (which is illegal in the country) than images of labour protests.

Reliance on the internet and mobile devices can put people at risk in a state with a powerful surveillance apparatus, but for my interlocutors, it is also the preferred way of sharing information with a wider audience. Knowledge about the technologies of censorship comes from historical experiences of collective struggle and is evidence of the vitality of different forms of sociality in contemporary Chinese society. Given certain precautions, many claim to feel safer sharing things online than face to face, as it is still possible to exercise a certain anonymity.

If WeChat is the basis of virtual interactions, internet forums like Baidu Tieba or Q&A sites like Zhihu offer a more indirect forms of interaction. Users can post their own queries or comments, or simply read and follow publications under different topics. When one types a question on Baidu, China's most popular search engine, it often places results from forums and Q&A sites at the top of the list. Users would usually subscribe to themes or communities of shared interest where they can establish interactions. Potential newcomers to the city use this medium to learn more about working and living conditions. One young female migrant and professed Christian, Xiaofeng, decided to come to Shenzhen after gaining some knowledge about the job market and local churches from friends and internet forums. She was cautious about moving: 'I had a good job in a factory in Dongguan, but a friend told me that in Shenzhen one can make more money, and the city is more interesting'. Looking for certainty, she started reading online forums: 'I thought people in Shenzhen needed higher skills to work for electronics factories, but many people in the Tieba said they had worked without previous experience!' Soon after starting her first job in a cable factory in northern Shenzhen, she realised that the hours were longer and the workload greater than in her previous place. Xiaofeng complained about the lack of free time to make acquaintances and the unfriendliness of everyone around her. In fact, to my surprise, she said that in Dongguan she used to chat and laugh a lot with her colleagues during working hours, but in Shenzhen migrants seemed to be permanently planning their next move, so there was no interest in building relations among them. 'I feel all my

contacts happen online now. I only talk to my friends from Dongguan, or with people from the church… Now I have more time to study the Bible, so the brothers and sisters send me things to follow.' Inadvertently, perhaps, people like Xiaofeng have turned to online community-building, which can include offline forms of sociality as a way to fight loneliness and alienation.

However, online communities of interest can go in potentially dangerous directions, as is the case with ethnonationalist discourse. A more assertive foreign policy has been but a symptom of a tolerated and growing sentiment across the country. Radical defences of the role of the Party at critical historical conjunctures can easily be accessed, explicitly equating the fate of the Party with that of the nation. When, at dinner with Chen Weili, a young worker in a telecoms infrastructure factory, the issue of re-education camps in Xinjiang came up, he based his arguments about the bias in the coverage of China in western media on quick glances at posts on online forums. Weili, who does not usually follow news from foreign sources, argued that there was an excess of negative issues: workers' protests, industrial espionage, or the re-education centres in Xinjiang. Weili believed that his country's predicament in the international system should be blamed on the historic humiliation of China by the western powers and their anti-China media. As a supporter of the ethnonationalist discourse, he also claimed that Chinese culture has been Han-centric for five thousand years and that is unfair to give privileges to ethnic minorities when many Han people like him are still poor. Chen Weili's ideal of the nation was determined by historical loyalties and a distrust of those groups that were associated with repression or resistance to the Han people.

A different type of collective socialisation can be observed in short-video sharing apps. I decided to use Kuaishou after noticing how popular it was in my surroundings. Kuaishou was launched in 2011 and it quickly became popular among farmers and migrant workers (Ye 2019). Its main competitor, Douyin (also known as TikTok in international markets) was launched in 2016, becoming the fastest growing social media platform on the planet. TikTok's massification has been taken up by the government of the United States as a bargaining chip in its trade war with the PRC. Today, short-video apps are a popular social media around

the world. The premise is simple: record a video of yourself of up to sixty seconds, edit it with music and a variety of special effects, and share it with the general public. Consumers of content receive a rolling feed of popular videos but can also subscribe to specific creators or take a glance at uploads happening around them.

Using the option 'around me', I quickly start to recognise places, examine the videos, and meet new people. Scrolling down the feed, I am stunned by the variety of uploads being shared: one worker in the production line, a lady offering jobs in a late-night teleshopping style, a group of migrants coping with the heat in their dormitories, and a group of Sanhe Gods (chapter 5) interviewed by a passer-by about the effects of the last storm in the area. Every now and then I check the local feed to keep track of the videos and the comments, as well as trying to meet content creators for a chat.

Some of the most common videos broadcast by migrant workers are created while working inside factories. Complaints against extended work schedules, often not compensated or at least not according to law, were extremely common, so it was no surprise to find that workers would record themselves working over-hours. He Yong revealed that he was lured into an illegal factory without knowing it: 'Brothers, don't go to small factories, they are all black ones', he says. He and I stayed in touch and eventually met face to face. He had recently come to Shenzhen, at nineteen years of age, after working for a season in Nanning, capital of his native Guangxi province. Yong complained about not being able to find a good place to work since arriving after the Autumn Festival last February because many bigger factories requiring unqualified labour have moved away, confining his options to smaller workplaces. At first he did not suspect his current place of work was an illegal operation because there was a contract, which he showed me on his mobile. On paper, all seemed to be in accordance with the law, with a couple of interesting details. First, the work schedule is fixed at eight hours per day, six days a week, but the working times are between 8:00 and 18:00 (with one hour and fifty minutes of cumulative breaks), after which it does not say 'end of the working day' but 'beginning of extra hours'. Second, the workers are fined 1,000 CNY for chatting, smoking, or carrying a lighter within the factory building during their ten minutes

breaks, but, according to Yong, it takes more than ten minutes to go out, smoke, and come back. In his view, a regular company would not be as harsh as this one, so it must be a 'black factory'. 'It's always like that, so I think if I let other brothers know they will be able to find better places, maybe even taking me with them', he said.

It is almost eight in the evening in a regular working week, and I decide to try the streaming function while cooking dinner at home. I watch a young male migrant from Guizhou, who has just gone live from the factory floor. He is working just a stone's throw away from my place. His video is entitled 'We are all voluntarily doing extra hours here'. From time to time he raised his eyes to look at what people write, e.g. 'how are you still working?', 'do they pay extra hours at your factory?', and 'people from Guizhou are all very hardworking.' He would then answer in a low voice while assembling little electric motors for automatic toys. It was difficult to set up a meeting with him, as he had little time (or will) to spend. Eventually, we managed to meet for dinner. At eighteen years of age, Aqing, an ethnic Yi, is trying to make the best of a difficult situation. He says that good jobs are scarce in Shenzhen, so most migrants have to settle for hard conditions. Moreover, the Yi have more complications in the local labour market, as they are not considered good workers (X. Ma 2018). Aqing says that in his current job he is considered a good worker precisely because he is very diligent and works many extra hours, even unpaid. Additionally, by showing himself online, he helps to fight views that the Yi people are lazy and unruly: 'Many of my followers comment about my hard work; that's very good, as now they know we Yi people are reliable'.

The sense of solidarity in the broadcasts by He Ying and Aqing are present in many of the videos shared by migrant workers. They strive for fairness in treatment and the well-being of the collective idea of migrant workers—whether in general or emphasising a specific ethnic group—which contrasts with another, equally present trend highlighting individual struggles and self-improvement (I return to this in the next subsection).

Stronger tendencies of reification of the representation of migrant workers are uploaded by job-brokers, who are themselves migrant workers. In a video entitled 'my workplace has food, lodging, and girls', I see a young male migrant in the shopfloor. He does not talk, and all one hears is Mando-pop music in the background. The camera moves away, and suddenly dozens of workers are shown performing repetitive tasks in their uniforms. The caption presents a job offer for an electronics factory in Shenzhen. Another video, 'food, lodging, and many, many girls included!', depicts two girls not in company uniform sitting next to working women assembling toys. Just as in the previous video, the description details a job offer, and many people ask in the comments' section whether the factory is hiring, and even whether they accept seventeen-year-old workers.

Against the intentions of organisations like Pepper Tribe, job-brokers usually use women in their videos to attract male migrant workers, reifying women as consumable objects (see Verkerk 2017). At the same time, unemployed migrants complain about the lack of good jobs. The apparent contradiction speaks more about the changing interests and attitudes among new generations of migrants, where ideas of fairness in treatment and recognition have gained more relevance than being unhappy in a factory. In fact, many male migrant workers manifested a desire that involved sexual objectification by declaring that they would join factories with the aim of meeting a potential partner. When that was not possible, they would then leave the place, even if the working conditions were good.

In another video from an electronics factory that supplies a major brand, three female workers fitting local canons of attractiveness are seen showing themselves around the factory (Figure 14). Two of them are recording themselves with their phones, while the third is holding a bunch of cables in her hand, having been interrupted in the middle of her task. The video seems to have been recorded at the end of the workday, as not many workers can be seen in the background. The caption presents a long text describing the job offer:

> '18 CNY per hour, men and women between 18-49 years old. Electronics factory in Shenzhen, very good retention, regular work hours! Main production: electric mops and toothbrushes. Working environment: air-conditioned dormitories and workshop, two shifts. Additional benefits: room and board for 200 CNY per month; additional requirements should be self-sorted. Please note: people with a criminal

> record, people with tattoos, people who have been previously fired are not accepted. Monthly wages are paid on the 7th with equal pay for equal work, salary differences are published on the 25th of every month. Interview: 13:00. Requirements for the interview: physical fitness certificates issued within the last 6 months or a medical examination paid by the employee, and three copies of the identity card. **Except Uyghur and Hui ethnicities, everyone else can apply, you just need to be cultured** (*you wenhua* 有文化).'

There are many videos like this one, offering work in Shenzhen but excluding the so-called 'four big ethnic minorities: Yi, Tibetan, Hui, and Uyghur'. The reasons, according to my interlocutors, relate to the representations of these groups in Chinese society, in which they are linked to criminality, laziness, unruliness, and lack of integration.

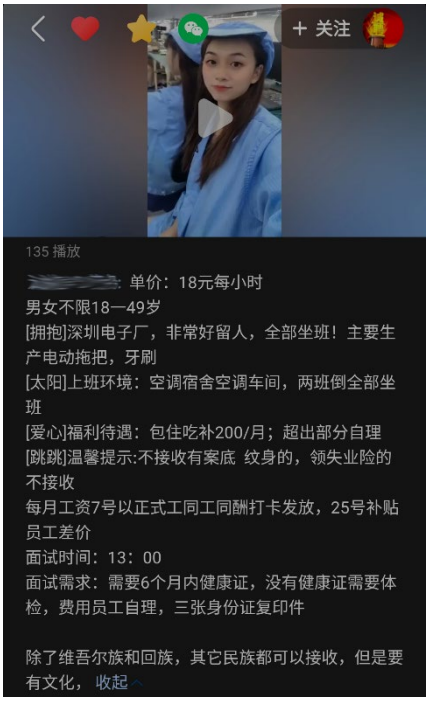

Figure 14. Post on Kuaishou with job description.

With hundreds of views and dozens of comments, the aim of these types of video is to show positive working conditions and happy migrant workers inside clean factories. These optimistic representations fall short of what workers really face. Migrants would leave a factory after a couple of days because of unfulfilled promises. Moreover, most of my interlocutors saw factory work as a stepping-stone towards something better, such as opening their own shop or becoming an internet celebrity (more about this below). The use of arresting female images, which many suspected used professional models hired for marketing purposes, suggests a sexist slant that

favours men over women in the promotion of the available jobs. This is symptomatic of a conundrum, namely that migrants complain about the lack of good jobs while job-brokers use several social media platforms to attract new employees. As representations of labour by companies looking for new employees are essentially unfair and unrealistic, the efforts of migrants to make their diversity visible become more relevant.

In these examples, social media can be an instrument with which to produce solidarities and challenge the representation of migrant workers in society, either by providing knowledge of working conditions or labour rights, or by channelling their voices, thus leaving a testimony of the diversity of the life-worlds that constitute the universe of migrant workers (as in defence of an ethnic identity or in reproducing sexual objectification). This is especially relevant in building collective forms of representation such as class, gender, sexual orientation, fashion, patriotism, or religion across platforms that allow direct interactions and association.

6.3. Re-inventing the self

A large chunk of the practices underlying social media are linked to expressions of individuality—voicing the self. Taking selfies, writing a brief commentary over a news link or making friends jealous with images of one's last holiday trip are well-known, everyday expressions of individuality where matters of collective representation and the production of solidarities might not be a priority. What interests me is how users consciously seek to represent themselves in a specific light, following a trend, performing a stereotype (or resisting it), or reclaiming a higher social status that might not correspond to their conditions offline.

Let us take the example of Xiaoman. A young-looking woman wearing a white chiffon dress, pink high-heels, and a white and gold purse is shown standing in the middle of an urban village. At the foot of the video, she writes: 'Unwilling to be ordinary. Work hard to realise your dreams'. Xiaoman is aesthetically reproducing a female stereotype known as *sajiao* 撒娇, characterised by an almost infantile look and behaviour. The self-objectification of women as *sajiao* emphasises the

weakness of the female, the necessity of a protective and providing man, and a relation of dependence on the partner. These qualities are deemed attractive by men, who actively engage with this type of female user. Women like Xiaoman want to be seen in that light in the hope of finding a male partner. In this case, by performing *sajiao* while also highlighting her non-conformity with being ordinary and pursuing her dreams, Xiaoman was referring to the fact that she did not need to work any longer, as she had recently got married. Yet, in other cases, as with Xiaofeng, who was constantly uploading pictures and videos of herself performing *sajiao*, it was clear that this was just a performance aiding to appear more attractive. Her demeanour behind the screen was completely different: she spoke in a normal voice (unlike the exaggerated baby-like *sajiao* voice of the videos) and was kind and respectful (unlike to the spoiled-child attitude of *sajiao*).

People from different ethnic groups face similar conundrums. In their case, the individual is rejected and objectified by means of stereotypes that hint at a lack of civilisation (*wenming* 文明; Chapter Four). Uyghur women in particular are widely considered to have attractive features and be good dancers. Social media apps are not short of videos or images of Uyghurs singing and dancing, usually met with a positive response from users. A common job for young migrant Uyghurs in Guangdong province is to work as advertising models for e-commerce. The 'foreign' features of the 'Xinjiang people' are sought after by companies that wish to show that their products have an international flair. These models have huge numbers of followers, and they prefer to show an image of modernity that differs from the stereotypes ascribed to their ethnic identity. It was very difficult to get in touch with them. Tn the end, Sardan, a male model with millions of followers on Kuaishou, texted me: 'Just because I am from Xinjiang it does not mean that I need to wear a *doppa* and dance in every video. I am a normal person—I like to take selfies and make content for my followers, original content about fashion and life, not just about Uyghur culture'.

Another popular Uyghur user, who describes himself as a DJ and model living in Guangdong, posts daily videos of himself rapping. Wearing fashionable attire inspired by hip-hop, most of his lyrics are in Xinjiang Chinese, with a few in Uyghur

and the occasional English expression. DJ Ku also uses his Kuaishou platform to teach sentences in the Xinjiang variation of Chinese. His declared goal is to popularise his music and become famous. Dj Ku told me his ethnic identity is not so important to him, but rather his national identity: 'Uyghur, Kazakh, or Yi, we are all Chinese'. He equated this identification with an aspiration for modernity: 'I came to Shenzhen to study at university. Here people are more open-minded, and I feel I can express myself. Shenzhen is very developed and modern: if one works hard, everything is possible. I want to share my music with everyone, not only with people from Xinjiang.' As with Sardan, Dj Ku's goal was not to show that Uyghurs in general can become something beyond the stereotypes, but that they themselves, as individuals, can do so despite being Uyghur.

Hard working conditions and loneliness are ubiquitous aspects of the lives of migrant workers in Shenzhen. While some people can fight these challenges by reinventing the self online, others become subsumed by what Timothy Bewes (2002) called 'the cultural anxiety of late capitalism.' This is more clearly observed in the practice of sharing messages that border on existentialist discourse.[33] One user recorded herself next to a female friend. The latter signals to a male colleague, who suddenly turns his head around while some romantic Mando-pop starts playing in the background. The video description reads: 'You can live the life you want only after you have walked the way you have to walk. Some paths you must walk down alone. This is not loneliness, but choice.' The two girls fit local canons of attractiveness, which might explain the large number of visits, likes, and comments. Another video shows a recently arrived young migrant worker sitting on his suitcase outside a factory. The caption reads: 'Absolutely everything is for money. I could not go to the factory today, but I keep strong. Even if I sleep on the street tonight, I will succeed!'.

The idea of an individual path of struggle and, ultimately, of a reward is something I came across often in the field. What is presented here in short videos was a recurrent topic of conversation with my interlocutors. The man with the suitcase,

[33] In the next chapter, I go more deeply into ideological trends among migrant workers.

Jiangjiang, was only sixteen years old when I met him, and not many factories were prepared to take him. He eventually started working in a restaurant close to my compound. He was obsessed with the life story and teachings of Alibaba's founder, Ma Yun, of whom he had a vast collection of videos in his mobile phone. 'Many people say that we migrant workers can't be successful, but if I work hard, I can accomplish anything', he told me while smoking a cigarette outside during his break. Many like Jiangjiang feel that the only way to success is through individual struggle, in the same way that Ma Yun built his own commercial and financial empire by himself.

I associate these individual representations with the promotion of 'self-reliance' as a poverty-alleviation strategy found across rural China (Boullenois 2020). In this sense, the use of motivational messages, many of them bordering on existentialist discourse, hinders the potential development of a collective consciousness and echoes market-conforming behaviour, with individualism, competition, and self-improvement at its core. This is expressed better by Auntie Zhao, a 46-year-old migrant working for a residential sanitation service, who uses WeChat as an educational tool to challenge stereotypes of rural migrant subjects. 'I didn't finish school, but with WeChat public accounts I can learn so much… it's like a school for me!', said Auntie Zhao while we walked together in a residential compound. She had been working as a cleaning lady in Shenzhen for less than a year and found it useful to acquire new knowledge and skills through reading or listening to audios on her mobile phone. 'Many people believe migrant workers have a low *suzhi* because we come from the countryside, so I learn new things to show that I don't have low *suzhi*', she said proudly.

Some users have become popular figures among migrant workers for their posting of motivational messages: everyone seem to know at least one. For many, these messages provide comfort in circumstances of loneliness and frustration. 'Without us there is no Shenzhen', said a veteran construction worker who now drives people around the Longhua district on his motorbike for a living. He barely carries any cash, as most of his transactions are done through WeChat. 'In the past, we worked hard and got good money to live, but today one can't survive on 2000 yuan (255

EUR) a month in this city'.[34] He thinks that new generations of migrants feel lost and weak, so he writes motivational messages on his WeChat feed. Every new client has to scan his QR code, become friends, and then pay him through the chat. This way he makes sure that he can increase his followers and regular clients, who can book him directly and, as an added benefit, can read his messages on the public feed. He is aware that workers' lives are tough, so he tries to share his messages both online and offline, with his family. 'My daughter works in a logistics company, she works for ten hours and has to commute for up to three hours every day. She has no time to share with her family even though we all live together. As a motorbike driver I can make a bit more money, but it's hardly enough. We migrant workers have to eat a lot of bitterness. That's why I always share positive message on my WeChat and tell my daughter that she is a good mother, and she is doing a good job.'

Migrants like Xiaofeng regularly read these posts in search for motivation. 'Every day we have to fight by ourselves', she tells me while scrolling down on her phone. 'Look, I have talked to this guy, look at what he posted now: "it doesn't matter how hard or how tired you are, you must pull yourself by your bootstraps, you just have to apply yourself and work hard… keep going!"', then she smiled. Even when she is participating in a Christian community that provides her with some spiritual and emotional support, Xiaofeng, like others, felt that these messages were a helpful way of coping with hardships and social duties in a context where (offline) compliments and encouragement were rare.

For many young migrant workers, migrating to Shenzhen is part of a larger plan where hardships are the precondition for achieving something bigger. This involves moving across workplaces, districts, and cities looking for better employment, possibly leading to becoming self-employed in the best of cases. It is therefore difficult to build lasting relationships in the city, thereby increasing the sense of loneliness and of life as a struggle. Ultimately, those who move physically also move

[34] The PRC does not have a national standard for minimum wage, but some cities like Shenzhen have established their own. Since 2018, Shenzhen's minimum wage has remained unchanged at 2,200 RMB (280 EUR) a month or 20.3 RMB (2.5 EUR) per hour, which is the highest across the country (Zeng 2018).

digitally, finding new ways to socialise online, where they can represent themselves as individuals, find words of encouragement, get 'likes', etc. They find that online interactions reduce the awkwardness and anxiety of face-to-face interactions, as they are easier to control. On a different scale, the representation of the self is not only related to matters of individual recognition. In its most radical expression, subjects aspire to improve their material conditions of existence through their own commodification, that is, by becoming or consuming *wanghong*.

6.4. The *wanghong* economy

6.4.1. Producing *wanghong*

Juanjuan uses a number of social media apps on which she posts videos of her daily life as a migrant worker in a large manufacturing company. She came to Shenzhen when she was seventeen years old and, thanks to an introduction by a cousin, quickly managed to join a Taiwanese factory. At times it felt as if she was living through a camera lens, as there were very few things she would not record. 'I have an interesting story to share, I am a female migrant worker from Anhui chasing a dream, I show my life inside Foxconn… everybody knows Foxconn… I open a window for others to see how things are made and what my life is as a worker', she tells me. I was still sceptical about how her videos could bring her fame, yet she seemed to have a clear plan: 'to become *wanghong*, one has to show off, do something interesting so people want to see it. I have an interesting story, like a TV series'. In her videos she depicted herself as a lonely, nostalgic, young and naïve country girl who accepted the routine of work and celebrated the most mundane experiences, like choosing food in the canteen. It was a staggering difference from the ambitious young girl with a thing for new tech that was sitting in front of me.

While most of those recognised as *wanghong* flaunt expensive cars and luxury brands in their media posts—in many cases as part of marketing strategies—several users have reached a modest level of recognition based on their class or ethnic identity, such as the construction worker who started breakdancing among his colleagues or the Uyghur woman dancing to Mando-pop with her Han husband and documenting her life in a multi-ethnic household in rural Hunan. What

Juanjuan lacks in luxury, dancing or landscapes she makes up for with film quality. She has been learning video-editing through freely available material online, and one can easily observe her progress. She is also planning to purchase a new camera to capture better image quality, which is an investment in viewership. 'I think people look at my videos because they are from Foxconn, from a Foxconn girl. I show where we sleep, where we eat, where we work, and what we do... if I am in another factory, then it might not be so interesting'.

Figure 15. Thumbnail from video on Kuaishou with the caption 'wanghong'.

Juanjuan exploits the stereotype of migrant workers as rural subjects to become, eventually, a profitable *wanghong*. Her approach differs greatly from more established online figures, who perform a high-class lifestyle filled with luxury and a variety of locations. Class divisions are certainly at work behind the production of *wanghong*. In this sense, Juanjuan's aspirations are limited by her rather proletarian offer, possibly making it harder to become widely recognised. She is aware that *wanghong* incubators looking for possible e-commerce promoters will not consider her: 'My wish is for an electronics company to ask me to use their

products.' In this way, Juanjuan expected to leave the factory and start a traveling vlog centred on the food of different places.

More successful strategies of *wanghong* production play on the aspirational aspects of material wealth. These users are usually postgraduate university students or the children of wealthy individuals, who either live a high-class lifestyle themselves or manage to stage one. More affluent *wanghong* can get profitable sponsorships to show products or places. They might even host their own popular internet shows, like Cao Yiwen, a female vlogger celebrity and daughter of a wealthy real-estate developer who was recently criticised for her disdain of manual labour while performing a stunt at a construction site owned by her father. She is part of a mass of *wanghong* who profit from the commodification of their own representations of themselves as high-class subjects. A big gap separates this group from the emerging middle-class and often university graduates, using streaming functions to sell products on e-commerce sites. This large group of people prefer to be called KOL (Key Opinion Leaders), replicating forms of interaction seen in South Korea and Japan. In this case, notions of modernity, taste, and higher *suzhi* help to mystify a relation of domination and exploitation where *wanghong* incubators control the representation and economic activity of the promoters. Reification thus appears as a complex economic relation that is inherent to capitalism and is disguised as individual entrepreneurialism.

On a different scale, migrant workers engaging in *wanghong* production, as in the case of Juanjuan, aspire to improve their material conditions of existence through internet fame. They acknowledge that the path to social mobility through labour is difficult and filled with uncertainties. Their online efforts can be seen as a fair bet, just like those of workers engaged in constant job-hopping. In this sense, Juanjuan shares with other, more successful practices of producing *wanghong* an effort at self-reification as a stepping-stone towards becoming profitable. She exercises her agency in attempting to become commodified. This particular aspect of producing *wanghong*, namely self-reification, is symptomatic of a new frontier in the commodification of labour.

6.4.2. Consuming *wanghong*

The extension of the *wanghong* economy does not necessarily start online. Around my neighbourhood in the Longhua district, it was commonly used as a label to advertise products to a young audience. At other times, my interlocutors would describe a place as being of their preference because it was *wanghong*.

One afternoon, Xiaofeng and I went for a walk. Shenzhen's subtropical climate can be difficult to bear in summer months, so after a few blocks we decided to look for a place to have afternoon tea. I was expecting to go into one of the many small tea houses that populate the area, but she had other plans. After a few more minutes walking and sweating profusely due to the high humidity, we arrived at a boba tea shop: 'This place is very popular, it's a *wanghong* boba tea', she said. The shop is called '鹿角巷' (*lu jiao xiang*) or 'The Alley', and it has become a complete sensation in Shenzhen. This Taiwanese chain enjoys a global presence, even opening a store in Berlin in October 2020. The way its black sugar milk tea looks, with the brown sugar syrup dripping dramatically inside the cup, is an iconic image of the brand. Its competitors in the PRC have sought to replicate the effect or, more commonly, to copy the whole business concept, including the brand and the prices. In fact, according to their official website, there is only one official 'The Alley' shop in Shenzhen, though one saw them very often across the city. I am fairly certain that Xiaofeng and I purchased this tea from an unofficial store, though I am not qualified to judge in terms of flavour.

Tea shops, bakeries, bookstores, meal set, etc.—a wide array of things can be labelled *wanghong*. According to some sellers, the idea behind the tag is that it represents the *wanghong* lifestyle, which I have linked to bourgeois capitalist aspirations. Some of the implicit requirements for qualifying are the attractive potential (i.e. being colourful or cute looking) and its trendiness (i.e. fitting contemporary preferences). In many cases, they are domestic alternatives to things that are already popular in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan or Hong Kong, such as the perceived cuteness of Japanese food preparations, or the aesthetic of South Korean

bakeries or Taiwanese and Hong Kongese tea shops. Fashion is also influenced by this circuit.

Through conspicuous consumption, migrants can become part of these aspirations for bourgeois capitalist modernity. Xiaofeng's attitude is representative among migrant workers, who are engaged in geographical mobility in the search for modernity. In this sense, the consumption of *wanghong* integrates her into a larger system of representations in which she shares the same imaginary as those with higher incomes.

6.4.3. A Materialist approach to the *wanghong* economy

The characteristics of the *wanghong* economy change across space and class. What scholars and journals have hitherto described relates mostly to experiences of online self-commodification among university students, small producers, and young people from wealthy families. For migrant workers in the northern districts of Shenzhen, *wanghong* is an aspiration related to a reified idea of modernity. Attempts at self-commodification are rarely successful: in fact, none of the people I met who were trying to make it became *wanghong*, and they probably never will. The main reason lies in market bias: as *wanghong* becomes more dependent on sales of fashion and cosmetics, those subjects that represent a high-class lifestyle have more credibility than those that do not.

Veteran migrant workers are sceptical of the *wanghong* lifestyle. According to Auntie Zhao: 'It is entertaining to make videos or take pictures and share them, but that is not a job. They spend so much money in trying to become *wanghong*, they think then they will be rich, but I don't understand how that is possible… how a person can be rich from Kuaishou or Douyin… if it's not a business or hard work, I don't know how it can be.' Auntie Zhao is critical of the naivety of new generations who refuse to work hard and spend their parents' money. She tells me about a woman providing creative make-up tutorials on short-video apps: 'She is all day long there, putting on make-up, talking about products… maybe the companies give her products to sell now, but before she had to buy them herself'. Many interlocutors

shared Auntie Zhao's opinion that *wanghong* aspirations are too volatile, and only hard work and investment in tangible goods was the way to build wealth.

Becoming *wanghong* is an individual initiative. Users must reify themselves to become sellable and profitable products. One way of doing this is to perform something unique that makes one stand out, like the breakdancing construction workers or the woman working in bucolic landscapes. The most common way, however, involves depicting oneself as living a capitalist bourgeois lifestyle, conveying a sense of cosmopolitanism, modernity, and knowledge about fashion. I use the word 'bourgeois' quite literally, as users in Shenzhen are usually university graduates (many following postgraduate studies) who have travelled abroad or use one of the many replicas of European towns around Shenzhen as a background to convey an image of bourgeois Europeanness. Once they grow their followers, an incubator might select them for their programme. The incubator provides capital, training, a studio, a business plan, and technological support to increase the user's profitability. As the aim is to sell products, Taobao directly provides a platform on which users can interact directly with their followers. This is different from the short-video apps, where interactions are asynchronous and take the form of comments. Usually, the incubators help in the building of a Taobao store, where followers can buy the products promoted by the user and then the profits are shared, half for the incubator, half for the user. Seen in this way, the *wanghong* economy is not much different from other practices of telemarketing. However, in this case what is being sold is not only a series of clothing and cosmetic items, but also the reified persona that offers them.

At this level, the individual becomes commodified through a process of reification. This involves performing a *wanghong* persona, as with Juanjuan showing herself to be a migrant worker with existentialist thoughts, or more explicitly, the middle-class postgraduate student strategically placing products on pictures of herself in a luxury shopping centre. But *wanghong* as an idea can also be reified and consumed. This is the dimension I wish to include in a materialist characterisation of the *wanghong* economy.

Many shops offer *wanghong* versions of their products. A meal-set, a variety of boba tea, an ice-cream combination, a type of craft beer, or a category of clothing—these are all possible offers under the *wanghong* label. This is different from the less explicit, popular use of *wanghong* to denote a particular store, where it could be translated as 'trendy' or 'popular'. In the case of these products, there nothing essentially different that would distinguish them from others. The chicken burger and fries set I used to order from a cheap local fast-food restaurant had one more product than the large set. Similarly, the *wanghong* boba tea at the tea shop around the corner from my residence had no extra-special ingredient but rather involved the performance of the tea brewer mixing the beverage. These products differ from those offered on Taobao in that they are not linked to a *wanghong* subject. Rather, they are aimed at the aspiring sentiment of young people for the *wanghong* lifestyle. In this sense, the underlying relationship between the subject and its reification is reduced to a thing, a commodity. Through consumption, a migrant can display their aspirational contemporaneity (cf. Çağlar 2018) with those subjects that produce *wanghong* through their own reification.

All things considered, the *wanghong* economy should not be reduced to an online experience. It is a new frontier of commodification of labour that can, in itself, be reified and consumed. As a form of commodified labour, the *wanghong* economy is far from being an emancipatory alternative for migrant workers. Instead, it traps them in a spiral of domination and exploitation, of self-commodification and consumption, with unstable financial sources.

6.5. Conclusion

Social media is another space inhabited by migrant workers, with similar tensions about the politics of representation. The digital migration that accompanies geographical mobility has produced new spaces of collective solidarity. A diversity of voices channels the interests and experiences of different migrant identities, seeking to improve the material conditions of existence of its members in their own way. These claims challenge the stereotype of migrant workers as having low *suzhi* and being naturally preconditioned to perform hard labour. Other claims for

recognition question ethnic stereotypes that view the Uyghur, Tibetan, Hui, and Yi peoples as lazy, unruly, or criminal.

Additionally, social media offers the possibility of reinventing the way a person presents him- or herself in society. The lives of new generations of migrant workers are crossed by loneliness and unfulfilled goals. By using social media, they can meet new people and learn about others like them. They can also pursue claims to establish their own individuality. Many people seek to share their stories and show the challenges involved in striving for success, while others practice forms of self-reification in aiming to become internet celebrities.

The *wanghong* economy represents a highly reified form of sociality: first, because those pursuing *wanghong* aim to become profitable by self-commodification; second, because calling things *wanghong* is a common practice of economic speculation by claiming that the product or place conceals ideas of bourgeois capitalist modernity; and third, because it mystifies the essential class and ethnic chasms that mediate it. A materialist approach reveals that *wanghong* is nothing but an impossible aspiration that traps hundreds of migrants in spirals of self-reification. The whole structure is supported by very feeble financial foundations. This so-called new frontier of the internet industry operates in trends. As a result, celebrities come and go, as do the investments of *wanghong* incubators and companies seeking to place their products. Instead of being a way for migrants to improve their social status and material conditions of existence, pursuing a *wanghong* lifestyle is just a waste of their hard-earned money.

Behind the illusion of living in a world of individual opportunities, the reality is that very few people manage to live out of their fame on the internet. These cases showed how the (self)representation of migrant workers relate to issues that are inherent to the capitalist economy. Challenging the stereotypes of migrant subjects as predisposed to be exploited is a way to fight for better and fairer treatment. Of course, this is not the case for all migrant workers, and while many of the cases above represent a sort of call for positive treatment, different levels of self-reification

are also practiced. This opens up the possibilities for a variety of ideological expressions that are the focus of the next chapter.

VII. Hegemony and Subaltern 'Conceptions of the World'

7.1. Introduction

The previous chapters have addressed a variety of expressions of difference, otherness, and exclusion underlying the current situation of domestic migrant workers in the PRC. In this final ethnographic chapter, I bring to the fore a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary Chinese society, namely the Party and its hegemony-building efforts. Without completely renouncing the language and ideas of Marxism-Leninism, the post-Mao CPC has toned down the revolutionary and class-emancipating aspects of its ruling ideology while enhancing a set of traditional values that stress obedience and respect for social hierarchies. More recently, Xi Jinping has implemented a theoretical corpus that updates Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the new domestic and global contexts. Given the pervasive nature of the Party's discourse, I focus on the ideological tensions between hegemonic discourses—stressing ethnic unity, national rejuvenation, and the realisation of the Chinese dream—and how they are received and redefined by domestic migrant workers. I build on Gramsci's notions of hegemony (*egemonia*), common sense (*senso comune*), and conceptions of the world (*concezione del mondo*) to characterise the tensions between the state and domestic migrant workers.

In a widely circulated article in the Party's ideological and theoretical journal *Qiushi* of April 2019, Xi Jinping warns that the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was due to historical nihilism after Stalin, ideological chaos, and the Party's inability to lead its cadres and the army (2019). These remarks, originally made in a speech on his first visit to Shenzhen in 2013, have been the argument underlying the Party's emphasis of its 'ideological work' (*yishi xingtai gongzuo* 意识形态工作) as a critical task ensuring the leadership of the Communist Party. The changes in political language and political economy after Mao's death led many to predict that the CPC would abandon socialist ideas (Blanchette 2020). Even though intellectuals and party leaders have seen their work as belonging to the sinification

of Marxism, under Xi Jinping there has been a more explicit appeal to study the legacies of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, practice socialist values, and highlight the role of the CPC in Chinese history. I see this emphasis on 'ideological work' as part of the CPC's 'hegemonic transformation' (Hui 2018), that is, its implementation of domination by securing the people's active consent, or in Gramsci's term, *egemonia*. Although Gramsci has not had a strong influence on the CPC's ideological development, his works have been translated and studied by specialists of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Central Party School (S. Tian 2017). The concept of *egemonia* has been translated as *lingdaoquan* 领导权, which brings together the ideas of leadership and authority. In recent years, Xi Jinping (2017) has made use of this concept in the sense of 'ideological leadership/*egemonia*'.

As Kate Crehan (1997, 24) has rightly pointed out, Gramsci's hegemony should not be reduced to purely ideological domination, as it proposes a multidimensional approach to the whole problem of power. From the perspective of migrant workers, several studies have examined the changing representations and new identities of subaltern working subjects (Lee 2019; J. Li 2015; Sum 2017; W. Sun 2018; Simeng Wang 2020). They reveal the impact of the process of marketisation on the disempowerment and disarticulation of the socialist proletariat. Other scholars have focused on emerging patterns of organisation and activism. Most recently, Ngai Pun (2020b) has suggested that new forms of working-class discourse and student-worker solidarity are evidence of a 'political awakening'. Her publication was well-received among specialists who saw similarities with other labour movements, while also highlighting the specifics of the phenomenon (J. Chan 2020b; Pia 2020; Bruckermann 2020; Simeng Wang 2020; Karl 2020b; Pun 2020a). In any case, scholars of Chinese labour agree that domestic migrant workers have developed their own forms of resistance and, in some cases, attempted to build larger solidarities (H. Ren, Z. Li, and Friedman 2016; J. Chan 2020a; J. Chan, Selden, and Pun 2020). Instead of opposing state and society as well defined entities, Gramsci proposes a broad and all-inclusive concept of *senso commune*, defined as 'a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, [where] one can find anything that one likes' (Gramsci 1971, 422). Common sense is not a consistent and well-articulated set of

beliefs; rather, it may contain various and contradictory elements linked to tradition, state power, religion, popular beliefs, and so forth. In his logic, subaltern subjects approach common sense from their own 'conceptions of the world', which are ideological expressions informed by language, folklore, practical activity, religion, etc. And when a group of people achieve a coherent conception of the world, then the potential for the critical transformation of the prevailing common sense is opened (Wainwright 2010, 509).

In this chapter I explore the production and reproduction of hegemonic discourses and contrast them with other, more or less coherent 'conceptions of the world' among different groups of domestic migrant workers. Anchored in Gramscian terms, I show how central state discourses—e.g. core socialist values, ethnic unity, or socialism—leave a 'sedimentation of "common sense"' (Gramsci 1971, 326n5) that is signified by subaltern practices in different directions. At the national level, state-sponsored discourse is filled with tensions and contradictions that make it murky and indeterminate. Therefore, social action claiming loyalty or opposition to state ideology can take multiple and disparate forms. These subaltern expressions are not circumscribed by any single institution or closed system of thought, but are rather spontaneous social trends that group themselves around communities and achieve visibility through 'working-class media cultures' (W. Sun 2015). In this chapter I focus on four influential and widely spread subaltern conceptions of the world: ethnonationalism, neo-Maoism, Christianity, and what I call 'proletarian existentialism.'

7.2. Hegemony and its limits

Socialist discourse is ubiquitous in the social and political life of Chinese citizens, from school textbooks to banners with slogans hung up around a neighbourhood, to the latest production in the national creative industries and even little signs at public toilets. The intensification of 'ideological work' under Xi Jinping, who received his doctoral degree from Tsinghua University's graduate programme in Marxist theory and political education in 2002 (Zhongguo Gongchandang Xinwenwang Ziliao 中国共产党新闻网资料 2019), has been the focus of much debate (competing views are Bougon 2018; K. Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018).

During his administration, Xi has led campaigns to study, practice, and generally reinvigorate Marxism both within and outside the Party. As part of the 200th anniversary celebrations of the birth of Karl Marx, Xi held a special conference dedicated to his life and work (2018), the country sent a two-metre tall statue of Karl Marx that was installed in Trier, and a seven-part animated series centred on the lives of young and dashing comrades Karl and Friedrich called 'The Leader: Karl Marx' (*lingfengzhe: ka'er·makesi* 领风者：卡尔·马克思) (Figure 16) was well received by domestic audiences.

Figure 16. Promotional image for 'The Leader'.

For Gramsci, hegemony is a practice that combines force and consent in a reciprocally balancing fashion, without the latter prevailing over the former. The key is to deploy force as based on the consent of the majority, represented in the 'organs of public opinion', e.g. newspapers and associations (Gramsci 1971, 80). In this framing, consent emphasises human practice, especially in the intellectual and moral orders, rather than thinking (Gramsci 1971, 388). According to Riccardo Ciavolella (2018), Gramsci's concern with the history of subaltern groups allows anthropologists to 'appreciate subaltern people's resistances as a manifestation of their *agency* and of their criticism of power systems, dominant classes, and modes

of exploitation,' as well as 'to question their actual capacities to turn into effective mobilisations for emancipation—to become "historical subjects"' (2018, 50). In this way, the researcher ponders how the dominant classes build their hegemony without disregarding the agency of subaltern subjects in either joining or challenging the hegemonic project.

Understanding that economic development alone cannot guarantee consent, the CPC has put forward narratives that highlight the position of the Party in China's struggle against foreign forces and the building of a modern country. In its more radical expressions, strategies of 'sinicization' (*zhongguohua* 中国化) have been implemented to dominate over Islamic religious expressions (M. S. Brown and O'Brien 2020; Kuei-min Chang 2018; Erie 2018), while strong patriotic calls have been made to combat 'Westernisation' in higher education (Xiaojun and Alsudairi 2021). At a more general scale, the Party has sought to establish itself as a spiritual force (K. Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018) by promoting 'Core Socialist Values' (*shehui zhuyi de hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义的核心价值观). These twelve concepts—first presented by Hu Jintao in his report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the CPC (2012), at the end of which Xi Jinping took office as new leader of the party and the country—populate street walls and toilet stalls, even becoming the theme of televised documentaries, discussions, and quiz shows. These consensus-building efforts to consolidate the CPC's dominance attempt to secure the active consent of the population, a critical step in building hegemony (Gramsci 1971, 80n49; Gow 2017; Hui 2018).

As a bastion of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Shenzhen crystalises the meanings of 'national rejuvenation' and the 'Chinese Dream'. As in other places across the country, political propaganda is part of daily life. During my frequent evening walks around my neighbourhood in Longhua district, I used to stop at a large, beautiful park along People's Road. During the day, stroller-pushing grandparents could be seen walking around or sitting and chatting with one another. An area set aside for sports, with all sorts of machines, was usually occupied by young men and women trying to keep fit. Day or night, I hardly ever saw the basketball court empty. At about seven in the evening, right after dinner and when

the heat started to wind down, the whole park became a big stage for amateur dancing troupes, the senior residents' preferred activity. A tango corner was set up outside the bank branch in front of the park. The biggest open area was taken over by a rather elaborate group performing what they called traditional Chinese dances, with bright garments and hand flairs. In the passage between them and the exercise machines, a large group of older women followed their 'teacher', who was drafting a choreography to the tune of kitsch mandopop hits. At the northern entrance, a long queue of people were marching around to the sound of pop music, moving their hands in a coordinated fashion. These last two were the easiest ones for me to join, as their choreographies were not so elaborate and seemed to focus more on physical exercise.

This was the routine at the 'Core Socialist Values Park', a place filled with large posters describing each concept, with constant mentions of the Chinese Dream and National Rejuvenation. If Karl Marx said once that in a communist society people could explore any activity of their interest, 'to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have in mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic' (Marx and Engels 1998, 53), Chinese ideologists could then claim that under Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, one can work during the day and dance after dinner, without ever becoming proletarian or a dancer.

The twelve Core Socialist Values are: wealth and strength or prosperity (*fuqiang* 富强), democracy (*minzhu* 民主), civilisation or civility (*wenming* 文明), harmony (*hexie* 和谐), freedom (*ziyou* 自由), equality (*pingdeng* 平等), justice (*gongzheng* 公正), rule of law (*fazhi* 法治), patriotism (*aiguo* 爱国), industriousness or dedication (*jingye* 敬业), integrity (*chengxin* 诚信), and friendliness (*youshan* 友善). Michael Gow has pointed that these concepts are bundled into three different categories, pertaining to duties towards the state (*guojia* 国家), society (*shehui* 社会), and citizenship (*gongmin* 公民). Moreover, these relations are linked to Fei Xiaotong's identification of Chinese culture as a 'differential mode of association', i.e. a pattern of concentric circles that connect the individual with increasing social levels

through different, albeit clear-cut, moral demands on each person in each specific context (2017, 105).[35]

Figure 17. Core Socialist Values outside a factory in Longhua.

These spiritual campaigns are managed by the CPC Propaganda Department (*zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui xuanchuanbu* 中国共产党中央委员会宣传部) and the Office of the Central Guiding Committee for Building Spiritual Civilisation (*zhongyang jingshen wenming jianshe zhidao weiyuanhui bangongshi* 中央精神文明建设指导委员会办公室), making use of traditional and new means of communication. The portal wenming.cn, administered jointly by these two institutions, integrates a variety of propaganda efforts that range from theoretical

[35] Fei Xiaotong established a difference between the Western 'organisational' (*tuantigeju* 团体格局) and the Chinese 'differential' (*chaxugeju* 差序格局) modes of association. The former was characterised by relatively autonomous organisations, with well-recognised social boundaries: i.e., the Western family usually refers to a man, a woman, and children. By contrast, the Chinese concept of the family has certain ambiguities that can convey a whole range of meaning, from small household units to large relations of kinship to the whole nation (X. Fei 2018, 22–24).

articles on *Qiushi* 求实 [36] to social commentary and posters to vlogging and an app dedicated to the study of Xi Jinping's oeuvre, called *Xuexi Qiangguo* 学习强国.[37]

The Core Socialist Values Park is evidence of the diverse forms in which hegemonic discourses are transmitted. Chatting between rest breaks with the dancing troupe members, one can easily hear positive comments about China's global rise, especially from the older population. For them, prosperity is not an abstract concept but a reality of material improvement throughout their life experiences. Similarly, they defend their freedoms against those in 'the West': 'as long as one is not looking for trouble, one is free', was a common expression. The example of Hong Kong was used to show how the pervasive western idea of freedom is seen as irresponsible, as a seventy-year-old migrant from my residential compound remarked: 'Those kids in Hong Kong would be better off in a more egalitarian and harmonious society: there is no point in protesting and using violence against China when the West is their problem'. Having grown up in rural Hunan, Mr Zha's words conveyed a sense of celebration and optimism for his country's great transformation. He moved to Shenzhen in the 1980s and worked for several years assembling electronics for a Japanese company. With the money he saved, he bought a taxi which is now driven by his son. Mr Zha is in a comparatively privileged position, as he is aware that his life path would be difficult to replicate today. He worked in a 'good factory' that respected its workers and managed to acquire a Shenzhen *hukou* when it was still possible for rural migrants. Younger people in the crowd appreciate the country's

[36] *Qiushi* is the Communist Party's most important forum for political theory. Xi Jinping has been a steady contributor of 'important documents' to the bi-monthly journal since 2012. *Qiushi* has been published by the Central Party School since 1988. It was preceded by *Hongqi* 红旗 (Red Flag), which ran from 1958 to June 1988. The name is a contraction of *shishi qiushi* 实事求是, 'seek truth from the facts', a phrase of Mao Zedong that was used by Deng Xiaoping to delineate his 'pragmatist' approach to socialism, despite departing from what was considered the 'ideological' approach of the previous leadership.

[37] The app was developed by the Alibaba group and launched on New Year's Day 2019, quickly becoming a matter of analysis and debate. After registration (linked to a mobile phone number in the PRC), the user can access daily reports on Xi Jinping's activities, speeches, breakdowns of his main concepts, and other related materials, which he or she can then test on a in-app quiz. It provides a score based on app usage and correct answers which are then ranked among all users. High scorers are eligible for prizes, such as cinema tickets, books, or discounts in shops. Fears of a personality cult have been raised by observers who see a resonance with Mao's 'little red book'. The name, *Xuexi Qiangguo* 学习强国 (Study and Strengthen the Country) plays with the word for 'study', *xuexi* 学习, in which the second character is also Xi Jinping's surname. Therefore, *Xuexi Qiangguo* can also be read as 'Study Xi to Strengthen the Country'.

development and show a strong sense of patriotism, but they are also anxious about the shrinking employment opportunities. The biggest concern is that many factories are moving away, while the services and technology sectors expand their operations in the city, posing new challenges for 'low-end migrant workers', who are finding it increasingly difficult to make a living. For Mr Zha's daughter-in-law, who works as a cashier in a supermarket, the reason for these shortcomings lies with the country's large population, not other political or economic issues.

Figure 18. Core Socialist Values Park.

A great number of domestic migrant workers are avid readers. It is common to find them by the dozen reading historical novels in the hallways of bookstores or catching up with the news on the big staircase in Shenzhen's city library. This is where I met Chen Yi, a construction worker in his forties, who spent most of his free time in the library. He was working on one of the new high-rises around the corner. I could see the spots of dried concrete on his worn clothes, now a permanent fixture. I was struck by the absence of protective gear: his straw hat, sandals, arms

and legs were all flaked with construction residue. Mr Chen came from Sichuan to Guangdong more than two decades ago and has spent most of the last decade in Shenzhen. He knew all the other migrants reading in the library by name. They did not talk much among themselves, at least not when they were reading, but exchanged a few words when Mr Chen arrived at noon, and then again before or after his shift. He complemented his lunch with the newspapers: the *Shenzhen Evening News* for local coverage, the *Global Times*, a sensationalist nationalist tabloid, for global news, and, if possible, a literary magazine. In the evenings, Mr Chen read books. At the time we met, he was reading *bainian gudu* 百年孤独—Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'Cien Años de Soledad'—a recommendation he got from reading a report on Mo Yan's literary influences.

Mr Chen shared with other migrants a sense of uncertainty about his future. Unable to stay in Shenzhen, he looked forward to returning to his village, opening a shop and living with his family in the large house he has built over the years. As is usually the case, his family was scattered, with his wife in neighbouring Dongguan and his daughter in Chengdu, where he hopes she can attend university. Mr Chen has seen improvements in his material conditions of existence, but also feels that nothing has come easy to him. 'We always have to *eat bitterness*,' he said. 'It's so difficult to improve one's situation and so easy to lose everything; the older I get, the harder it is to find a good job,' he said, voicing a persistent concern of older generations of migrant workers. While they live with a constant fear of losing what has been earned, the younger migrants worry about the impossibility of sending remittances home, the challenges of finding a wife without owning a residence, or the pressure to be married before being labelled a 'leftover woman' (*shengnü* 剩女). Many workers take extra shifts or a second job to increase their incomes, stifling their chances of meeting a suitable partner, while in the case of established families, women feel much more cautious about having children. Many women confessed that they gave birth only to silence the demands of their families, not in the sense of not wanting to procreate, but rather of feeling unable to cover the emotional and material needs of childcare. In most cases, this perpetuates a cycle that divides urban production from rural reproduction of labour, with children growing up with their grandparents while their parents work in the city.

However, the bitterness of life did not weaken their patriotic sentiments. Either in the shopfloor, dancing in the park, on the train home for the holidays, or reading in the library, most domestic migrant workers felt a sense of pride over New China's role in the world. Their stories reveal a tension between predicting a better future for the country, which has materialised in the rapid transformation of their surroundings, and the uncertain employment prospects. These frictions are also found in Stephan Feuchtwang's (2004) distinction between capitalist and state territorialisation in place-making.[38] In this sense, national identification relates to state forms of territorialisation that are essentially Han *minzu* and male-centric, where migrant workers are part of a larger narrative of Chineseness and national development, while local place-making among migrant workers is directly affected by capitalist territorialisation, with limited state resistance to the commodification of labour and land (Chuang 2020).

The narrative of the Core Socialist Values is well received as a remedy against the 'moral corruption' of commodification, 'National Rejuvenation' (*guojia fuxing* 国家复兴) speaks to an acquired knowledge of a common history as a people and the wrongdoings perpetrated by imperialist powers, and the 'Chinese Dream' translates into an incorporation of their own wishes for a better life into a collective political project. In the great scheme of things, every citizen has a role to play in a differential system of relations, recalling Fei Xiaotong's *chaxugeju* order. In part, this explains why many Han migrant workers did not see any problem with forced re-education centres in Xinjiang, and many of them praised such measures, to the extent that they have been covered by domestic news sources. The underlying logic is that those who fail to play their part must be guided and, given the 'civilisational' dimensions of these matters, the Han way of life, as the 'centripetal nucleus' of Chinese-ness, is assumed to be the acme of civilisation.

[38] Against Hardt and Negri's view that localisation refers only to the productions of identity and difference within the global capitalist empire, Feuchtwang argues that 'all territorial place-making is a negotiation with and a reappropriation of state and capitalist territorialisations' (2004, 14). He also acknowledges that 'different cosmologies and different ways of using and sharing wealth channel and modify the capitalist commodity and its territorialisations' (2004, 14).

The ideological work performed by the CPC over time has left behind a sedimentation of 'common sense'. Political slogans simultaneously project the hegemonic project and absorb and co-opt social dissatisfaction. Most explicitly, the three-tiered structure of the Core Socialist Values connects individual moral tenets (such as patriotism, industriousness, trustworthiness, and friendliness) with social relations (freedom, equality, justice, rule of law) and national relations (prosperity, democracy, civilisation, harmony). Challenges to patriotism or industriousness, as in the case of ethnic or workers' unrest, can justify limitations of access to the larger categories. In a similar fashion, ideas of the 'Chinese Dream' or 'National Rejuvenation' are vague enough to contain individual desires as well as national policy objectives. Hegemonic transformations are far from being a one-way street. Their limits are negotiated in common-sense terms, where even those migrant workers who feel they represented by the hegemonic project manifest reservations connected to their experiences of place-making. A different set of tensions emerges when groups of migrant workers critically reflect on common sense through their own conceptions of the world, which involves a transformation of the prevailing common sense and their own ideology, as well as of the social relations and material conditions around them.

7.3. Subaltern conceptions of the world

By pursuing a 'hegemonic transformation' (Hui 2018), the CPC has established mechanisms that absorb and restructure social demands in a way that promotes active consent. Far from cancelling the agency of migrant workers, they rearticulate their defensive forms of resistance. As subaltern groups that are subject to the initiative of others, their articulations can seek to depart from or integrate more fully into economic or political systems, depending on any particular group's conceptions of the world. In the cases I present below, we find expressions that take the official discourse of patriotism as Han chauvinism (ethnonationalism), that summon up the PRC's revolutionary legacies to question current social and economic trends (neo-Maoism), that come to terms with a hopeless reality that is economically stagnant and politically repressive (proletarian existentialism), or that turn to God and the community of underground churches against moral degradation (Christianity).

7.3.1. Ethnonationalism

Ethnonationalism as an expression of patriotism does not pertain only to the Han majority. Stevan Harrel (1996) has shown how members of minority *minzu* on China's ethnic frontiers participate in the civilising project. More recently, Guangtian Ha (2020) has described efforts to safeguard a 'lost sense of Han-ness' by parts of the Hui population. In general, this includes subscribing to the view of scales of civilisation, where the civilised group establishes paternalistic relations with those who are conceived as less civilised. This is complemented by notions of *suzhi*—an inherent human quality that determines life outcomes—and practices of '*suzhi* education' and sinification to maintain the harmony of the great family of the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族; see chapter 3). Understood in this way, Chineseness has a pervasive effect on how Chinese people of all *minzu* conduct their lives.

Xiaohu, a young 24-year-old Hui female worker in a tyre factory, argued that 'it is not due to the political system that Chinese people lack freedom, it's the people.' She blamed Han society in particular for its moral imperatives. Filial piety (*xiaodao* 孝道) is usually mentioned in this context, often being situated within the reified system of ethical and hierarchical relations known as Confucianism. In this logic, reverence to one's parents and educators is also extended to the national authorities, but not necessarily to the local authorities, who are commonly targeted by popular discontent. 'Every time we talk on the phone, my mum asks me to go back, but I don't pay any attention,' said Xiaohu. Not wanting to upset her mother, Xiaohu avoids conversations about her life choices, about not having a boyfriend, let alone a husband, about not wanting children or being unable to send more money. With all which that entails, precarious domestic labour migration can offer a sense of emancipation for non-conformist subaltern subjects. These claims are not obscure but a commonplace, especially among young women and LGBTQ subjects who come to Shenzhen to build a new life, a theme gaining coverage in films, novels, and even non-fiction books popularised in both China and the wider world.

When exploring the more political dimensions around these private pressures, Xiaohu was straightforward: 'the Han have been taught to follow a particular lifestyle that is very materialistic and devoted to obedience,' a characterisation of Han society as a 'society of control'. Growing up in a rural area of Shaanxi province, Xiaohu's biggest wish was to see the world. After joining her parents in Xi'An, where they did odd jobs, Xiaohu entered a vocational school. After graduation, she and two other friends bought train tickets to Shenzhen. 'I like it here, I feel I can be myself', said Xiaohu while we were looking over the 'Happy Seacoast', an artificial beach surrounded by shops and restaurants adjacent to Shenzhen Bay. In this global metropolis, Xiaohu has come to terms with her own identity: she is not a practising Muslim like her parents, she does not eat pork because she is a vegetarian, and she is a lesbian, currently dating a Han woman she met through an online dating app. 'I don't go back to Shaanxi anymore,' Xiaohu said angrily. As an only child, she has faced constant pressure to marry, procreate, and fit into an ideal of virtuous womanhood (S. Jackson, J. Liu, and Woo 2008, 24). Against the conservativism of her family, Xiaohu's experience in Shenzhen has been liberating, albeit with some caveats. Since she is classified as Hui *minzu*, employers and colleagues make assumption about her religiosity and eating behaviour: 'It is like a label. People think that I don't eat pork, or that I'm a Muslim. But I am not! It is so hard to make friends with Han people… they do not trust other lifestyles. I am not Hui enough for my family, and I am not Han enough for my friends… Why is it important anyway?'

Xiaohu's case illustrates the ethnic tensions underlying claims to Chineseness. As shown by Guangtian Ha (2020), many Hui who seek the recognition of the Han majority face the structural paradox that they speak for themselves while 'simultaneously speaking *against* themselves' (2020, 313). From the perspective of her Han peers, she fails to fit into the definition of Hui otherness that justifies the civilising project (Harrell 1996). For her Hui family, conversely, she does not satisfy her the moral obligations as a daughter that would make her acceptable in the eyes of the majority group. The experiences of Sinophone Hui Muslims in claiming Chineseness differs from those other minority *minzu*. In the case of contentious interethnic relations, such as those that occur in Xinjiang, ethnic boundary markers

are used by the Uyghur to emphasise real or imagined differences (Bellér-Hann 2002, 59), while claims to Chineseness are imposed by the Han ruling elite in forms that have increasingly been viewed within the frame of colonial settler capitalism (A. Anderson and Byler 2019; Grose 2019). In any case, the civilising project of Chineseness conveys a particular understanding of Hanness, one that articulates forms of ethnonationalism that either celebrate it or pit it against other ethnic identities.

In another dimension of ethnonationalism, Chineseness is positioned as being in a constant struggle with foreign powers, most prominently Japan and the United States. Many Chinese citizens resent Japan's invasion of their country and their brutal tactics, which are the subject of hundreds of stories, movies, and television shows. This does not reduce the popularity of Japanese entertainment, food, or commodities, which enjoy an important place in contemporary Chinese society. Yet, there are those who would reject anything coming from 'little Japan' on grounds of national pride. This came as a surprise to me, as I had not seen any strong anti-Japanese sentiment since 2012, as did the fact that someone like Xiaofeng—a young female migrant worker who did not finish school and was oblivious to geopolitics—would have such a strong reaction against Japanese products.

I had been accompanying Xiaofeng to her underground Christian church for some time. The church had organised a lucky draw, and this was the first time Xiaofeng, a neophyte, would be part. She sought my advice on where to purchase gifts, so I considered taking her to the Muji store at the Jiufang shopping centre. It was just a twenty minutes' walk from her workplace, but she took some convincing to walk there. December in Shenzhen is delightful; the temperature averages a pleasant eighteen degrees, the humidity is much more bearable, and precipitation is rare. On the way to the shop, Xiaofeng asked me about Christmas in my country and told me that she had been rehearsing some songs and sketches with other members of the church.

Many Chinese lifestyle shops have followed the example of Muji in offering innovative and trendy designs at more affordable prices than the Japanese company.

Upon arrival, Xiaofeng started browsing with great excitement, tried on some coats, closely examined a pair of boots, and then suddenly stopped at the cosmetics counter. She stayed there for a long time while I strolled around. Xiaofeng could not identify any of the brands she knew, so she gave me a sign to come closer and asked me in a low voice, 'What is this brand?' 'Muji, a famous Japanese company', I answered. 'Japanese? I don't like Japan', she exclaimed. Her lips tightened as she frowned. Xiaofeng hastily grabbed the contents in her basket—an eye liner, two types of red lipstick, and a bottle of toning water—and put them back on top of the display. She was not going to buy any products here, not for herself nor for the lucky draw. I apologised, arguing that I did not know her feelings about it. 'It's OK, I just prefer domestic products (*guochan* 国产), they are better', she said.

I teased her by suggesting that foreign products could be more interesting as a gift, as, at least in this situation, they were of better quality. She gave me a disapproving look and retorted: 'I'm sure they are all made in China, it's only the brand that is from Japan.' Before coming to Shenzhen, Xiaofeng assembled electronics in a factory in neighbouring Dongguan. She understood little of the technology in her hands, but knew that Chinese workers in Chinese factories built and assembled products for foreign brands. We moved to another store, a bookshop offering Chinese-made products, tea, and free gift-wrapping services. She was ecstatic and bought two gifts for the lucky draw (one on my name, for which she refused to let me pay on the grounds that I was her guest), one for her church 'sister' (*jiemei* 姐妹), one for the pastor, and another for an undisclosed friend (later I learned that it was for me). By then, our stomachs were growling, so I treated her to some delicious Shanghai-style soup dumplings around the corner. Between slurps, we talked more about China and Japan. Xiaofeng mentioned the Nanjing massacre and how Japanese soldiers raped women and decapitated babies, but she did not know when these events happened. Her knowledge was more emotional than historical, informed by series and films. In her view, being Chinese is a source of pride that must be defended against threats; that included favouring domestic brands over Japanese ones.

This type of discourse is frequent in news coverage and resonates with the tone of official foreign affairs' spokespersons, whose assertiveness has gained them a minor celebrity status. Over and over, references to the 'century of humiliation' (*bainian chiru* 百年耻辱) are deployed by people from all walks of life to justify the CPC's aspirations. This phrase refers to a period of intervention and conflict by the imperialist powers, stretching from the First Opium War (1839-1842) to the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the foundation of the PRC (1949). In the context of a trade war with the United States, ethnonationalist discourses reflect an assertion of China's position in the world that is informed by notions of historical exceptionalism. It was not unusual to be asked 'from which perspective are you writing?' when meeting older interlocutors. The implication is that there are good and bad perspectives in which to conduct research on China. A positive perspective would acknowledge China's exceptionalism, while a negative one would question it. Finding it difficult to judge my work in such Manichean terms, this time I replied 'a scientific perspective', which triggered a few laughs.

An eloquent account of how notions of historical exceptionalism permeate workers' narratives can be found in my conversations with Chen Hongming, a migrant worker from Jiangxi province who moved to Guangdong province in 1997. For eight years he had been working at the same small factory making party paraphernalia, owned by a co-villager. When there were only four workers in 2012, Mr Chen used to work in the paint section. Today, he oversees the productivity and well-being of forty employees. His story is one of success, mostly linked to place-of-origin networks and the economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. 'We Chinese are all very humble; we move step by step, not in big jumps,' said Hongming while sipping his tea in a small showroom filled with latex masks of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Recounting his life story, he made several references to Deng Xiaoping's campaign mottos, such as 'crossing the river by touching the stones' and the 'black cat, white cat' metaphor. Mr Chen was not just paying lip service to a hegemonic discourse, he was inserting himself in the same narrative of 'rise' (*jueqi* 崛起) and 'success' (*chenggong* 成功). 'Conditions are fair for everyone, we all have the same opportunities; in fact, some people have more opportunities for being *minzu* minorities,' he argued. In Hongming's conception, the Chinese nation is

'unified and equal for all members', so it was unfair for some to get ahead due to their *minzu* classification. He argued that all peasants, regardless of their ethnicity, bear hardships. In order to succeed 'one has to do the right thing', that is, save money, make good *guanxi*, etc. In this sense, his idea of Chineseness expressed an intense Han-ness that could hardly integrate the diversity of the country. When pressed on the issue, Hongming declared that he did not care about ethnicity or place of origin, only about good workers. Yet, all the employees I encountered in the factory were Jiangxi natives, an all of them had arrived at this place through place-of-origin networks. None of the employees had worked in factories with ethnicities other than Han, and they thought that this condition was common in other places, as they could easily identify other small or medium factories employing Hubei people or Hui *minzu*.

Mr Chen, who only finished primary school, connects his story of success directly to the story of his country. Just as the country pursued a gradual approach to economic reform, so migrant workers can improve their situations by being good workers and saving money, 'little by little'. He argued that many migrant workers are uneducated and need to be led, just as the country needs a fair ruler. 'Politics is very confusing in the West, there are always conflicts, but in China, conflicts are internal, and we only have one person who has the last word—it's simpler this way,' he said, defending the way the country and his factory operate. As a migrant worker himself, Hongming knows how important life on the shopfloor is, especially in smaller operations where workers might share a common ethnicity or place of origin. While Mr Chen is proud to show how workers cooperate with one another when someone wants to learn a new skill or needs support in times of high pressure, he is oblivious to how instrumental his factory may be in reproducing practices of exclusion by hiring only within their own networks. But when one is in the dominant majority in an ethnonationalist reality, then there is no need to think much about those left behind.

7.3.2. Neo-Maoism

Some migrant workers have a longing for the type of political effervescence and social camaraderie of the Maoist period. Studies of neo-Maoism have highlighted

its rather institutional dimension as a leftist trend within the CPC (K. Brown and van Nieuwenhuizen 2016) or as invoking patriotic nostalgia with hints of the Cultural Revolution (Blanchette 2019). My approach is slightly different, as I build on the views of internal migrant workers who are critical of the consequences of the reform period—especially under Jiang Zemin—and who had positive views of Mao's leadership during the revolution and the early years of the PRC. Their type of neo-Maoism celebrates the language of class and national unity, as well as the practices of solidarity experienced under Maoism. Terms of endearment are used with reference to 'old Mao', providing a (lost) sense of proximity between leader and subalternity. Xi Jinping has revived some aspects of Mao's political praxis to his benefit, such as his use of campaigns for popular mobilisation, insisting on the idea of struggle, re-introducing a mass line, and promoting a cult of personality to incarnate the Party and weaken internal factions (Zhao 2016).

In Shenzhen, neo-Maoist workers have built networks of solidarity, with connections in the countryside, other urban industries, and even with university students across China. These organisations have recently been targeted by government crackdowns seeking to stifle the organic potential of labour (J. Chan 2020a; Pun 2020b). Given the radical history of global Maoism, it should be said that these workers do not aspire to a new social revolution in their country. Nonetheless, they are sharp critics of the direction taken by the CPC since the 1990s, a type of capitalist transformation that relies heavily on corruption and the exploitation of rural and urban labour. In their view, there is no 'Chinese miracle' (*zhongguo qiji* 中国奇迹) but only the exploitation of labour (*boxue laodongli* 剥削劳动力). In the current political situation, neo-Maoist networks have developed strict codes of privacy and protection, but is not difficult to encounter people who subscribe to this conception of the world in labour markets and factories.

Brother Guo, a politically conscious Sanhe God, commented that 'China has developed very quickly since Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening, [and] the common people worked very hard and improved their lives step by step.' Generational differences play a big role in the historical imagination of domestic migrant workers, as they acknowledge that the early generations of migrants were

able to improve their material conditions of existence while sacrificing their physical well-being and the integrity of their families. Newer cohorts, however, experience the same shortcomings with far fewer gains. 'Xi Jinping is trying to improve the situation of the common people, but we still don't see the improvement,' said one of brother Guo's friends. 'Why is that?', I asked. 'I don't know'. He looked at the ground and after a long pause he looked at me and said 'You know what? He represents the people, but there are still some bad elements in the government.' Brother Guo claimed that there are internal struggles in the CPC between those who want to enrich themselves and those who want to help the common people. Other job-seekers around us agreed that Xi Jinping's leadership might not improve their situation, but they celebrated the fall of corrupt officials and business personalities. This is well illustrated by two jokes I was told by Mr Hu, a seventy-year-old migrant from Hunan who worked by using his three-wheeled bike to salvage home appliances for recycling.

In the first joke, a leopard invested in building a bathhouse and contracted it to the fox. The fox then transferred it to the squirrel. The squirrel hired six ants to administer it. One day, the cockroach went to take a bath, accidentally fell into the water, and drowned. The Tiger King was furious at the news of the incident and ordered the police to investigate. As a result, the fox was scolded, the squirrel was beaten, and the six ants got arrested.

The second was one of old Hu's most celebrated jokes. In a discussion group during his inspection of Guangxi province, Uncle Xi wanted to see the good people of China. The incredulous governor asked where one can find good people. Uncle Xi pointed at one of the men nearby and asked what his job was. 'I am a farmer', the man replied. 'Let me ask you, if you had two houses, would you give one to the state?' asked Uncle Xi. Without hesitation, the farmer said 'Yes!' The governor was not convinced. Then Uncle Xi asked again: 'If you had two cars, would you give one to the state?' Again, the farmer assented without a trace of doubt. Then Uncle Xi allowed the governor to ask a question: 'If you had two cows, would you give one to the state?' 'No! Never!' replied the farmer. Uncle Xi was baffled: 'but you just said

you would give a house and a car! Why wouldn't you give a cow?' The farmer answered almost apologetically: 'Well, it's because I actually have two cows.'

These jokes point out the tensions that are inherent in the condition of migrant labour in Shenzhen. They are at the bottom of society and are victims of discrimination and violence. As migrants, they leave their families to work in cities that do not provide them with full citizenship. And as workers, they are expected to contribute their labour power for little material gain. In this sense, neo-Maoist discourse insists on the importance of class and class solidarities in counteracting the destructive force of capital.

On many occasions, brother Guo referred to the Maoist idea of 'struggle' (*fendou* 奋斗). 'We come here to fight, but there is no reward,' he said on one of our many occasions at the Sanhe labour market, where he was able to secure employment for a day or a week at most. As a *ba ling hou* 八零后, or a person born in the 1980s, Guo was representative of a generation that is feeling the material consequences of a decelerating economy. Uncertainty in employment and the lack of opportunities for vertical mobility within factories make it difficult to plan for a 'career'. Guo and others seem to have done it all, from construction to factories, from waiting at tables to delivery services. 'I don't know what type of work I would like to do. Anything that will allow me to save some money is fine. That is the important thing now. I want to help my parents and buy a house for myself and my wife,' he said with a hint of despair.

Neo-Maoists are aware of the contradictions among the people; they favour advancing women's rights and protecting of minority languages and affirmative policies. Demands for equal pay for equal work and for serious accountability in cases of sexual assault are prominent in this conception of the world. A network of labour NGOs has been instrumental in promoting these issues when strikes are not possible. From writing workshops to cooking courses, from micro-finance and Chinese labour history lessons to volunteer work in rural communes, organisations like Pepper Tribe, Worker's Home, or the Jasic Workers' Solidarity Group have developed different tactics to raise the consciousness of the working class. The aim

is to overcome their differences of occupation, gender, ethnicity or place of origin by unity in struggle.

More contentiously, the issue of ethnic unity seems to idealise the past. Although many of my interlocutors claim to have minority *minzu* subjects in their networks, I did not come across any during my fieldwork. In many ways, the approach espoused by my interlocutors was somewhat paternalistic, reflecting the tensions between theory and practice in the Communist civilising project (Harrell 1996, 25–26). The Stalinist dogma of the 'nation' was certainly prevalent, implying both self-rule and territorial integrity. There is no questioning of the *minzu* classification of the 1950s, only assertions of the importance of ethnic unity to serve the struggle. What distinguished my informants from the ethnonationalists was a naïve understanding of *minzu*, instead of the direct belittling of other ethnicities. Most of my neo-Maoist interlocutors did not want to talk about the 'people from Xinjiang', and those who did felt, cautiously and resentful, that the problem was not having Muslim beliefs but religious fanatism.

7.3.3. Proletarian existentialism

In his reflections on the passing of a young man, Kaimah, with whom he worked closely in Sierra Leone, Michael Jackson asked 'how it is that human beings faced with events they can neither fully comprehend nor control nevertheless struggle to find ways of acting and speaking that effectively connect them with others, thereby rendering life worth living rather than alien and absurd' (2017, 155). He argues that one's humanity depends on the possibility of acting on one's world even under circumstances under which one is overwhelmingly acted upon (M. Jackson 2017, 174). Citing Albert Camus, Jackson concludes that acquiring awareness of the absurdity of our condition enables us to act acting in a life that belongs to us (2017, 175). Inspired by this essay, I suggest using the notion of 'proletarian existentialism' for expressions of dissatisfaction with life prospects and despair in the face of increasing challenges among domestic migrant workers in Shenzhen. In labelling this existentialism 'proletarian', I highlight the spontaneity and material reality of these trends among domestic migrant workers, distinguishing them from the more scholarly forms seen in literary and philosophical production (see N. Wang 2018).

In Chinese, the tropes *diaosi* 屌丝 or 'loser' (Sum 2017), *sang wenhua* 丧文化 or 'mourning culture' (Tan and S. Cheng 2020), the ironic[39] self-recognition of white-collar workers as *dagongren* 打工人, and, more recently, *neijuan* 内卷 or the local translation of the Geertzian concept of 'involution' (Q. Wang and Ge 2020), convey new experiences of working life. Whether in the factories or on the desks of IT companies, more workers feel lonely, disempowered, marginalised, and defeated by the lack of prospects. For domestic migrant workers subsumed in a cycle of temporary employment, challenges like hyper-exploitation, unpaid salaries, and poor living and working conditions can seem insurmountable and lead to suicide. In most cases, however, migrant workers continue with their lives, taking decisions and engaging with others while pursuing their own goals. They make use of any number of channels to vent their frustrations, connect with others, and find the motivation to carry on. Online media, such as blogs, 'bullet' commenting[40] on videos, and online forums and other social media, play a central role among new generations of workers. In these spaces there is constant interaction between online content and commentators, which can lead to wider public debates.

A rich and dynamic form of expression for generations of Chinese workers has been the genre of proletarian poetry. Some newspapers dedicated to labour issues carry a weekly section where a couple of pieces are published. Most commonly, however, workers share their productions on internet blogs or forums or with selected audiences in face-to-face interactions. Probably the best known piece of contemporary proletarian poetry is 'I swallowed a moon made of iron' (*wo yanxia yi mei tie zuode yueliang* 我咽下一枚铁做的月亮) by Xu Lizhi, a migrant worker who jumped to his death from the dormitory building of Shenzhen's Foxconn complex in October 2014:

我咽下一枚铁做的月亮	*I swallowed a moon made of iron*
他们把它叫做螺丝	*They call it a screw*
我咽下这工业的废水，失业的订单	*I swallowed this industrial waste, orders of unemployment*
那些低于机台的青春早早夭亡	*Those kids lower than machines have*

[39] I use 'ironic' in Hans Steinmüller's (2011) sense of expressing commonalities and acknowledging differences between 'communities of complicity'.
[40] Popular platforms for online videos like Bilibili display comments running from right to left across the screen, called *danmu* 弹幕 or 'bullet screen'. Users can deactivate the function and read the comments in a more traditional fashion as posts under the video.

我咽下奔波，咽下流离失所 咽下人行天桥，咽下长满水锈的生活 我再咽不下了 所有我曾经咽下的现在都从喉咙汹涌而出 在祖国的领土上铺成一首 耻辱的诗	*died too young* *I swallowed and ran around, swallowed the displacement* *Swallowed the overpasses, swallowed the life full of limescale* *I can't swallow anymore* *All I have swallowed now surges up my throat* *Spreading all over the territory of the motherland and becoming a* *Poem of shame*

A similar theme is present in the lyrics of a rock band formed by migrant construction workers in Shenzhen called *zhong D yin* 重 D 音, a wordplay that can be translated as 'voices from the bottom (of society)'. Their lyrics address the hardships of life as domestic migrant workers. In the last verse of one of their most popular songs, *zhe niantou buhao hun* 这年头不好混 ('It's not easy these days') they sing:

年迈的妈妈总说我命运不好 勤劳的爸爸已经苍老 有人说我是个废物草包 有人说我读书读得呆头呆脑 亲爱的朋友别问我收入是多少 这年头比我好过的没有多少 祖国的 GDP 又长了不少 可是有谁管我们过得好与不好	*Old mama always said that my luck was no good* *Hardworking father is already too old* *Some people say I am a useless idiot* *Some people say I'm too stupid to read books* *Dear friends, don't ask me how much I earn* *There's not much better for me nowadays* *The country's GDP grew a lot again* *But who cares whether we live well or not?*

The elements of discrimination, loneliness, and despair among individuals interlock with a general sense of optimism about the country's economic future, which does not trickle down, a tension most eloquently represented by Li Simeng. We met during one of my visits to her workplace, a factory producing 5G infrastructure, where she works in quality control. At first, Simeng seemed shy and distant, but once we started to chat, she revealed her acid sarcasm and cynicism of life. That day, she invited me to meet with her friends at Hellen's, a popular pub filled with young people drinking cheap beer, smoking hookah, and playing dice. 'What's the point in complaining?' Simeng interrupted one of her friends who recently arrived in the city. Her perspective was shared by others around the table. One must take each day as it comes. Unable to plan, the only thing left to do is to

get money and spend it. Perhaps one day, in a stroke of luck, things might improve. Her friend ignored Simeng's comments: 'How could life be so bleak in such a bright city?' she said, while turning her face away.

Simeng is not a published poet, but she likes to draw and write about her experiences. She does not usually share her work with others; they are rather a dialogue with herself. 'Life in Shenzhen is very lonely, so I write to feel like I am not alone.' This was the leitmotif of most of her creations, as shown in one of her untitled poems:

这天有各大傻瓜
闲来无事
打算出去走走
路边的蔷薇
红的、粉的
有千千万万朵
瞧着甚是欢喜
左右看一下
嗯!
没有人
便折了三两枝
想着
来年他的院子里
也有千千万万朵花
真好

'There was a big fool this day
with nothing to do.
She planned to go for a walk.
The road was full of roses,
red and pink.
There were thousands of roses.
She really likes them.
She looked around...
oh!
There is no one.
She took two or three branches
while thinking
about the thousand flowers
that will be in her garden the coming year.
How splendid!

The optimism displayed in the closing lines manifests a desire for a better life. Simeng shares with people of her generation a set of expectations that allow them to act in the face of constant difficulties and setbacks. 'Without a dream, we have nowhere to go,' she tells me while browsing for content on her mobile phone. Then she shows me a post from her WeChat contacts: 'As a person in a strange city, what has been your most lonely experience?' She immediately tells me: 'So many people are bad spirits.' With these words she meant that is hard to find trustworthy people and build close relations with them. Her remedies are the pub and her mobile phone. In this conception of the world, class, ethnicity, and gender are secondary issues in light of the sensations of individual stagnation and despair. They see the country getting richer but only a small group of people benefitting; the rest are trapped in a cycle of precarity. But instead of losing the will to carry on, these

migrants embrace their despair through the production or consumption of different discursive devices that allow them to continue to exist in this seemingly endless loop.

7.3.4. Christianity

Most of the members of the underground Protestant church that Xiaofeng used to frequent arrived looking for certainty. They resent the decaying moral standards and intense consumerism and materialism as a disease ailing Chinese society. As an alternative, they find comfort and optimism in the Christian God.

Every Sunday morning, Xiaofeng attended Bible school after the service. While the room on the tenth floor was transformed from a church into canteen, the younger parishioners went three floors down to study the holy book together with a tutor, occasionally the pastor, and a triumvirate of older women who could recite Bible verses by heart. During the week, the official business of the church room was a photography and art school. Its walls were decorated with watercolour reproductions of biblical passages. Bible school took place in a guitar school—in fact, the lessons were usually accompanied by the sound of young learners struggling to play their oversized instruments. The owner of the guitar school did not participate in the church, but some of his students did, and that opened the door for mutual collaboration—he allowed Bible study in his office, and in turn he got customers from the church and gave small concerts on important dates, such as Christmas.

Xiaofeng takes her Bible studies very seriously. On one occasion, she asked a colleague to cover for her while we met for lunch at the Yifang Tiandi shopping centre. Walking around Sisyphus, a bookstore and café chain, Xiaofeng confessed that she disliked reading books. 'I get bored and distracted easily, then I forget what I am reading about. If I stop on a page today, then tomorrow I don't remember anything.' 'How about the Bible?' I asked. 'That's different, we study in a group, and we have these sheets with questions that we write answers on in class. I can always check them again and remember.' In a megalopolis like Shenzhen, where the rhythm of life and production becomes detrimental to the convivial aspect of

food in Chinese society (E. Anderson and M. Anderson 1977, 366; Oxfeld 2017, 158), communities like the church can provide an important space for sociality and emotional ties.

Figure 19. Church before service.

After Bible study, the whole group went back upstairs to join in the collective lunch. I usually ate with Xiaofeng and her friends before moving around and chatting with some of the others. The news about a crackdown on Protestant churches in Sichuan and Guangdong was on everyone's lips. 'We have nothing to fear, they are a satanic sect,' said Xiaofeng. Other members were more cautious: 'They were too big; Wang Yi[41] was popular even before starting the church. Ours is rather small, nothing to be worried about.' In this environment, reports of the crackdown were carefully

[41] Wang Yi is a lawyer, a well-known blogger, and the founder and leader of the Early Rain Covenant Church, a Calvinist underground parish. Wang Yi converted to Christianism in 2005, and by 2018 he was the leader of the largest unregistered Christian organisation in the country. On 9 December 2018, he was detained together with more than a hundred parishioners as part of a wider campaign to contain the growth of underground churches, mosques, and temples. A year later, he was sentenced to nine years in prison for inciting the subversion of state power (Mozur and Johnson, December 30, 2019).

circulated through WeChat groups, making sure it would not catch the attention of the censors. Even though the church was small, members feared losing their community, and with it the sense of peace it provides.

For these church-goers, believing (*xin* 信) was a central aspect of their lives. They declared that believing in God gave them the strength to overcome challenges, cope with pressure, and reject temptation. From a different perspective, it also provided them with a community that met regularly and fulfilled the social and emotional aspects that were undermined by the rhythm of life in Shenzhen. Cognizant of their marginality as a group operating without license, they were understanding of certain social struggles. Their conception of the world was patriotic and patriarchal, but with regularly organised activities in support of the poor and of other newly organised Christian churches. Some members did not see any problem in practising their Christian belief alongside Buddhist or folk rituals, but not many held Islam in high regard.

These church members shared the same sense of uncertainty and despair with people like Simeng. The difference lies in how that sentiment is perceived and channelled into social practice. Simeng, for example, could perfectly agree with what Xiaofeng said: 'The world is very chaotic, and life is very messy too. Sometimes it's difficult to find ourselves, to find our purpose.' But whereas the former comes to terms with the absurdity of life, socialises with a small group of people at the pub and vents her frustrations and desires through poetry, the latter finds transcendental optimism in Christian beliefs. Building on Michael Jackson's account, these ways of coping with the challenges are manifestations of the need for socialisation in the face of an overwhelming presence. They provide a remedy for a life with an uncertain future.

7.4. Conclusion

In recent years, new waves of labour activism have attracted political and academic attention. At the same time, the intensification of 'ideological work' has become a signature policy goal of Xi Jinping's. These trajectories manifest a trend in the war of ideas within the Chinese polity that present clear political challenges. However,

the reality on the ground is much more nuanced, with a variety of subaltern conceptions of the world in permanent interaction.

For all the efforts put in place, the hegemonic project of the CPC has some essential limitations. Even in an authoritarian polity, efforts to secure active consent can be challenged by the subaltern subjects' reception and reproduction of state discourse or through ideological alternatives. Instead of generalised brainwashing, it is better to think of hegemony as a political struggle fought out using linguistic and tactical practices that often hinge on defining 'common sense'. In this struggle, the hegemonic discourse has toned down the revolutionary aspects of its founding ideology without completely renouncing it. In turn, migrant workers relate to these discourses through their own conceptions of the world, sometimes enhancing themes that inform the hegemony, such as ethnonationalism or neo-Maoism. Others do so by challenging them either in whole or in part, as was seen in the cases of proletarian existentialism and Christian discourse.

Top-down ideas can acquire different forms when they are taken up by subaltern subjects. Internal inconsistencies in ongoing political campaigns in the PRC are sometimes predesigned to co-opt subaltern demands while pushing the dominant class's interests. And while ideas of the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation can resonate with some and not with others, they can also become the basis for radical expressions of patriotic (ethnonationalist) and revolutionary (neo-Maoist) sentiments. These expressions can disguise themselves under the cloak of official discourse by articulating aspects of common sense.

More generally, this chapter has reflected on the material conditions in which ideas exist, mutate, circulate, and disappear. A great number of domestic migrant workers, those facing stagnation in their lives, a lack of prospects, and precarity, and who often fail to meet the expectations of their families, find it difficult to come to terms with the grandiloquent political mottos of the time. Under these overwhelming challenges, life can feel absurd, much like Sisyphus's unending task. Becoming aware of the present limitations, instead of disarming individual agency,

can enable new forms of solidarity. While not being emancipatory, socialising at the pub or house church makes life bearable, even when it feels meaningless.

Finally, a more nuanced understanding of the ideas produced and reproduced by domestic migrant workers is critical to evaluating their potential for active consent. Therefore, consideration must be given to the different types of agency exercised in the interactions between conceptions of the world, from the claims of a narrow sense of Chineseness to the more assertive cases of labour mobilisation that produced solidarities with other workers and progressive university students across the country. We should also take into account other expressions of 'counterhegemony', or at least 'everyday resistance' (Scott 1985), which are present in proletarian existentialism and underground Christian churches. A great deal of confidence is put into the continuous growth and empowerment of the PRC, but not many migrant labourers feel optimistic about their own futures. From the top, the solution has been to intensify 'ideological education' and information control. From the bottom, migrant workers re-signify or challenge hegemonic discourses in ways that make sense to them.

VIII. Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim has been to explore the 'critical junctions' that surround class with an emphasis on ethnicity in the development of a collective identity of internal migrant workers in Shenzhen. It has interrogated the ways in which Han migrant workers relate to their *minzu* minority others in the migrant city of Shenzhen. Through an approach that has combined ethnography and critical theory, it has assessed the social dynamics that stifle the formation of an interethnic working-class identity and that foster the reproduction of ethnic and home place-based social hierarchies. The investigation was conducted from the perspective of the Han majority *minzu* in order to a) complement studies conducted among minority *minzu* migrants (Iredale, Bilik, and F. Guo 2003; Yun Huang 2008; Tursun 2016; X. Ma 2018), and b) enable a more nuanced characterisation of the complex relations of domination that are inherent in class, that is, those of a subaltern group that is also part of the ethnic majority.

Shenzhen provides a salient vantage point for observing the social transformations that are connected to marketisation. It was one of the first and most successful areas where the PRC experimented with market reforms, which the CPC holds up as evidence of its wisdom and strategic vision. The city received a massive influx of migrant labour from all provinces and ethnicities, who came to work in the expanding labour-intensive industries.

Chinese internal migrant workers have not been able to represent themselves. Their labour power contributes to the economic development of cities that externalise their social reproduction to their places of origin, thus placing an economic burden in an already precarious locality. The pervasive effects that the expansion of marketisation has had in the last forty years configures a set of social relations that determine the objective existence of a class of 'migrant workers' (*dagongzhe* 打工者) with fragmented experiences of how class is lived. These precarious workers exist in a permanent transient condition, subsumed in cycle of temporary employment (*dagong* 打工) and constant mobility. As a class, internal migrant workers face structural challenges of representation due to the legal and political constraints imposed on them by a state that claims to be 'the vanguard of the working class, the Chinese people, and the Chinese nation' (Communist Party of China 2017). In terms

of class politics, the collective identity of migrant workers has been fragmented by the different relations of domination that are exercised over the subaltern groups. In this dissertation, I have focused on those related to ethnic and home-place identities.

8.1. Summary of arguments

The investigation addressed the dissertation's central theoretical issues in Chapter One. The conditions that enable the formation of a class of internal labour migrants are intrinsic to the process of Reform and Opening that was adopted by the PRC in 1978. In seeking to modernise the economy, the government opened up certain areas of the country to transnational capital. These areas of experimentation with the market economy, designated as Special Economic Zones, absorbed surplus rural labour released by the redistribution of rural land through the implementation of the Household Responsibility System. Local governments waved restrictions related to the *hukou* in order to allow rural migrants to populate the new factories. Although the *hukou* system has undergone several changes, its core function in barring migrant workers from access to urban services and benefits is still in place. Therefore, the same migrants who contribute their labour power to the development of a city cannot buy a house, send their children to school or retire there. Public services and social welfare are the responsibility of their place of legal residence, usually towns and villages with little capacity to stimulate their economies.

The literature on migrant workers in southern China has, for the most part, focused on industrial and construction workers. My contribution seeks to expand the scope and rethink labour migration as a reality of subalternity that is affected by multiple relations of domination, both externally and internally. In this way, the development of a collective identity for migrant labour is characterised by interactions with the state and capital, as well as by the tensions between the migrants themselves. I have employed a critical and materialist approach to class that builds on contributions from Antonio Gramsci and Critical Theory to the complex set of relations that affect the historical and spatial phenomenon of class.

Chapter One also examined the issues of ethnicity and representation, as key concepts that articulate the analysis. The former has been largely overlooked in studies of Chinese migrant labour. With the expansion of marketisation, however, many *minzu* minorities

became increasingly marginalised and impoverished, and struggled to integrate. In this research, I have paid special attention to relations between the Han and the Uyghur, demonstrating the deep chasm between these two groups. Certainly, the socio-political reality of the PRC aims at the domination of contentious minorities by favouring Han-centred notions of 'civilisation' and '*suzhi*'.

Chapter Two provided a detailed description of Shenzhen's past and present. It was one of the first SEZs in the country, which aimed to receive capital transfers from neighbouring Hong Kong. Given its strategic position, Shenzhen quickly became the most successful of all the SEZs in mainland China. This success has turned Shenzhen into a myth: a fishing village that became China's Silicon Valley at 'Shenzhen speed.' I dismantled these narratives and provided a historical account about a group of villages with long-standing trading relations with British Hong Kong that became a metropolis through heavy state intervention and the hyper-exploitation of rural migrant labour. Shenzhen was elevated to city level in preparation for its designation as SEZ in 1978. At the time, several SOEs established branches in the city to develop the necessary infrastructure and collaborate with foreign investors. As a result, SOEs secured the transfer of capital and know-how that later enabled the domestic production of competitive products. The spirit of these first leaders was also mystified by Shenzhen's symbol: the ox that opens the wasteland.

As the flagship of the country's Reform and Opening process, Shenzhen has been labelled a 'model socialist city', that is, a blueprint for what the CPC considers to be urban socialist living. But behind the high rises, hipster art district, and flashy shopping centres, some of the world's most renowned brands profit from the continuous exploitation of internal migrant labour. Through a few ethnographic vignettes, I depicted the stark contrasts of a migrant city that has experienced rapid and radical transformation in a short period of time.

In Chapter Three I delved more deeply into how class is lived. I elaborated on the historical changes in the language of class throughout the history of the PRC. Certainly, since the launch of the Reform and Opening process, class has been left behind in the political discourse, giving space to other, less politicised conceptualisations. From a Marxist standpoint, however, the absence of the subjective aspects of class does not mean that its objective reality disappears. On the contrary, the reality of class continues to exist, but it is

articulated in different ways. In contemporary Chinese society, the concept of *suzhi* operates as a marker of class differences. Usually translated as 'inherent quality,' *suzhi* conveys a multiplicity of traditional and contemporary meanings that are difficult to reconcile. Therefore, I propose understanding *suzhi* as an 'empty signifier,' i.e. a signifier to which meaning is ascribed, instead of one that emanates meaning. For Ernesto Laclau, who took this trope from Lévi-Strauss via Lacan, looking more closely at empty signifiers allows us to observe the power tensions that are intrinsic in domination. In this sense, *suzhi* is usually deployed to highlight a subject's lack of 'civilisation' (*wenming* 文明), which the state seeks to 'elevate' by educational means. In social practice among internal migrant workers, it becomes clearer that the attributes ascribed to *suzhi* convey a marker of intragroup differences. People of rural origin or from *minzu* minorities (many of them linked to agricultural or pastoralist activities) are considered to belong to lower *suzhi*, as if their material conditions reflected their social identity and behaviour. Ultimately, the ethnography shows that *suzhi* is at the root of the production of solidarities and exclusions, representing class contradictions and implicit hierarchies of labour.

Chapter Four focused on ethnicity as one of the main cleavages in the collective identity of migrant workers. Defining ethnic identities in the PRC is not a simple task, mainly due to its heavily politicised history. The Ethnic Classification Project of the 1950s implemented Stalinist notions of 'nationalities' to categorise the different ethnic groups in the recently founded People's Republic. The categorisation system has perpetuated the hegemony of the Han majority *minzu.* The Han are therefore the standard of civilised behaviour, at the top of a scale along which others are distributed according to their level of assimilation. Things are particularly pervasive for those *minzu* minorities with strong religious traditions, such as the Uyghur. A Turkic group of over ten million people mostly concentrated in Xinjiang province, the Uyghur have recently been severely affected by policies of forced assimilation. In the wider Chinese society, Uyghurs are portrayed as good dancers, beautiful women, and non-pork eaters, as well as petty thieves and terrorists. Under the label of 'othering for profit', I described how Xinjiang food restaurants owned by Han people exploit Uyghur migrants to provide a spectacle for the patrons. The ethnography also revealed the 'imaginaries of exclusion' that essentialise Uyghur Islamic faith as a marker of difference justifying the civilising mission of the state. In these imaginaries, the 'language of exclusion' plays a major role. Words like 'little greens' and

'halal' were frequently used by some Han migrants as pejorative concepts that mock Islam (associated with the colour green) or Uyghur eating habits. These practices of othering make inter-ethnic relations difficult. Many migrant workers find affirmative policies unfair, as they favour *minzu* identifications instead of material conditions of existence. They too would like their children to receive extra points for their university entrance exams. More harshly, however, the sustained domination over the representation of ethnic minorities, even among internal migrant workers, has articulated languages and practices of exclusion that favour assimilation instead of autonomous diversity.

In Chapter Five I returned to the issue of class by exploring a new labour identity in the Sanhe labour market. The name 'Sanhe Gods' is ascribed to a group of migrants who decided to escape the cycle of temporary employment and embraced a life of marginality instead. These 'lilies of the field' have no concerns for the future. They live in an absolute present enabled by casually engaging in waged labour for one or two days a week. The Sanhe Gods appeared as a social response to the abuses of the employment system. One of the most common ways to find employment in Shenzhen is through specialised agencies located in an area popularly known as 'Sanhe', after the biggest agency, located right on the street corner. These agencies provide a service locally announced as 'labour dispatch' (*laowu paiqian* 劳务派遣), or the dispatch of workers to factories where they will work and live but with which they do not have a formal contract; the contract is with the agency. This mechanism releases employers from any contractual obligation to the workers, but in some cases the workers can leave the operation at any time of their choosing without any consequences. Women and certain ethnic minorities are particularly affected by structural discrimination in the labour markets. In these cases, networks of place of origin play an important role in providing employment opportunities, despite their being highly gendered and racialised. In any case, not many alternatives exist, therefore many migrant workers feel trapped and find it hard to deploy strategies to improve their material conditions of existence. Recently, some migrants, mostly Han men, have decided to free themselves from the economic and social imperatives that make life harder and to follow instead the lonely path of becoming a 'Sanhe God'.

However, what can seem emancipatory from one perspective can be quite different from another. Many of the Sanhe Gods have sold their ID cards, so their only prospects for an

income are the illegal factories, which operate without licenses and cannot guarantee workers' safety. The Sanhe Gods are paid significantly less than other migrant workers, between 100 and 200 CNY (12 to 25 EUR) for a twelve-hour shift, which they spend during the week. Illegal factory recruiters consider them unreliable, but celebrate the fact that their existence allows their operation. Other migrant workers can understand the motivations of the Sanhe Gods but still consider them irresponsible and weak. This new migrant identity is evidence of the limits to the state's efforts to achieve market re-substantiation, as capital finds new ways to circumvent legislation. It also stands for the fragmentation of the collective identity of migrant workers, which needs to be considered, especially in combination with structural forms of exclusion such as gender and ethnicity.

Chapter Six addressed practices of self-representation where class and ethnicity interconnect. The ethnography engaged with the 'double migration' of Chinese migrant workers, both geographical and digital. Mobile phones allow migrants to keep in touch with their loved ones in other corners of the country, join online communities of like-minded people, learn about the world, and use it as an instrument of self-promotion and even profit. The internet has been a great tool for educating migrant workers on their rights and channelling their voices and experiences. Feminist labour NGOs such as Pepper Tribe have successfully created support networks to advance the rights of working women. Across their digital platforms, they offer legal counselling, financial advice, a blog with relevant testimonies, recommendations for physical and mental health, etc. An important aspect of this labour NGO is that it strongly encourages a collective identity of migrant labour that highlights feminist struggles. It recognises that Chinese working women have particular challenges in Chinese society related to their class and gender, but they add an extra layer by situating within struggles of working women elsewhere. In this way, the working women of Shenzhen learn about those in South Korea, Turkey, or the United States and can recognise commonalities. With radically different aims, job-brokers make use of digital platforms to perpetuate female stereotypes. Smaller factories that do not subcontract their labour to a 'labour dispatch' service promote open positions through short video apps such as TikTok or Kuaishou. It is common for females to be used to attract unmarried male workers. In this sense, digital platforms can be tools of social empowerment, as well as social alienation.

Individuals are prone to 're-invent' themselves through digital platforms. Some follow more general trends, such as dressing in 'ethnic' attire or filming themselves dancing and then sharing it on short-video apps to gain attention. Others try to learn new skills that might improve their employment opportunities or become a new source of income for them. In its most radical form of reification, some migrant workers re-invent themselves with the intention of becoming internet celebrities or *wanghong* 网红, hoping to reach fame and gain a better income. The whole matrix of incubators, sponsors, producers, and creators of viral content is known as the *wanghong* economy. It differs from the more international notion of *influencers*, in that the Chinese model is highly institutionalised, with a whole set of subjects dedicated to professionally produce *wanghong*. Therefore, many internal migrant workers who try to reach internet celebrity status have a hard time doing so on their own. Their goal largely remains just wishful thinking, which does not mean that they give it up. Many keep trying, waiting for luck to strike someday. They certainly keep consuming already established *wanghong*, either by buying the products they promote or by spending their money on *wanghong* places, like teashops and bakeries. By reflecting on the concept of reification—understood as the subsumption of social relations by capital in the form of a commodity—I formulated a materialist critique of the *wanghong* economy and the limitations it presents to the development of a collective identity among internal labour migrants.

Chapter Seven centred on the ideological tensions between government and migrant workers and among migrant workers themselves. Thinking through Gramscian categories of hegemony, common sense, and subaltern conceptions of the world, the ethnography demonstrated the complex power relations in the relationship between the state and internal migrant workers, as well as among the latter. In recent years, the CPC has intensified its 'ideological work' and promoted Core Socialist Values that stress patriotism, harmony, the rule of law, etc. These ideas have become part of the 'common sense' of Chinese internal migrant workers, who relate to it according to their own conceptions of the world. This means that, instead of blind repetitions of the state's discourse, migrant workers mould ideas and slogans into ways that might differ from the claims of the hegemonic project. Here I have identified four predominant conceptions of the world that relate differently to hegemonic discourses. Ethnonationalism and Neo-Maoism are two conceptions of the world that take elements of common sense and reinforce them. The

former builds on Han chauvinism under the guise of patriotism, the latter on national history and the nostalgia for the social embeddedness of the Mao era. 'Proletarian existentialism' and Christianism also adopt elements of common sense, but in a way that is ironic or divergent. I suggest that proletarian existentialism reflects an attitude of loneliness, disempowerment, marginalisation, and defeat connected with the exploitation of labour that underpins the country's economic growth. These migrants vent their frustrations through a variety of artistic expressions, such as proletarian poetry or music, allowing them to come to terms with their condition and carry on. Finally, underground Christian churches have provided many migrant workers with a way to cope with the challenges they face. Many recent converts have found a community of equals for themselves where moral, spiritual, and material support are promoted as a remedy against the materialism and consumerism that are ailing Chinese society. Being aware that their activities are illegal, these Christians deploy a series of techniques that allow them to function and stay under the radar of the local authorities.

8.2. Implications of findings

The evidence of this study suggests that internal migrant workers produce solidarities and exclusions that simultaneously constitute a collective class identity and reproduce social hierarchies. Institutional constraints and the continuous assault of capital promote a continuous sense of struggle among internal migrant workers that helps them articulate a common identity. However, as experiences of subalternity differ between ethnicities, places of origin, and gender, new markers of difference are used to build solidarities and exclusions that stifle large collective actions. The most critical marker of difference in China is *suzhi*, which adopts meanings according to the contingencies of the situation. More importantly, however, these practices of differentiation are central to understanding the way class is lived by real sentient subjects. In this sense, class emerges as a much more dynamic and broader analytical category.

These findings contribute in several ways to our understandings of class and interethnic relations. First, they revealed the ways in which these processes unfold at the most marginal and precarious levels of Chinese society. Second, through a critical and materialist approach to class, they made possible a comparison with other contexts in which labour migration and ethnicity or race are contentious issues. Third, by focusing on

a wide conception of internal migrant workers (*dagongren* 打工人), they complement the works of those scholars who have focused on the more militant experiences of the last decades. In this sense, although my contribution does not deny the developments in class consciousness that were achieved by experiences of struggle, it does invite us to think further about the complex forces at issue, which, for example, explain why some migrant workers defend ethnonationalist positions that exclude their Muslim compatriots.

Figure 20. Migrant workers visiting the trendy OCT Loft.

China's experiments with marketisation have been varied and complex. The implementation of economic reforms was aimed at accumulating capital and transforming the PRC into a wealthy and strong country. The process was conducted gradually and partially, with economic areas still under some degree of state control. In the last two decades, the regulatory capacity of the state has been reinforced as a way to re-embed the market into social and ethical relations. However, capital keeps finding new ways to circumvent these efforts. These transformations have had a deep impact on social relations. While sectors of the population grow richer, a vast group of internal migrant workers have

had to fend for themselves in precarious living conditions. Landless migrants are increasingly pushed to search for new sources of income, thereby nurturing the informal economy. My research shows the significance of migrant networks in securing access to resources and facilitating mobility between places and industries. However, given the limited and precarious resources available, these networks stifle the common recognition of a collective identity of migrant workers.

Of course, these limitations are not deterministic. In this dissertation I have focused on the situation of migrant workers before, as it were, the emergence of the language of class. In this sense, I seek to contribute to the excellent previous studies on increasing labour militancy by highlighting the complexities surrounding historical processes of class formation. In this sense, taking a Gramscian perspective enabled me to think about the realities of class from the perspective of the lived experiences of subaltern subjects. In his time, Antonio Gramsci wrote from a position of defeat, trying to understand what went wrong with the Italian labour movement and what led to the triumph of fascism. Gramsci did not provide straightforward answers, only rigorous analyses that combine the complexity of Marx's materialist approach with Gramsci's own political experience. This suggests that the historical experience of class cannot be limited to the recognition of segments in a social pyramid and the forms of consciousness ascribed to them. Class is an objective social condition, but also a dynamic process in which different relations of domination articulate different subjective experiences of class. That is why Gramsci preferred the phrase 'subaltern classes', as it stresses the plurality of ways in which those subjected to domination make their own histories.

What I take from Gramsci is not a theory but a way of thinking. If we accept the precepts of this materialist and critical approach, then we need to find the particular set of experiences that produces the multiple ways in which Chinese migrant workers relate to class relations. A quick glance at the history of the country reveals a few relevant themes. First, the PRC still claims a socialist political identity for itself. Socialist and Marxist discourses have enjoyed different levels of popularity over the years, becoming quite prominent in Xi Jinping's administration. This has ideological as well as practical consequences. In terms of ideology, the CPC insists on its role as the vanguard of the workers and, as such, recognises the maintenance of certain levels of control over the

factors of production as a moral imperative. Second, even though the language of class has disappeared from public debates, the tensions between private capital, state officials, young professionals, and the working poor speak volumes about the realities of class relations.

These early glances present us with a problem that ethnographic inquiry is best equipped to engage with. By living among precarious migrant workers, I learned about the different ways in which the *suzhi* discourse expressed modes of differentiation in their social relations. In this sense, the polysemy of *suzhi* reveals a congeries of representations of migrant workers as individuals, as a gender identity, as members of a network, as part of an ethnic or national identity, as claiming a place of origin, as workers in a particular industry, etc. Each of these significations illustrates the different relations of domination in which they are immersed. My intention has not been to identify a reified meaning of *suzhi* that is applied in social relations, but rather to show how the changing signification of *suzhi* revealed reified social relations.

Probably the most pressing of these relations is the hegemony of the Han majority *minzu*. By reflecting on Han–Uyghur relations, I have been able to consider critically the complicities associated with the ongoing 'de-radicalisation' in Xinjiang. Additionally, this provides an approximation linking the Chinese reality to global discussions about racial capitalism. Here we can observe that the production of social hierarchies among migrant workers favour features of Chineseness that are associated with Han-ness and marginalises those that have resisted assimilation. This is a multifaceted issue that needs further investigation.

Newer generations of migrant workers are still having to face the challenges of their predecessors, namely the restrictions of *hukou* registration and its different consequences. However, the increasing commodification of rural land has reduced the chances of many young migrants earning an income from land-use rights. These landless workers must find new ways to combine sources of income, mostly in the informal sector. However, the competition and permanent insecurity can have devastating effects on a person's emotional and physical well-being. Partly as a result, and partly due to a desire for freedom, some migrants embrace marginality and become Sanhe Gods. This phenomenon is one of the many possible subaltern responses to the commodification of labour, and it also

demonstrates the few spaces of agency that domestic migrant workers have available to them if they are to feel truly autonomous. No Sanhe God would claim that their situation is ideal, but I cannot avoid thinking that there is something admirable in their devotion to life in an absolute present. In this sense, the Sanhe Gods present us with an ontological challenge in defining the boundaries of what constitute the working class. If the working class is not defined by a common ethos towards work, then who is? Here there are no easy answers, possibly making different theoretical tools necessary, especially if we want to start considering the reality of working subaltern subjects who are affected by the robotisation of production or have benefited from Universal Basic Income.

Moreover, Gramsci cannot be used to explain the role of digital spaces in society. Although he offered us powerful tools with which to criticise mass media and the cultural mechanisms that produce consent, new framings are necessary to reflect on how digital economies in purely virtual settings portend a novel form of value creation. My materialist approach to the *wanghong* economy was a step in this direction, namely at understanding how humans become commodities and how production units are treated as living beings. The dynamism of the technology sector enables forms of commodification that we need to think about more closely. The ubiquitous use of mobile devices and the way people engage with the different platforms for purposes of social communication have opened up new possibilities for self-representation, economic desire, and the strengthening of collective identities.

In sum, the different experiences of how class is lived provide us with a complex picture of opportunities and challenges for the future of class analyses in social anthropology. In this way—and not because we assume the reality of class as part of the market economy—we completely disregard the cultural specifics of any particular society. The task is precisely to think with those specifics in order to understand the various ways in which these social relations change in time and space.

8.3. Future horizons

The scope of this study was limited in terms of both its subject and its location. Future research exploring the interconnections of class and ethnicity from the perspectives of *minzu* minorities is necessary. While Shenzhen was an ideal field site for the goals of this

study, different findings could be expected from other contexts of migration, especially in the older cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, where local dialects or languages are stronger markers of differentiation between locals and outsiders. Additionally, the transition of rich coastal cities in the direction of capital-intensive industries has pushed labour-intensive ones to the interior provinces of the PRC. A study of this kind conducted in smaller cities would be a good complement to understand the new labour struggles in those spaces.

This investigation has not explored in detail the forms of labour militancy that others have studied. Instead, I have attempted to describe the situation of migrant workers who find different ways to navigate the relations of domination and exploitation that act to produce their subaltern condition. New ethnographic studies should be undertaken focusing on the fluidity between militant and non-militant groups of migrant workers. If we take E.P. Thompson's and more recently Don Kalb's premises that the language of class emerges from struggle (as I do), then more migrant workers can be expected to engage in some kind of movement of the Chinese working class. In this case, it would be interesting to explore the transformations in the perceptions of ethnicity and the new roles of migrant networks. Similar processes have happened before, as they often do, not just in Chinese history, but also elsewhere. In fact, these types of reformulation were fundamental to the transformation of modern China, from the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 to the foundation of the PRC in 1949. During this period, grassroots organisations and home-place networks played a critical political role with implications for how 'the nation' was imagined and constituted. Being conscious about these historical trajectories, it is not surprising that the CPC has been so cautious in observing and curtailing the emergence of organisations in 'civil society', in Gramsci's words. However, just as capital finds new ways to push further commodification against the state's intentions to re-embed the market, so migrant workers as a subaltern class can develop strategies that enable them to act in history.

I regard my dissertation as a first exploratory step towards the formulation of an anthropology of exploitation. Here I have focused on the relations of exploitation between people; however, I would like to expand the scope of this investigation to provide a critique of exploitation as a more systemic and general practice of accumulation through

domination. New ethnographies and theoretical devices are needed to integrate the exploitation of natural resources, robots, ideas, etc. into a common framing. Exploitation is a trope with a politicised history that is connected to the desires of social emancipation. However, an all-encompassing concept of exploitation, applied as an analytical category, could reveal more nuances about our relationship as human beings with the environment around us.

Finally, building on the traditions of materialism and critical theory, this dissertation contributes to the anthropology of migrant workers and social transformation in the PRC. The results of this study provide ample room for comparison with other experiences of accelerated economic transformation. This is true for the Latin American context, where the implementation of neoliberalism since the late 1970s dismantled developmentalist economies and social organisations for the sake of economic growth. It took several decades for popular movements to gain in numbers and visibility. In the case of my own country of origin, Chile, after highly respected scholars and less respected politicians proclaimed the end of history (and of class) for decades, in 2019 the working people of Chile mobilised, fought fiercely, and won an initial battle to launch a process that will lead to a new democratic constitution. Nowadays there is little to doubt about the complex identity of the Chilean working classes, which comprises a variety of waged and non-waged individuals. This is the people that, against all odds, pushed for a new 'common sense' and won its first battle.

It was just when I started to reflect on my work that I realised that the experience of my compatriots has filled me with an optimism about the working class. However, this is not naïve make-believe, as we should be aware that these projects of social transformation have not always led to the emancipation of subaltern subjects. Authoritarian proclivities and xenophobic and racist sentiments can also be part of the 'common sense'. In the end, the trajectories that societies pursue are not reliant on the 'objective forces of history' but on human agency. This dissertation is thus a contribution to a necessary conversation in a world that is increasingly preoccupied by conflicts emerging from migration, ethnicity and race, and social inequality.

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