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*Struggling around “dagong”: discourses about and
by migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta*

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Introduction

The long process of conceiving, maturing and writing this dissertation results from an initial interest in Chinese peasants, migration and discourse. Sixteen years ago, while I was still a student in a Chinese university, each time I went to the countryside, I was touched by Chinese peasants, by their sense of hospitality and curiosity. In my later successive stays in China during the mid-1990s, I could observe the subaltern condition of rural migrants in major Chinese cities. One particular episode struck me as to this condition. This episode took place on a Xi'an-Zhengzhou night train. A migrant worker and his young son got on the train and they sat next to me. The young 7 or 8 years-old kid's face was black, and so were his hands, arms and ankles. When I first saw him, I remember having wondered how his skin could be so black, so dirty. As our trip went into the night, more and more people were getting on the train and everybody was crammed in the carriage. The young kid soon lost his seat and found himself lying on the floor under the seats. On the seats in front of ours, a nicely dressed kid of approximately the same age, whom I reckoned from his and his parents' look was an urbanite, was sleeping on at least two seats. The next day early in the morning, the train was approaching its destination and as a train employee was sweeping passengers' rubbish that had accumulated through the night, the young kid found himself covered by a pile of rubbish swept onto his body by the employee. A quarrel then ensued as the father became aware of the situation. When I later started to research the issue of rural to urban migration in China¹, this episode kept puzzling me and along with reading Chinese and non-Chinese literature on the topic, I got increasingly interested in the issue of discourse and representations on rural migrants in China. This envy to get deeper into this question was also strengthened by an interest in international migration and issues of racism and xenophobia. The similitude in the condition of Chinese rural migrants and international migrants had been highlighted in the literature on the subject. In a 1994 paper, Jean-Philippe Béja for instance talked of Chinese internal migrants as "immigrés de l'intérieur" ("immigrants from inside"), while Dorothy Solinger stressed that Chinese internal migrants shared with international migrants in other countries "a form of institutionalized discrimination so stringent that it barred them from becoming full citizens in their own home countries" (Béja, 1994, p. 32; Solinger, 1999, p. 27). If rural migrants do not fare equally in Chinese cities, it is a fact that, despite the reforms

¹ In 1997, within a course on Chinese contemporary society, I started reading the literature on Chinese internal migration and in 1998 I was asked by the University of Ghent to prepare a paper on the socio-economic and political aspects of migration in China for a conference aimed at the Belgian ministry of foreign affairs. This paper was later revised and published in *Hommes et Migrations*. See Florence, 1999.

the household registration system has undergone since the the mid-1980s, their stay is often marked by juridical precariousness and conditional legitimacy.

Getting back to the case of the young kid I mentioned above, his subaltern condition, here materialized by his lying on the ground and being covered with rubbish, hinted at the very strong geographical and social hierarchization which had been produced by almost three decades of virtual separation between cities and the countryside. In post-Mao China, this kid's position stands as a violent metaphor for the condition of migrants from the countryside in Chinese cities. This condition is the result of processes of domination which rest upon the collusion of reformed socialist institutions inherited from the Mao-era — among these the household registration system which “externalizes” rural migrants² — which are backed by a series of more or less formal practices of social control. A whole series of discourses aimed at rural migrants are also part of these configurations of institutions and practices: either they strengthen or endeavour to legitimate practices of domination or they are the product of these practices. This is where the present dissertation originates from.

The initial project was to carry out a comparative analysis of discourses on rural migrants by examining such discourses in newspapers from two different cities: Beijing as the Chinese capital city and Shenzhen as a city that was almost built from scratch and in which the presence of rural migrants was numerically and proportionally very important. After a first rough analysis of how migrants were described in the two cities' selected newspapers in 1994 and 1998³, clear differences were observed. While in the Beijing newspapers migrants were very commonly associated with crime, in Shenzhen one could not perceive such a broad criminalization of migrants. In the Shenzhen press a clear demarcation between those labelled “migrant workers” (打工者 *dagongzhe*), “working sisters”, (打工妹 *dagongmei*) and “working boys” (打工仔 *dagongzai*) and those labelled “sanwu people” (“three without”) was observed. While the former seemed on the whole represented under a rather positive light as the “builders of the Special economic zone” (特区的建设者 *tequ de jianshezhe*), the latter were described as obstacles to the prosperity of the city and as damaging its image; as such they were the target of cleansing campaigns. This clear-cut distinction between the two groups, my getting more familiar with the emergence in Shenzhen and in the Pearl River Delta of the so-called “dagong literature” (打工文

² By “externalizing” I mean that through this mechanism migrants' stay in Chinese cities is conditioned on their obtaining residency and work permits, and they are not provided the social entitlements permanent residents usually get or used to get. Their pay is also on the whole much lower than that of permanent residents.

³ For Beijing these newspapers were *Beijing Ribao* (*Beijing daily*), *Beijing Wanbao* (*Beijing evening*), *Beijing Fazhibao* (*Beijing legality daily*), *Beijing Qingnianbao* (*Beijing youth daily*). For a presentation of the Shenzhen newspapers and other press material examined in this dissertation, see chapter 2.

学 dagong wenxue), as well as the various discourses around the notion of “dagong” and on Shenzhen contributed to my focusing on this area. At that stage, the project was still to focus only on official discourses on migrant workers in Shenzhen. But in the course of 1999, as I became more versed into social theories that dealt with discourses and ideological domination, the idea to look both at official representations and at the way they were being articulated within migrants’ narratives slowly made its way into my research design. This was confirmed when I had my first contacts with the field in the summer of 1999.

But the choice to focus on Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta also has very much to do with their specific status. As it will be documented later, Shenzhen, and later several other areas of the Pearl River Delta, have been at the forefront of the economic reforms in China. Migrant workers from the countryside have a specific position in the development of Shenzhen⁴. From the 1980s on, the Pearl River Delta has witnessed an unprecedented parallel increase of foreign investments and migrant workers from the countryside, so that in cities such as Shenzhen, Dongguan or Zhuhai, migrant workers not only make out the great majority of first line manufacturing workforce, but are also more numerous than the permanent population. Therefore, migrant workers from the countryside have *a central economic role* within both the Pearl River Delta’s but also within the whole country’s economic growth since in other coastal areas with a strong concentration of labor-intensive factories they provide also the vast majority of manpower. Without this huge pool of rural labor, China would not have known its double digit growth. Since the capacity to generate high levels of economic growth and to improve people’s living standards are crucial in the Party’s legitimacy, migrants also somehow play an important political role. One of the paradoxes of the Mao-era policies is that by having geographically and socially “immobilized” the population, it has constituted an immense reservoir of labor and has generated a gap between cities and villages which is going to keep fuelling internal migration for the years to come. But at the same time, the vary harsh labor regimes implemented in the Pearl River Delta and the violence — both physical and symbolic — that the meeting of global capitalism and post-Mao China state socialism generate upon migrant workers also constitutes a challenge for a ruling party whose founding narratives are grounded precisely upon the rejection of capitalist exploitation.

⁴ While Shenzhen has had a specific status as the first special economic zone all along the 1980s and during part of the 1990s, the dual features concerning migrant workers which I point to also apply to some extent to other open areas of the Delta. This being said, there still are important differences between cities as to the proportion of migrants laboring in manufacturing industries as well as to each city’s policy towards migrant workers. Cities such as Shenzhen have literally sprouted in the 1980s while others such as Guangzhou were already major cities with a long history. See for instance the differences between Shenzhen and Foshan in the early 1990s as they are documented in Scharping and Sun Haiyang, 1997.

At this stage, it is worth attempting to clarify some of the meanings which the notion of *dagong* embodies, since this also accounts for my focusing on how this category is represented and how it became an object of struggle. Originating from Hong Kong, this word carries a connotation of discipline and submission to an extremely harsh regime of work (Chan, 1998, pp. 4-5). Made of the words “to beat” (打 da) and “to work” (工 gong), it involves a plurality of meanings that are far from being exhausted by the notion of ‘work’ (工作 gongzuo). Lee Ching-Kwan has shown that its meanings ranged from fierce exploitation, loss of control on one’s time and space, an intense feeling of precariousness and injuries to one’s dignity, to symbols of modernity and prosperity (Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998, pp. 109-136). For Pun Ngai *dagong* “refers to casual labor — labor that can be dismissed at will, that can be replaced by anyone who is willing to sell his or her labor for a lower price” (Pun, 2005, p. 12). But Pun Ngai also argues that to *dagong* in modern factories implies a “politics of desire” (Pun Ngai, 2002, pp. 341-348; Pun Ngai, 2005, pp. 13-14). This last argument allows me to turn to one last specific feature which makes studying discourses about and by migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta particularly interesting. The fact that migration implies a politics of desire is something which I think one can point to in most contemporary migration processes in the context of globalization⁵. The prosperity of cities of the Pearl River Delta such as Shenzhen, symbolized by their skyscrapers and their conspicuous consumption, have a formidable power of attraction upon migrant workers, fuelled by the legacies of the Chinese socialist system, Pun argues (*Ibid.*, p. 14). Post-Mao economic reforms, as they are built against a bedrock of rejection of what state socialism meant in terms of its rigid social structure and impediments upon social mobility, entail a politics of emancipation which tends to essentialize individuals’ talents (Rofel, 1999, pp. 27-33). Such a politics has been most pervasive in Shenzhen and in other areas of the Pearl River Delta as we shall see and it is also linked to the building of an identity for the area. I argue that there is a great interest in looking at how this state-sponsored discourse which stresses individuals’ capacities articulates with migrant workers’ nurturing hopes for improving their lot as well as their “eagerness to articulate a modern imagination” (Pun Ngai, 2005, p. 7). For, as Rofel argued, in post-Mao China, power “operates precisely in those realms it has made liberatory” [labor market, employment choices for instance], (Rofel, 1999, pp. 29-33). By trying to shed some light on this thorny issue, we go further than simply

⁵ I am using Michel R. Trouillot’s understanding of contemporary globalization for whom at least three elements define this process: “an increased and selective flexibility of capital (.); differentiated labor markets within and across national boundaries; an increased but uneven integration of consumer markets worldwide”, i.e. “a global politics of desire and consumption”. This process results in socio-economic polarization within and between countries. Trouillot, 2001, pp. 128-130.

look at the process of building legitimacy for the party-state, since we are dealing with a form of power which is supposed to govern *through individuals*.



Female migrant workers watching television next to a production site in Shenzhen. The politics of reproduction of the labor force often implies a politics of desire. Copyright: Pun Ngai.

General presentation of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided in three parts: part I goes from chapter 1 to 3; part II from chapter 4 to 9 and part III is devoted to chapter 10. In chapter 1, I first give an overview of the scientific literature on the issue of discourse and representations about migrant workers in China. I underline that several works have observed the association of migrants with social disorder but that they did not document which discursive forms this association took. In the second part of the chapter, I explain why I find it important to study discourses about migrants in China. One important argument I put forward is that discourses are part of practices of government and that studying discourse should help inform modes of re-deployment of party-state power in post-Mao China. In the third part of the chapter, I detail the main research questions and hypothesis. I explain that my aim is to look at how the categories of the dominant public transcript about migrant workers articulate with the narratives and experiences of migrant workers as they are mediated via texts written by them and via interviews. Chapter 2 starts by defining the conceptions of discourse and discourse analysis I am using in this dissertation. I draw the attention to the need to study discourse in relation to context and history. I then describe the context of the Chinese written press in China in the post-Mao era and present the main materials I have used within this dissertation. These are mainly: national mainstream newspapers and magazines for the 1950s, late 1980s and early 1990s; three Shenzhen official daily newspapers; a body of published and unpublished texts written by migrant workers; and ethnographic interviews. Chapter 3 examines in detail the approaches of power, domination and resistance which have guided my analysis. I provide a critical appraisal of James C. Scott's concept of public and of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. In chapter 4, the socio-economic context of the Pearl River Delta is examined. I focus on the politics of migration, and on the disciplining of migrant workers within and outside the work-place. Chapter 5 is made of two parts. In the first part, I analyse how migrant workers were represented in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the period of Spring festival. I document the emergence of discursive categories such as "blind migrant" or "peasant worker" and I argue that these categories are linked to practices of social control. In the second part of this chapter, the way Spring festival population movements are depicted in the Shenzhen mainstream press in the 1990s is documented. I point to a process of de-dramatization of these population movements. The emphasis in the Shenzhen mainstream is put on the exemplary role of local officials in managing these migrations. I also point to a persisting official conception of population flows as unplanned and disorderly. Chapter 6 sheds light on the way undesired rural migrants, the sanwu people, are constituted as an "internal

other” vis-à-vis the legitimate migrant workers and Shenzhen residents. I argue that the campaigns aimed at cleansing the sanwu people allow the party-state to affirm its power and its capacity to restore order and preserve the conditions for transforming Shenzhen into an international modern city. Chapter 7 deals with the ways in which the issue of labor right abuses are represented in the Shenzhen mainstream press. In chapter 8, I look into how exemplary figures of migrant workers are constituted within a special page dedicated to migrants workers within the official city newspaper *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*. I focus on which values and attributes are associated to migrant workers in order to draw the boundaries of the dominant public transcript of migrant workers. In chapter 9, I show that Shenzhen has been the focus of an intense ideological construction by the party-state from the 1980s on and that it has been at the forefront of economic reforms and spiritual civilization. Chapter 10 endeavours to contrast the main elements of the dominant public transcript of migrant workers described in part two with migrant workers’ narratives and experiences of migration in the Pearl River Delta. I document the highly complex way in which the major idioms of the dominant public transcript are partly and ambiguously confirmed, strongly opposed and sometimes re-appropriated within migrant workers’ narratives. Finally, a conclusion sums up the main insights of the dissertation.

**PART I : RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGY
AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Chapter 1: A Review of the literature and main research questions and hypothesis

1.1 A review of scholarly works on discourse and representation of rural migrants

It is first to be stressed that, despite the numerous statements in publications that stress the fact that media and elite depiction of migrant workers are on the whole negative and pejorative⁶, there are not many scholarly works dealing with discourse and representations about rural migrants in China. I will first highlight the main findings of these works. Then, in regard with the research questions of this dissertation, I will point to what these studies did not deal with. I will also point to the arguments developed in these publications which I have found useful for my own work. The first broad overview of media discourse about migrant workers was carried out by Delia Devin. In this work she highlights some general features of the media depictions of migrants. She points to the largely homogenising descriptions of rural masses penetrating into cities. They are described as threatening law and order, and social stability in general. Rural to urban migration is depicted as a problem and the media tend to put forward figures on the number of migrants which may vary from 80 million to up to 200 million people. Migrants are also frequently associated with unemployment and crime, she explains. When migrants are not linked to social ills, they are often described as being in need of help and protection. More positive accounts are rarer, she writes, and are usually related to migrants' contribution in the economy⁷. Delia Devin does not tell the reader anything about the selection of articles under scrutiny, nor the number of articles analysed. She quotes articles from Beijing, Tianjin and Guangzhou as well as a few national magazines. All articles are from 1993 and 1994. She observes that amongst the more positive accounts of migrants, none used the editorial voice and all positive statements were from social scientists and researchers (Devin, 1999, pp. 150-155 and Devin, 2003, pp. 278-291)⁸. I will show through my analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream press that, until the mid-1990s, unlike what Devin and Jacka have argued, the construction of

⁶ See for instance, Zhao Shukai, 1996 and Zhao Shukai, 2000; Zhou Daming, 1997; Mallee, 1995 and Mallee, 2000; Smith, 1996; Solinger, 1999.

⁷ Rachel Murphy refers to how newspapers depict successful return-migrants in two Jiangxi province rural counties, see Murphy, 2000, pp. 231-247.

⁸ This, as I will show later, stands in sharp contrast with what my analysis of both early representations of migrants in the national press 1980s as well as with what my analysis of the Shenzhen press shows. For a similar account of representing rural migrants as a social threat, see Sarguson, 1999, pp. 182-187.

migrant workers as a threat to social order is not predominant in the media, either one considers the Pearl River Delta or more specifically Shenzhen⁹.

Xiang and Tan provide a useful overview of research on Chinese internal migration and its relationship with public policies in China since the 1980s. They shed light on how social science research has impacted the way migration is perceived at the political level. While most of the knowledge produced by policy experts in government and semi-government institutes was concerned with the issue of whether migrations were “progressive” or “destabilizing”, they also document the establishment of a “migrant-centered narrative which focuses on migrants’ rights and problems”. This “migrant-centered narrative”, they argue, is one of social science research’s most important contribution. They also shed light on the triangular relationship between research, media and policy, and they provide arguments on the issue of how researchers can influence policy indirectly through the media (Xiang and Tan, 2005).

Zhang Li’s work provides a good complement to the general overview offered by Xiang and Tan. She has carried out a conceptually interesting study of media and urban elite discourse on migrant workers in Beijing. This work on media discourse as well as on migrant workers’ written narratives takes place within a larger ethnographic study of “how space, power, and identity-reformation intersect to reconfigure the state-society relationship” in post-Mao China. One core Foucauldian argument developed by Zhang Li in her volume is that the process of subject formation of migrant workers is accomplished via various discursive and non-discursive strategies, both within and outside the state institutions. In studying this process, Zhang Li looks at the process of categorization and media representation of migrant workers (Zhang Li, 2001a, pp. 23-24). She stresses that in official publications such as government censuses, newspaper reports, scholarly research and reportage literature, migration has been conceived as a problem and that the main question was how to improve the management of the floating population¹⁰. Such circulation of knowledge, she argues, has shaped popular representations of migration and has served as groundwork knowledge for designing policies and rules related to migration¹¹. As such, she argues that these discourses on migrants are “intrinsically linked to the changing modes of governmentality” of migrants which slowly changed from blocking and suppressing to

⁹ Jacka’s point that depictions of migrant workers as heroes or models are relatively rare in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s needs qualification as to the Shenzhen press as well as to newspapers such as *Guangzhou ribao* (*Guangzhou Daily*) or *Yangcheng Wanbao* (*Yangcheng Evening*).

¹⁰ See Also Jacka, 2006 who in addition and along with Solinger noted that the floating population in general stood as a metaphor of the anxiety generated by the market as it signified change in a society still strongly marked by the planned economy. Jacka, 2006, p. 46-47; Solinger, 1999, p. 101

¹¹ See Dong Jinhong and Stockman, 1999 for a study of the attitudes of Shanghai residents towards rural migrants which shows that negative perceptions circulated by the media are not always shared by Shanghai residents.

regulating migrants¹². She also describes three dominant modes of representation in the construction of the migrant other in Chinese cities: unifying and homogenizing; dehistoricizing and dehumanizing and, thirdly, abnormalizing. (*Ibid.*, pp. 28-46). In an essay, Zhang Li also looked at how migrants' settlements in Beijing have been depicted in the Beijing press. On the whole, migrant space is described as "dirty, chaotic, and dangerous" both in media and official accounts and such a depiction, Zhang Li argues, needs to be considered in relation with the need for the Party-state to discipline and control the migrant population which was perceived as challenging its power in Beijing. The association of migrant settlements with crime is often explained in terms of their spatial mobility or rootlessness which is historically linked to chaos. Migrants' counter-narratives mainly center on requiring that crime be related to larger social conditions, as well as to the corrupt practices of local bureaucrats, she explains (Zhang Li, 2001b, pp. 201-224). Zhang Li's work is particularly suggestive for her investigation of the relationship between local officials within various administrations and migrants, as well as for her emphasizing that the formal and informal practices, as well as discursive and non-discursive ones are part of one single process of governing migrants in urban setting. She does not however deal with the argumentation developed in favor of migration in the early debates on migration. Neither does she show the kinds of discursive structures and mechanisms which are at work in representing migrants in the media.

Other works on the representation of migrants in the written press include that of Zhao Yuezhi in an essay on the depiction of well-off people, laid-off workers and criminals (including the depiction of criminality by migrant workers) within Chinese tabloids in the nineties¹³. In this essay, Zhao Yuezhi addresses the issue of how tabloids reflect on social stratification in post-Maoist China. She observes how tabloids tend to narrate tales of laid-off workers who were successful in their professional efforts because they had managed to "discover and mobilize their entreprising selves". (Zhao Yuezhi, 2002, pp. 122-123). As to the depiction of migrant workers involved in crime, she observes similarly how much tabloid crime tales "transform issues of social divisions into those of character, morality, and law and order" (*Ibid.*, p. 128). Some of Zhao Yuezhi's insights on the depiction of state-owned enterprises laid-off workers, especially her argument of a strong trend toward individualization of social stratification¹⁴, resonate with some of the features which I shed light on in this dissertation.

Sun Wanning's work on the Anhui Women federation publications as well as on a range of commercial newspapers deals with the strategies of these media in representing female migrant

¹² Solinger makes a similar argument in Solinger, 1999, p. 92.

¹³ Her study focuses on the years 1994-1995 and 1998-1999 for a wide selection of 29 titles for 1994-1995 and 86 tabloids for 1998-1999. See Zhao Yuezhi, 2002, pp. 133, footnote 8.

¹⁴ Jacka makes a similar point in Jacka 2004, p. 283 and Jacka, 2006, p. 71.

workers. In the Anhui Women Federation publications in 2000, the image of an ideal virtuous woman is widely sponsored, she argues. The four qualities of independence, strength, self-respect and dignity are often associated with this ideal figure. Sun Wanning calls this “indoctrination”. She also points to the voyeuristic stance of commercial journalism through means of eyewitness and undercover accounts, which, instead of denouncing social wrongs, subjects female migrants to “moral surveillance and control with titillating sex, crime, and intrigue” (Sun Wanning, 2004, pp. 109-119). Such voyeurism, Sun argues, strengthens a “middle-class sensibility” and may help the party-state re-gain currency in circulating appealing popular genres such as police or investigative stories “framed within a law and order discourse” (*Ibid.*, pp. 119-120). She eventually highlights the “humanistic discourse of compassionate journalism” which, while it hints middle-class concerns for justice and individual rights, also hides the structural factors behind the abuses of female migrant workers’ rights.

Li Feihong wrote an essay on how four Guangdong province newspapers related the Sun Zhigang case in 2003¹⁵. He shows that *Nanfang Doushibao* (*Southern Metropolis*) somehow challenged the ordinary chain of command of the media since it actually revealed this highly sensitive case which pointed to the ill practices of Guangzhou local government. *Nanfang ribao* (*Southern Daily*), the Guangdong province official organ, as well as *Yangcheng Wanbao* (*Yangcheng Evening*) and *Guangzhou ribao* (*Guangzhou Daily*) all had articles on the Sun Zhigang’s case only once the issue had been set on the political agenda and after three law scholars from Beijing University had written an open letter to the People’s National Assembly pointing to the anti-constitutional nature of the detention and repatriation system. Li Feihong also observes that within Southern Metropolis, the Sun Zhigang case as well as other similar cases were framed into a narrative of “injustice” and into a vocabulary of “citizen’s rights” (公民权 *gongmin quan*). As such, he argues, the way this newspaper reported these cases somehow bridged the gap between rural migrant workers and urban dwellers (Li Feihong, USC paper).

In addition to these works that dealt with the mainstream media representation of migrant workers, other scholars have examined the ways in which migrant workers have narrated their experiences in magazines dedicated to migrant workers or more generally aimed at rural readers. Again, several authors refer to such writings in a rather peripheral manner and some of

¹⁵ Sun Zhigang is a young designer who died in a repatriation camp in March 2003. The circumstances of his death were revealed by the tabloid *Southern Metropolis* and generated widespread debates in the media. On June 19th 2003, the whole repatriation system was abolished by the State Council. Thireau and Hua also wrote a paper which deals with the debates generated by the Sun Zhigang’s case as well as with the internet debates on the household registration system, see Thireau and Hua, 2004, pp. 275-312. They show that the major principle upon which arguments criticizing the household registration system are grounded is that of “equality of civil right” and that it is more and more associated to notions of equity, dignity and freedom. Other principles were that of economic and administrative efficiency.

their arguments will be discussed in upcoming chapters¹⁶. Tamara Jacka however has produced very insightful scholarship on migrant workers' letter writing and how this practice related to their self-description. She first did so in an essay which examined how female migrant workers in Hangzhou described themselves in relation to others and how this related to elite representations of these female workers. Her central argument in this essay is that one needs to consider the ways in which these female migrant workers express themselves "and construct their subject positions" as a way of answering back to the negative social comment on them and to their undergoing discrimination at work and urban setting. She emphasises that magazines such as the one she analysed¹⁷ as well as the mainstream press, while they may express sympathy for the lot of migrant workers, actually contribute to representing people from the countryside as "inferior others against which the city defines itself and its modernity" (Jacka, 1998, pp. 43, 49)¹⁸. She also points to the way female migrant workers spoke of their sense of justice and equality as being strongly influenced by Maoist narratives and narrative techniques such as "the speaking bitterness" (*Ibid.*, pp. 60)¹⁹. Tamara Jacka develops these arguments further in an introduction to a series of texts written by female migrant workers and published in a journal called *Nongjianü baishitong* in 1998 and 1999 as part of a writing contest. She notes that many of the stories narrated were written in a "formulaic and unconvincing" language quite different from that used in interviews. In her most recent volume, Jacka analyses how female migrant workers are depicted in *Rural Women* (农家女 Nongjia nü) and *Working Sisters* (打工妹 Dagongmei), two magazines linked to the All-China Women Federation in the early 2000s. She notes the emphasis on self-development and on the capacity to work hard as main venues in order to rise on the social hierarchy. Jacka also observes a difference in written accounts of migration which tend to stress more heavily efforts and self-development than oral ones. I will show later that I have found a similar contrast to the one pinpointed by Jacka between written and oral forms, but where she tends to relate this to the fact that "real life is very messy and it takes some effort to pare it down to a single, teleological narrative" (Jacka, 2006, p. 264), I will bring in arguments related to the context of production of such narratives as well as to the role and expectations of editors and to how migrant workers react in their writings to such expectations. Some of the

¹⁶ See for instance Pun, 1999; Lee Ching-Kwan, 1995.

¹⁷ She analysed a body of articles from a magazine run by the All China Women's Federation called *Nongjianü Baishitong* (*Rural women knowing all*) dedicated to female peasants which also contained articles on and by female migrant workers working in cities.

¹⁸ In Jacka, 2004 and Jacka, 2006, she qualifies this argument by observing that such magazines offer valuable platforms for female migrant workers to challenge some dominant discourses about themselves, while at the same time also reproducing some dimensions of dominant discourses.

¹⁹ She notes though that while the Maoist techniques of "speaking bitterness were mobilized in order to help establish the Party-state hold on society, in Post-Mao China they expressed these sufferings in "opposition to the contemporary social order". *Ibid.*, p. 71.

insights highlighted above shall be discussed and qualified in the upcoming chapters of this dissertation.

Another interesting work on how migrant workers frame their experience and produce claims is that of Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan. They analyse 123 complaints sent by migrant workers to the Shenzhen municipality Labor Bureau in order to examine what common principles migrant workers mobilize in order to express their feelings of injustice. Thireau and Hua's larger argument is that by mobilizing such common principles drawn from various repertoires, these migrant workers participate to the building of a sense of what is fair and thereby contribute to the reshaping of labor norms and regulations (Thireau and Hua, 2001, pp. 1283-1312 ; Thireau and Hua, 2003, pp. 83-103).

Tan Shen and Anita Chan also examine letters written by migrant workers and letters sent to migrant workers by their relatives and friends in Shenzhen. They collected more than 70 letters left on the ruins of the Zhili factory in Shenzhen after a blaze had killed 87 workers and injured 46 people in 1993. Their work does not deal with issues of representation of migrant workers through writing, but rather with what these letters revealed as to the conditions of these migrants in factories of the Pearl River Delta. Both scholars point to the harsh labor condition, migrant workers' everyday concerns for food, health, housing, employment, fear of harassment in public space, etc (Tan Shen, USC paper ; Chan, 2002, pp. 163-188).

On the whole, the association of migrants with social disorder has been highlighted by several authors. The discursive forms this association took and how the categories of discourse were produced are questions that have not been studied in these works. The debates that have ensued from such problematizations in the early depictions of migration have not been documented either. In addition to this, none of these works provide a detailed study of the specificity of the representation of migrant workers in Shenzhen or in the Pearl River Delta. As I explain in the introduction as well as in chapter 4, there are several reasons that call for a study of such discourses in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta. What I am setting out to do is to look closely at the kinds of categories and structures being used to define migrant workers and the notion of *dagong*, as well as to examine the struggles that revolve around these categories and structures. Before explaining further the main research questions and hypothesis that will be developed through this dissertation, I want to point out why I think it is *worth studying discourses* about and by migrant workers.

1.2 Why a study of discourse about and by migrant workers?

I will put forward the main reasons to account for the value of studying discourses about *and* by migrant workers²⁰. First, it must be stressed that within the political history of the Chinese Communist Party, discourses by the Party, or sponsored by the Party but produced through “the masses”, have had a central function before 1949 and as part of the establishment and continuous strengthening of the regime’s legitimacy. As such, these discourses are part of the very identity of the Party. Not only were such discourses very important for building the legitimacy of the regime, but they went hand in hand with the major transformations of Chinese society engineered by the Party, such as the Agrarian reform and the collectivization of agriculture in the early and mid-1950s²¹. In addition to the urban-rural divide which institutionalized differential treatment of the two major categories of the population (i.e. the “agricultural population ” and “non agricultural population”, 农业人口 *nongye renkou* and 非农业人口 *fei nongye renkou*), the Party has implemented very encompassing class-based and political classifications²² that were to have important effects on various categories of people. As Jean-François Billeter has noted, for almost three decades since 1949 such classifications exerted tremendous consequences on the position of each individual in the social hierarchy and on the nature of the relationship of each individual with the party whenever mass movements were launched (Billeter, 1985, pp. 127-169). But if the functioning of this highly elaborate system of classifications had very concrete material purposes and effects, it has been made possible partly through the mobilization of a series of narrative techniques (‘speaking bitterness’, literary campaigns, scar literature, mass movements, etc.) which aimed at overcoming, inverting and reinterpreting reality (Apter and Saich, 1994, pp. 13-15). This reinterpretation has been of critical importance in creating a “new mythos of the polity, a new moral discourse of the nation, and a new hegemonic interpretation of experience” based on collectivism and egalitarianism, as well as on a rejection of exploitation. By telling their story, using specific categories of knowledge such as class exploitation, individuals were encouraged to locate themselves with regard to the party, and so became conceived of as new socialist subjects (Rofel, 1999, pp. 27-33). This system rested on fixing people at their place of residence and work.

In the post-Mao era, with the implementation of economic reforms and as spontaneous population mobility resumed, some of the Party-state-sanctioned classifications and concomitant

²⁰ One should note that I detail the conception of discourse I am using throughout this work in chapter 2.

²¹ See Apter and Saich, 1994 as well as Hinton, 1958 on this.

²² From 1952 on, the entire population was classified into more than 60 different categories. On the nature of these classifications and the fact that these were not only economic but also political, Billeter, 1985, pp. 127-169; Dirlik, 1983, pp. 182-211.

allocation systems (of space, goods, labor, etc.) have been considerably altered²³. The system of class labels has been abandoned to be replaced by a state-sponsored discourse on development that has spread throughout society and taken a variety of forms (scientific, journalistic, popular, etc.). The notion of the “quality of the population” (人口素质 renkou suzhi) is at the core of this discourse of development²⁴. It has meant a shift from a focus on relations of production during the Mao era to a strong emphasis on productivity in the post-Mao era (Yan Hairong, 2003, p. 92). In addition to these general shifts in Party-state discourse in the Post-Mao era, the official representations of labor have also changed. Whereas in the Mao era job stability and predictability were highly valued and constituted a defining feature of the status of workers²⁵, with the economic reforms, values and attitudes of flexibility and autonomy have been more and more prized.

With this major representational shift and with the popularization of new forms of discourse that justify social stratification through an essentialization of the self, looking at how migrant workers are represented, as well as how they define themselves and rationalize their success and failures in the Pearl River Delta is important for several reasons. First, the dominant representation of migrant workers that I document in chapters 5 to 8 should, *per se*, shed some light on *the kind of identity the Party is building for itself*, and on how the Party is also constructing *a particular image of society*. Second, by looking at both the dominant construction of migrant workers in Shenzhen *as well as* at how such a construction relates to migrant workers’ narratives and experiences, I hope to also shed light on the party’s reformed narrative techniques as well as on discursive modes of legitimation of social stratification deployed by the party in the post-Mao era. I must stress too that I see these discourses as intrinsically linked to material processes that *impact* on the lives of migrant workers and other categories of the population. Some of these discourses have a quasi-performative nature as they are produced by specific practices *and* also make such practices possible. Let me give one example from my very first day of extensive fieldwork in the Summer of 2001. At that time, as I had carried out a first rough analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream press discourses on migrant workers, I had been asking myself if spending so much

²³ For instance, the household registration, as well as regulations on employment and on trade have been considerably reformed.

²⁴ For Rachel Murphy the discourse on the quality of the population has allowed to back both “increased state intervention in some spheres and retreat in others”. Murphy, 2004, p. 19.

²⁵In the Mao-era, the “workers” (工人 gongren) were represented as the “masters of the country” and benefited from a great stability as to their work. They also could enjoy access to subsidized food and to a full array of public services such as lodging, welfare, schooling for their children, etc. Peasants were excluded from these services. See Solinger, 1999 and Chan Kan-Wing, 1994.

time and labor on the party-state “law and order discourse” on the “sanwu people”²⁶ was going to allow to document more than the party’s own representation of reality. I hadn’t even spent half an hour in Foshan where I was looking for my apartment when I came across a scrap collector. We had been talking for about 15 minutes when he uttered:

“Well, it’s hard! All these policemen, they say that we are damaging the appearance of the city with our tricycles, that we are dirty and that we stink! They often confiscate our tricycles. We have to pay fines to get them back. But I have come here, I have traveled more than two thousands kilometers to try to provide a future to my children, so that they can go to school!”²⁷.

There it was. The whole discourse on the sanwu people that were a stain for the city’s image and that needed to be cleansed was in this worker’s narratives. He had experienced its effects as it was combined with the practices of control performed by the police. This meant that this discourse or discourses very similar to the one I examined in the Shenzhen newspapers circulated through society via specific institutions and became materialized through more or less formal institutional practices. In the remaining section of this chapter I shall explain what the main research questions and hypothesis of this dissertation are.

1.3 Research questions and hypothesis

Considering the above-mentioned arguments, studying party-state discourses about migrant workers should allow *to examine specific modes of re-deployment of party-state power in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta*. This approach is grounded on Abdelmayek Sayad’s argument that *discourses about migrants are discourses about the heart of society, as well as about the state in some of its core prerogatives*, in the sense that studying discourses from this angle would correspond *“to interrogating the state, to interrogating its founding principles, to interrogating its structuring and functioning mechanisms”*. Such an endeavour ought to enable us *to de-naturalize the categories the state has produced, “to re-historicize the state (...) to highlight the social and historical conditions of its genesis”* (Sayad, 1996, p. 14). Thereby, one may *question the various ways the state is building itself continuously, the way it is constituting its categories of discourse, of legitimation and of action*. More specifically, I hope to inform this question: *how are migrant workers being constituted into categories of government?*

²⁶ The sanwu people or “three without” are people who have no legal job, no legal residence and no official identification documents. For a detailed description of how the sanwu category is represented in the Shenzhen mainstream daily newspapers, see chapter 6.

²⁷ Foshan, fieldwork notes, Summer 2001.

In this dissertation, I will therefore not only aim at studying the discursive production of the party-state about migrant workers, but *also at examining the links between such discourses and migrant workers' experiences*. This way I hope to inform the question of *how the party-state's categories circulate throughout society?*

These research questions are grounded on the assumption that *differentiated discourses* aimed at migrant workers *are linked to differentiated modes of government* (Ong, 1999, p. 7).

Once the main values and attributes which are expected from migrant workers will be highlighted, I shall address the question of *what kinds of effects the party-state's normalizing power produces on people's experiences*²⁸. I will focus on the *points of resistance and accommodation which the inscription of power generates*. I will try to inform the hereafter related questions. In which respect are migrant workers forging alternative categories of discourse? Or, on the contrary, are they mainly drawing from the repertoire of categories that belong to the dominant public transcript of *dagong*²⁹ and, if so, *are such categories both enabling and constraining?*

Eventually, I will question the Foucauldian argument put forward by several scholars that the enterprising self has turned into a core political category within a process of neo-liberal governmentality. In this respect, I am *not only* considering the *legitimizing* aspects of discourse, but I will also question the idea of a mode of government that is said to govern *through* discursive categories by producing autonomous and responsible individuals.

²⁸ I shall do this by looking at *how migrant workers define their experiences of work* (打工 *dagong*) as they are mediated through two different sites: a body of letters to the editors of a migrant workers magazine on the one hand, and interviews, as well as participant observation on the other hand.

²⁹ See chapter 3 for a discussion of the concept of public transcript and for what it entails for the present study.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Discourse and discourse analysis: main concepts and methods used

In order to shed light on the ways in which migrant workers and the notion of “dagong” have been constructed in the Shenzhen mainstream written press and to examine how the major categories of official discourses relate to migrant workers’ narratives, I have drawn upon analytical tools that allow both to show aspects of regularity and homogeneity within discourse, as well as dimensions of heterogeneity and creativity in migrant workers’ narratives. I have therefore drawn upon methods belonging to structural semantics and semiotic analysis, as well as upon more pragmatic approaches which stress the conditions of production and reception of discourses. Before going any further into the types of methods used and into the presentation of the different bodies of analysis, I want to make clear what conception of discourse and discourse analysis I have developed in this dissertation.

From discourse understood as *speech* in opposition to language, via a pragmatic view of discourse which insists on the dynamic character of dialogic utterances to the underlying systems or structuring mechanism of various statements made from a specific social or ideological position, Maingueneau stressed the “instability” of the notion of discourse which as such would render useless the definition of discourse analysis “as the discipline which studies discourse” (Maingueneau, 1991, p. 10). Instead of trying to provide a firm definition of discourse, he suggests to consider discourse analysis as the study of language that gives priority to social contexts, to the activity of speaking subjects and the dynamics of utterances and dialogues³⁰. Hence, there should be a double dimension in discourse analysis, one that looks at how language functions internally — by looking at its structures, at the relation between its different components, etc. — and one which endeavours to anchor the working of language into society and history. From this perspective, depending on the questions under scrutiny, each researcher in specific disciplines will work out his own “network of concepts” in an interdisciplinary way (*Ibid.*, p. 11; Fiala, 1983, p. 148)³¹.

I wish to stress that I am not taking discourse as a theoretical object of investigation. I conceive of looking into discourse and narratives as a specific way to investigate the relationship

³⁰ Blommaert similarly calls for the study of “discourse in (and) action or language in-use”, Blommaert, 2005, p. 1. For discussions of various definitions of the term “discourse see Howarth, 2000, pp. 1-15; Riggins, 1997, p. 1-3; Van Dijk, 1993, pp. 28-36; Van Dijk, 1985, pp. 1-13.

³¹ The difficulty obviously lies in how to link the two dimensions.

between domination and resistance. I am interested in looking at discourses and at their circulation in order to examine these as an instance of power relations and my interest also lies in investigating how discourse can “become a meaningful site of differences, conflict and struggle” (Fiala, 1983, p. 142; Blommaert, 2005, p. 3)³². Hence, I am conceiving of discourse *as socially and historically situated practices* and not chiefly or solely as a linguistic system that would be severed from society (Maingueneau, 1991, p. 11). Hence, language is not to be taken as an autonomous system. Rather, meanings ought to be studied in relation to both micro and macro context, both “inside and outside language” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 35), allowing to shed light both on regularity and stability on the one hand, and on change, adaptation and appropriation on the other hand. Hereafter I will deal with some concepts and approaches borrowed from discourse analysis and which I am using in this dissertation.

While I have used several of the methods which are part of the paradigm of (critical) discourse analysis³³, I also depart from some of the claims made within this field³⁴. Blommaert and Bulcaen, as well as De Fina have highlighted that one of the major questionable stance in several critical discourse analysis work, is that once specific meanings are found to be pervasive, they “are often forced upon the reader”³⁵. In this dissertation I will show precisely that there may not be any straightforward and unquestioned link between a specific ideology and its internalization. I will show that there is much room for heterogeneity, appropriation, negotiation *and* for some dimensions of reproduction, not losing sight of the possibility of appearances of reproduction.

Blommaert, along with De Fina, have also called for greater attention to the circumstances under which texts are produced and received (Blommaert, 2005, p. 31; De Fina, 2003, pp. 29-31). Ahearn similarly suggests that researchers concentrate their attention on “constraints on the kinds of meanings that might emerge from specific events” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). She calls for emphasizing “how individuals, including scholars, actively construct and

³² Blommaert provides also a larger conception of discourse including not only practices linked to language, but also “other meaningful symbolic behaviour” such as images, photos, etc. While I did not quite consider such a large conception of language, I did consider the link between images and the meanings conveyed by texts. Blommaert, 2005, p. 2. I did as well pay attention to how specific objects such as buildings could generate specific reactions by migrant workers as these objects seemed to embody meanings related to the official public transcript of dagong as I will detail it later.

³³ Teun Van Dijk and Norman Fairclough are leading scholars in this field. For a critical appraisal of critical discourse analysis see Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000 and Blommaert, 2005. For a review of the “French school of discourse analysis”, see Maingueneau, 1991.

³⁴ I found the critical appraisal of critical discourse analysis provided by Blommaert, 2005, Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000 and De Fina, 2003 quite useful.

³⁵ I found some of Van Dijk’s work denoting such a deterministic conception of agency, see Van Dijk, 1993, pp. 25-28. See also Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p. 456. Otto’s work on public discourse on the Latinos in the USA also presupposes an uncritical acquiescing to ideologies that sustain the social order. See Otto, 2002, pp. 17-19. I discuss the issue of ideological consent in relation to James C. Scott’s work and to various understandings of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in chapter 3

constrain – rather than passively receive – interpretations that are both socially mediated and intertextually situated within a bounded universe of discourse” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). The conditions of production of discourses, their conditions of circulation, as well as the kinds of publics to whom these discourses are addressed all need to be considered. The way a specific set of discourse comes into existence and its later circulation and publics — i.e. considering “where it comes from and where it goes to”— strongly impacts on the very meaning of discourse (Blommaert, 2005, p. 35; Maingueneau, 1991, pp. 177-178; Fiala, 1983, pp. 150-155). Such a focus is helpful in order to study different bodies of texts such as the three main bodies under scrutiny in this dissertation: mainstream official press texts, texts from or written for migrant workers magazines and interviews with migrant workers. These three different bodies of texts may be considered as three different *genres* of discourse, with different institutional constraints and resources and different publics. As it is explained hereunder, the mainstream newspapers are mainly aimed and distributed to party cadres and Shenzhen city officials. The Shenzhen newspapers examined are thus all institutionally very close to the Shenzhen Party Committee and as such are acting chiefly as mouthpiece of the party. If one considers migrant workers’ texts and interviews, the former stand closer to party censorship on an ideologically or politically loaded continuum than the latter. One may argue that, because they are *written* and because they are *aimed at being published* within magazines under the party’s more or less direct ideological censorship, the written narratives produced by migrant workers will be more constrained than interviews, and will entail a different kind of dialogue, a different kind of engagement with the core elements of the dominant public transcript³⁶.

The notion of *genres* of discourse initially developed by Bakhtine draws the attention to moments and places of specific utterances, the status of the one who speaks or writes, as well as the kind of public addressed, which all impact on the semantic content (Maingueneau, 1991, pp. 155, 156, 175). Each genre has its own conventions, its own “condition on telling”, with specific background knowledge both on the rules, norms or rituals of the genre as well as on how a specific discourse will be interpreted (Bruner, 1991, pp. 10-11). For Bruner, *genre-ness* is one of the defining features of a narrative. For him, “genres seem to provide both writer and reader with commodious and conventional “models” for limiting the hermeneutic task of making sense of human happenings”. But a specific genre also implies particular “forms of telling” (*Ibid.*, pp. 14-15) for as De Fina argued:

³⁶ See chapter 3 for a definition of the notion of public transcript.

“Story-telling (...) creates social rules, understandings, and roles. It obeys social rules that dictate how narratives should be constructed, by whom and to whom they should be told, what is tellable and how” (De Fina, 2003, p. 5).

In this dissertation I am using this notion of genres which, I will show, can be usefully combined with the concept of hegemony as it has been developed by Roseberry³⁷.

The notion of genres is also closely related to another concept which I have found heuristically interesting, that of *intertextuality*. For Blommaert, “in its simplest form intertextuality refers to the fact that whenever we speak we produce the words of others, we constantly cite and re-cite expressions and re-cycle meanings that that are already available” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 46). This notion has to do with Bakhtin constitutive dialogism for whom a text is always a field where multiple other discourses or voices interact: the speaker’s voice, the listener’s, and “all the other voices which resonates with the speaker’s voice” (Todorov, 1981, quoted in Maingueneau, 1991, p. 154)³⁸. This approach is particularly relevant in order to look into migrant workers’ writings and into how the categories and structures they mobilize in their narratives relate to the dominant public transcript of dagong for instance. As I will show in the following chapters, one finds a very recurrent and pervasive use of expressions in migrant workers’ writings, drawing from a variety of repertoires which are characterized by different scales of historicity (Blommaert, 2005, p. 129). As we shall see, the notions of genres, as well as those of intertextuality and the stress on taking seriously the condition of production and circulation of discourse fit rather well with the concepts of interaction between “public transcripts” and the approach to hegemony which I develop in chapter 3. Hereafter, I describe briefly the main methods which I borrowed from structural semantics and from semiotics in analyzing the various bodies in this dissertation.

To analyze the various texts gathered within the different bodies so as to highlight the how migration, migrant workers, the South and the hometown were discursively constructed and which values and attitudes they were associated with, I have used a founding proposition of structural analysis. This proposition holds that the identification of relations of opposition on the one hand and of relations of conjunction on the other hand are fundamental in the process of structuring of meaning (Hénault, 1979, pp. 37, 94). Hence, in my treatment of the various bodies I have endeavoured to highlight the major structuring oppositions as well as to identify the major

³⁷ See chapter 3 on this.

³⁸ Maingueneau conceives of intertextuality as a form of “re-investment” which may bear on a genre and not on a specific text. He distinguishes two major kinds of intertextual (or hypertextual) strategies which he names “inveigling” (captation in French) for in this case the use of utterances linked to a genre results in a strengthening of the speaker’s or author’s position thanks to the legitimacy attached to this genre. He calls the second strategy “subversion” (subversion in French) which ruins the legitimacy attached to the genre. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

“isotopies” within texts³⁹. Within the different bodies I have tried to identify the *descriptors* or *signified*⁴⁰ of each *signifier* and to see how they relate to other key notions of the text (Mucchielli, 1988, pp. 113-115). By comparing how specific notions were constructed, that is by identifying which chains of signified were associated to which signifiers, I have highlighted in which respect specific constructions shared elements of similarities and of difference. In this endeavour, the notion of “floating signifier” developed by Laclau and Mouffe has proved helpful⁴¹. Laclau and Mouffe start from the notion of overdetermination which implies that any identity is open (to struggles), unaccomplished and negotiable (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 13). This means that no signifier is never fixed for good as they are the object of struggles in order to fix their meanings. For Laclau and Mouffe, any notion or signifier is the object of struggles in order to fix its meaning to specific signified or chains of signified. Hence, within a specific political project of constructing a chain of signified associated to a signifier, while each signified was initially different, the chain of various signified, may become linked by a relation of equivalence in the sense that their initial differences are neutralized by the fact that they together define a specific notion in a certain way (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 11). The logic of equivalence allows to construct the signifier by marking a frontier between two opposed poles. This logic of equivalence tries to construct meaning around antagonistic poles. The counteracting logic of struggle and of difference tries precisely to “weaken and displace” this polarity and break the initial chains of equivalence. Such an approach is particularly appropriate in order to study discourse around migration which often are strongly polarized. This has for instance allowed me to show in chapter 5 that in the early accounts of migration in the late 1980s, migration could be constructed in two major ways. In much journalistic and reportage literature accounts, it was associated to disorder, instability, lack of civility and of the attributes of urban dwellers. These signified could then become equivalent since they all contributed to constructing the presence of migrants negatively as illegitimate. This was possible too because these signified were articulate in opposition to the planned economy and the state. On the contrary, when articulated positively around the reforms and market commodity economy, migration is associated to signified such as dynamism, openness, and innovation, in opposition to the system of central planning which is then constructed negatively as a mark of archaism and rigidity⁴².

³⁹ An “isotopie” is defined as “the repetition of meaningful elements which belong to the same category, The function of a dominant isotopie is to promote discursive development”, *Ibid.*, pp. 80-82. For Klinkenberg, an “isotopie” is a statement which, thanks to its redundancy, embodies an homogeneity in term of its meaning. Klinkenberg, 1996, p. 118.

⁴⁰ i.e. the terms (adjectives, adverbs, etc.) which are used in order to qualify them.

⁴¹ I must say that if I have found some of their developments useful, I can not subscribe to their reducing all reality to discourse. For interesting critiques of Laclau and Mouffe’s see Kipnis, 2003; Townshend, 2003; Bowman, 2002.

⁴² See chapter 5 for figures which summarize these two ways to problematize migration.

Other specific methods and tools of analysis designed and used for each body of texts are explained within the presentation of each body. Now that my conception of discourse and discourse analysis as well as the main concepts and methods used have been introduced, we can turn to a presentation of the main features of the written press in China as well as a presentation of the various bodies and of how they have been analysed.

2.2 The Chinese written press : continuities and changes

Before examining the bodies of documents analysed in this dissertation, it will be helpful to briefly address the nature and the status of both the official party-linked newspapers and popular or more market oriented publications such as migrant workers magazines. It must be said that both the media and cultural production have undergone major changes over the last two decades. While the diversification of type of newspapers and magazines starts in the beginning of the 1980s with the emergence of “family-oriented evening papers and television guides”, it is from 1992 and Deng Xiaoping’s call for a deepening of economic reforms that the trend toward commercialization stepped up (Zhao Yuezhi, 2002, p. 114). This being said, despite a clear trend of transformations toward marketization, the principles of news and cultural production have not been altered fundamentally: the Chinese media still retain their role as mouthpiece of the party (Zhao Yuezhi, 1998, 2002). The paradoxical situation of the Chinese press is summed-up appropriately by Thomas Man Chan’s formula which is “commercialization without independence” (Chan, 1996)⁴³. Kevin Latham observes that “one of the fundamental responsibilities of news media is [still] to contribute to social change as desired by party and government.” (Latham, 2000, p. 638). As for arts and literature, the party document published in February 1989 which stated the aims for cultural and ideological work shared much continuity with pre-reform principles, as Barmé argues. According to this document, art and literature need to be exploited:

“to arouse the national spirit, raise the quality of the broad masses, inspire people, beautify their spirit (...) to edify, educate and excite people for the sake of social progress (...) Their aims must be to enhance our national self-confidence and strengthen national cohesion, as well as being able to further socialist construction, the reform and open door policies” (Barmé, 1999, pp. 14-15).

⁴³ For a description of the complex organizational functioning of the supervision of the media in China as well as principles of propaganda control, see Scharping, forthcoming.

Still, there has been a tremendous diversification of the press in its written and audiovisual forms. Many daily papers in China nowadays do not look much different from Western tabloids, with much stress on sensationalism and consumption. In press organs directly under the supervision of party or municipal authorities, however, rather bald examples of party propaganda are still common. For instance, in newspapers such as the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*, articles on model workers and more generally on spiritual civilization are frequently imposed by party leaders through the newspaper propaganda department (Zhou He, 2000: 134).

In today's landscape of the written media, one main difference between "party newspapers" (党报 *dangbao*) and newspapers not linked directly to party and municipal or provincial authorities is that the latter kind of newspapers have to be sold to their readers and attract advertisements in order to make profits or simply remain financially viable⁴⁴. The "party newspapers" do not face such financial pressure from the market and do not rely so much on a readership. Most often they are distributed to officials in governmental and party institutions or in public transports such as long distance buses. These newspapers retain the traditional mouthpiece function of the party. One important feature in distinguishing "party newspapers" from tabloids and other market-oriented papers is that people seldom buy them individually. Even though popular newspapers need to be sold on the market, the propaganda committees in these newspapers still try to influence the content of the articles published as to the kinds of issues that may or may not be published, or the way in which these issues may be discussed. The party has tried to harness the process of commercialization by issuing guidelines in the aftermath of the 1992 emergence of week-end editions so that they may help promote the "socialist spiritual civilization (...) patriotism, collectivism and socialist ideas"⁴⁵. To characterize how the party has been handling its relationship to the various kinds of press organs, Zhao Yuezhi spoke of a "policy of differentiated press control", i.e. "tight at the center, loose at the peripheries; tight on political issues, loose on soft news; tight with party organs, loose with other papers.

Since the very form and nature of what may be qualified propaganda has changed since the end of the 1980s, it gets more difficult to make clear where this influence of the party propaganda committee lies⁴⁶. Indeed, as Geremie Barmé has shown, during the nineties, the lines between "the mass culture suffused with ideological traits that may back authoritarian rule and

⁴⁴ It happens too that official newspapers create market oriented newspapers or magazines such as weekly editions. See Zhao Yuezhi, 2004 on this phenomenon.

⁴⁵ Central Propaganda Department, State Press and Publications Administration, "Guidelines on Strengthening the management and Improving the Operations of Week-end Editions", quoted in Zhao, 2004, p. 134. See also Zhao, 1998, pp. 52-72 and 127-151 on the development of market-oriented press.

⁴⁶ Popular newspapers rarely publish official discourse and party-sponsored editorials. Interview with Chen Huailin, Professor at the Department of Journalism of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, August 1999.

more traditional forms of propaganda” began to blur. Barmé links this blurring to the emergence of young editors, journalists, and writers and to their ambivalent position towards party propaganda. He also notes that the party has been more and more creative in “packaging” its ideological line within a mass culture largely permeated by the market (*Ibid.*, pp. 109, 114-115, 235-236; Zhao Yuezhi, 1998, pp. 4-7)⁴⁷. Zhao Yuezhi also shows that even street tabloids that may seem to deviate from dominant or official norms, actually confirm these very norms, even if not in a systematic manner (Zhao Yuezhi, 2002, p. 130).

As to the migrant workers magazines, some of them are linked to more mainstream newspapers or to government or party authorities while others don’t have such straightforward institutional links⁴⁸. These magazines face constraints that are similar to those which more mainstream types of popular magazines and newspapers face: they have to be responsive to the market and be attractive to their readership and advertisers, while at the same time they must stick to, at least not move too far from, the party line especially on sensitive issues like migrant labor in the Pearl River Delta. In my interactions with journalists and editors of such magazines, I could sometimes feel a tension between a sincere desire to remain as close as possible to the issues relating most directly to migrant workers’ lives and concerns, as well as to raise questions relating to social hierarchy or to social justice⁴⁹ and the need to take into account the political injunctions to stress positive or optimistic dimensions of the *dagong* experience. Where both staff of the magazines and political leaders did meet was indeed in the idea that the magazines should have a pedagogical function vis-à-vis migrant workers or readers in general⁵⁰. The authors of several letters I analyzed expressed the thought that the magazines give “a direction to migrant workers” because, as one writer said, “they allow us to better understand how to protect our human rights and our dignity”⁵¹. Magazine journalists and editors were all conscious of a need to give a direction: “to give migrant workers an example of how they should act,” they told me. I will argue later in this dissertation that this effort to educate people as well as the exemplary dimension of tales written by migrant workers are key features if one wants to shed light on the links between the dominant public transcript and migrant workers’ public transcript.

⁴⁷ For an interesting depiction of how *Beijing Youth News*, the newspaper of Beijing Communist Youth League, managed to transform propaganda messages and render them more appealing to readers, see Zhao, 1998, pp. 147-150. Stanley Rosen also documents the debates within this newspaper in Lee Chin-Chuan, 2000, see Rosen, 2000, pp. 152-178.

⁴⁸ Some magazines are linked to party mass organizations such as the Women’s federation. See Jacka, 2005 on the Beijing women’s federation magazine called *Nongjia nü baishi tong*. *Dagong zhiyin*, another migrant workers’ magazine is linked to the Wuhan Women’s federation.

⁴⁹ Migrant workers in their letters to the editor did stress this point very much.

⁵⁰ Zhao Yuezhi has documented this concern in the case of a very popular programme called “Focus” broadcasted on China’s Central Television (CCTV). In 1993, CCTV’s president stressed the need for programmes to encourage people and give them confidence and not to deal with problems that could not be solved. Zhao Yuezhi, 1998, p. 120.

⁵¹ Letter 25, see also letter 8, 9, 11, 15 and 28.

2.3 Presentation of the bodies of texts studied in this dissertation ⁵²

2.3.1 Sources on early migration (1950-1958 and late 1980s-early 1990s)

Some 30 articles of the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) dealing with migration have been analysed for the period between 1950 and 1958. Keywords such as *mangmu*, *mangliu*, *bukou* or *mingong* have been used in the CD Rom edition of the *People's Daily* to identify articles of interest.

For the period between 1986 and 1990, 45 articles published in the national written press were analysed. These daily and weekly newspapers included: *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*); *Nongmin ribao* (*Peasants Daily*); *Guangming ribao* (*Clarity Daily*); *Fazhi ribao* (*Legality Daily*); *Jingji ribao* (*Economics Daily*); *Zhongguo gongrenbao* (*Chinese workers journal*); *Renmin gong'anbao* (*People's police journal*); *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (*China Youth journal*); *Zhongguo renkoubao* (*China population journal*). Some of these articles were referenced within a volume which contained an extensive bibliography of publications published between 1984 and 1995 (Ji Dansheng and Shao Qin, 1995) or in scientific articles or books on Chinese internal migration. Other articles were found by using the Chinese Universities Service Centre database through keywords search. While I did not aim at an exhaustive analysis of these publications, the articles were chosen among press organs which are linked to specific categories of the population such as the peasants (*Nongmin ribao*), the intellectuals (*Guangming ribao*), the youth (*Zhongguo qingnian bao*); people working in fields related to justice (*Fazhi ribao*) or the police (*Gong'anbao*). Some of these papers are linked to specific party organizations such as *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* (*China Youth Journal*) which is linked to the Chinese Communist party Youth League.

29 items from scientific, Chinese Communist Party linked journals and general magazines were also analysed. These journals include: *Shehui* (*Society*); *Xin guancha* (*New observation*); *Dangzheng luntan* (*Party political affairs forum*); *Liaowang* (*Outlook*); *Neibu wengao* (*Internal manuscripts*); *Renkou yu jingji* (*Population and economics*); *Chengxiang jianshe* (*City and countryside construction*); *Xuexi yu tansuo* (*Study and exploration*); *Minzhu yu fazhi* (*Democracy and legality*); *Renkou dongtai* (*Population trends*).

In addition, substantial fragments from six works of reportage literature were analysed: Dong Jie et al., 1990; Ge Xiangxian and Qu Weiyong, 1990; Zheng Nian, 1991; Yang Shen, 1993; Wang Haiping, 1993; Wang Lingxu, 1993.

⁵² In addition to the hereunder bodies of texts, I have made an as extensive use as possible of both Chinese and non-Chinese scientific literature on migration in the Pearl River Delta. Some of the literature in the field of international migration has been used too in a comparative perspective when appropriate.

The purpose of the analysis of these publications was to examine how the term *mangliu* (blind migrant) had become a political and press discourse category in the late 1980s as well as to analyse articles and books that dealt with migration in order to document how migration was problematized in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For these publications, I have mainly highlighted:

- the main axes of argumentation mobilized;
- the categories used to designate migrant workers;
- the predicates associated with migrants in order to determine whether migrant workers were described as rather active or passive.

Such a method of analysis has allowed to describe the various ways in which migration was depicted and around which kinds of major oppositions these depictions were structured.

2. 3.2 *Shenzhen official daily newspapers*

The three Shenzhen mainstream newspapers investigated in the dissertation are all linked institutionally to Shenzhen authorities: *Shenzhen Tequbao*, hereafter *STQB* (*Shenzhen Special Zone daily*), is under the direct control of the Shenzhen municipal authorities; the *Shenzhen Wanbao*, hereafter *SWB* (*Evening of Shenzhen*) is linked institutionally to the former paper but targets a more popular audience, while the *Shenzhen Fazhibao*, hereafter *SFB* (*Shenzhen Legality Daily*) is rather intended for Shenzhen administrations of justice and public security⁵³. Articles from the *Nanfang ribao* (*Southern daily*), *Guangzhou ribao* (*Guangzhou daily*) and *Yangcheng wanbao* (*Yangcheng Evening*) have also been considered but not as systematically and thoroughly as the Shenzhen daily newspapers which are the core focus of my analysis in terms of mainstream newspapers. It should be noted that these three newspapers are clearly “party newspapers” (党报 *dangbao*) and that as such they act as mouthpiece of the Shenzhen Party and have to propagate the official line⁵⁴.

All articles related to migrant workers and to migration⁵⁵ have been analyzed on a systematic basis between January and March for 1988-1990, 1994, 1998 and 1999. August has also been considered for these three years. The choice of the January to March period has to do with the fact that a great number of articles on migrants are published during this period since it

⁵³ Interview with Chen Huailin, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, July 1999 ; see also He Dan and Chen Huailin, 1998. See annex 1 for a list of these newspapers and their corresponding abbreviations.

⁵⁴ I am grateful to Prof. Thomas Scharping for highlighting this point to me.

⁵⁵ This included articles on the *mingong* (peasant workers), the *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* or *dagongzhe*, the *wailai renkou* or *wailai laowugong*, as well as articles on the *sanwu* people, beggars, etc.

corresponds to the Spring festival during which population movements are most important numerically. 1988-1990 is the period when internal migration became a political and social issue which drew the attention of the media. During this period and most importantly during the Spring festival period, most newspapers and magazines had front pages that dealt with the waves of peasant workers who were pouring into Chinese cities. The choice of 1994 is related to the fact that it followed Deng Xiaoping's Southern trip in early 1992 which actually legitimized the policy of the Special economic zones using Shenzhen as the model Special economic zone to be followed. Economic reform and foreign direct investment increased considerably within the coastal provinces, so did the number of migrant workers (Tian Xiaowen, 2001, pp. 75-92)⁵⁶. It is worth noting too that a public debate on Shenzhen's image and status and on "the new citizen" or the "Shenzhen person" was launched by the Shenzhen municipal authorities in 1994.

1998 and 1999 have been chosen because this period coincides with the consolidation of Jiang Zemin's rule as President of the PRC and as First secretary general of the party, and with a major turn in the economic reforms since 1997. The 15th party Congress in September 1997 saw the introduction of the concept of "mixed ownership economy". Jiang Zemin's speech at the Congress provided important ideological justification for furthering⁵⁷ the reform of state-owned enterprises. The sale of shares of state-owned enterprises was made possible as well. The 15th party Congress also marked the end of life-long employment. From then on, workers from state-owned enterprises were asked to reform themselves and adapt to the changing circumstances. Within larger discourses centred on economic efficiency and competition, the image of state-owned enterprises workers along the nineties changed from "masters of the country" to "burdens" for economic development. This is what Rofel means when she speaks of workers having been "decentred" as they "became icons of all that went wrong with maoist-socialism" (Rofel, 1999, p. 7)⁵⁸. As we shall see in my analysis of the "World of dagong" depiction of migrant workers in 1998 and 1999, the issue of laying-off and re-employment of state-owned enterprises becomes quite pervasive within this special page initially dedicated to migrant workers. Hence, looking at 1998 and 1999 is particularly interesting since one may argue that this a nice vintage point to look at how the economy of representations linked to labor has changed.

⁵⁶ See chapter 4 on FDI in the 1990s; see Lin, 2001 for figures on the Pearl River Delta economic development in the 1990s and Liu Kaiming, 2004, on the parallel increase in FDI and migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta.

⁵⁷ Between 1994 and 1996, the laying-off of part of state-owned enterprises had started and in 1997, the number of redundant workers from the state sector had reached an unprecedented level of 12 million and even 16 million if one included those who were still on the job but were not paid or were underpaid, see Lee Ching-Kwan, 2002, pp. 62-91; Rocca, 2006, pp. 103-176. According to the Ministry of Labor, in 1996, 10 million workers had been laid-off and one half had found new jobs through the re-employment systems put in place in the early 1990s, Cheng, 1998, pp. 12-13. On the various forms and status of "unemployment" within state-owned enterprises see Kernén, 2002, pp. 23-29. See also Wang Xun, 1998, pp. 363-394; O'leary, 1998, pp. 455-478.

⁵⁸ Lee Ching-Kwan speaks of the "remaking of the Socialist worker" and the "unmaking of the redundant worker", see Lee Ching-Kwan, 2002, pp. 71-91. See also Sarguson, 1999, pp. 19-29.

A preliminary rough thematic analysis of all the collected articles was first carried out. Major thematic categories that came out of the preliminary analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream press articles were “right abuses”, “new year migration” and “social order and sanwu people”. Articles that belonged to the “World of dagong” were all gathered to be analysed separately.

In a second stage, articles belonging to each major thematic categories were gathered into tables that included:

- a number for each article;
- reference of the article (date and title);
- the main theme and values or major oppositions of the text;
- short summary of the main ideas of the text and or fragments in English;
- short fragments in Chinese.

In the case of articles dealing with the sanwu people, as in almost all of these articles, the sanwu people was an object category that was most of the times talked about and only occasionally uttered a word of its own, a column was added to the table which indicated how the sanwu people were qualified and which kinds of predicates they were associated with. This method of analysis has allowed to identify the major metaphors used in articles that dealt with the cleansing campaigns aimed at the sanwu people. Hence, in addition to highlighting the way the sanwu people are depicted, this analysis also allowed to shed light on how the party-state and his actions were constructed.

As for articles that belonged to the “World of dagong” pages, in addition to the above-mentioned steps, the main values and meanings related to “World of dagong” articles were brought into categories⁵⁹. Each category was given a specific code. A table which gathered all articles analysed and the codes (main values and meanings) for each article allowed to identify which meanings and values were more prevalent within the whole body of texts for 1994, 1998 and 1999. In some instances, the emergence of certain meanings along time could also be singled out. Carrying out such a method allowed also to compare the “World of dagong” body with the bodies of texts written by migrant workers as to the kinds of meanings and values dagong, migrant workers and the South or Shenzhen were associated with.

⁵⁹ To bring about these categories, 25 texts were analysed, their values and main meanings associated to dagong, to migrant workers, to the South (Shenzhen) and to the countryside were gathered into tables. Once this initial analysis was done, the values and meanings were classified under specific categories. These categories got further refined and made more specific as other remaining articles were analysed. Some categories which later happened not to be recurrent were eliminated from the listing of categories, while new ones got added in the process.

2.3.3 Magazines for migrant workers

Although all along this dissertation I use the terms “migrant workers’ magazines,” it should be noted that these magazines are usually not published *by* migrant workers, but *for* them, even though some of the articles are written by them. Most of the journalists of these magazines are not of working class background⁶⁰. Hence, the readership of these magazines is almost exclusively made of migrant workers. In this dissertation, the bodies of texts published in migrant workers’ magazines or simply sent to these magazines but not published come mainly from a bi-monthly magazine which used to be called *Wailaigong* (*Worker from outside*) and since 2003 changed its name into *Dagongzu* (*The Nation of migrant workers*). *Wailaigong* has been established in 1993 and was the second magazine aimed specifically at migrant workers⁶¹. Before *Wailaigong* was created, journalists and writers at the magazine *Foshan Wenyi* (Foshan Literature and Art) realized that among the many letters they received from readers, a substantial proportion of letters expressing much suffering were written by migrant workers. The vice-editor in chief of *Wailaigong*, who was working at *Foshan Wenyi* at that time, explained that the idea had come up that there was a demand for a magazine which would be dedicated to migrant workers⁶². At the outset of the magazine⁶³, romance was the topic most often dealt with in texts written by migrant workers. As time went by though, the various problems faced by migrant workers in cities became more and more important within the texts received and published by the magazine⁶⁴. The number of issues published every two weeks rose up to 500.000 in the mid 1990s. It then decreased to around 50.000 in 2001 and kept decreasing until 2006 when it was around 30.000⁶⁵. In 2001, *Wailaigong*

⁶⁰ Thank you to Zhao Yuezhi for highlighting this point to me.

⁶¹ The first such magazine was *Dapeng Wan* (*Dapeng bay*) which started publication in 1989.

⁶² He also explained to me that the name *Wailaigong* had been chosen by Foshan municipal authorities and the local Party Committee. Several editors and journalists did not feel quite comfortable with this name since it contained the term “exterior” and as such reinforced the idea that the workers were not “bendiren” (locals). Fieldwork notes, Guangzhou, December 2005. On this issue see also *Wailaigong*, “Wailaigong, ni wei shenme yao xing wai?”, 12/98, pp. 4-7.

⁶³ Unless specified otherwise, the information used in this section comes from interviews I carried out with 5 editors at *Wailaigong* in 1999, 2003-2004 and 2005-2006.

⁶⁴ One editor explained to me that a contradiction arose from the fact that the magazine could help shed light on serious problems facing migrant workers, but that they were most often unable to help these migrant workers solve these problems. This incapacity to solve the difficulties encountered by migrant workers was one of the weaknesses of *Wailaigong* since as time went by this demand for solving their problems had been building up on the part of migrant workers, he added. There used to be a wish to remain as close as possible to the life of migrant workers. This wish could not be fulfilled because, this editor argued, “it has been impossible to know the reality of migrant workers well, as it was impossible to stay close to them”. Another reason mentioned was that the magazine had to pursue financial goals and as such it somehow “cheated” migrant workers as it beautified their life in cities.

⁶⁵ Among the reasons for this decrease in the number of issues published, I was told by several editors that the burgeoning of new magazines and therefore the increasing competition on the market had to be considered. Another element mentioned was the editorial turn which according to some editors would lead the magazine to turn away from migrant workers or simply mean the end of the magazine. I was told indeed by several editors that today the magazine had lost most of its appeal among migrant workers. The wider use of internet is also said to have contributed to turning down the sales figures of the magazine.

changed its name into *Dagongzhu*. This change in name did not modify the general content or tone of the magazine. An important editorial change occurred however in 2004 when it was decided that the magazine should aim at a readership of both blue and white collars. The magazine slowly evolved into a magazine more oriented towards literature per se and less concerned with the reality lived by migrant workers⁶⁶.

In this dissertation, I analyse two kinds of texts written by migrant workers as well as editorials. The first kind of texts is made of texts that were published in *Wailaigong* and that are descriptions of migrant workers' living and laboring within the Pearl River Delta's cities. Most of these texts, as well as the unpublished texts, belong to the general category which editors call "jishi" (纪实, note the reality). Since my interest lies in looking at how migrant workers are describing their experience of dagong and in order to build a coherent body of texts and contrast it with texts published in the "World of dagong", I chose not to include in the analysis texts which belonged to the category of romance (恋爱 lian'ai) and entertainment (娱乐 yule). I have not been able to carry out a systematic analysis for the same periods as those for the "World of dagong" articles (1994, 1998-1999) since only some magazines were available at the magazine office for 1994, 1995 and 1996, as well as some for 1999⁶⁷. I therefore selected 48 texts that focused on descriptions by migrant workers of their living and laboring in cities for the issues that were available, i.e. February, March, and April 1994; January, February, June, July and August 1995; April, July, October, November and December 1996; April, October and December 1998; August, September and October 1999. Articles written by journalists and editors have also been examined for the same issues of the magazine. In addition to these texts which constitute the main body of published texts, other texts published between 2000 and 2003 in *Wailaigong* and *Dagongzhu* and in other migrant workers' magazines, as well as texts published in volumes gathering migrant workers articles were also examined.

The second body of texts written by migrant workers is made of 34 unpublished letters⁶⁸, i.e. letters that had been rejected or, for some of them, had not been read at all⁶⁹. The way I got hold of the letters is rather simple: in August 2001 as I was talking to a *Dagongzhu* editor, I saw a

⁶⁶ Several editors I talked to told me their scepticism about this editorial change which had been decided by the "leaders" (lingdao), i.e. the Party Committee and municipal authorities. The scepticism expressed by these editors had mainly to do with the fact that they knew that migrant workers and white collars were two very different readerships which demands were different and hard to combine within one single magazine.

⁶⁷ The magazine could not be found either at the Universities Service Centre (Chinese University of Hong Kong) which gathers the greatest collection of Chinese newspapers, magazines and academic journals, nor could it be found at the library of Zhongshan university.

⁶⁸ See Thomas et Znaniecki, 1998 for an analysis of the life-story through letters written on demand by a Polish peasant living in Chicago in the early twentieth century.

⁶⁹ The envelopes were still sealed when I received the letters.

pile of letters next to his working desk and asked him if these were letters sent to the magazine by migrant workers. He said yes and explained to me that each week they received so many letters⁷⁰ that a great deal of them were rejected or not even read because of a lack of time. I said I would love to read some letters and use them as material for my research. The editor then gave me the pile of letters that stood on the shelf next to his working desk. Among this pile of letters were also were 33 texts which were poems and short stories. Although I read these texts, I chose not include them into the analysis except those poems which referred more directly to the dagong experience (dagong jingli)⁷¹.

The 34 unpublished letters I analyze here describe the writers' lives and work in cities of the Pearl River Delta. Of the 34 letters under scrutiny, 30 were written in 2001 and 4 in 2003⁷². The length of these letters varies from two handwritten pages to more than twenty pages: hence the body analysed makes out a total of 174 handwritten pages. Most authors of the letters work in Pearl River Delta major cities such as Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Guangzhou or smaller cities and towns⁷³. 26 of the letters were written by male migrant workers.⁷⁴ This proportion is worth noting because while most surveys show that labor migration in China is predominantly masculine, approximately 60 percent of migrant laborers in the Pearl River Delta are women and, as we have seen earlier, in some manufacturing industries the proportion of young females may be much higher. Compared with articles published in other migrant workers magazines that discuss romance and dating practices of (female) migrant workers at length, only a few letters in my collection focused on romance. The explanations given to me by former and actual editors as to the criteria of selection of texts written by migrant workers were of four kinds. First, the texts needed to be characteristic of the reality experienced by migrant workers, editors referred to this as "representativity" (代表姓 daibiaoxing) . A second criterion had to do with the length of the texts: they could not be too long. The literary style was not considered too important since, editors told me, it was rather poor in most cases and had to be reworked by editors anyway. Thirdly, the sensitivity of the topics discussed and the way certain issues were discussed was another important criterion. The content of the letters could not contradict explicitly the editorial

⁷⁰ The vice chief editor of *Wailaigong* told me that during the first years after the magazine had been created, they used to receive up to one hundred letters a day which they simply could not manage. Later on, the number of letters received each week decreased.

⁷¹ Except for those poems that focus on migrant workers' experiences of dagong and which therefore have been used in this dissertation.

⁷² I received 4 additional letters in December 2003. These letters were included in the body.

⁷³ In some instances, authors had not been to these cities and were in their village, expressing a wish to leave the village for the South.

⁷⁴ The editors I asked to tell me about the proportion of males and females writing to the magazine confirmed that there were more men who were writing than women. According to them, this could be accounted for by the fact that young men from the countryside were more educated than young women.

line of the magazine. Editors participated regularly to meetings convened by the editor-in-chief of the magazine⁷⁵ during which political guidelines were explained to the editors and journalists. One editor told me that “editors could feel when a text would not be well accepted by leaders” and that “therefore there is a kind of self-censorship as to the sensitivity of specific texts”. According to this editor, political injunctions as to the sensitivity of specific issues were felt most heavily during the 1990s, a period during which the concern for “attracting investments and protect the environment for investments was strongest”. One last reason for explaining the rejection of articles had to do with insufficient time to read all of the hundreds of letters received each month.⁷⁶

The fact that these letters were rejected, and in some cases not read by the editors, does not fundamentally distinguish them from published texts⁷⁷. The value of reading these unpublished letters lies however in the greater variety of styles and plots they exhibit. The picture they give of the lives of migrant workers in the Delta is also somewhat darker than the one in published letters⁷⁸. Another important feature of this body of unpublished texts has to do with reading and being able to better feel the emotion embodied in these handwritten texts. Some of the texts were hardly readable because of poor quality handwriting and one could somehow better apprehend part of what the person writing was going or had gone through. Furthermore, the unpublished letters have not gone through the reworking process by editors, hence in some instances, the kind of language used is more straightforward than in published texts.

The methods of analysis used for these bodies of published and unpublished texts is similar to the one detailed for the “World of dagong” texts⁷⁹. As most of these texts were narrative tales, specific attention has been paid however to the elements of transformation that allowed or not a resolution of the initial situation within tales (cf. De Fina, 2003; Bal, 1985). For this purpose,

⁷⁵ One should note that the editor-in-chief of the magazine was also in charge of propaganda for the city of Foshan. Thomas Scharping explained that “depending on the status and importance of the individual media, their editors-in-chief are appointed by the central or regional propaganda departments directly”. As to the kinds of topics that should be excluded from publication or broadcasting, the Propaganda Department issues lists of topics that are to be banned or which are recommended. Scharping, forthcoming, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁶ Among the letters collected, about one fifth had not been opened, hence not read.

⁷⁷ See chapter 9 for a comparison of the main topics and values outlined in the published and unpublished.

⁷⁸ As was explained above, there is a general concern on the side of city party leaders to try to portray a rather rosy picture of their city. Magazine editors are well aware of this concern, hence there may be a bias in the selection of articles (in the sense of possible rejection of the most gloomy depictions). On the other hand, this concern may be balanced by the fact that editors also need to take into account the readers’ interests (i.e. migrant workers) in the articles published. Publishing articles that would be too much at odds with their daily life would not have much appeal for migrant workers. One should also take into account the standpoint of editors who may wish to push some issues which they think are crucial to the lives of migrant workers.

⁷⁹ See chapter 10 for tables gathering the number of occurrences of meanings and values associated to dagong, migrant workers, and the South.

forms have been designed in order to help identify the narrative structures of specific narrative tales.

2.3.4 *Fieldwork, interviews and observation*⁸⁰

The fieldwork interviews carried out in 2001, 2003-2004 and 2005-2006 have been preceded by a series of exploratory interviews carried out in Hong Kong and in mainland China during the summer of 1999⁸¹.

My first intention was to carry out fieldwork mainly in Shenzhen. For this, the contact I had made with Mr Shi Xianmin should have been quite useful. Six month before starting my summer 2001 fieldwork stay, I could not manage to contact him and it is only later that I learned that he had been arrested. I therefore had to change my original plans. I contacted editors at *Wailaigong*, who agreed to help me find an appropriate shelter and establish a first series of contacts with some migrant workers in Foshan.

During fieldwork, I carried out interviews with migrant workers, with editors and journalists of migrant workers' magazines. I had initially planned also to interview local officials and journalists working in the Shenzhen mainstream press. This has not been done mainly because of professional constraints in Belgium which made that I could only spend short periods of time doing fieldwork. I decided to go deeper into doing fieldwork with migrant workers and migrant workers' magazines. In addition to this, the nature of my relationships which was rather informal made it that my key-persons working in migrant workers' magazines were reluctant to introduce me to officials or simply said they did not know any official. The fact that I didn't do interviews with Shenzhen mainstream press journalists has unfortunately not allowed to apprehend the institutional functioning of these newspapers. For instance, it has not allowed me for instance to look at the genealogy of the "World of dagong" special page⁸². This being said, I must stress that this dissertation does not deal with how the Chinese mainstream written press is working. In chapter 9, I do show however the way the Shenzhen mainstream press representation of migrant workers is linked to official views on Shenzhen, on migrant workers and on Chinese society. The main reason for doing interviews with journalists and editors working in migrant workers magazines was that, as my research was going on, I realized that a complex relationship was at work between editors and journalists of these magazines on the one

⁸⁰ In order to prepare, carry out and analyse these fieldwork interviews and observations I have used the guidelines presented in Burgess, 1984; Whyte, 1984 ; Blanchet et Gotman, 1992; Kaufmann, 1996; Bertaux, 1997; Silverman, 1995.

⁸¹ It is during this period that a great deal of the bodies of texts from the mainstream written press was constituted. See annex 2 for the list of people interviewed during these exploratory interviews.

⁸² This point had been highlighted by Thomas Scharping during the May 2007 intermediate meeting that was convened to discuss several chapters of the thesis.

hand and migrant workers' narrative practices on the other hand, and that studying this linkage was crucial in understanding these narrative practices.

2.3.4.1 The setting and context of the interviews

Once in Foshan and after I had made clear to the deputy chief editor of *Wailaigong* that I was interested in meeting migrant workers in order to discuss with them their dagong experiences, an editor at *Wailaigong* who used to be a migrant worker himself introduced me to three migrant workers at the *Wailaigong* office⁸³. Hence my first recorded interview in July 2001 took place within the *Wailaigong* office, after I had explained to my interlocutors that my research dealt with migrant workers' experience of dagong and how they viewed this experience⁸⁴. Once this first interview was over, the following interviews with these three and other migrant workers took place either in my apartment or in one of the migrant worker's room. I met other migrant workers through these three initial informants. During each of the three fieldwork stays in China, I met the three initial informants on a very regular basis, i.e. basically every day in the evening and sometimes during week-ends and public holidays. It seems that, while they knew each other long before I met them, they did not come together much except when I was coming to Foshan for fieldwork. Usually, interviews and discussions were taking place in the evening and would often end late at night.

In 2003-2004 and 2005-2006, the interviews occurred mostly in my hotel room which despite being far from luxurious was very spacious with sofas for everyone to sit on and feel comfortable⁸⁵. My informants would often bring peanuts or some fruit and we used to share tea and cigarettes and sometimes some beer as well⁸⁶. The atmosphere of the interviews and discussions was on the whole very good and I think that my informants took some pleasure in this exercise and this type of relationship which was created during our interactions. It has been a very rich and profound experience both on the scientific and at the human levels. Along the years and with our successive encounters and the time spent together, a particular relationship was built between me and them, one that for me was chiefly a relationship between a researcher and

⁸³ On the importance of how the researcher gains access to his informants see Burgess, 1984.

⁸⁴ I also explained to them that this was part of a larger project of Ph.D. dissertation and that all data from these interviews would be used only for this research. I also made clear that all information relating to their names would be modified.

⁸⁵ I stayed at the hotel where one of my most familiar informant was working. This made daily contacts with him and other regular informants easier and more frequent than if I had stayed further away from where they were staying.

⁸⁶ It may seem unimportant to explain these details about food and drinks but I think they may help get an idea of the kind of rather relaxed atmosphere in which the interviews and more informal discussions took place.

his objects of research but which became not that far from a relation of friendship⁸⁷. During the interviews, my informants have always taken the questions I was asking them and the topics discussed very seriously and they kept doing their best to reply thoughtfully to my questions, often trying to make specific points clearer and qualifying arguments they had developed earlier.

Foshan has been the city where I have spent most of my fieldwork time although I carried out interviews in Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Dongguan on several occasions too from 2001 to 2006.

2.3.4.2 Nature of interviews carried out

Semi-structured interviews were carried out both individually and in small groups of three to four persons. In 2001, In addition to participant observation, 15 interviews in small groups of two to three persons and 7 individual interviews were carried out between July and August 2001. These in-depth interviews were all recorded⁸⁸. The reason for recording the 2001 interviews was that I wanted to let my informants talk about their experiences as freely as possible and this way think self-reflexively about what they have been going through. In 2003-2004 and 2005-2006, as my questions were dealing with more precise elements and not with general depictions of migrant workers' experiences, I decided to take notes of the interviews. Some interviews and less formal discussions were carried out in small groups⁸⁹. I have found that in some instances this kind of interview has turned out particularly fruitful since a specific dynamic was created within the interview which actually often changed into a semi-structured discussion⁹⁰. I will give one example of such a dynamic. The hereafter fragment relates to the reply by a migrant worker to a question I had asked on the level of education of those who were leaving the villages for work. Li

⁸⁷ As Burgess notes, the interviewee ought to get some pleasure from taking part to this exercise. Burgess also underlines, along with other authors, that the researcher ought to be interested in and show sympathy for the life of the interviewee, Burgess, 1984, pp. 102-103.

⁸⁸ During the first interview I carried out in the Wailaigong office in the summer 2001, I had planned first not to use my tape recorder so as not to influence this first encounter with migrant workers. As soon as the interview had started however, one migrant worker asked me if I had a tape recorder and why I did not record what they were going to say. See Whyte, 1984, p. 105 on the advantages and disadvantages of recording interviews.

⁸⁹ I had not planned initially to carry out interviews this way, but as most interviews took place in the evening, my three most regular informants often came together, not necessarily at the same time though. It would often happen that I would start the interview with one of them and perhaps one hour later one or two of them joined the discussion. In addition to participant observation and to short informal interviews in the streets of Foshan, Dongguan and Guangzhou, 6 interviews in small groups and 5 individual interviews were carried out between the 19th of December 2003 and the 3rd of January 2004. Between the 28th of December 2005 and the 14th of January 2006, 10 individual interviews and 6 interviews in small groups were carried out in addition to participant observation and informal interviews in the Streets of Foshan, Guangzhou, Dongguan and Shenzhen.

⁹⁰ During such interactions, I would always let my informants talk together without interfering except in the rare occasions when I would feel that the topic discussed had become too unrelated to the initial topic.

had started to explain the situation in his village. At one stage, he explained that unlike Guangdong province where one person out of two passed the exam, in 1993 out of 7 students who tried to gain access to the university, only one had been successful. Hearing this, Zhang interrupted and the following dialogue started:

Zhang: Out of 7 persons one could enter the university?

Li: That's right.

Zhang : But in my class, out of 38 candidates, I am the only one who managed to pass the exam in order to access senior middle school! (laughter).

Li: All right, but you only consider your school. May be that your hometown is even poorer than mine (Li's laughter)... Anyway, on the whole, those who have gained access to the university rarely go out to *dagong* since they have a way out.

In this dialogue, we can see how Zhang, listening carefully to Li's arguments, reacted to one element of Zhang's explanation, which then pushed Li to somewhat qualify his argument⁹¹.

In addition to interviews, participant observation has also been an important component of my fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta. Some of the observation happened during meals and in the evening, as well as during public holidays such as New year holidays. Observation of interactions and interviews of odd-job workers in the streets of Foshan, Guangzhou, Dongguan and Shenzhen occupied a good deal of my afternoons during fieldwork⁹². While I did have a series of questions and topics which I wanted to raise when doing casual interviews⁹³ with odd-job workers, such interviews were not as structured as the interviews I carried out with my informants on a regular basis. One thing I found interesting in doing these interviews in the streets, was to allow for unexpected encounters which would sometimes thoroughly change my work plan as to how to spend a day or an afternoon doing fieldwork, but which often would turn out to be very instructive. I will highlight two such encounters to illustrate my argument. One day at noon in the summer of 2001, I was talking to a shoe repairer in Foshan who was being healed by a Buddhist monk. The monk was practicing acupuncture for the shoe repairer's aching shoulder. Once the monk had finished with the aching shoulder, he asked if I wanted to follow him as he wanted to show me where he and his other fellow monks lived. I must say that at first I was not too sure about whether I should accept this invitation or not, but the shoe repairer

⁹¹ See chapter 8 for another interesting example of the kind of dynamic that could arise within the discussion.

⁹² In the morning I usually went through and highlighted the most useful elements that came out of the interviews and observation carried out the day before. This allowed to adapt the next day's interviews questions and help me deepen my reflection on the whole fieldwork process and rework my grid of topics to be discussed. See Burgess, 1984, pp. 175-179.

⁹³ These were not interviews in the formal sense since the people I was talking to did not know me. Usually, I or the informants would start the conversation with ordinary questions. As the discussion went on, some of the topics I had in mind (number of hours of labor, length of sojourn in town, administrative situation, etc.) were touched upon.

convinced me to go with the monk. Hence we took the bus and aimed for the Foshan train station. I then followed him into a maze of narrow streets with filthy water on the ground. We walked next to several women who were prostitutes. Then, after having walked for ten minutes within the maze of streets we got to a square which actually was a “Anhui village”, i.e. a community of people from the countryside who were mostly hailing from Anhui province⁹⁴. I first followed the monk to his lodging where we found his 4 fellow monks who were playing cards⁹⁵. After that, I had a meal with the five monks in the Anhui village among odd-job workers, scrap collectors, beggars, and other people who all apparently came from the countryside. Although the focus of my work was not directly on these communities of outsiders, this afternoon spent with this monk was instructive in many respects. Another such unexpected encounter took place in January 2006 as I was watching a bicycle repairer⁹⁶ who was repairing a motorbike tyre. I then started to talk with the young owner of this motorbike. He gave me a cigarette and we started to talk about European and Chinese football. Once the tyre had been repaired, he invited me for lunch. I got on his motorbike and we went to a nearby restaurant. As I explained that I was doing research on labor migration in the Pearl River Delta, he invited me to another lunch the next day. He had invited three friends who were all hailing from the countryside and who were working in Guangzhou and Foshan. During the lunch, each of the three migrant workers gave me their version of how they explained people’s and their own successes and failures. Therefore, through this unexpected encounter, I observed three different and complementary ways to account for social mobility.

2.3.4.3 Note on the successive fieldwork sojourns and their status within my research process

Before the first fieldwork took place, most of the mainstream press bodies of articles, both the national and Shenzhen press), had been analysed. The main features of the dominant public transcript of dagong had been outlined already. Having done this before carrying out my first fieldwork interviews helped me better focus these interviews. This does not mean that the

⁹⁴ See Xiang Biao, 2003 ; Wang Chunguang, 1994 ; Ma and Xiang 1998; Béja et al, 1999a and Béja et al., 1999b on these communities of rural people within Chinese cities.

⁹⁵ From what I could observe, these monks were practicing acupuncture and were performing martial arts in the streets. I could observe that they talked a lot about how to get money. The monk I followed told me too that in the “Anhui village” where they were staying, they had to have contacts with “black knives” (黑刀 heidao). These five monks, it seemed, were leading a life at the borderline between legal and illegal activities. They somehow made me think of the traditional figure of “jianghu”. On “jianghu”, see Wu, 2001. For a description of groups of people leading marginal lives within Chinese cities Laowei, 1999.

⁹⁶ I had met this repairer in 2004 several times,

topics chosen for the interviews were determined by the results of the analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream press construction of migrant workers. The way the interviews were structured and the issues they focused on were chosen according to the general goal of the first fieldwork stay, i.e. to examine how migrant workers described their experience of labor and their life in the Pearl River Delta's cities. Bearing in mind the main features of the dominant public transcript was useful in retrospect in order to highlight nodes of continuities and discontinuities between the two transcripts. The same was also true too for the analysis of migrant workers' writings. The categories which the analysis engendered were specific to this body and were not pre-determined.

The first fieldwork stay took place in Foshan, Nanhai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Dongguan from July 10th to August 25th 2001. A grid was designed in order to help me structure the interviews. This grid was made of the main items to be discussed and within each major item there were sub-topics or specific issues to be discussed. At the very beginning of each interview, as the interviewee was not yet familiar with me, I mainly focused on descriptive features and rose more evaluative questions only later once a relationship of greater confidence had been built (Whyte, 1984, p. 102; Burgess, 1981, p. 111-117)⁹⁷.

The second series of interviews carried out in Foshan and Guangzhou from December 19th 2003 to January 3rd 2004 aimed at several interrelated goals⁹⁸:

- make more explicit some elements linked to migrant workers' depiction and definition of *dagong* which were highlighted in the analysis of the interviews carried out in 2001;
- carry out a series of informal interviews with odd-job workers, shoe and bicycle repairers, scrap collectors and street peddlers.

The third series of interviews and fieldwork observation was carried out between December 28th 2005 and January 14th 2006. The main aim was to confront some of my analysis to migrant workers' own experiences and arguments. I wanted to question further the issue of how migrant workers justified failure and success and identify which categories they used in these justifications. Another issue I wanted to examine further during this fieldwork sojourn was the status of the practice of writing texts for migrant workers' magazines. The aim was also to ask migrant workers to react to the main categories and structures identified as constituting the dominant public transcript and migrant workers' public transcript mediated through the practice of letter-writing. One last related goal, was to interview editors of migrant workers' magazines in order to discuss specific issues linked to their editorial practices. Further informal interviews of migrant

⁹⁷ The main items discussed during this first series of in-depth interviews can be found in annex 3.

⁹⁸ Since this second stay was very short and since my regular informants were particularly busy I could not do formal interviews with them during this period. I did however get the chance to spend time with them at night once they came back from work.

workers in the streets of Foshan, Shenzhen, Dongguan and Guangzhou were also carried out during this last fieldwork stay.

For the treatment of these interviews, I have endeavoured to look as closely as possible at how migrant workers described their experience of migration and their life in the Pearl River Delta. I have focused on the values they expressed to define their experiences relating to the various topics dealt with in the course of interviews (see annex 3). I have highlighted the specific categories migrant workers used to identify themselves individually and collectively. I have looked at how they defined their hometown and life before migration, as well as how they depicted their condition as migrant workers. The series of in-depth interviews carried out in this systematic manner. For the interviews and fieldwork observations carried out from 2003 to 2006, I followed similar principles of looking at regularity and heterogeneity in discourse, but since these interviews dealt with specific topics, the analytical process was itself too more focused on the particular issues being discussed.

As for the analysis of letters written by migrant workers, I have tried to relate too some of their experiences or evaluation of these experiences to other scholarly works on Chinese internal migrant workers as well as on Chinese society in general. Hence, I valued the interviews for their sociological values, trying to see how what they expressed related to the issues addressed by other works by sociologists or anthropologists. I also valued them with regard to the empirical question I am willing to investigate in this dissertation, i.e. how the categories and narrative structures they use relate to those which were identified as being part of the dominant public transcript of dagong.

Chapter 3: Domination and resistance: theoretical framework

Within social science, concepts such as power, as well as those of domination and resistance are concepts which remain the focus of intense scholarly debates as to their definition (Poggi, 2006, p. 464). As Lukes explained, there is no consensus on how to define power, neither on where it lies, nor about its reach or the extent and nature of its effects (Lukes, 2005, pp. 61-62). In the 1950s and 1960s, orthodox understandings of power still mainly tended to think of power as the power to dominate, manipulate and coerce and viewed resistance as necessarily pitted against this dominating power. The conceptions of power that dominated the social science scene in the 1960s were chiefly looking at power located in formal institutions of governing. (Sharp, 2000, pp. 4-5). In the 1970s, a number of theories stressed the ideological incorporation of subordinate groups and argued that “a powerful, effective, dominant ideology in contemporary capitalist societies” was at work (Aberchrombie et al., 1984, p. 1). In 1974, Stephen Lukes similarly called for attending to the “three dimensions of power” in his famous opus called *Power: A radical vie*. The first dimension of power was interested in focusing on political participation and decision making. According to this conception, power was evenly distributed in the democratic arena as political elites were said to represent the people. The second dimension of power took into account the fact that the interests of some participants in the democratic political process were excluded, hence non-participation could not be attributed chiefly to the people themselves or to their culture. (Lukes, 2005, pp. 4-7. ; Gaventa, 1983, p. 6-9; Clegg, 1994, p. 11-14, 98-103). In addition to these two dimensions, Lukes argued that a third dimension had to be taken into consideration, i.e. the one which manages to secure people’s “compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires” (Lukes, 2005, p. 27). Raymond Williams also had a strong impact on studies of power, especially for his reading of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony⁹⁹, which according to Ortner, amounted to “revitalizing the culture concept” by making it “more politicized, more saturated with the relations of power, domination and inequality within which it takes shape” (Ortner, 1995, p. 182). While as I explain later in this chapter, Williams developed a conception of hegemony marked by struggles, he also developed a more totalizing view of hegemony which shares a dimension of naturalization of social orders with other rather encompassing concepts such as Bourdieu’s habitus¹⁰⁰. In Williams’ more totalizing concept of

⁹⁹ Raymond Williams was a leading figure of the British school of cultural studies along with Stuart Hall.

¹⁰⁰ In his discussion on hegemony, he argues that “relation of domination and subordination” need to be considered as “practical consciousness, as in effect, a saturation of the whole process of living (...) of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the limits and pressures of what can ultimately be seen as a

hegemony, as well as in other approaches such as a Lukes¹⁰¹, we find something that comes close to false consciousness and the consequent need to reveal people's real interests (*Ibid.*; Chazel, 1983, p. 380)¹⁰². I must say that if I obviously acknowledge that there are dimensions of reproduction in the way people act, I feel rather uncomfortable with having to *decide for* people what their true interest is. Furthermore, with having to decide on people's true interests, what about the value of people's experiences in sociological or anthropological terms, even though of course one needs to attend to the possibility of self-representation in analysing interviews? In this respect, I found John Gaventa's *Power and Powerlessness* standing in between approaches grounded on false consciousness and works such as James Scott's or Alfe Lüdkte's "everyday life school". In Gaventa's volume, one finds both confirmation of the idea that one needs the intervention of some exterior force to overcome powerlessness, as if a consciousness of action had to be generated. At the same time however, Gaventa stressed the need to look closely at studying what he calls "non-actors (...) their experiences, their lives, their conditions" (Gaventa, 1980, p. 27). Furthermore, he argued and showed that, contrarily to what much of the literature held at the time he wrote *Power and Powerlessness*, some of the subordinate people he was studying had been capable of resistance. Instead of simply hinting at ideological incorporation, Gaventa emphasised the role of an "exploitative system of power that affected all aspects of the lives of minors", in addition to a rule of terror exerted outside the formal political structure (*Ibid.*, pp. 86-89, 105). One also finds in Gaventa's conclusions a critique of the methodological bias — precisely the one Scott was going to undermine more systematically — in studies of power to chiefly look at rebellion to evaluate the political capacity of subordinates. He actually pointed to a latent and "generalized form of discontent" (*Ibid.*, pp. 252-253).

While Michel Foucault's work has had an important impact on studies of power, I have had similar difficulties in using some of Michel Foucault's insights. I find many of these insights highly stimulating and some of the later developments on the concept of governmentality will be discussed and hopefully qualified later in this dissertation. I have renounced however to mobilize Foucault's developments within my core theoretical framework for several reasons. One of these has to do with the fact that although Foucault argued that power and resistance are always to be thought as coexistent and their relationships always "uneven, heterogeneous, unstable and

system of economic, political and cultural seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense", Williams, 1977, p. 110.

¹⁰¹ In his 2005 volume, Lukes further develops his third dimension of power and also points to Bourdieu's notion of habitus as an illustration of this third dimension. Lukes also highlights some of the difficulties which the study of the third dimension implies. See Lukes, 2005, pp. 146-148

¹⁰² As Chazel argues, Lukes' merit is that he does take the notion of people's "real interests" as something that "needs to be empirically identifiable" in stating that they would consist in the interests of the one who is affected by another's power if he could have chosen independently. But then, Chazel goes on, the conditions for such a relative autonomous choice remain unclear. Chazel, 1983, p. 380.

tenses” (Foucault, 1976, p. 121-128), I find his understanding of domination too totalizing. In this sense, I agree with Lukes’ argument that Foucault was not interested so much in practices, but rather in design of disciplinary practices, i.e. “in their idealized forms”. But Lukes also recognized the extraordinary inspiration that Foucault has had on other people’s work who have precisely tried to look into “how and to what extent the governed are rendered governable”. Lukes also pointed to another dimension of later works inspired by Foucault which is that they often exaggerate the extent of the productive nature of power (Lukes, 2005, p. 98). Indeed, I find that the possibility of *thinking agency* becomes difficult when power is said to be *producing* literally the subject and this is precisely this argument that I want to qualify in this dissertation. In addition to this, I have found it difficult to use Foucault’s insights at the analytical level. This is precisely one of the dimensions of James C. Scott’s work which I have found appealing at the analytical and empirical levels: a constant concern for applicability of approaches developed. In the hereafter sections, I explain why I have found James C. Scott’s approach useful in looking into matters of domination and resistance and in which ways some of Scott’s framework will be adapted to fit my research agenda.

3.1 James C. Scott: *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* : main arguments and concepts

James C. Scott’s work has been and is still very influent and it has generated a tremendous amount of reactions in studies of domination and resistance in political science, but even more so in political sociology, history and anthropology. When I started working on this Ph.D. dissertation, I found Scott’s focus on symbolic forms of resistance in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* as well as his developments on how power relations impact on people’s speech highly stimulating. Scott placed people’s agency at the core of studies on power. I found some of his insights stimulating in order to study how dominant discourses circulate within society, how people react to such discourses in unequal power relations, and in which respect they do or do not pervade the social space.

Since Scott’s arguments on power have wide theoretical implications and since they occupy a core position within my own approach, it is worth explaining in some details his main concepts. When appropriate I will further develop some insights that Scott succinctly refers to

and will explain what kind of use I will make of some of his developments in this dissertation¹⁰³. I will then review some of the major criticisms that Scott's *Everyday Forms of Resistance* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* have aroused. I have therefore chosen to focus on those criticisms that I feel are most relevant with my own research interests¹⁰⁴. I first review and discuss these criticisms and then suggest looking at how, in the aftermath of Scott's questioning of hegemony, the concept has been re-visited by several scholars. The aim of so doing is to examine how post-Scott developments of hegemony may complement his approach and be helpful as to the research questions I am interested in.

3.1.1 *Everyday forms of resistance*

In the very first page of his preface to *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday forms of Resistance*, Scott explained the reasons why the concept of peasant and other subordinate groups' resistance needed to be reconsidered. For Scott, most of social science attention had been devoted to the rare moments of peasants' rebellions and revolutions, i.e. to organized, big scale and public forms of political behaviours that usually posed a threat either to the state or to the international order. Scott argued that such instances are rare indeed because they often turn to be too risky for those who decide to take part to them. He then drew on Hobsbawm to stress that most peasants are rarely willing to change the entire structures of domination and are instead interested in "working the system... to their minimum disadvantage" (Hobsbawm, 1973, quoted in Scott, 1985, pp. xv, 28-29). The implications of focusing on organized political activities of peasants, he notes, is "the first step in concluding that the peasantry is a political nullity unless organized and led by outsiders" (*Ibid.*). From this observation, Scott then suggests looking rather at what he calls "everyday forms of resistance", which he defines as:

" (...) the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most forms of this struggle stop well short of actual outright collective defiance (...) they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand much of what the peasantry has historically done to defend its interest against both progressive and conservative orders. It is my guess that just such kinds of resistance are often

¹⁰³ I think it is important to go into some detail in Scott's arguments since some criticisms of Scott's work seem to be grounded on a superficial reading of specific arguments. The notions I am most interested in (the encounter of two public transcripts and the idea of the elite public transcript as the major ground upon which elite and subordinates interact) and which I highlight hereafter have been the least discussed within Scott's work.

¹⁰⁴ I will not discuss or, sometimes, I will just hint at the criticisms that do not relate to the concepts I am using in this dissertation.

the most significant and the most effective over the long run (...) It is largely in this manner that the peasantry makes its political presence felt" (*Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xvii).

I have chosen to quote this passage's full length since it underscores an important aspect of the notion of "everyday forms of resistance" which is found in Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, i.e. that such forms of resistance, both material and symbolic, often have political implications¹⁰⁵. They are, as Scott nicely puts it "the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow, and they are likely to persist as long as such other forms have failed or produced, in turn, a new pattern of inequity" (Scott, 1985, p. 273)¹⁰⁶. Scott rightly emphasises, as we shall see later, that such forms of resistance are being fought "under difficult conditions" as part of the daily strategies of subordinates (*Ibid.*). He observes that for some authors¹⁰⁷, "real" resistance is distinguished from token or incidental resistance, the latter lacking revolutionary consequences. Scott acknowledges that it may well be so, but that that most modern revolutions would not be understandable if one does not take into account everyday forms of resistance as they occur on a large scale (Scott, 1985, p. 293)¹⁰⁸.

In his definition of the concept, Scott observes that everyday forms of resistance do not explicitly challenge hierarchical orders, mainly because of the danger of retaliation that an open act of insubordination could engender. If by such practices, the formal order is left unchallenged, Scott argues, it is not solely by virtue of a choice than out of tactical convenience and sheer necessity (*Ibid.*, pp. 32-33). As he puts it, "what everyday forms of resistance share with the more dramatic public confrontations is of course that they are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by superordinate classes or to advance claims vis-à-vis those superordinate classes" (*Ibid.*). Everyday forms of resistance relate to both symbolic forms of resistance such as those that are part of a contest "to control the concepts and symbols by which current experience is evaluated" as well as material forms of resistance (*Ibid.*, p. 27)¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁵ In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott makes clear that there is a link between backstage practices of resistance (hidden transcripts) and public protests and rebellions. See *infra*. Scott warns however against romanticizing everyday forms of resistance since in most cases they are unlikely to have altered substantially the forms of exploitation peasants were the object of.

¹⁰⁶ We shall see hereunder that this argument has been criticized by several authors as being insufficiently elaborated.

¹⁰⁷ Scott goes further into a revision of what should be conceived of as resistance (see especially the section "What is Resistance ?", *Ibid.*, pp. 289-303. I shall come back to this issue of the definition of resistance later. See Rose, 2004 ; Sharp et al., 2000; Cresswell, 2000; Pile, 1997 and Moore, 1997 for elaborate discussions on this issue.

¹⁰⁸ In addition to his own fieldwork observations in the Malaysian village of Sedaka, in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* Scott also draws on studies of slavery in the US, of the caste system in India and on work-place resistance that confirm the pervasiveness of such forms of resistance. Doing so allows him to extend some of his arguments to other social groups than the villagers he studied in Sedaka.

¹⁰⁹ Except that he stresses that such symbolic conflicts relate to very concrete material issues, the way in which the symbolic and material issues specifically relate to each other is not detailed.

In Scott's elaboration of everyday forms of resistance as well as in his further theoretical framework on power relations, it is clear that the forms and nature of resistance practices are to a large extent influenced by the forms of domination exerted, the kinds of labor control implemented as well as the fear of potential coercion (Scott, 1985, p. 34). Scott very much emphasises the weight that the potential use of coercion may have on people's resistance practices and on consent or compliance. In the Malaysian village he studied, Scott found that the fear or memory of coercion (what he refers to as "routine repression") was paralleled by the pressure engendered by Marx's notion of the "dull compulsion of economic relations"¹¹⁰ (*Ibid.*, pp. 246-247, 322-326). By "routine repression", Scott referred not to outright use of force or even the memory of massacres or stormy repressions that peasants would still retain fresh memory of, but to "the steady pressure of everyday repression backed by occasional arrests, warnings, diligent police work, legal restrictions (...)" (*Ibid.*, p. 274)¹¹¹. The emphasis on these two mutually enforcing factors applies fairly well, as I shall argue later, to the setting of the Pearl River Delta and is crucial in understanding the forms of symbolic and material resistance migrant workers engage in as well as more generally how they experience life and labor in urban settings. I shall keep this notion of "routine repression" in mind in order to see how it can help describe the Pearl River Delta environment, as well as the idea of its combination with the pressure of economic relations for the role they may play in setting limits on practices of resistance¹¹².

An important and related argument in Scott's approach is that people are more constrained in the sphere of actions than within the sphere of ideas¹¹³. This argument is important since it allows for the development of Scott's further theoretical elaboration of the public and hidden transcripts¹¹⁴. "Armed" with this argument Scott could then criticize theorists of false consciousness and ideological incorporation who had tended to equate the inevitability

¹¹⁰ See *infra* on the link between such dual pressure and the practical inevitability of social orders.

¹¹¹ Scott also calls this the "context of real and anticipated coercion", *Ibid.*, p. 277. As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, Gaventa describes a similar combination of systems of control and economic pressures on miners. Gaventa, 1980, pp. 86-87.

¹¹² This could be usefully combined with Foucault's notion of panopticon, see the chapter on the Pearl River Delta's political economy.

¹¹³ Scott observes that Gramsci himself did draw a distinction between thought and action, but to mean exactly the opposite of Scott's argument, i.e. the subordinate groups are more constrained at the level of thought than at the level of behaviour. According to this perspective the process of demystification requires an external agency (i.e. the revolutionary Party). See Scott, 1985, pp. 38, 39, 316, 322, 331. See Mitchell, 1990, for a criticism of this and other similar dualisms conceived of as an effect of power relations.

¹¹⁴ Scott's conception of hidden and public transcripts is close to Erving Goffman's approach. Gal notes that for Goffman, representation of the self is involved in any social act, while as Scott holds that there is a hidden transcript where people do not need to act, for her this is why Scott's view differs from Goffman's. Scott has observed though that such secluded spaces where the hidden transcript may be nurtured are never entirely free from power relations and therefore from acting or posing. Gal, 1995.

of social orders by subordinate groups with considering that such orders are just and legitimate¹¹⁵. For Scott no convincing evidence has been provided as to how people actually change from viewing their condition or their subordination as something inevitable to considering it as something just. The reasons for the inevitability of social orders should rather be found in the dual pressure generated by the “dull compulsion of economic relations” and routine repression which were just referred to. The main function of systems of domination might therefore just be he argues:

“To define what is realistic and what is not realistic and to drive certain goals and aspirations into the realm of the impossible, the realm of idle dreams, the realm of wishful thinking” (*Ibid.*, p. 326)¹¹⁶.

If Scott recognizes that the inevitability of social orders is a possible fact, he stresses that such inevitability is therefore better seen as a “practical inevitability”¹¹⁷ rather than as something happening at the level of values. This argument turned indeed into a central theme of his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, i.e. apart from systems of total domination, subordinates retain a great imaginative capacity where they may create spheres of (relative) autonomy, and where they may foster a cultural universe where the values of elites can then be challenged (*Ibid.*, pp. 328-330)¹¹⁸.

Now that the basic features of everyday forms of resistance have been highlighted, I suggest to turn to further theoretical developments Scott made in his opus *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. As we shall see, the overall argument is not fundamentally different from that developed in *Everyday Forms of Resistance*. There is actually a great deal of continuity among the arguments elaborated in the two volumes. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott deals with a broad range of extreme forms of dominations and extends his arguments to sometimes venture into what he himself recognizes to be crude generalizations. The arguments are therefore of a broader scope, more questionable¹¹⁹. Provided that one departs from the broadest of such developments, the core arguments developed in this volume present a fruitful theoretical framework to analyse issues of domination and resistance, especially those issues that relate to the

¹¹⁵ In his demonstration, Scott draws partly from Abercrombie et al.’s volume *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* in which the authors question the consequences that dominant ideologies would have had in Feudalism, Early and late capitalism. See Abercrombie et al., 1980, pp. 59-155.

¹¹⁶ What may appear inevitable and what is part of idle dreams may, in changed circumstances, become realistic aspirations, Scott notes.

¹¹⁷ Scott quotes Gaventa’s nuanced argument about finding resignation and demoralization among the Appalachian coal miners which, according to Gaventa, is “not irrational [since] it has been instilled historically through repeated experience of failure”, Gaventa, 1980, p. 254, quoted in Scott, 1985, p. 325.

¹¹⁸ He notes that there is ample historical evidence that subordinate groups are capable of imagining reversals or negation of social orders.

¹¹⁹ One of the criticisms addressed at Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is related to overgeneralization.

links between hegemonic discourse and migrant workers' narratives which I am studying in this dissertation.

3.1.2 *From everyday forms of resistance to the public and hidden transcripts*

In *Hidden Transcript: Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott elaborates on an observation he had written on in *Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Resistance*. This observation was made during Scott's fieldwork research in Sedaka and consisted in the fact that in the face of landlords and other people in power, the villagers would speak differently than when landlords were not there. The same was true for the well-off and the powerful, their speech was different when they were among themselves from when they were with villagers. Starting from this observation, Scott developed his twin notion of "public transcript" and "hidden transcript", and explored "how one may study power relationships when the subordinates are constrained to act strategically in the face of the dominant (...) and when the powerful have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery" (Scott, 1990, pp. ix, iix). Much of Scott's theoretical framework is contained in this quote. As Greenhouse observes, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is "not about resistance as such, it is about the interpretive demands of resistance" (Greenhouse, 2005, p. 357).

How then does Scott define his twin notion of public and hidden transcripts? He starts from the argument that subordinates will often present a "public performance" that will, because of fear of potential coercion and because of the asymmetry of power between the dominant and the subordinate, tend to please the expectations of the dominant. Hence, for Scott, there is a fundamental dimension of misrepresentation in this relationship. Appearances of deference and consent shown by the subordinates should not be taken at face value. Hence, Scott's thesis is that domination practices actually produce a public transcript that confirms or proves that compliance of the subordinates or even that "enthusiastic complicity" have been achieved. Such "convincing evidence" of compliance needs to be related to two interrelated goals that subordinate groups often share under circumstances of intense domination. Firstly, they are likely to try to avoid explicit insubordination. Secondly, they have a practical interest in resistance so as to minimize the effects of practices of domination. Forms of resistance that avoid direct confrontation allow to reconcile these two goals. Scott summarizes his argument neatly:

“The official transcript of power relations is a sphere in which power appears naturalized because that is what elites exert their influence to produce and because it ordinarily serves the immediate interests of subordinates to avoid discrediting these appearances” (Scott, 1990, p. 87).

If we follow Scott’s last argument on avoiding discrediting the appearances of compliance, then this raises the issue of the definition of what constitutes an act of resistance. If we stand within the “public/hidden transcripts” framework, it has to do with the capacity to determine what may be part of the public transcript and what may not. If we think of this at the level of ideology or of symbolic resistance, we may hence posit that this capacity may become an object of contention. For instance, what terms may be used in a specific debate, what terms should be kept out of the public transcripts or how should a specific term defined could be the object of such contentions¹²⁰. This, I will endeavour to show in this dissertation, will depend very much on the type of arena where such contentions is taking place. Besides, the public transcript of subordinates may be characterized by exaggeration of the extent of subordination or of compliance. On the other hand, the hidden transcript of the subordinates entails a process of recoding of “those very gestures and signs for recirculation as counterdiscourse”. This is what Scott refers to as an “infrapolitics of resistance” (Greenhouse, 2005, p. 358)¹²¹. The notion of putting up a face and of building a public transcript is not limited to the subordinates. The powerful too often put up a specific public dress which may be necessary both for their own image or identity or for the justification of their domination. The public transcript of the elite has to do chiefly with the ideas and principles that justify their rule.

Scott defines the “public transcript”¹²² as “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate”. By “public”, he means “action that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship”. As to the term “transcript”, it refers to “a complete record of what was said”. He adds however that the “transcript” may include speech as well as gestures and attitudes not related to speech (*Ibid.*, p. 2). Scott also gives a larger conception of the public transcript of the ruling elites being schematically made of three [interrelated] domains which are :

¹²⁰ See infra the concept of *hegemony* characterized by struggle and contention as well as a project of establishing a common discursive framework.

¹²¹ As Greenhouse notes, Scott’s criticism of incorporation is phenomenological in the sense that the heavily constrained means of resistance of subordinates have tended to be mistaken for their abundant motives for resistance. Greenhouse, 2005, p. 358.

¹²² One may consider that there are either four transcripts (the public transcripts of the dominant and of the subordinates on the one hand, and their respective hidden transcripts) or three transcripts (two hidden transcripts and one common transcript that would be the encounter of each party’s public transcript, with the dominant’s public transcript constraining the subordinates’ and being prior to subordinates’ hidden transcript). See Tilly, 1991.

1. “material appropriation” (of labor, taxes, grain, etc.);
2. “public mastery and subordination” (rituals of hierarchy, deference, demonstration of authority, parades, humiliation, etc.);
3. “ideological justification for inequalities” (*Ibid.*, p. 111).

While Scott does not go deeper into how these three domains are linked, he emphasises that if the goal of domination is appropriation, he chose to focus more on how indignities, control, submission, forced deference, etc. are socially produced and experienced”. His point is also, by highlighting these three domains of the public transcript, to argue that resistance is more than resistance to material appropriation, but entails also resistance to cultural patterns of (personal) domination (*Ibid.*, pp. 111-112). I can not possibly focus extensively on these three domains. What I wish to do however is to examine in more details the third domain, while highlighting how it may relate to the other two domains¹²³.

3.1.3 *Maintaining the public transcript and struggling over its limits*

Once relations of domination are established they will need to be maintained through continuous efforts. Hence, the public transcript conceived of as a form of public manifestation of the dominant’s material and symbolic domination does accomplish part of this “political work”. As we have already seen, Scott very much emphasises the theatrical dimension present in the exercise of domination. Central in what he calls the “dramaturgy” of the forms of domination he is studying, are the processes of “affirmation, concealment, euphemization and stigmatization, and finally unanimity” (*Ibid.*, pp. 44-58)¹²⁴. While in my description of the public transcript of migrant workers I shall look at whether some of these processes are or are not observed, while I shall endeavour to identify other processes specific to the case I am studying, the important thing here seems to me to stress the dynamic conception of power relations in the analysis of processes of domination and resistance. The relations of domination, examined by Scott, are characterized by a logic where both parties are testing the limits. This conception, where the dominants need continuously to maintain or extend their material and symbolic control, and where the subordinates are also struggling on these two levels, goes against “any static view of naturalization

¹²³ One interesting feature, I believe, is that when one examines the narratives and experiences of migrant workers, one can observe that elements belonging to these three domains are repeatedly referred to.

¹²⁴ Scott raises also the important issue of who the public(s) is/are for such performances. We shall come back to this core issue later since it is related to one of my hypothesis.

and legitimation” as “no victory is won for good on this terrain” (*Ibid.*, 197)¹²⁵. I shall get back soon to this idea of a constant struggle over the definition of the public transcript, but I suggest to highlight first how the hidden transcript is defined. The necessary counterpart of the “public transcript” of both the elite and the subordinates is used

“to characterize discourse [gestures, etc.] that takes place beyond the direct observation by powerholders (...)”

It therefore consists in

“those offstage speeches, gestures, practices that confirm, contradict or inflect what appears in the public transcript”¹²⁶ (*Ibid.* pp. 4-5).

One may therefore describe the “hidden transcript” as the speeches, gestures and practices that within asymmetrical power relations are cast from the “public transcript” of the subordinates because of this asymmetry. For Scott, the “hidden transcript” is produced as a reaction to the exercise of power. It may be thought as a collective cultural product in the case where subordinates who are subjected to similar forms of domination can create a collective “discourse of dignity, of negation, and of justice” (Scott, 1990, p. 111; Scott, pp. 286-287)¹²⁷. The production of the hidden transcript is then a symbolic process by which the major idioms of domination are recoded (Greenhouse, 2005, p. 357). As to the “hidden transcript” of the elite, it would include elements (discourse and practices) that need to remain hidden from subordinates since they are likely to threaten the very ground upon which domination is built (Scott, 1990, pp. 27-28).

In his further defining his concept, Scott highlights three features related to the “hidden transcript”. Firstly it is produced by particular actors in specific social sites. Secondly, it is made of both discourse and practices. Thirdly, the frontier between the “public transcript” and what should remain within the hidden transcript “is a zone of constant struggle between the dominant and subordinate — not a solid wall” (*Ibid.*, p. 14)¹²⁸. A related argument is indeed that within the public transcript of subordinates, one is likely to find elements of the hidden transcript of the

¹²⁵ For Scott, this dynamic conception is what is missing in Gaventa’s book as well as in Lukes’ *Power. A Radical View*. Scott, 1990, p. 197, footnote 33.

¹²⁶ Elsewhere Scott notes that the hidden transcript is « the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourses ». The problem I see with this definition is that it does not allow for a conception of alternative practices that would not be produced by domination. This relates to the issue of the relationship between domination and resistance, and to whether they are necessarily always directly linked or not. I shall come back to this issue later.

¹²⁷ This necessarily collective dimension of the hidden transcript as well as how one may pass from an individual to a collective level have been criticized by several scholars. See *infra* on this.

¹²⁸ I find it useful to link this argument with Massey’s approach of a “politics of interrelation”. She argues that “if relationships are practices (they are processes, they are dynamic) so the spaces of domination/resistance are active spaces of action, continually being made. Massey, 2000, p. 284.

subordinates or endeavours by the subordinates to introduce such elements into the public transcript¹²⁹. This argument was the fruit of an intuition Scott had had during his fieldwork in the Malaysian village of Sedaka: the subordinate may find sufficient room in order to introduce some kind of critique or dissatisfaction within the public performance that is partly controlled and induced by the elite. He neatly sums up this intuition by writing that “What is conveyed is the impression of compliance but without its substance” (Scott, 1985, p. 26). The public attitude of the subordinate signals, Scott adds, deference and “intrusion, however slight, of the offstage attitudes into the public performance itself” (*Ibid.*)¹³⁰. But his main point here is that by confronting the hidden and public transcripts of the dominant and of the subordinates, one may hope to examine fruitfully the domination-resistance couple and “we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse” (Scott, 1990, p. 5; Scott, 1985, pp. 286-287). The question that arises is that of the difficulty of gaining access to the relatively secured sphere of the hidden transcript. It is indeed most often extremely difficult for researchers to actually get to the hidden transcript of subordinates. Scott therefore suggests looking at the subculture of these groups by examining elements such as songs, folk literature, jokes, etc. so as to get access to something that would get closer to the hidden transcript, farther from the politically overloaded field of the public transcript. Scott then makes a related argument which I think may have broad empirical and theoretical implications. He observes:

“For the study of power relations, this perspective alerts us to the fact that virtually all ordinarily observed relations between dominant and subordinate represent the encounter of the public transcript of the dominant with the public transcript of the subordinate” (p. 13).

This argument has proved very helpful and is a core one in my own research. It has been helpful to examine the kind of struggles that take place within practices of articles and letters writing by migrant workers, as a meeting point between the party-state public transcript and migrant workers’ public transcript. One of the forms such an encounter may take is that where the subordinate groups are using the very principles and values of the public transcript of the

¹²⁹ In his comments on Scott’s notion of public transcript, Moore suggests to see the public transcript as a discursive effect through which power does its work. Moore, 1997, p. 91. This conception is not fundamentally different from that of hegemony as the capacity to build a discursive framework, see later on this.

¹³⁰ Scott also notes that there has been a tendency to ignore the subordinates’ capacity to penetrate the dominant ideology since analysts have often based their analysis to the surface of the encounter between the dominant and subordinates. The subordinates’ capacity of penetrating the reigning ideology is rooted in their daily experience of the material world, Scott argues. The idioms, values and principles of the ideology are not received passively, they are re-appropriated and people make sense of them in relation with their continuous efforts to defend their material interests. Scott, 1990, p. 319. I shall come back later in our discussion to the centrality of interests in Scott’s work and to the criticisms this focus on people’s sovereign interests has aroused.

dominant in order in order to make claims or produce grievances. Because of the gap between the promises made in the name of the reigning ideology and the daily world people experience :

“(…) the very process of attempting to legitimate a social order by idealizing it always provides its subjects with the means, the symbolic tools, the very ideas for a critic that operates entirely within the hegemony” (*Ibid.*, p. 338).

The main point made here is that even in cases of open protest, subordinate groups often tend to remain within the rules or limits of the dominant order and to use the main terms of the dominant ideology to make claims in their interest. The idea is one of using the main values and principles upon which the dominant ground their rule in order at once to obtain gains and by the very mobilization of such values and principles to protect oneself against potential reprisal¹³¹. Seen from this perspective, the dominant ideology may be conceived of as a “plastic idiom or dialect that is capable of carrying an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive to their use as intended by the dominant”¹³².

Again, this very argument has turned to be useful in my looking at how the party-state dominant discourse on migrant workers and more widely on social stratification is found at the level of migrants’ experiences and narratives. The very rationale for domination and inequality, once it is made public, while necessary for the legitimacy of the dominant, often provides subordinates with further resources to interrogate the dominant and require that the very basis of its rule be taken seriously¹³³. Scott captures this argument with the hereafter statement:

“Every publicly given justification for inequality thus marks out a kind of symbolic Achilles heel where the elite is especially vulnerable” (*Ibid.*, p. 105).

¹³¹ Scott gives a series of examples borrowed from French and Russian history to illustrate the capacity of subordinate groups to put on a dress of deference, use specific forms which may help them to put forward their claims.

¹³² A further argument is made by Scott that, I feel, would need qualification by replacing “only” with “main” in the following quote: “For anything less than completely revolutionary ends the terrain of dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle”. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

¹³³ Scott quotes Paul Willis’s study of working-class children in the UK, for whom if the elite were successful in inculcating thoroughly the core tenets of ideology among subordinate classes, it could well be that the result would be more dissatisfaction and possibly anger. Those who actually took seriously the dominant ideology of hard work and stick to the school discipline were more likely to feel betrayed when social mobility failed to be achieved. Hence, Scott concludes this chapter by warning that “The system may have most to fear from those subordinates among whom the institutions of hegemony have been most successful (…)” since “the anger born of a sense of betrayal implies an earlier faith”. Scott, 1990, pp. 106-107; Scott, 1985, pp. 338-339.

This argument is indeed useful, I will show, when considering how some founding values and principles of the Chinese regime are being reworked creatively in Post-Mao China's politics of labor. I suggest now to turn to a discussion of some criticisms of Scott's arguments and concepts.

3.2 Major criticisms of Scott's framework

3.2.1 *Scott's ahistorical, rational and strategizing subject*

An often read criticism of Scott's framework is that his core concepts of everyday forms of resistance, public and hidden transcripts are grounded on unconstrained subordinates' interests. A concurring criticism is that Scott has on the whole neglected the impact of history on people's practices of resistance. Therefore, Scott has been criticized for having somewhat reified an "at all time strategizing" subordinate (Gal, 1995; Hanchard, forthcoming; Lukes, 2005; Tilly, 1991).

Smith has developed this line of criticism. He points at Scott's rationalistic conception of agency, noting that his understanding of agency rests chiefly on people's individual choices and strategies¹³⁴. Smith agrees with Scott that such choices are made under specific conditions, but, contra Scott, he emphasises the fact that such conditions are not only the "present conditions" (or the everyday), but that they are also historically produced. Smith finds that there is definitely no need to oppose approaches that focus on the everyday from those that stress historical dimensions. Scott's conception of agency is, according to Smith, grounded on his interest-based phenomenology and it leaves the collective, historically produced conception of agency unexamined (Smith, 1999, pp. 101-102, 105, 123-124). Mitchell shares this line of criticism with Smith as he observes that « the rational is never something calculated in a manner that is context-free »¹³⁵. The calculation will always depend on "estimations and suppositions that are the effect of a set of hegemonic relations (...) a configuration of historical and political forces ». Hence,

¹³⁴ Mitchell too criticizes Scott's construction of an autonomous political actor. For him this needs to be related to Scott's emphasis on a dualism between the public and the private (i.e. the public and hidden transcripts) and between thought and action as well as to his narrow interpretation of the concept of hegemony. Mitchell, 1990, p. 348 ; see also Smith 1999, pp. 102-103.

¹³⁵ I do not quite agree with Mitchell's reading of Scott's approach of power that would posit the subject as a self-constituted subject that would try to preserve his autonomy against external power. Scott's approach has been very much to emphasize the effects produced by asymmetries of power. Especially in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* Scott argues that the spheres of autonomy are never entirely outside the realms of power and that the hidden and public transcripts are most of the time intermingled.

calculations about what is rational are “situated interpretations of historical and practical experiences” (*Ibid.*, p. 354, 355, 356)¹³⁶.

Gal develops another line of criticism that is however related to Smith and Mitchell’s criticisms. She criticises the public/hidden transcript distinction too, noting that there may be instances where one can have resistance within a group of subordinates. What exactly distinguishes the public from the hidden transcript? From whose perspective is the public/hidden distinction to be made? (Gal, 1995, p. 417). Indeed, why then not talk, as Tilly asked, of many public and hidden transcript, a hundred or more of them? (Tilly, 1991, p. 597). This is a stimulating question. Firstly, as I have noted above, I find the idea of the encounter of two public transcripts (that of the dominant and of the subordinate) more useful in analytic terms than the distinction between the public and hidden transcript itself since the hidden transcript often remains more something that can be imagined to exist more than something that can be demonstrated. As to the distinction itself, I feel it needs to be stressed at what level and in which context the analyst is using this twin concept. One way of replying to Gal’s question is to make clear what one is looking at, to state clearly what kind of couples of subordinates and dominants one is examining. Let’s take the example of migrant workers. The analyst may indeed be interested in the interaction between two groups of migrant workers, or between migrant workers and permanent urban residents, or between a group of migrant workers and officials. It is a fact that one may then end up with many public and hidden transcripts depending on what one is studying. In the fieldwork observation and interviews I have carried out with migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta, I have come across instances where my informants would speak about particular topics among themselves in a specific manner and then suddenly, once an outsider had joined the group, they would turn to completely unrelated topics and change the way they were talking before the outsider had come in. One could argue that this is an instance of a performance of a specific hidden transcript or of a public transcript in which elements of a hidden transcript are present that change into the performance of a(nother) public transcript (i.e. the one with the outsider). The example I have just given above relates to a situation I have come across during a fieldwork observation in the Pearl River Delta¹³⁷. I was sitting with my three informants in the room of one of them that was located in a hotel. They were talking quite loudly about the poor economic situation of their hometown, one of them shouting: “They are talking about the growth rate of Guangdong province, about such and such statistics. But they should go

¹³⁶ On Scott’s imputing rational agency to peasant subalterns, Hanchard suggests that this has not much to do with an affinity with Comtean positivism, but rather with Scott’s interest in looking at how such groups “create and maintain an alternative sense of community and political agency under materially and ideologically stultifying conditions”, Hanchard, forthcoming, pp. 7-8.

¹³⁷ Fieldwork notes, summer 2001, Foshan.

down there, Zhu Rongji should go himself to see how it is in my village! But he does not want to go!". The discussion went on among the three of them, they were getting more and more excited. Then a man came in the room. The whole atmosphere, tone and content of the discussion changed radically. It calmed down turned to an unrelated topic. One could argue that what I was observing before the man joined in was an instance of a hidden transcript. But was it really so? I think a more fruitful way to look at things suggested by Scott is to view both performances along a more or less constrained, differently loaded politically continuum (Scott 1990, pp. 124, see also footnote 29). Indeed, could the first performance I described above be defined as an illustration of a hidden transcript? Did my presence among them not generate another kind of public transcript? As an outsider, as I was observing this discussion¹³⁸, a specific balance of power was also at work¹³⁹.

Getting back to Smith and Mitchell's criticisms on the lack of considerations for historically produced constraints when considering people's practices, I will make clear that Scott's framework as I am using it will be usefully complemented by a specific understanding of hegemony that I will develop hereafter. In this dissertation I do take into consideration the historical dimension that may impact on people's agency since I do stress the impact of historically produced gaps between city and countryside, the rigid social structure that Maoist society entailed and how much this influences people's conceptions and practices. I am also attentive to the need of taking into account how specific categories (such as migration, worker, labor, etc.) have been historically produced and how they relate with social practices.

Where I do not quite follow Smith and Mitchell, is when they argue that within Scott's conception, strategizing individuals are acting within a field of freedom. As I have stressed above, Scott has very much emphasized the constraints of economic relations and of routine repression. Scott's conceptualization of everyday forms of resistance however does posit a kind of "strategic alertness" on the part of subaltern actors and it does emphasise strategizing agency and calculation as Sivaramakrishnan observes. Scott's framework would need to be further elaborated

¹³⁸ During this discussion, I did not write down anything nor did I record the talk. I wrote down several pages of transcript once back in my own room late at night, feeling that if I had recorded or written down what I was observing, I would have run the risk of breaking what I would qualify as an unstable equilibrium. It is precisely this equilibrium that was broken once the man entered the room. Here the notion of "contractual framework" between the interviewer and the interviewees may be useful. This framework which unites the interviewer and the interviewees, would in the situation described above have been broken. On this notion, see Blanchet et Gotman, 1992, pp. 75-77. I am grateful to Pierre Verjans for having suggested to think of this in term of "juridical opposability".

¹³⁹ The most interesting discussions I have been observing during my fieldwork where those spontaneous discussions my informants had among them, those that I had not explicitly solicited. Very seldom have I asked them politically sensitive questions. They would, in some of the interactions they had among themselves, raise such issues spontaneously and on the rare occasions when I had raised such issues, it turned to no avail.

in order to consider “the everyday exercise of power” (Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, pp. 350-351)¹⁴⁰. I will definitely touch upon this issue when I examine how the elite public transcript of “dagong” relates to migrant workers’ narratives and experiences. I will do this by following Keith’s suggestion to study and problematize the relationship between “subjectivities of resistance” and “institutions of subjectification” (Keith, 1997, p. 281).

3.2.2 *The continuity between the hidden transcript and public outburst*

A second line of criticism has been developed around Scott’s assertion of an insufficiently questioned link between the hidden transcript and what is being expressed publicly when instances of insubordination or rebellion occur. Tilly finds Scott’s argument of a rebellion or a publicly expressed challenge expressing and being backed by what used to be silent or hidden transcripts interesting since it would account for the speed at which counter-ideologies and counter-religions appeared along with rebellions. Such an argument would then attribute a more relative weight to the role of ideology within the emergence of rebellions. From this perspective, what would trigger public outrage would have to do with the signs of vulnerability of the elite. But then is it so that situations of vulnerability of elites are as rare as rebellions would suggest, Tilly asks? To what extent does the hidden transcript impact or not on the way subordinates define and are aware of the potential vulnerability of elites? The problem with Scott’s approach is that his “adoption of crude individualized rationality to explain rebellion clashes with his exquisitely sensitive account of non-rebellion” (Tilly, 1991, pp. 598-599).

To characterize this relationship between a hidden transcript nurtured backstage that may in specific circumstances be made public and then feed into practices of direct challenge such as rebellions, Scott uses the metaphor of the reef barrier as an image of the reef of resistance: “Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly; a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reef of their own” (Scott, 1990, pp. 1-17, 111, 201-203). This metaphor, Hanchard observes, implies a cumulative aspect of hidden forms of resistance, as if there would be a cumulative knowledge of previous acts of resistance that would constitute the reef. For Hanchard, one may not posit an unquestioned correspondence between accumulation of knowledge and experience on the one hand, and

¹⁴⁰ Scott recognizes that he has perhaps been better at analysing resistance than domination. Scott, 2005, p. 399.

“collective action based on shared meanings” on the other hand¹⁴¹. The problem with the tendency to equate individuated practices of resistance with collective or macro-political resistance is that it lacks analytical clarity as it does not allow to distinguish between different types of resistance, the scales at which they operate, and the kinds of effects they may have (Hanchard, forthcoming, pp. 10, 53)¹⁴². Furthermore, some modes of resistance do not enter the hidden transcript-public transcript explanatory framework. The extent in which the inherent hidden transcripts are transformed by collective action is not addressed either in Scott’s account (Kelley, 1992, p. 295)¹⁴³. The manner in which the hidden transcript may get transformed into a collective public transcript is perhaps the weakest part in Scott’s theoretical accounts. He does not really offer a model for this potential passage and he does recognize that most of the time everyday forms of resistance are unable to alter the very nature or extent of domination.

Besides, Scott recognizes that resistance to ideology may require a counter-ideology but he remains unclear about whether such counter-ideology would be an individual or a collective product. Tilly observes that Scott suggests in the introductory chapter of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* that he wants to show that structurally similar forms of domination will generate roughly comparable forms of resistance. Two issues remain unanswered by Scott according to Tilly. Firstly, Scott does not discuss what “constitutes uniformity among conditions of subordination”, do subordinates share common beliefs on their condition? The second unresolved question, more interestingly as to my concern, is “whether some kinds of subordination produce greater conformity, suppression of anger, or opportunities for communication than others do” (Tilly, 1991, pp. 597-598). This question is very relevant when considering the Chinese party-state’s narrative practices both in the Mao and post-Mao eras. As I have argued, part of the party-state power relies on establishing a common discursive framework and mobilizing a network of values and concepts among subordinate groups. In this dissertation I will try to shed light upon the contentions that establishing such a framework entail in post-Mao China (see *infra* on this understanding of hegemony). As to the values migrant workers share or not, it is one of my core argument that narrative practices such as letter-writing to

¹⁴¹ Sivaramakrishnan raises a similar question : “Are violent confrontations the unintended consequences of everyday struggles, or do they reveal a particular interest striking to consolidate at a moment of perceived opportunity”. Sivaramakrishnan, 2005, p. 350.

¹⁴² Hanchard asks what the “cumulative effects of Brechtian modes of resistance” can be. He lists at least four possibilities: overturning of conditions of domination; partial amelioration of conditions of domination as a result of the accumulative effects of coagulate politics; contingent improvement of some conditions of domination but not others, and increased repression. For him, in most cases the second, third and fourth possibilities combine with each other. *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Following Foucault, Gupta and Ferguson suggest that we study how the experience of resistance may transform or on the contrary solidify the identities of resisting subjects. Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, p. 19.

magazines do indeed foster an engagement and partial identification with a specific repertoire of specific collective values.

3.2.3 *Romanticization of resistance?*

A third major line of criticism addressed at Scott's framework is that of a reification and simplification of subalterns' politics, with subalterns unitarily pitted against the dominants. By associating certain forms of resistance to specific groups or people, the "everyday forms of resistance" paradigm tends to underplay the potential instrumental dimensions of subaltern politics (Hanchard, forthcoming, p. 11). Gal qualified Scott's approach of "romanticization" of resistance¹⁴⁴ that "ignores the extent to which hegemony may be tacit and resistance often partial or self-defeating". Its outcome may as well be rebellion or on the contrary the reproduction of the system of domination, depending too on the historical process and the institutional context within which such acts are taking place. Gal's point is that resistance and incorporation may well coexist partially (Gal, 1995, p. 420; Smith, 1999, p. 104; Lukes, 2005, pp. 129-132). Lukes joins Gall and Hanchard in this criticism in arguing that Scott has been successful at demonstrating in a systematic manner only one way to explain quiescence. In so doing, Lukes argues, Scott has dismissed the possibility that the kinds of representational tactics of the subalterns he described may well coexist with resignation, consent, as well as a whole "range of cosmological, religious, moral and political ideas and everyday commonsensical assumptions" that can render conditions of powerlessness and dependence "appear intelligible and tolerable, or less intolerable, or indeed desirable" (Lukes, 2005, pp. 131-132).

White addresses a related issue by arguing that one may have an alternative reading of everyday forms of resistance and that there may be instances where acts that, according to the weapons of the weak paradigm, would qualify as resistance, which could be psychologically satisfying and at the same time politically ineffective. Such acts would mystify those who are performing them as to the extent of their powerlessness and exploitation (White, quoted in Mitchell, 1990, p. 555; see also Sharp et al., 2000, pp. 22-23 for a related argument). A tricky issue then is that of the definition of what kinds of acts qualify as resistance and how are we to understand the effects of such acts. This problem is even further complicated since acts of resistance may be co-opted and integrated "within new strategies of power" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, pp. 18-19). In this sense, acts and categories of resistance, just as practices of

¹⁴⁴ See Gupta's radical criticism of Scott's "everyday forms of resistance", for him Scott has exaggerated the political significance of petty acts such as thefts, poaching, etc. Quoted in Smith, 1999, p. 104.

domination, may both turn to be enabling and constraining. This may be so because of the internal politics of subaltern groups needs to be taken into consideration. Because of the internal politics inherent to any social group (including the subordinates), individual and collective acts may well be contradictory or ambiguous, Ortner remarks. The tendency in studies of resistance to ignore the internal politics among the subordinate groups¹⁴⁵ entails that such groups are often reified as being necessarily always turned towards resistance to the elite¹⁴⁶.

As far as my own work is concerned, I find it useful to conceive of practices of resistance as entwined with practices of domination, to view both kinds of practices as hybrid, contingent and intermingled into social networks and processes, as well as into economic relations (Sharp et al., 2000, pp. 22, 23, 27, 30¹⁴⁷). With this conception, I concur with Moore for whom instead of thinking resistance outside domination or hegemony, it is the mutual imbrication of these processes that needs to be studied (Moore, 1997, p. 92). Such an approach seems quite appropriate with regard to the question I am researching in this dissertation. Both the enabling and constraining dimensions of practices of domination and resistance as well as the entwined feature of these practices are approaches that, I will show, are useful to study the links between the party-state public transcript of dagong and migrant workers' public transcript through letter-writing.

3.2.4 *Neglect of influence of medias*

Gal makes an interesting criticism of Scott's approach in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. She observes that the ideological impact and functioning of various sorts of medias in the vast range of different historical cases presented by Scott are ignored or neglected. Yet these medias, Gal goes on, have had an impact on the political and ideological transformations of the

¹⁴⁵ Ortner refers to this as the "ethnographic refusal".

¹⁴⁶ Massey makes a similar points when she observes the moral stance associated with resisters, she writes of the romance of the margins/resisters. Massey, 2000, p. 285. In an interesting article Cresswell observes that in most studies "resistance seemed irrevocably heroic and infused with positive moral value" as it is the actions of subalterns that are described as resistance. He explains that he and his students felt at a loss of concepts to explain the acts of the middle-class white male main character of *Falling down* who in this movie had threatened and killed people of colour. He therefore suggests to look for another language that does not make such a moral investment in those who resist. Cresswell, 2000, pp. 257-258.

¹⁴⁷ See Pile 1997 for a disentangled conception of resistance inspired by the work of De Certeau. Pile has suggested to take into account practices which are partially disconnected from practices or structures of domination. Referring to resistant subjectivities, he notes that they are "constituted through positions taken up not only in relation to authority— which may well leave people in awkward, ambivalent, downright contradictory and dangerous places — but also through experiences which are not so quickly labelled 'power', such as desire and anger, capacity and ability, happiness and fear, dreaming and forgetting". Pile, 1997, p. 3.

last two centuries (the spread of consumerism or the collapse of communism for instance)¹⁴⁸. There should be more room for the analysis of complex linguistic processes such as those mediated by the media and that can not be subsumed under the face-to-face interaction (Gal, 1995, p. 416; see also Greenhouse, 2005, p. 357). I think Gal is right in pointing to the neglect of the role of medias in Scott's framework. But I do not subscribe entirely to her reading of Scott's understanding of power as exclusively a face-to-face interaction. As I have stressed above, it is the idea of the encounter between two public transcripts and the idea that the elite public transcript or the hegemonic discourse and its key terms and categories are often flexible enough to serve as the groundwork for struggle that I find most useful in Scott's work. This, I believe, can not be subsumed under the idea of a face-to-face interaction. The concepts I borrow from Scott need to be adapted in order to fit the particular case I am studying. Getting back to the media and more specifically the practice of letter-writing to migrant workers' magazines in China, it is not only a question of impact of the press upon people's worldview. I would rather conceive of reading and writing letters to migrant workers' magazines as a space of mediation, accommodation, engagement, contention of some of the key categories of the elite public transcript. It is at this space that I will be looking at when I confront the elite public transcript as it is mediated by the Shenzhen mainstream written press on the one hand and the practice of letter-writing by migrant workers on the other hand.

I will show that migrant workers engage in complex ways with some of the core idioms of the hegemonic discourse through this practice of letter-writing. They are engaged in processes of identification through the reading and writing to newspapers and magazines for instance. They are also reworking their very relationship with the party-state through such practices. The specific historical and institutional context as well as the particular status of both the media and of the written form should allow for a qualification of some of these debates about domination and resistance.

3.2.5 Governing *through the shaping of wants and values*

Another interesting criticism that has been addressed at Scott's approach is that it can not account for forms of rule that work through the shaping of desires and expectations. Gaventa and Lukes had pointed to these forms of government. For Lukes, these are forms of power that are "non-dominating" in that they do not invade people's freedom (Lukes, 2005, p. 85; Gaventa,

¹⁴⁸ Gal also criticizes Scott's unmediated and simplified conception of communication that bear upon his understanding of how ideologies are produced, disseminated, and how they produce effects. Gal, 1995, p. 408.

1980, pp. 66, 90). If they do not invade or restrict people's freedom through coercion, they actually govern through freedom. Rofel has referred to forms of domination that are emancipatory:

“Modern disciplinary power, then, operates most efficiently when self-interested, individuated subjects believe they are most free, and thus it confounds the emancipatory power of modernity. Put another way, actions we take in the name of individual freedom are figured by and within, rather than externally to, regimes of power” (Rofel, 1999, pp. 11-33).

Furthermore, economic development in China has turned into an intense cultural field which, I argue, following Escobar and Yan, is linked to a field of government (Escobar, 1995 ; Yan Hairong, 2003). As Rofel has put it, “As a means of radical disengagement from Maoist socialism economic reform is also and most significantly a space of imagination” (Rofel, 1999, pp. 29, 98)¹⁴⁹. Within this cultural field of economic reform and development, the historically produced rural-urban gap plays a crucial role. Migration from the countryside have contributed to devaluing the countryside, while cities turned more and more into highly desired places. Proximity to the urban is more and more conceived of as situating oneself closer to the market and to civility, as well as gaining access (or hoping to gain access) to consumption (Pun, 2004). Besides, values and attributes often associated with the market and with capitalism have become more and more prized. This process is of course not peculiar to China. But the element which I think has not been sufficiently highlighted is that the party-state and the urban elite are deeply involved in the reproduction of the discourse on the poor and backward countryside and in fostering a discourse of “lack” aimed at peasants. The participation of the party-state in the circulation of discourses, symbols and images that essentialize talents and bodies and that strengthen the rural-urban divide contribute to the shaping of desires and wants of peasants, i.e. the desire to leave the village and go to the city to work and hopefully participate to consumption (Pun, 2005). The fact that the party's core rhetoric is grounded on a rejection of Maoism's static social structure and on the idea that in post-Mao China people's talents can now be used as long as they are shaped properly can be thought of as a powerful tool aimed at fostering people's wants and expectations. What has been overlooked is that this rhetoric, backed by a series of images, symbols and narratives related to urban consumption, strikes at the heart of a process — the migration rationale and the reproduction of migration — which it in itself is already highly complex and related to the very

¹⁴⁹ Rofel also notes the heterogeneity of imaginings of economic reform because of great social inequalities and because their eradication was one of the central tenets of Maoist discourse. I will show that as an important element within this imaginary, the Party-state public transcript of *dagong* generates both identifications and rejections among migrant workers.

production and reproduction of desire on the ground of objective material disparities between the countryside and cities.

The Foucauldian concept of neo-liberal governmentality has been put forward as an interesting way to study modes of government that work through the shaping of people's conducts, desires, aspirations and beliefs. The "ethos of enquiry" of governmentality (Rose, 1999, p. 5) allows to question the very limit between state and society and to conceive the boundaries between what may be considered within the sphere of government and what is thought as outside this sphere both as an instrument and an effect of practices of government (Lemke, 2001). In post-Mao China, this approach may turn fruitful since a process of renegotiation between the spheres of freedom, autonomy and coercion is taking place and also because as Yan Hairong has argued, in post-Mao China the emphasis on developing productive forces is linked with building a market economy that rests on a neo-liberal conception of the 'market'. According to such a conception, the market "is not taken to be a natural formation, but is both a system and a subjectivity that has to be actively produced and facilitated" (Yan Hairong, 2003, p. 92)¹⁵⁰. A number of scholars have followed the neo-liberal argument to argue that the "enterprising self" who is requested to transform his life into "an enterprise of oneself" (Gordon, 1991) has turned into a core political category aiming at producing responsible and enterprising subjects (Hoffman, 2003; Zhao Yuezhi, 2002; Jeffrey, 2001; Guiheux, 2004; Hanser, 2003; Pun 2005; Yan Hairong, 2003). In this dissertation, I will hopefully bring some insights that will nuance and problematize the thesis of the production of a neoliberal subject.

3.2.6 *A narrow conception of hegemony*

In this section I examine some criticisms that have been addressed at Scott's reading of the notion of hegemony. One should note that both in *Everyday forms of Resistance* and in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott chiefly attacked the idea of successful ideological incorporation of subalterns and the notion of false consciousness¹⁵¹. He does not as such in these two volumes examine the notion of hegemony through Gramsci's work. Still, as Greenhouse observes, the reactions to Scott's charges against ideological incorporation have generated a re-

¹⁵⁰ Zhao Yuezhi refers to a process of "naturalisation of competitive capitalism". Zhao Yuezhi, 2002, p. 122; see also Wang Hui, 2003. Mitchell Dean notes that all forms of neo-liberalisms have in common this sort of essentialization of the market and that individuals ought to be subjected to [an entrepreneurial] *cultural reform* that aims at fostering and spreading "the norms and values associated with the market including those that of 'responsibility, initiative, competitiveness and risk-taking, and industrious effort' (...)". Dean, 1999, pp. 161-162.

¹⁵¹ In his review of the concept, Blommaert observes how often hegemony is used to signify total internalization or generalized consent. Blommaert, 2005, pp. 166-169.

reading of Gramsci's concept of hegemony and a series of interesting ethnographic and historical work that have complicated the understanding of the relationship between coercion and consent (Greenhouse, 2005). Hence, after having highlighted what Scott had to say about the concept, I examine how the concept has been developed first by Gramsci and then by several scholars. My aim in doing this is to check what the concept of hegemony, after its post-Scott reworking, may bring in my own work and how it may complement Scott's framework.

3.3 On different readings of Gramsci's hegemony

According to Scott it is not quite clear in Gramsci's *Prison notebooks* whether hegemony means active belief in the legitimacy of the ruling of the elite or whether it entails a passive acceptance somewhat forced by the potentiality of repression (Scott, 1985, pp. 316-317). He does however often equate hegemony with ideological incorporation. At some points, he stresses however that his charge on hegemony is aimed more at some theoretical elaborations of hegemony and false consciousness than at Gramsci himself. He also recognizes one of Gramsci's contribution as departing from the strong economic determinism that characterized Marxist approaches, since Gramsci actually recognized some autonomy to the ideological sphere. As he observes: "The very terms hegemony and false consciousness are, after all, a clear admission that culture, values, and ideology cannot be directly read off objective, material conditions". Scott's criticism is precisely that some of Gramsci's followers have tended to replace materialist determinism by ideological determinism (Scott, 1985, p. 317).

Scott's reading of Gramsci and more specifically of "hegemony" has been generally criticized as being too narrow and as indeed equating hegemony with political consensus and mystification (see for instance Abercrombie et al., 1980; Smith 1999; Hanchard, forthcoming; Gal 1995; Knight 1994; Roseberry 1994; Lukes 2005). If we follow such a reading, we are left, Smith notes, with a choice between two exclusive alternatives: either people are mystified (hence the case for ideological incorporation is strengthened) or they are not (in this case the false consciousness thesis is weakened). As we have seen, Scott's main argument is that public social evidence has been too often considered at face value and subalterns have too often been considered as taken in at the level of thought and values. For Smith, the problem with Scott's argument starts with his biased understanding of hegemony and his concomitant neglect of the role of culture and history. He therefore suggests judging the usefulness of the concept starting from Gramsci's use and understanding of it. (*Ibid.*, pp. 119-120).

It is firstly worth stressing that one ought not to read Gramsci's writings as a "general work of social science". Most of his key concepts are scattered within diverse writings, including of course the *Prison notebooks*. This fragmentary and scattered dimension of his writings present immense difficulties for the analysts, hence the different interpretations that have been made of the concept of hegemony (Hall, 1996)¹⁵². Some of Gramsci's major developments relating to hegemony are found in a text of the *Prison notebooks* where Gramsci compared the political structures of Russia (elsewhere pointed to as the 'East') and of Western Europe as well as the revolutionary strategies that ought to be developed in each case. Gramsci observes that in the 'East', the "state is everything", while civil society is weak. In Western Europe, the state is made of complex organizations and civil society is very much developed with its myriad of associations. The relationship between the state and civil society is defined as balanced. The kinds of rule in Russia and Western Europe are also contrasted by Gramsci: mainly coercion in Russia, while in Western Europe there is a mix of coercion and consent. Gramsci uses military metaphors to characterize the differences in the two systems: war of manoeuvres in the East and war of positions in the West, where civil society and its many associations are compared with trenches and fortress in this war of position. In another fragment Gramsci explains that from 1870 on, as the structures of Western states complexified, the term "permanent revolution" slowly was replaced by that of "civil hegemony".

While the term "hegemony" had its prior connotations and usage, Gramsci extended the concept from the forging of an alliance of the working class with the peasantry and other exploited groups against "the oppression of capital" to use it "for a differential analysis of the structures of bourgeois power in the West" (Anderson, 1977, pp. 19-20). The term has therefore become one that can be applied to all classes, not to the strategies of the working class only. Besides, Gramsci opposes two complementary modes of rule: "The supremacy of a social group assumes two forms: "domination" and "intellectual and moral direction". In Gramsci's earliest development of the term, he pointed to the fact that hegemony (direction) was exercised throughout (civil society), while coercion (domination) pertained to the state (*The prison notebooks*, Quoted in Anderson, 1971, p. 21; Hall, 1996, pp. 425-426)¹⁵³. We can see therefore that the state and civil society were opposed as separate entities in the first version of hegemony Gramsci developed¹⁵⁴. In two subsequent versions, hegemony pertained both to the state (political hegemony) and to civil society (civil hegemony). In this case, the concept of hegemony

¹⁵² Hall notes that that "the notebooks are what they say: *Notes* — shorter or more extended; but not woven into a sustained discourse or coherent text". As such, considering the "most unfavourable circumstances" under which they were written, they are a "remarkable intellectual feat". Hall, 1996, p. 412-413.

¹⁵³ Gramsci also opposed "political society" (the state) to civil society. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁵⁴ This entailed the intervention of agents (socialist militants) to demystify the working class. Anderson, 1977, p. 28.

corresponded to a synthesis of coercion and consent. Both were concerned with ideology, but coercion pertained only to the state. In a third inclusive version, the state became identical with civil society. No matter Gramsci's contradictory versions of the relationship between the state and civil society, what Gramsci stressed was the complexification of both the state and civil society as well as the complexification of their relationship. The state becomes more complex, in addition to its coercitive and administrative functions, Gramsci highlights that the state also educates and it has a function of moral leadership:

[the state] "is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to cultural and moral level (or type) which corresponds to the need of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interest of the ruling class" (*The prison notebooks*, 1971 quoted in Hall 1996, pp. 428-429).

The interesting thing in this development, as Hall has argued, is that once this complexification is stressed, the state becomes a "complex formation in modern societies which must become the focus of a number of different strategies and struggles because it is an arena of different social contestations" (*Ibid.*, pp. 429-430).

This argument allows me to stress one related feature of hegemony that I find interesting. It has been stressed above that hegemony has often been equated with ideological incorporation. Femia considers that it is not quite clear at which end Gramsci stood within a continuum with two poles that are deep internalization of dominant values on the one hand, and the unstable assimilation grounded on the status quos as the best available solution (Femia, 1981, quoted in Lukes, 2005, p. 8). Williams and Hall, and in their "tracks" several other scholars, argue on the contrary that the way Gramsci understood hegemony is all but equivalent to total internalization. For Williams, if "ideology is a rather formal and articulated system of meanings, values and belief", hegemony, as a process, while "always dominant, (...) is never either total or exclusive". Hence, for Williams, hegemony is always *experienced* or *lived* hegemony and as such the formal system of meanings and values (ideology) can not be equated with consciousness. Hall points to a concurring feature which is that Gramsci was not interested in ideological work for itself but well in "organic ideologies", that is ideologies that confront and link with the everyday, the practical and common sense. In Gramsci's words:

"Every philosophical current leaves behind a sediment of 'common sense'; this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life (...)" (Gramsci, *The Prison notebooks*, 1971, quoted in Hall, 1996, p. 431).

Hall argues that Gramsci's interest in common sense is important because it relates to the "conceptions and categories" upon which people build their practical consciousness. It is this area of commonsense categories that ideologies need to "take into account, contest and transform" (*Ibid.*). Hegemony is therefore characterized by struggle and it always needs to be "renewed, recreated, defended and modified" because it is always "resisted, limited, altered, challenged"¹⁵⁵. One interesting feature of these alternative and oppositional political and cultural practices is that they indicate what the hegemonic process needs to try to control, transform or incorporate (Williams, 1977, p. 597-599). In a certain way then, the oppositional practices, or the patterns of counter-hegemony reveal important features of the hegemonic process¹⁵⁶.

On the whole, hegemony could be defined as a kind of dialectical process between a formal system of values and ideas on the one hand, and people's conceptions and experiences of the world. Hall summarized the process as one of articulation and de-articulation of ideas and values with social forces (Hall, 1996, p. 434). In the case I am studying, I will show that within the hegemonic framework, these values and principles are drawn from a range of diverse registers or repertoires some rather traditional, others relating more to the socialist heritage, while others would rather be linked to the market or the culture of capitalism and globalization. Migrant workers too, in their practical engagement of the world, in trying to make sense of it and of themselves can mobilize a variety of ideas and symbolic practices (Link et al., 2002, p. 5).

On the whole, I find this understanding of hegemony particularly interesting as it highlights the idea of a process at work that is fundamentally dynamic. It emphasises the intertwined nature of people's categories and practices with dominant or state-sponsored cultural forms. Second, this conceptualization of this relation as a 'dialectic of cultural struggle' is relevant in order to examine the relationship between migrant workers' narratives and party-state discursive construction of *dagong* in China. The emphasis put on the idea that this dialectic of cultural struggle takes place in contexts of unequal power, which several of these approaches of

¹⁵⁵ For conceptualizations of hegemony as struggle and characterized by instability, see Roseberry, 1994; Sayer, 1994; Nugent and Alonso, 1994; Alonso, 1994; Smith, 1999 and Smith, 2004; Abercrombie et al., 1980. Rose provides a similar emphasis on a dynamic and complex process at work but he does not use the concept of hegemony. Rose, 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Cresswell develops a similar approach but without reference to hegemony: resistance would not be the evidence of power's absence, but rather it would provide an indication on the kind of power that is at work. It is in this sense that Abu-Lughod writes of resistance "as a diagnostic of power". Cresswell, 2000, pp. 264-265. In this sense, when we study and learn something about practices of resistance, we also glean something about dominating power. Such a conceptualization is actually not that far from Scott's argument on the interest in studying both the public transcript of the dominant and of the subordinate as well as their intermingling as a way to better understand what domination does or does not achieve, what it manages or endeavours to cast from the public transcript. Cresswell's argument also somehow backs Scott's development on how the categories of the public transcript of the dominant may be used creatively by those who are resisting. By thinking of resistance as a diagnostic of power, the entangled dimension of domination and resistance may also be better stressed.

hegemony share, cautions against viewing people and their agency in a a-historical manner, not considering the fields of power they are part of. It allows for a contextualized and historicized way to conceive of agency. Finally, it allows for looking at how popular and hegemonic culture influence each other, and it sets limits to the conceptualization of an all-too encompassing domination.

3.3.1 *Hegemony as a common discursive framework*

Roseberry has put forward an interesting conception of hegemony that in addition to focusing on struggle also conceives of hegemony as a *political project*¹⁵⁷ that aims at establishing a common material and discursive framework. In this sense, hegemony would rather be used to study struggle instead of studying consent per se. Roseberry suggests to mobilize hegemony as a way to analyse:

“the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then is not a shared ideology, but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination” (Roseberry, 1994, pp. 360-361)¹⁵⁸.

According to such an approach, the hegemonic process is constituted of a whole range of practices such as accommodation, confrontation, or resistance that are conceived as taking place within a complex field of forces that links the elite to the subaltern groups. Roseberry develops further the idea of establishing a common discursive framework. For him, the establishment of such a framework is the heart of the hegemonic project. Furthermore, to examine the relationship between state formation and practices of subaltern groups, one should be attentive to the *points of contention or of rupture* within the discursive framework. Establishing the discursive framework rests on “prescribed forms of procedures” or “prescribed forms for expressing both acceptance and discontent”¹⁵⁹. This last argument, as I shall demonstrate in this dissertation, will

¹⁵⁷ Roseberry stresses that hegemony (or the establishment of a common discursive framework) needs to be thought of as a project, not as an achievement. This is important since the existence and features of the hegemonic project need to be described empirically and not just be considered an a-priori. Scott, 1994; see also Sayer, 1994.

¹⁵⁸ This conception is close to the Sharp et al. conception that sees the dominant order as both enabling and constraining. Sharp et al., 2000.

¹⁵⁹ In a similar vein, Sayer, referring to Havel’s story of the greengrocer hanging the “Workers of the world united” panel, writes of the “everyday moral accommodation grounded in an equally everyday fear (...) Individuals live in the lie that is “the state”, and it lives through their performances”. Sayer describes Havel’s greengrocer as a “thoroughly knowing but apparently compliant greengrocer”. Sayer 1994, p. 374.

be useful to shed light on explaining specific patterns of the relationship between the hegemonic construction of *dagong* and migrant workers' experiences and narratives.

3.4 Conclusion

On the whole, both Scott's conception of the elite public transcripts that is a space of contention and the notion of hegemony conceived of as a process that entails struggles and tensions share a dynamic approach of power. Both kinds of approaches point to the need to look at political objects within *and* beyond state institutions. In this they partake to a broad movement of "the radical deinstitutionalization" of the understanding of political processes with politics "inscribed in the texture of the everyday" (Dirks et al., 1994, p. 5).

Both Scott's approach and the understandings of hegemony I have discussed above share a conception of culture and ideologies as non-totalizing. They share too the idea that practices of domination and resistance are entangled and that state-sponsored or hegemonic cultural and ideological categories are potentially constraining *and* empowering.

Hegemony, we have seen, may complement usefully Scott's concepts by its insistence on the role historical settings have on people's agency. Approaches in terms of hegemony also emphasise the idea that within the hegemonic process both elite and subordinate's practices impact upon each other without neglecting that their relationship is one of asymmetry of power. In the analytical chapters of this dissertation, I will use the concept of public transcript and of the encounter of public transcripts as a non-static terrain, an arena where diverse articulations and struggles are taking place. As such, the hegemonic discourse or framework may be conceived as concepts that are close to the public transcript. In the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I will be using these notions interchangeably bearing in mind the features discussed above. I believe that these notions will allow to examine how the party-state discursive power is being deployed, how its main categories are engaged with and challenged by migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta.

**PART II: THE DOMINANT PUBLIC TRANSCRIPT OF
MIGRANT WORKERS**

Chapter 4: The socio-economic and political context of the Pearl River Delta

In this chapter, I shall introduce the general socio-political and economic context of the Pearl River Delta. I will first sketch out the main features of the development of the Special economic zones policy in the Delta. Then I will turn to migration to Guangdong province and the Pearl River Delta. In the third section, I deal with the relationship between local economic development, local authorities and migrant workers in the 1990s. In the fourth section, I look at the regimes of the work-place in the Pearl River Delta and at the the Pearl River Delta environment.

4.1 Guangdong and the Pearl River Delta region in the reform era

The dramatic economic development of Guangdong province and more specifically of its Pearl River Delta is the result of the implementation of export-oriented economic reforms in Guangdong province and of major restructuring of the Hong Kong manufacturing industry. From 1979 on, special policies have been implemented in Guangdong province providing it with greater autonomy in several fields such as agriculture, industry, transport, commerce, (...) technology and public health (Goodman and Feng Chongyi, 1994, pp.179-180). Guangdong province also obtained greater leeway in managing its foreign trade, its fiscal policy and in matters linked to dealing with investment, both domestic and foreign. The creation of Special Economic Zones, of which Shenzhen was the first, was too part of these policies. In the mid 1980s, the thirteen counties of the Pearl River Delta, labeled open economic zone, were granted greater autonomy in managing foreign trade and attracting foreign investment (Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998, p. 43; Woon Yuen-Fong, 1993, p. 582). Foreign investors were offered advantageous conditions in terms of taxes, customs, renting of land and the hiring of rural workers (Tan Shen, 2000, p. 3). In 1988, such policies were implemented in all other coastal areas of the country. As C. S. Lin has put it: "Increasingly, China's coastal zone has been seen as a 'development catalyst' or a stepping stone for the country to move up to the stage of Pacific regional cooperation and newly international division of labor" (Lin, 2001). As we will see below, as a result of these policies and of decentralization measures, local authorities were going to take an ever more active part in economic activities. Guangdong province received 28% of US\$305.922 foreign direct investment

that poured into China during the 1979-1999 period (China State Statistical Bureau, 2000, pp. 604-609, quoted in Lin, 2001).

In the meantime, within a general trend of relaxation of the State's hold on part of the economy, Chinese agriculture underwent a gradual process of decollectivization which actually allowed a great number of ruralites to engage in non-agricultural employment, either by working in township industries without actually leaving the countryside, or by heading towards towns and cities to look for employment. These transformations were taking place while Hong Kong manufacturers were facing serious difficulties related to "a shortage of labor supply, rising costs of production, and growing competition from manufacturers in Southeast Asia in addition to other East Asian newly industrialized countries (NICs)" (Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998, p. 45). Since the mid 1980s, the solution has been for these manufacturers to massively relocate in Guangdong province where labor and land were plentiful and cheap. As Tan Shan observed, "the Delta is the first frontier to meet international capitalism. Mobile women workers and mobile capital meet each other in the Delta and form a new type of tripartite relationship among workers, capital and the state" (Tan Shen, 2000, p. 293). It is towards this relationship that we are going to turn in a later section. Let us first however briefly look at migration to the Delta in the post-Mao era.

4.2 Migration to the Pearl River Delta

Internal migration in China is a very complex and diverse phenomenon that affects all regions of the country. As far as migration to Guangdong province and the Pearl River Delta is concerned, a great number of economically motivated migrants have been attracted by the open zones of the province. In fact, the area has witnessed a dramatic increase in both foreign investments and inflow of migrants all along the 1980s and 1990s.

In the early 1990s, official estimates for Guangdong province population gave a figure of around 5 million for the "floating population" of the province, while at the end of the decade, the volume of "floating population" reached 10 million for the Greater Delta alone according to conservative estimates (Guldin, 2001, p. 127). The Pearl River Delta area has the highest rates and volumes of both interprovincial and intraprovincial migrants in the country and there has been a general trend of increase of long distance migration to the Delta's most developed areas in the 1990s (*Ibid.*, pp. 232-233).

The areas of the Pearl River Delta where the economic development is most dynamic, with a high concentration of labor-intensive industries, high levels of both government and foreign investments, are also those that attract the greatest number of migrants. According to Gregory Guldin, “a hierarchy of desired work destinations exists, with the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) at the top, the prosperous heart of the Delta next, followed by the Delta periphery, and then other provincial destinations” (*Ibid.*, pp. 226-228). This has changed somewhat since the middle of 2004 with the emergence of the so-called “mingong huang” (民工荒) in several labor-intensive areas of the country. This labor shortage of migrant workers from the countryside has been widely commented in the Chinese media. The shortage started in the Pearl River Delta, in the city of Dongguan, in the first instance but was soon followed by other coastal regions. Although caution is called for in assessing the breadth and the causes of this situation, it is worth noting that the most frequently cited cause is the violation of workers’ rights and the disastrous working conditions in the manufacturing sector. It would seem that a large number of workers are refusing to go to places where working conditions are too bad and the non-payment of wages too frequent¹⁶⁰.

In many of the cities that have “mushroomed” in the Delta area, the “floating population” — i.e. the population that does not hold local permanent registration¹⁶¹ — actually outnumbers the local permanent population. In Shenzhen, from less than 100,000 people, the municipality had a floating population of 2,850,000 people, while the permanent population numbered only 1,250,000 in 1999 (Thireau et Hua Linshan, 2001b, p. 38)¹⁶². In 2004, out of a total population for Shenzhen of 5,975,000, 4,324,200 were holding a temporary registration (Shenzhen Statistical Yearbook, 2005). Isabelle Thireau has observed that this floating population should be divided in two major groups according to how they face official measures regarding the issuance of permanent permits by the Shenzhen municipal authorities: those who have reasonable chances of obtaining a permanent residence permit and those, with whom we are concerned here, who will most likely not be able to ever obtain permanent residence status (Thireau et Hua Linshan, 2001b, p. 38). One should note that there may be important differences in figures related to the “floating population”, depending on which definition of “floating population” is being used. Surveys that have been carried out in the 1980s and 1990s very often

¹⁶⁰ On this question, see Chan, 2005, pp. 23-31.

¹⁶¹ This may include people who are in Shenzhen only for a very short period of time, such as tourists, businessmen or people visiting relatives, depending on the definitions being used in the survey.

¹⁶² In 1980, 90% of the Shenzhen population was holding permanent household registration, while in 1993, only 40% was registered permanently in Shenzhen. For further details, see Scharping and Schultze, 1997, p. 177.

use different spatial and temporal norms to define what migration or what a migrant is. This renders any comparison across time rather hazardous¹⁶³.

While most surveys show that labor migration within China is predominantly masculine, in the Pear River Delta however approximately 60% of migrant labor are women (Tan Shen, 2000, p. 296; Scharping and Sun Huaiyang, 1997, pp. 37-39). The proportion of female migrant labor is usually even higher among people aged between 15 and 19 years old as in Shenzhen and Foshan where female migrants account for around 75% of the total migrant population (Scharping, 1999, p. 79). This reversed sex ratio has to do with the strong demand for female labor of labor-intensive factories in the electronics, textile and toys industries. These factories show a marked preference for young rural female workers who, as Yuen-Fong Woon puts it, “are hired for their ‘feminine virtues’: obedience to authority, discipline and self-denial” (Woon Yuen-Fong, 2000, p. 146). This preference can be witnessed in the recruiting practices of some of the Delta factories which, as Gregory Eliyu Guldin has shown, put up ads aimed specifically at women under the age of 30 (Guldin, 2001, p. 172). In her fieldwork on foreign-invested enterprises in the Delta, Tan Shen has found also that much more women than their male counterparts worked in the assembly lines where work was more demanding and pay lower. She argues that “it is the demand of foreign investors for cheap and unskilled labor that determines the working opportunities for rural women”. Let us now turn to what the same scholar has phrased as “a new type of tripartite relationship between workers, capital, and the host community” (Tan Shen, 2000, pp. 293, 297).



Migrant workers in a Dongguan factory (Summer 2001).

¹⁶³ For a thorough discussion of these issues of definitions see Scharping, 1997, pp. 9-55.

4.3 Local officials, investors and migrant workers

With the launching of economic reforms and its concomitant decentralization of a number of prerogatives in the economic domain, local cadres have, contrarily to what some observers might have reckoned, successfully adapted to the novel situation. Actually, middle level bureaucrats and local party members have retained considerable power through their access to resources that are often critical for the success of an enterprise. The nature of this power has changed considerably when compared to what it was during the Mao-era. One important element is that the economic performances of a locality will very much condition the advancement and revenues of local government agents and local party cadres (Rocca, 1996). But even more than that, local bureaucrats have taken a very active part in economic activities in many different ways. At the township or village level, it is not rare to see key players in the local administration being also members of the management of collective enterprises. The involvement of local governments in economic activities may also be indirect. Gregory Guldin has documented the creation of companies by district governments in the Pearl River Delta Special Economic Zones to run the many enterprises established in the district (Guldin, 2001, p. 81). Local governments in the Delta have been quite active in trying to attract foreign investments to their localities. One should stress, that such investments may be crucial for the local economic development. As Jean-Louis Rocca has put it, “enterprises have to contribute to the growth of local employment, to investments in infrastructure, to training activities and, more generally, to the increase of local revenues” (Rocca, 1996, p. 11). In terms of income, in 1993 Guangdong local governments were paid by foreign-invested enterprises almost 2 billion US \$ for hiring migrant workers, while the same year, collective-owned and village enterprises had only generated 258 million dollars for local governments. Tan Shen has argued that for local governments there is a natural disposition to favor both investors and the host community at the expense of migrant workers who remain outsiders (Tan Shen, 2000, pp. 297-300). According to Yuen-Fong Woon, as the Delta region was being incorporated into the international division of labor, coastal cities and provinces, as well as county governments in the Pearl River Delta are engaged in “cut-throat competition for foreign investments”, with each governments competing to offer the best conditions to foreign investors in terms of labor and production costs (Woon Yuen-Fong, 1993, p. 588). As a result, migrant workers’ salaries have been kept at an extremely low level, even in comparison with countries such as Malaysia or Thailand (Shi Xianmin, 1999, p. 119). Anita Chan observed that these salaries were so low that they were not included in any Chinese statistical records (Chan,

1998, p. 5). Between 1993 and 2005, migrant workers' wages have only increased by 68 yuan¹⁶⁴, while the cost of life has increased strongly. During the same period, permanent residents' wages were almost multiplied by 5, Anita Chan explains (Chan, 2005, pp. 3-4)¹⁶⁵.

Alarming labor conditions have also been widespread and have attracted the attention of the media since the end of the 1980s¹⁶⁶. Some figures as to the number of injuries and deaths in Shenzhen are stunning. For instance, according to the statistics of seven Shenzhen hospitals, every four days, one person died because of a labor accident and more than 12,000 people got injured because of labor accidents for the same year in 1998 in Shenzhen (Liu Kaiming, 2003, p. 12)¹⁶⁷. According to a person in charge of an organism that helps migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta, more than 40,000 fingers would be cut off every year in the Pearl River Delta, which makes 111 fingers cut off per day (Tan Shen, 2004, pp. 4-5). The number of labor disputes has also increased dramatically in the 1990s, from 209 cases in 1993 to more than 12,000 cases in 2002 (Liu Kaiming, 2003, p. 13)¹⁶⁸. Even in Shenzhen and Zhuhai which have been at the forefront of labor relations legislation, the implementation of such legislation has been very much lacking for several reasons: fragmentation of labor management structures, much too low number of personnel involved in labor condition inspection, very low level of trade union membership among migrant workers and trade unions that may be structurally linked to the enterprise management or to the local government leadership, etc (Chan, 1995, p. 31; Shi Xianmin, 1999, pp. 112-125). More generally there is strong concern from local governments to prevent any deterioration of the environment for investors. In this respect, Tan Shen observed that the "more directly the government is involved in economic activities, the more likely the government will take a biased stand on the side of the capital investors, since economic growth is the most important measurement of the achievement of the local government" (Tan Shen, 2000, p. 306). If we agree that the capacity of local governments to bring a certain degree of prosperity to their constituencies is a major source of legitimacy for these governments, the lot of migrant workers is likely to remain subordinate to these economic and political concerns. As far as the issue of legitimacy is concerned, there may be here a tension between different levels of legitimacy: on the one hand, for local governments, economic interests are likely to prevail upon the interests of migrants workers; on the other hand, at higher levels such as the province, there

¹⁶⁴ 1 yuan corresponds to 10 cents.

¹⁶⁵ Anita Chan, "China Labour Conditions Conference", Brussels China Forum, Brussels, 22nd June 2007.

¹⁶⁶ See Anita Chan's introduction to the special issue of *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*. Chan, 1998, pp. 4-5; for a recent overview see Chan Wai-Ling, 2006, pp. 50-65.

¹⁶⁷ See also Liu Kaiming, 2005 for in-depth analysis of labor disputes and arbitrations.

¹⁶⁸ For recent reports on labor conditions and disputes in the Delta's factories, see China Labor Bulletin, 2005; China Labor Watch, 2005. See also Amnesty International's recent report on the human cost of Chinese economic growth, Amnesty International, 2007.

seems to be greater concern for the labor conditions and levels of revenues of migrant workers since they may represent an assault to the legitimacy of a party that once vaunted the working class (Chan, 1995, p. 56).

One should bear in mind the fact that if so many migrant workers are ready to labor under these very tough conditions, it is partly because of the constraints which many ruralites face in the Chinese countryside. It will become clear when we move to chapter 10 that the disparities in levels of revenues and in socioeconomic and educational standards between major poles of economic development in the Pearl River Delta on the one hand and the rural areas migrant workers are coming from on the other hand are often very substantial. In the beginning of the 21st century, rural-to-urban income inequality still account for much of the overall income inequality¹⁶⁹. It is however questionable to talk of the Chinese countryside as one single entity since there are great variations as to socioeconomic levels of development within the countryside in post-Mao China. From 1978 to 1985 rural revenues have initially increased by 10% per year, they then stagnated during the 1990s. From 1988 to 1995, severe poverty has decreased in Eastern and central China, while it has increased in Western China. With the increase of taxes and the rising cost of agricultural production, rural revenues have decreased by 30% between 1997 and 2000 which made that many rural families got severely impoverished. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of poor rural households increased while extreme poverty diminished modestly during the same period (Unger, 2002, pp. 171-183)¹⁷⁰. In many cities of the Delta, one can almost observe a reproduction of the landscape of poverty with those migrants hailing from the most impoverished areas performing the hardest and most despised tasks such as collecting scrap or selling one's labor on a daily basis.

Whether one considers push or pull elements, the Mao-era inherited rural-urban gap is the major structural factor behind rural-to-urban mobility in reform-China. As I will show, in many instances the financial constraints linked to education and health bearing upon rural people are strong enough to render migration to the coastal cities the only alternative. Even very low revenues such as 400 yuan per month may allow migrants to send home very much sought-after remittances that will help partly compensate for declining agricultural revenues. In other cases, upon the background of a strong geographical hierarchization, the city acts as an imagined and highly desired place for young ruralites.

¹⁶⁹ Li Shi, paper presented at the USC 40th anniversary conference, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 4th January 2004.

¹⁷⁰ Since the coming to power of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in 2002, there has been a growing recognition by the Chinese central government of the need to improve revenues in the countryside. The decision was taken in 2006 to abolish most agricultural taxes. It remains to be seen though how this measure is going to be implemented at the local level.

4.4 Regimes of the work-place

In this last section I will turn to a brief overview of the labor regimes of the Shenzhen work-place as they have been described and analyzed by Pun Ngai and Lee Ching-Kwan, two scholars who have done extensive fieldwork in Shenzhen factories. Pun Ngai observed how a politics of difference and a politics of language “establishing a hierarchy between the rural and the urban, the Northerner and the Southerner, and male and female” in order to manage women migrant workers within and outside the work-place (Pun Ngai, 1999, pp. 4-6, 8-18; Pun Ngai, 2005, pp. 109-132)¹⁷¹. Pun Ngai shows that in the ideology of the work-place, to be a working girl (*dagongmei*) meant that one was uneducated, stupid and somebody whose rurality had to be negated and rejected in order to be replaced by a new identity fitted to a modern production site. A whole series of putative attributes of rural life uttered repeatedly in the face of migrant workers by factory leaders had to be abandoned. Pun Ngai shows as well that factory management personnel often associated notions such as submissiveness, obedience, industriousness, etc. to being a girl (i.e. somebody who should strive to become a woman). As she puts it, “Divisions between rural and urban, north and south and male and female are all manipulated to maintain and extend new forms of domination and hierarchy” (Pun Ngai, 1999, pp. 15, 18). Pun Ngai also documented the various tactics that female migrant workers deployed in the work-place to resist these modes of domination. Lee Ching-Kwan describes the “processes through which physical conditions [the extremely harsh labor conditions of migrant workers] take on subjective and collective meanings” in the electronics factory where she did fieldwork. She argues that such a process is accomplished through despotism and localism, the two main regimes within the work-place (Lee Ching-Kwan, 1995). She too described a managerial ideology that defined women migrant workers as “maiden workers” and that constructed them in terms of lack, as “young, immature, ignorant and single women” (Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998, pp. 126-128). As for what working in Shenzhen factories meant for migrant workers, Lee stressed that despite the fact that factory work very often implied fierce exploitation, prejudices and injuries to their dignity, it also meant opportunities for greater autonomy, experiencing a whole series of challenges associated with city life. She argued that migrant workers participated in the re-negotiation of their class, gender and localist identities (Lee Ching-Kwan, 1995, pp. 15-23). One should also note that definitions of migrant workers as unfit, as lacking that were found on the shop-floor are

¹⁷¹ For a similar kind of argument but in two silk factories in Zhejiang province, see Xu Feng, 2000.

paralleled by a discourse of local officials concerned about offering hard-working and docile rural labor force to potential foreign investors (Annagnost, 1997, p. 76)¹⁷².

4.5 The Pearl-River Delta Environment: observation, visibility and appropriation

The sense I got from doing fieldwork in the Delta and from analysing migrant workers' texts, as well as from much of the sociological and anthropological literature is that the institutionally-induced instability puts great pressure on migrants' and pushes them to accept work at lower than expected conditions. Migrants are vulnerable both inside and outside the Delta Factories. Within the factories, administrative and fiscal decentralization, a key components of economic reforms, means that managers have immense leeway in determining working conditions (Chan and Zhu Xiaoyang, 2003, pp. 563). I want to stress here, along with Lee Ching-Kwan, Pun Ngai and Anita Chan, the fact that the macro-institutional features of the urban environment go hand in hand with factories disciplinary labor regimes and allow for optimal appropriation of workers' labor. As has already been stressed elsewhere, and as my own fieldwork and analysis of migrant letters confirmed, the environment outside factory walls in the Delta area is highly unstable and precarious (Tan Shen, 2004, p. 4; Dongguan mingong zhuangkuang diaochao, 1995, pp. 85-87; Zai liudong zhong shixian jingying yimin, 1995, pp. 117-119; Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998, p. 88; Chan, 2002, pp. 173-174). Pun Ngai observes that in Shenzhen the household registration system and labor control mechanisms are well connected. These mechanisms contribute to intensify and conceal "the exploitation of migrant laborers" she argues (Pun Ngai, 2004, p. 6)¹⁷³. Outside factory walls, migrants face two major forms of vulnerability. One pertains to daily necessities such as shelter. Another has to do with controls by public security officials. The high costs that living in urban setting implies, as well as the difficulties of finding a shelter while looking for work are said to be major concerns for migrants. Anita Chan notes that among ten young migrant workers she interviewed in Shenzhen in 2002, five had been caught by the police, some of them several times, and nine of them knew of people who had been arrested (Chan, 2003, p. 49; Li Qiang, 2003, pp. 126-137; Li Peilin, 2003, pp. 163-171). Many migrants I interviewed in the streets of Guangzhou, Dongguan, Shenzhen and Foshan from 2001 to 2006, be they migrant workers legally registered, scrap collectors or wandering monks, expressed frustration about the prejudice they faced in the city. They felt

¹⁷² See also Yan Hairong, 2003, pp. 493-523.

¹⁷³ Pun Ngai also makes a strong argument about the "dormitory labor regime" which "(...) generates hidden costs which are borne by women workers", *Ibid.*, p. 2.

particularly frustrated having to comply with many kinds of regulations and having to make pay-offs. One of them reflected on this by asking “Are these streets not large enough for us? Are they after all not ours too?”¹⁷⁴

The household registration and a host of formal and informal, institutional and discursive practices that go with it enable an economy of power and *visibility*. The degree of intervention by the party-state in people’s private life in cities does indeed vary according to which category of the population they belong to. It should be noted here that the category of ‘rural migrants’ ought to be further divided into smaller and more accurate categories according to their status, the kind of jobs they do and the level of prestige attached to their occupations, the nature of their relationship with officials (Solinger, 1997, pp. 98-118), their ‘visibility’ in the city, etc. In most Chinese cities, each category of rural migrants has been subjected to a high and differentiated degree of state intervention — both formal and informal — in spheres of residence, employment, reproductive practices, etc.¹⁷⁵. By “externalizing” migrant workers, the household registration system and the several certificates and permits required surely help implementing highly flexible production regimes or what Robin Cohen called a “labor repressive system”, since it shares with other such systems the “political [and institutional] means used to organize and perpetuate the supply of labor-power” (Cohen, 1988, p. 20).

Before turning to the study of how migrant workers are depicted in the Shenzhen mainstream press, in the next chapter I suggest first to examine how rural to urban migration was problematized in the late 1980s, when the issue started to be debated by the Chinese national media.

¹⁷⁴ Fieldwork notes, Guangzhou, January 2004.

¹⁷⁵ Zhang Li notes that one of the distinctions between migrants and urban residents is the degree of state-intervention in people’s private and public spaces. For instance, she highlights the fact that migrant housing may be the object of unwarranted inspections, while this seldom happens for urban residents. Zhang Li, 2001, pp. 37-38. In 2003, according to Pun Ngai, enterprises had to have workers registered at the Labor Bureau; pay an increased City Capacity Fee and introduce an official demand to City Public Security Bureau and to the local police station to get temporary registration documents issued. They should in addition to this introduce a demand at the District for issuing a temporary residence certificate. Such regulations are often modified Pun Ngai observed. Pun Ngai, 2004, p. 6.



Migrant worker dormitory compound in Shenzhen.

Copyright: Pun Ngai.

Chapter 5: Debates regarding the representation of migrants workers in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. From “mingongchao” to “chunyun”

This chapter is divided in two main parts. In the first part, basing my argument on a close study of daily and weekly press articles, scientific journals, and reportage literature published between 1986 and 1991, I intend to show that, rather than a simple homogenising description of labor migration in terms of social disorder and urban disturbances, there is in fact a struggle taking place around the way such migratory movements are represented, and that this struggle is centred around the contentious relationship between the state and the market economy. This struggle mainly finds expression through a debate over the terms that should be used to describe migrants, and in particular over the expression “blind migrant” (盲流 mangliu). At issue is the very legitimacy of their presence in cities. I will also reflect upon the way in which certain discursive categories, such as “blind migrant”, have developed historically, to argue that they contribute towards defining areas of state intervention (Rose, 1999; Dean, 1999)¹⁷⁶. In the second part, I will look at how new year migration¹⁷⁷ is represented in the Shenzhen mainstream press in the 1990s.

The main reason why I want first to examine the representations related to the “wave of mingong”¹⁷⁸ (民工 mingongchao) in the late 1980s and the early 1990s relates to the fact that it was during this period, marked by a socio-economic and political crisis, that the question of migrant labor began to make its way to the forefront of public debate. While the press in the late 1980s and early 1990s conjured up a sudden and overwhelming rise in the number of migrants, statistical data for that time actually show a very moderate increase.

After considering the extent of the continuity between the way migration was identified as a problem in the 1950s and again in the late 1980s, I will describe the characteristics of this discourse which links spontaneous migration with urban disturbance. I will then shed light on the logic informing the arguments of those writers who present a positive image of labor migration, essentially by associating it with the economic reforms and the market economy.

¹⁷⁶ As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, categorisation as praxis is a struggle “for the monopoly over ways of seeing and understanding, of installing cognition and recognition, of imposing the legitimate definition of the divisions in society, and hence of making and unmaking social groups”, Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 63-72.

¹⁷⁷ By “new year migration” or “spring festival migration” I mean the population movements which take place during the Chinese new year festival, usually from late January to late February.

¹⁷⁸ Mingong (民工), is a contraction of nongmin (农民, peasant) and gongren (工人, worker).

5.1 The context of the debate: social and political crisis

The situation in the late 1980s was one of social crisis coupled with political and ideological tensions at the highest levels of government¹⁷⁹. Since the beginning of the decade, reformists and conservatives had been clashing over the extent of the economic reforms, and more particularly over the role of the market within an economic system that was still largely planned (Fewsmith, 1992, pp. 124-130). As major steps were taken towards deepening the reforms, the ideological tensions between reformists and conservatives increased correspondingly. The former were mostly young economists grouped around Zhao Ziyang, and opposed to them were the Chen Yun faction. From 1985 onwards, the clashes grew fiercer around the issues of growth rates, inflation, price reforms, and the fight against corruption (*Ibid.*). In 1987, the struggle between the Secretary of the Chinese Communist party, Zhao Ziyang, and the Prime Minister, Li Peng, escalated. In May 1987, in a situation of inflation and social dissatisfaction, measures were adopted to accelerate the price reforms, but in September of the same year state control over the economy was strengthened. Towards the end of 1988, conservative influence over economic policy reached its highest degree, and in March 1989 economic policy was reoriented towards giving priority to the development of agriculture and basic industries, at the expense of the rural and manufacturing enterprises. In addition, state control over local affairs was reinforced. In this situation, following the financial constraints imposed by Prime Minister Li Peng, a number of rural enterprises went bankrupt. When the central government imposed an economic slowdown in 1989, a growing number of rural migrants from the countryside headed for the cities, particularly around the New Year period (Béja, 1989, pp. 2, 36-37). Given the heightened social tensions and the large concentrations of migrants drawn to the main urban centres, the consequent reaction was panic in towns and cities, a social panic which the media contributed to generate (Banister, 1997, pp. 72-97)

5.2 From “hooligan” (*liumang*) to “blind migrant” (*mangliu*)

In the late 1980s, the Chinese media were already raising concerns about the “flood of migrants” (民工潮 *mingongchao*) causing disturbances in cities. The term “blind migrant” (盲流

¹⁷⁹ See the summary of the ideological debates related to the reforms in the 1980s by Joseph Fewsmith in Fewsmith, 1992.

mangliu) played a major role in these reports. The term itself is a homophonic inversion of liumang (流氓), a pejorative expression roughly equivalent to “hooligan”. The inverted term consists of two characters: the first, mang (盲), means “blind”, and is itself made up of the character (亡 wang), which in classical Chinese means “disappear” or “lose”, and the character (目 mu) which means “eye”. The second character in the expression is liu (流), meaning “flow” or “float”, as opposed to everything rooted, fixed or stable. The character liu (流) is to be found in a whole series of expressions referring to wandering or migration, all of which are historically associated with disturbances bringing about population displacements (Chen Baoliang, 1993, pp. 2-7, quoted in Dutton, pp. 63-64; Zhang Li, 2001a, pp. 33-34). Liumang (流氓) likewise includes the same character liu (流), combined with mang (氓), which in former times meant “leaving or being forced to leave one’s native land”. Under the Qing dynasty, the term liumang (流氓) acquired the meaning of “hooligan”. So this term, and indirectly its homophonic inversion mangliu (盲流), are loaded with rather heavy symbolic associations.

But I suggest paying attention also to the way in which the term mangliu (盲流) was mobilised in the early years of the communist regime and, more to the point, when the first measures were taken to handle the presence of the peasants in cities, and population mobility in general. Mangliu (盲流) is a term that has become closely linked to official disapproval of migration from the countryside to the cities. At first, in 1950, freedom of movement was guaranteed by Article 5 of the common programme, but on August 3rd 1952 the first official resolution aimed at “dissuading the peasants from entering blindly into the cities” was adopted (Cheng Tiejun, 1991, pp. 70-71, 76). At that time, the logic underlying this position was a deep anxiety about possible social instability in the towns, which was a reaction to movements from the countryside to the main urban centres within a still precarious situation. Cheng Tiejun notes that two threads can be detected running through this document. The first of these is the idea that there is a difference between under-employment in the countryside and in the cities, the latter being the only real under-employment to be avoided. The second is simply typical of the way all governments have understood spontaneous movements by the population: they are blind and need to be controlled.

This first resolution was followed on March 17th 1953 by an official “directive concerning the discouragement of the blind influx of the peasants into towns”, which was published in the *People’s Daily* on the following day by the Premier Zhou Enlai. The reasons were clearly spelt out: “(...) At present, since urban building has hardly started, the demand for labor is limited. Consequently, the arrival of peasants in cities means that the number of unemployed in towns is increasing, which causes administrative problems, while in the countryside the reduced availability of labor means that agricultural work is disrupted, leading to losses in production (...)”. Seven measures were adopted. The authorities at the different levels of the administration were requested to “patiently explain matters to those peasants who wish or intend to move to a town, and to dissuade them from doing so (...) When the time comes for urban construction to seek more workers, the governments of the townships and prefectures will be officially notified, [so that] they can recruit in a planned and organised manner”. They are advised “to show prudence when sending the peasants back, to pay the transport costs of those in difficulty (...) and to provide appropriate aid to those facing immediate constraints”. The last part of the directive concerns recruitment by work units, stipulating that they must communicate their manpower needs to the departments of labor and construction management, in order to receive an organised and planned allocation of labor¹⁸⁰.

A series of articles published in the *People’s Daily* sets out the details of this resolution and comments upon it. These commentaries show a tougher official attitude to unorganised migration, which will dominate the thinking of the urban elite right into the 1980s and 1990s. In fact it was as early as 1953 that expressions such as “blindly leave the countryside” (盲目 mangmu waichu), “blindly penetrate” (盲目流入 mangmu liuru) were repeated in newspaper articles and official documents, becoming associated with peasant mobility and presence in towns. This gave birth to the term “blind migrant” (盲流 mangliu), which can be considered as a contraction of “blindly penetrate” (盲目流入 mangmu liuru). The different levels of the administration were required to show their skill in persuasion by “patiently explaining to any peasants preparing to head for towns, that going blindly into the towns held out no advantages, either for the country or for the peasants themselves, and that they should stay peacefully at

¹⁸⁰ *Renmin ribao*, 17/04/53, “Zhongyang renmin zhengfu zhengwuyuan guanyu quanzhi nongmin mangmu liuru chengshi de zhishi”, p. 1.

home and develop agricultural production”¹⁸¹. It was also from 1953 onwards that the government set out its targets for the first five-year plan (1953-1957) and gradually introduced a system for restricting access to towns. The consequences of the peasants’ moving to towns were listed: increases in excess labor in towns, a decline in social order, negative effects on agricultural production, pressures on urban infrastructure etc. To remedy these problems, within the framework of collectivisation in agriculture, the primary need was defined as “resolving all the problems in peasant thinking (...). Dissuading the peasant from blindly penetrating into towns is not only imperative for the task of raising national consciousness but is also in the true interests of peasants”¹⁸².

As the principal factors affecting mobility (jobs, housing, food supplies) passed under state control, in tandem with the establishment of a national population registration system, the tone of the official directives and other measures dealing with migration from the countryside to the towns, progressively hardened. The “blind” individual interest of the peasants moving to the towns on their own initiative was contrasted with the collective interest represented by industrialisation and collectivised agricultural production. Forced repatriation was added to the tasks of persuading and educating the peasants. In December 1957, a directive laid down that, alongside the tasks of educating the rural masses and organising agricultural production, emphasis should be given to controlling towns through residence permits, establishing reception centres (收容所 *shourongsuo*) there, organising work for the arrested to enable them to pay for their return journey, and effecting their repatriation¹⁸³.

The directive concerning the registration of the population in January 1958 formally abolished the freedom to choose the place of domicile, and getting a permit to migrate from countryside to town became a matter of tortuous procedures which made it extremely difficult¹⁸⁴. This directive was one among many other official documents, which led to setting up a fundamental opposition between rural migration on the one hand and the actions of the state on the other. The former were perceived as non-organised phenomena (无组织 *wu zuzhi*),

¹⁸¹ *Renmin ribao*, 20/04/53, p. 1; See also *Renmin ribao*, 25/04/53, “Nongmin mangmu liuru chengshi yanzhong yingxiang chungeng shengchan”, p. 2; *Renmin ribao*, 15/03/54, “Zhongyang neiwubu he zhongyang laodongbu guanyu jixu guanche ‘quanzhi nongmin mangmu liuru chengshi’ de zhishi”, p. 2.

¹⁸² *Renmin ribao*, 17/12/53, “Jixu quanzhi nongmin mangmu liuru chengshi”, p.2.

¹⁸³ *Renmin ribao*, 19/12/57, “Zhizhi nongcun renkou mangmu wailiu”, p. 1. It should be stressed that throughout the period 1952-1957, the urban population increased significantly. See Cheng Tiejun, 1991, pp. 84-119; Cheng Tiejun and Selden, 1994, pp. 644-668.

¹⁸⁴ “Regulations concerning the registration of households in the People’s Republic of China” January 9th 1958, quoted in Cheng Tiejun, 1991, pp. 403-405. Owing to the famine following the Great Leap Forward, and the difficulties in supplying the towns, this directive only came into force in 1960.

unplanned (无计划 wu jihua), disordered and even irrational—since migrants who blindly left the countryside (盲目外出 mangmu waichu) and plunged equally blindly into cities (盲目涌入 mangmu yongru), were the cause of urban disorders (from security to food supplies),—while the state’s actions restored “strict control” (严格控制 yange kongzhi) over these population flows, by sending migrants back to the countryside, now that their presence in towns had become illegal. Within this logic, sending the peasants back to the countryside was aimed at enabling them to “work peacefully” at their agricultural tasks (安安地务农 an’an de wunong).

After the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and its terrible famine in the early 1960s, spontaneous mobility was virtually halted as the measures aiming at controlling strictly rural-to-urban migration were implemented. Until the early 1980s, organized migration for the sake of industrialization and of strengthening the borders became the main and only legitimate form of migration. The consequences of almost two decades of this closed-city policy upon the rural-urban gap have been dramatic: the disparities in terms of socioeconomic development between cities and the countryside have been multiplied at least by three from 1960 to the late 1970s (Selden, 1988; Lary, 1999; Guo Shutian and Liu Chunbin, 1991; Cheng Tiejun, 1991). The very strong momentum of rural-to-urban migration in post-Mao China and the way it has been problematized in the media have to be set against this background¹⁸⁵.

5.3 Struggles in the late 1980s over the legitimacy of peasant migration

The dominant ways in which migration and migrants themselves were represented in the late 1980s and early 1990s shared a number of similar traits with those of the 1950s. There is the same opposition between spontaneous migration, which were necessarily disorganised, and those planned and organised by the state. Another factor reminiscent of the 1950s is the range of measures stipulated for the incarceration and repatriation of migrants. An article in the journal *Society* in 1990 proposes that the reception centres be expanded, and that labor camps be set up, together with a system of compulsory repayment of the costs of repatriation. It states that in Shanghai:

¹⁸⁵ I am grateful to Thomas Scharping for having drawn my attention to the need to add thi paragraph on the 1960s and 1970s.

“among the population from outside the city are a large number of people belonging to the *mangliu* category who should be arrested and sent to the repatriation centres ” (外来人口中，有相当数量是属于收容遣送的盲流人员。wailai renkou zhong, you xiangdang shuliang shi shuyu shourong qiansong de mangliu renyuan).

To deal with this need to incarcerate more, the Shanghai authorities

“must undertake the renovation and enlargement of the repatriation centres (...). To handle those elements who persist in their errors, but whose criminal behaviour is not sufficient to draw the attention of the police, the policy to be followed must combine education with work provision, investigation and repatriation¹⁸⁶ Thanks to education through labor and a short period of education in the law (lasting three to six months), they must be made to understand the harm caused by their migration, so that they become aware of the error of their ways, amend them, and migrate no more ((...) 应采取边教育，边劳动，边审查，边遣送的工作方针(...) 使其懂得外流的危害，知错改正，不再外流。Ying caiqu bian jiaoyu, bian laodong, bian shencha, bian qiansong de gongzuo fangzhen) (Chai Junyong, 1990, pp. 8-10).

In a number of articles, spontaneous migration to towns are labelled blind for being opposed to the party's policy of controlled migration. Even a publication like *Nongmin Ribao* (*Peasants' Daily*), which has a reputation for defending the peasants' cause, takes up the dominant terminology when it is a matter of setting out a policy for “encouraging the transfer of rural populations to the townships, as well as to the small and medium towns, so as to get control of the blind migration of peasants to towns” (Yang Guangwu, 1987, pp. 40-41). The *Nongmin Ribao* journalists very rarely refer to “blind migration”, and in this particular instance it is used to refer explicitly to illegal peasant movement. From being legal and encouraged when officially directed towards the townships and small and medium towns, peasant migration become “blind” when they clash with the official line.

In describing the “blind migration”, the stress is often placed on their irrational character, and this is linked, among other factors, to the assertion that peasants are *driven* out by poverty, which could lead to an “endless multitude of peasants” arriving in towns (*Ibid.*, pp. 40-41). In most cases, the decision to leave their village is said to be taken lightly by these “blind migrants”, as they are prompted by rumours to make for the towns and try their luck. The poverty of the countryside is invoked to explain the blind irrationality of this behaviour, as well as their unrestrained lust to get money by any available means. The writers of *Mangliu! Mangliu!*, for example, affirm that the teams of migrant workers in the construction industry “operate in a

¹⁸⁶ This was the *sibian* policy, which had been in force since the 1950s. Cheng Tiejun, 1990, pp. 84-102.

totally blind manner. They go where there is work, where there is money to be earned, and money is their only motive. They have no feasibility study [sic] . They have no collective sense, and respond only to their thirst for money ...”. Likewise, their poverty is said to be the reason why they see no point in signing contracts. The same goes for the way the women are exploited in domestic service, for “[if] these people agree to be bossed about, it’s because they are too poor”. The “child laborers” are also “too poor”; they have to rely solely on their physical strength, because “their cultural level is too low” (他们的文化素质太底.. Tamen de wenhua suzhi tai di) This is also why “they accept unequal treatment like cattle, putting up with hard labor and insults” (Dong Jie et al., 1990, pp. 60-62). In many descriptions of the illegal activities of the *mangliu*, their thirst for money is linked to moralistic condemnation, whether it is a question of prostitution, begging, drug trafficking, or other petty crime. Their lust for money is seen as defining them, depriving them of individual will and unfailingly pushing them into illegal acts. That is why a number of newspaper articles and books provide “typical portraits” of people capable of morally reprehensible and sometimes legally punishable behaviour.

It sometimes happens that this irrationality is bolstered by abnormal behaviour, as suggested in the following analogy used to describe migrant women:

“... although their hopes are blind and without guarantee, they still come (...) At first they are like headless flies banging into things at every turn” (尽管这种希望使盲目的，无保证的，但她们还是来了。Jinguan zhe zhong xiwang shi mangmu de, wu baozheng de, dan tamen haishi lai le).

The author then goes on to describe the activities of two *mangliu*:

“These *mangliu* have no need to seek a temporary residence permit, or to worry about where they will spend the night. They possess a great deal of personal freedom and adaptability, enabling them to think of nothing but profit and getting money; they will do anything to put money in their pockets (他们具有极大的自由性和适应性和适应能力，把心都花在怎么样唯利是图，只要能捞钱¹⁸⁷，他们什么都干。Tamen juyou jida de ziyouxing he shiyixing he shiying nengli, ba xin dou hua zai zenmenyang weili shitu, zhi yao neng laoqian, ta shenme dou gan)” (Yang Guangwu, 1987, pp. 40-41).

In another article, the changes experienced by peasants who have moved to towns are compared with the changes experienced by “monkeys who have come down from the trees” (Ba Liang and Ma Lun, 1993, p. 180). In another article, a migrant woman is described as “an innocent goat”,

¹⁸⁷ The basic meaning of *lao* is to pull something out of the water; figuratively it means to get something illegally.

and young women who have left their village are portrayed as “little birds in search of food, far from their ancestral land and their cosy nest” (Liang Yibo, 1992, pp. 14-16). This kind of representation helps to create an image of migrants as fundamentally “other”, in contrast with the citizens who alone have the right qualities and attributes to live legally in a town. A simplifying cause-and-effect relationship linking poverty to migration, apart from contributing to the image of migration as a manifestation of disorder, masks the historically and politically produced polarity of town and countryside. But in fact, studies have shown that migration in China, just as elsewhere in the world, are only rarely undertaken by the poorest and least educate. Moreover, many investigations have established that, even as early as the 1980s, most migrants do not set out on a blind quest but, on the contrary, rely on networks or “chains” of support between their native village and their destination. To explain the causes of migration by reducing them to economic factors alone gives a very partial account of this complex phenomenon.

The fairly frequent recourse to hydraulic metaphors to describe the flow of migrants penetrating into the towns is yet another procedure which contributes towards homogenising and “othering” them. Articles talk endlessly of “floods of migrants” (民工潮 mingongchao), the “flood tide of migrants” (民工大潮 mingong dachao), or “waves of migrants” (民工浪潮 mingong langchao). Other expressions also refer to their large numbers, such as “the immense floating population” (庞大的流动人口 pangda de liudong renkou), the “ceaselessly growing floating population” (不断增加的流动人口 buduan zengjia de liudong renkou), the “huge army of mangliu” (盲流大军 mangliu dajun), the “horde of social burdens” (抱负队伍 baofu duiwu), the “hordes of over ten thousand egg-sellers” (上万人的卖蛋队伍 shangwanren de maidan duiwu), the “great army of millions of mangliu” (百万盲流大军 baiwan mangliu dajun), and the “shock troops of excessive births” (超生游击队 chaosheng youjidui) etc. In most cases such expressions invoke disorder (乱 luan), filth and crime, enabling the emphasis to fall on the sudden, violent and overwhelming character of the migrants’ arrival in towns. Such descriptions reinforce the idea of towns being literally under siege.

The arrival of rural migrants, and their continuing presence in towns, is frequently associated with pressures on urban infrastructures and threats to social order in cities. A front page article in the daily *Guangming Ribao* is a good illustration of this:

“Once the New Year festival is over, masses of migrants from the provinces of Sichuan, Henan, Hubei, Shandong, Shaanxi, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang emigrate. Most of them float blindly on the current, naively believing every rumour (...) The large number of these blind migrants puts enormous pressure on the railways, and causes chaos for the security services. Consequently, this enormous crowd of blind migrants is of no benefit to the country or the people (...) This extraordinarily violent flood of mangliu batters the four corners of Hainan Island like a tidal wave, and disturbs the political and social order of that large Special economic zone (...) 他们大都是轻信传言盲目流动 (...) 大量盲流于国于民都是不利的 (...) 这个迅猛异常的盲流大潮象洪水一样冲击着海南岛的各个角落 (...) Tamen dadou shi qing xin chuan yan mangmu liudong (...) Daliang mangliu yu guo yu min dou shi bu li de (...) Zhe gu xunmeng yichang de mangliu dachao xiang hongshui yi yang chongji zhe Hainan dao de gege jiaoluo (...))¹⁸⁸.

In a great many articles, the various harmful effects of the migrants’ presence are listed, even though the point is often clearly made that it also brings benefits. The pressures on urban infrastructure affect urban planning, transport, housing, markets, security, the environment, hygiene, birth control etc.¹⁸⁹. The need to control, incarcerate, and expel them is generally asserted. Some of these articles are veritable models of how to homogenise, stigmatise and even demonise. An article in *Renkou Dongtai* appearing under the headline: “The influence of the floating populations on city life and environment, and an analysis of its causes”, summons up images of saturation or super-saturation, pollution and destruction. The major damage alleged by the author is the irrational use of urban spaces, due to the fact that migrants live in huts which “ruin the urban landscape and, more importantly, take up large areas (不但影响了市容，更重要的是占用大量的土地 budan yingxiang le shirong, geng zhuyao de shi zhanyong daliang de tudi)”. These take-overs “are an ever-present danger to agricultural production, causing a scarcity of water and other resources” (such as grain, firewood, green spaces). The environment inhabited by the floating population is “polluted and chaotic” permitting “all sorts of contagious diseases to flourish, and causing a rise in infections and mortality”. Moreover, migrants are described as introducing “infectious diseases which are normally rare in towns”. Another charge is added: “The floating population adds to noise pollution in cities” (流动人口加剧了城市的噪音污染.liudong renkou jiaju le chengshi de zoayin wuran) because “one can hear everywhere the cries

¹⁸⁸ *Guangming ribao*, 10/03/1989, “Mangliu a mangliu. Fang Haikou de waidi mingong”, p. 1.

¹⁸⁹ See for example, *Guangming ribao*, 10/03/89, p. 1; *Renmin ribao*, 20/02/89, p. 1; *Renmin ribao*, 22/02/89, p. 1; Yang Guangwu, 1987, pp. 40-41.

of street peddlers, who at different degrees disturb the lives and the calm of the citizenry” (到处可听见外地小贩们的叫声，不同程度地干扰了市民的生活和休息 *dao chu ke ting jian wai di xiao fan men de jia o sheng, butong cheng du de gan rao le shi min de sheng huo he xi u xi*). In addition, “they increase air pollution” because of the extra public transport required, plus that caused by their own vehicles, plus the coal they burn for heating.

The second part of the same article moves on from the sheer size of the floating population to put forward the “cultural” and “moral” reasons which explain why they ruin the urban environment. The writer argues that the floating population

“does not possess the necessary attributes for living in a modern town (...). As for its cultural level, it lacks the public morality and civic qualities that city dwellers must have (...). In short, the problem is that the low cultural level of the floating population leads to chaos in the living spaces of the town and pollutes its environment” (不具有现代城市居民的必备条件(...) 流动人口缺乏城市公民应有的公共道德和文化观念(...) 带来大城市的居住环境混乱，生活环境受到污染 *bu juyou xian dai cheng shi ju min de bi bei tiao jian (...) liu dong ren kou que fa cheng shi gong min ying you de gong gong da o de he wen hua guan nian (...) dai lai da cheng shi de ju zhu huan jing hun luan, sheng huo huan jing shou dao wu ran*).

Finally, once again the migrants’ short-term behaviour and exclusive focus on money is described as a defining characteristic. The writer concludes with his solution to these problems, that control and education are needed for “people who blindly penetrate into cities” (Li Ting, 1990, pp. 26-28). These articles put most of the responsibility for the problems they raise onto the shoulders of migrants themselves, blaming their attitudes, mentality, morality, and poor education. What we find in fact is an essentialising process, through which the origins of the problems are found to lie in the culture of the individuals concerned (Zhang Li, 2001b, pp. 201-224).

As was highlighted in our review of scholarly works on discourse about migration in China, Zhang Li argued that there are three principal modes of representing migrants firstly as unifying and homogenising, secondly as dehistoricising and dehumanising, and thirdly as abnormalising (*Ibid.*, pp. 31-33). On the whole I would agree with this typology. However, some writers do criticise these ways of misrepresenting them, by introducing historical and political perspectives into their analyses, as well as structural approaches, in an attempt to bring out the specificity of the path followed by each individual migrant. The latter is no longer seen as simply merged into a mass, fleeing from poverty and frantically scrambling for money.

5.4 Migration and the reforms

A number of writers criticise the way migration is linked with disturbances, and the use of the label “blind migrants” (盲流 mangliu). Their prime point is to insist on a difference between contemporary and past migration, the latter being synonymous with unrest¹⁹⁰. They establish this difference by linking modern mobility with the economic reforms and the shift to a market economy. This association between mobility and economic reforms allows them to dismiss the usefulness of the term “blind migrants”¹⁹¹. These writers argue for the adoption of “new solutions for new problems”, meaning the need to guide and direct instead of obstructing and expelling. This is a very important point. They attack the use of terms like mangliu because they recognise and emphasise that it is linked to the practices of incarceration and expulsion, which they consider indiscriminate¹⁹². As one writer explains: “For the last month or two, the phenomenon of peasants trapped in several towns has appeared. All of a sudden, rural laborers have become “burdens” and mangliu. (...) Is this a fair judgement?” In the next paragraph he lists the benefits brought by the mobile rural labor force. He goes on to admit that there is inevitably a “blind” element in this mobility, but he affirms that in general it shows a certain regularity, and that consequently one cannot call the body of migrant peasants mangliu. He distinguishes present day migration from those of the past, because “their mobility is an economic activity within the framework of the market economy”. He acknowledges that the presence of migrants in the town poses certain problems, and that some measures need to be taken. Nonetheless, he continues, it is not right to “flush them all out of town”¹⁹³. The refusal to use the term mangliu to describe migrants is linked to questioning the way migration is explained solely in terms of poverty and a single-minded pursuit of profits. The explanation becomes more complex when structural, historical and psychological factors are taken into account. The writer of an article published in the journal *Society* in 1991 highlights “the rather frequent but mistaken outlook involved in discussing the question of the mingongchao: the very term mingongchao is the equivalent of mangliu, and mangliu means disaster”. As for the motives behind migration, he puts forward a desire, not only for a higher income but “to see the world”. He cautions against a simplistic causal link between demographic pressure and migration, criticising superficial analyses

¹⁹⁰ On the association of migrations with disturbances in Chinese history, see Zhang Li, 2001, pp. 33-34.

¹⁹¹ See for example *Renmin ribao*, 25/03/89, p. 5: “The sudden influx of peasant workers has uncovered deep contradictions in our system for directing the labor force, but it is not like the waves of *mangliu* in the past; it possesses clear characteristics of the market economy in its developmental phase”.

¹⁹² See See Dong Jie et al., 1990, pp. 178-179; Zheng Nian, 1991, pp. 86-87; *Renmin ribao*, 22/03/89, p. 2; *Renmin ribao*, 13/04/89, p. 5.

¹⁹³ *Renmin ribao*, 25/03/89, p. 2.

which take only demographic pressure and economic recession into account. He concludes that this leads to the view that “unemployed peasants have become an unorganised force attacking the medium-sized towns and coastal cities, that is to say, the mangliu on everybody’s lips”. Actually, migration should be explained by the dual structure of society and the economy, and by the disparities between town and country. He argues that the thesis which equates the mingongchao with blind migration and chaos is “clearly a reflection of urban value judgements”, and these ought to be seen “in direct relationship with the policy which, up until the present, has favoured the towns and heavy industry” (Miao Guangzong, 1991, pp. 8-10). So there are indeed some writers who, rather than setting up a direct causal link between the essential characteristics of migrants and the problems facing cities, draw attention to the historical and political dimensions in order to explain contemporary labor mobility and the problems encountered by the towns (*Ibid.*, p. 8; Dong Jie et al., 1991, pp. 160-181; Guo Shutian and Liu Chunbin, 1991, pp. 5-14; Cheng Ke, 1990, pp. 18-20). Their criticism is directed principally at the residency permit system and the dual structure of Chinese society.

Let us return briefly to the discussions which associate the economic reforms with the market economy on the one hand, and migratory movements on the other. These discussions take place within the wider framework of the debates between reformists and conservatives over the economic reforms and opening up to the outer world. After September 1987, readjustment measures were introduced to put a brake on the economic reforms, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s the clash between reformists and conservatives over the extent of the reforms already undertaken, was particularly acute. I would like to emphasise the similarity in the terms used by the defenders of the need to strengthen macro-economic controls over the Chinese economy and those deployed by writers describing “blind migration”, which likewise are said to need control through state intervention. Indeed, for certain conservative officials, “if prices were controlled spontaneously through the market”, it follows that “economic development would be blind”. Only long-term planning could avoid such chaos and loss of authority (Fewsmith, 1992, p. 94)¹⁹⁴. For Chen Yun, planning represents order and rationality, while the market is synonymous with blindness. He distinguishes between “the guidance provided by planning” and the rules of the market, which “allow the blind forces of supply and demand to determine production” (*Ibid.*, p. 170).

In articles dealing with labor migration, certain expressions can also be found which explicitly invoke measures to slow down and control economic growth. For example the reader is told that one of the causes for the big influx of migrants into towns in 1989 was the recession

¹⁹⁴ Sometimes references are made to the disorders of the Great Leap Forward, whenever the emphasis falls on the “blind” aspects of socio-economic development, see *ibid.*, p. 95.

caused by the measures of rectification (整顿 zhengdun) and adjustment (调整 tiaozheng), particularly in the rural enterprises. In a work published by journalists from the People's Daily, the policy of "cleansing" (清理 qingli) the towns was openly criticised, and the contradictions were laid bare between the rectification (整顿 zhengdun) measures imposed in cities and the policy of exporting rural manpower adopted by certain provinces. The writers explain that at the height of the cleansing campaign in the towns, party officials in Sichuan province gave orders to continue the exportation of rural manpower, and even attempted to find new outlets for it (Ge and Qu, 1990, pp. 171-175).

To affirm a close connection between mobility and the market economy through a narrowly economist discourse, also means to endow that mobility with a rationale which conflicts with the definition of migration as a blind and irrational phenomenon. From being a manifestation of blind irrationality, migration suddenly becomes

“the unavoidable outcome of the reforms and opening up (...), the inevitable product of the development of a socialist market economy (...), the inevitable historical product of socialist modernisation and urbanisation (改革开放的必然结果 (...) 是社会主义商品经济发展的必然结果 (...) 是我国社会主义现代化、城市化必然产生的历史现象. Gaige kaifang de biran jieguo (...) shi shehuizhuyi shangpin jingji fazhan de biran jieguo (...) shi woguo shehuizhuyi xiandaihua, chengshihua biran chansheng de lishi xianxiang)” (Cheng Ke, 1990, pp. 18-19).

Several writers appropriate the metaphor of the tide used by the detractors of migration and reverse its meaning: from being a force that sows disorder in society, it becomes a force for transformation, enabling the renewal of creative vitality. According to the *People's Daily*, “the wave of peasant workers waxes and wanes according to the rhythms of growth (...); in that respect it clearly displays the characteristics of the market economy in its developmental phase”. This wave may nonetheless contain a potential threat to the townsfolk insofar as it calls the urban *status quo* into question, especially with regard to the availability of urban services¹⁹⁵.

A particularly vivid illustration of this calling into question is provided in the following extract from an article headed “The shockwave shaking our town walls”. Referring to the stagnation in agricultural production, the author writes:

¹⁹⁵ *Renmin ribao*, 13/04/89, p. 5.

“People have finally understood. It is not because there is a lack of manpower in the countryside, but rather because there is no competition and no mobility, that eight hundred million peasants are tied hand and foot to a limited area of arable land, like creepers around an old tree. Their intelligence and skills have been stifled, their vitality has declined, and society has lost its energy. (...) The wave of goods produced for the market has hit the old villages and their dying fields. Millions upon millions of surplus laborers have joined this unstoppable tidal wave. The floodgates have been smashed, and the spirit of individual initiative and creativity, repressed for so long, is suddenly bursting out. The peasants have plunged in headlong, wherever they see a chance to earn a living and develop their skills, without bothering first to wash the mud off their faces or the cow dung off their feet (...). Feeling the shock of this wave, the town dweller, sitting comfortably in his solid armchair and eating from the state-provided “big pot”, has begun to experience the crisis for himself, and the consequent need to lift the curtains and slowly let in the reforms” (... 人的才智被窒息，生命力在萎缩，社会失去了活力 (...) 千千万万的剩余劳动力卷进了不可逆阻的汹涌浪潮中去。闸门被攻破了，被压抑多年的积极性和创造性奔腾而 (...) ren de caizhi bei zhixi, shengmingli zai weisuo, shehui shiqu le huoli (...) qian qian wan wan de shengyu laodongli quanjin le bu ke nizu de xiongyong langchao zhong qu (...) Zhamen bei gongpo le, bei yayi duo nian de jijixing he chuangzaoxing ben teng er chu)¹⁹⁶.

Here the economics of the market are presented as positive forces for change¹⁹⁷, for the peasants have been awoken by the market economy:

“ (...) at present the ideas of the market economy are besieging the whole country, and it is as though many people are suddenly realising that the outside world is full of wonders” (Dong Jie et al., 1990, p. 4).

Whereas those publications that represent the peasant migration as the source of disorder call for the control, incarceration and eventual expulsion of the “blind migrants”, those that associate migration with the reforms sometimes call the social hierarchy itself into question. For them, it is the “old and rigid” urban planning system, and the dual structure of society with its residence permits, which need to be reformed. Responsibility for the current situation is turned on its head. It is no longer migrants who are responsible for urban disturbances, but the failure of the state to plan and manage a proper labor market and to provide adequate services to migrants in towns (Ding Xiuyun, 1986, pp. 16-20 Chai Junyong, 1990, pp. 8-12; Wang Shuxin and Feng Litian, 1986, pp. 5-11; Li Menbai, 1990, pp. 28-30). This revelation of the state’s responsibility allows some of these writers to broach the question of migrants’ rights in cities, and to claim on

¹⁹⁶ *Nongmin ribao*, 30/12/88, “Zhenhan qiangbi de chongjibo”, p. 1; See also Yang Shen, 1993, pp. 104-107: “The walls separating town and countryside have begun to crumble under the shocks of the tidal wave of the *mingong* and the reforms. As the reforms continue, the days of this wall are numbered”. Dorothy Solinger emphasises that by their very association with marketisation, the rural migrants symbolise a threat to the urban status quo, see Solinger, 1999, pp. 56-100.

¹⁹⁷ See in particular *Nongmin ribao*, 24/06/86, p. 3; Dong Jie et al., 1990, pp. 4, 189; *Renmin ribao*, 13/04/89, p. 1.

their behalf the right to certain resources and services. Thus, in a major study of the floating populations, Li Mengbai makes a strong case: “We must immediately adopt a welcoming attitude towards them, actively provide them with the conditions and services needed to support their legitimate activities, and recognise their rights and duties without discrimination equal to those of other inhabitants of the towns” (Li Mengbai, 1990, pp. 28-30). Another writer argues that it is the mindset from the past which must be changed: “... we cannot go on refusing equal rights to the peasants. They must be able to participate in the modernisation process, and therefore enjoy its benefits (...). Seen objectively, the emergence of the mingongchao is a challenge to the urban protectionism concealed within our approach to development”. This writer also considers that towns must increase their ability to welcome migrants (Miao Guangzong, 1991, p. 9).

5.5 From undifferentiated masses to individual itineraries

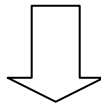
In 1990, two journalists from the *People's Daily* published an investigative work in which the question of migrants' rights was central. In this work, the writers reverse the alleged causal relationship between the presence of migrants and urban disturbances. If migrants were to leave the towns, they write, it is the normal urban functions which would be disturbed, putting an end to the towns' prosperity (Ge and Qu, 1990, p. 11). They also insist on the need to focus on individual paths so as to demonstrate that the mangliu category may not be used indifferently. This is not the only work to emphasise the migrants' individual itineraries, but all too often, when the homogenising and undifferentiated register of representations is left behind in favour of describing such individually chosen itineraries, the latter end up as deviations from the norm, which merely reconfirms the dominant representation. These two authors have opted to describe those who fail but who do not necessarily fall into the category of mangliu or criminals. For instance, writing about a young woman from Sichuan who refuses to work as a prostitute, despite having failed several times in previous jobs, they point out that “although she is among the migrant workers who have failed, she cannot in any sense be labelled a mangliu”. Their individual subjects display a personal will, they have a name, and they are active subjects. The writers make clear that many individuals who might appear to be mangliu but are in fact not, are women. Instead of despising them and rejecting them by calling them mangliu, local governments ought to be helping them and giving them support (*Ibid.*, pp. 12-15, 21).

In sum, peasant migration and the presence of migrants in towns are problematised in different ways, according to the writer's central tenets, i.e. whether he holds onto the state as the

guarantor of order and the *status quo* on the one hand, or the market and the economic reforms on the other. Depending on whether one or the other of these positions occupies the centre of the argument, the series of oppositions which it generates produce very different images of the migrant and migratory movements. It is tempting to reduce these oppositions, such as order/disorder, stability/instability, lack of civic sense/qualities of the modern town dweller, to the fundamental issue of the legitimacy or the partial and highly circumscribed legitimacy, of the migrants' presence in the towns. In the first case, migrants are described primarily in terms of what they lack (Laclau, 1990, pp. 16-23), in an essentially negative manner. Whatever positive qualities might characterise both migrants and migratory movements are negated in the face of those represented by the legitimate town dweller. By way of contrast, when migration is associated with the reforms and the market economy, they become synonymous with dynamism, openness, and innovation, in opposition to the system of central planning, which is then seen as symbolising rigidity, stagnation and archaic structures. Therefore, these two contrasting constructions of migration can be summarized as such (see following page please) :

Axis (nodal point)= State, planned economy (status quo)

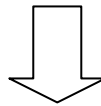
Migration	= disorder, perturbation	V	order
	= instability	V	stability
	= dirt	V	cleanliness
	= avidity	V	state's impoverishment
	= irrationality/spontaneity	V	rationality/planning
	= lack of civility	V	attributes of urban dweller



Presence of migrants = illegitimate

Axis (nodal point)= reform and commodity economy

Migration	= flexibility	V	rigidity, apathy
	= dynamism	V	lack of vitality, stagnation
	= infinite space	V	closed space
	= novelty	V	archaism



Presence of migrants = legitimate

Now that the late 1980s ways of depicting the New year migration in several mainstream press, reportage literature as well as some scientific publications has been examined, in the second part of this chapter I turn to an analysis of how these population movements are described in the Shenzhen mainstream press in the mid and late 1990s.

5.6 Representations of new year migration in the Shenzhen mainstream press: unstable normalization

Interestingly, I could not find articles on the new year population movements in the Shenzhen mainstream press for the 1989-1990 period. I did find three such articles in the *Nanfang Ribao* of 1989 and three more for 1990. These articles are quite similar to the ones of the same period found in other newspapers such as those that were analyzed in the preceding chapter. We find a similar stress on masses of migrants that are pouring blindly into Guangdong province. These masses have no voice of their own, they are objects to be controlled strictly and guided. Competent organs are described as having to take measures to either prevent them from entering blindly into Southern cities or to convince them to go back to do agricultural tasks. The similarity is also strong with those depictions of migration flows and state measures to control these flows in the 1950s. Similarly to the 1950s, peasants who have decided to leave their village for cities are described as influencing the agricultural production. As for those who are “stagnating”, they ought to be convinced and educated so that they get back to their hometown.

Through these texts, one may see the mouthpiece function of the mainstream press. These articles are carrying the official policy at the provincial level, i.e. controlling strictly those migrants who are trying to enter the province and its cities, guiding back home those who have entered, forbidding the recruitment of new laborers during the period of the new year, etc¹⁹⁸. Similarly to many of the 1989-1990 articles described above, one can see how migration is thought from the official standpoint as a phenomenon that needs to be organized and planned. We can observe the recurrence of terms such as “controlling”, “guiding”, “educating”. The hereafter table gives us a snapshot of these depictions as well as of the kind of terms being used (see the next two pages please).

¹⁹⁸ On the contradictions between the policies designed by the provincial authorities and their implementation at the local level, see Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998. She has shown for instance how directives that forbade the employment of people from outside Guangdong province were being circumvented by companies, sometimes with the implicit complicity of local authorities. She showed administrations at different levels could bear contradictory interests as to the effective implementation of state policies. It is interesting to note that despite the measures aimed at limiting the scope of economic growth, rural to urban migration went on apace in Guangdong province.

Table 5.1 : 1989-1990 *NFRB* Spring festival migration articles : illustrations of the mouthpiece function of the mainstream press.

Art. ref.	Title	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese	Categories
NFRB, 25/02/89, 1	<p>外来人员纷纷返乡，珠海东莞积极疏导</p> <p>The people from outside are going back to the countryside in numbers, Zhuhai and Dongguan cities are guiding them actively.</p>	<p>“The government of the city of Zhuhai and Dongguan have taken active measures in order to guide the people from outside and have required from all departments from companies to do the hiring and management work strictly”.</p>	<p>珠海市和东莞市政府采取积极措施疏导外来人员，要求企业各部门严格招工管理工作。</p>	<p>外来人员</p> <p>People from outside</p>
NFRB, 25/02/89, 1	<p>做好外来人员疏导工作，尽快恢复社会正常秩序</p> <p>To do properly the guiding tasks, in order to quickly recover the normal social order.</p>	<p>“Great numbers of people from outside are pouring into Guangdong province, there are still tens of thousands of them who are on their way to the province”.</p> <p>“As they are penetrating in great number in Guangdong province, not only are they leaving their agricultural tasks and influencing the spring agricultural harvest and production, but they are also causing a series of problems to the tasks of labor management, transportation, social order, hygiene and health”.</p>	<p>大量外来人员涌进我省，还有成千上万的外来人员在赴粤途中。</p> <p>他们大量涌进广东，不仅丢开农活，影响了家乡的春耕生产而且给我省的劳动管理交通运输，社会治安，卫生防疫工作带来一系列问题。</p>	<p>大量外来人</p> <p>Great numbers of people from outside</p>

Art. ref.	Title	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese	Categories
NFRB, 06/03/89, 1	<p>国务院办公厅紧急通知各地严格控制民工盲目外出</p> <p>The State Council Bureau has informed urgently all areas to control strictly peasant workers who are leaving blindly.</p>	<p>“Great numbers of mingong have poured into these areas and have caused chaos in local society”.</p> <p>“All People’s government are controlling strictly peasant workers who are leaving blindly, as for those peasant workers who are stagnating in Guangzhou and other areas without job, the Civil affairs and Police departments need to carry out the tasks of sending them back to the countryside”.</p>	<p>大量民工涌入这些地区，也给当地社会治安造成了混乱。</p> <p>各级人民政府严格控制民工盲目外出，对滞留在广州等地的无工作的民工，民政和公安部门要负责做好他们的返乡工作。</p>	<p>民工, 无工作的民工</p> <p>务工的民工</p> <p>Mingong those peasant workers who do not have a job those peasant workers who are working</p>
NFRB, 08/02/90, 1.	<p>劝导外省来粤民工返回原籍</p> <p>Convince the peasant workers from other provinces to go back to their region of origin.</p>	<p>“The Guangdong province Labor Bureau required from all labor departments to carry out well the tasks, to convince those peasant workers from outside provinces who are coming to Guangdong to go back quickly to their area of origin (...) to take part to the agricultural construction”.</p>	<p>省劳动局要求各市劳动部门做好工作，劝导外省来粤民工迅速返回原籍 (...)参加家乡生产建设。</p>	<p>外省来粤的民工</p> <p>民工</p> <p>Those peasant workers who are coming to Guangdong Mingong</p>

When we look at the representation of the new year migration in 1994, 1998 and 1999, the number of articles depicting new year migration has increased: from only six articles for 1989 and 1990, 19 articles were found for 1994, 23 for 1998 and only 6 for 1999. We find also that the whole phenomena has been de-dramatized and partly normalized. I use the term “partly” here since I will show that the whole problematization of migration as mainly causing trouble and as something that needs to be ordered is far from having lost its currency. It is still in use to characterize those whose presence is deemed illegitimate or in contradiction with official policy. From 1994 on, a much clearer distinction is drawn between, on the one hand legitimate migrants, i.e. those who already have a legal occupation and who once they have arrived in Guangdong go straight to their company, and on the other hand those who are looking for a job and are wandering, or “stagnating” to use the official vocabulary, in the public space. The terms used to describe new year migration has also changed from 1994 on: mingongchao (民工潮) is used less often while the term chunyun (春运), i.e. the “spring transportation” or “spring transfer” gained has become widely used. This latter term is not as heavily connoted as mingongchao. Along with chunyun, one finds terms such as “peasant workers” (民工 mingong), “people from outside” (外来人口 wailai renkou), “migrant workers” (打工者 dagonzhe) as well as more general terms such as “travellers” (lüke 旅客 and keliu 客流), “people” (人们 renmen), “young people” (青年 qingnian), “young man” or “young woman” (女青年 nü qingnian and 男青年 nan qingnian)¹⁹⁹. In these articles, it seems that the new year migration is considered something important because of the volume of people concerned, but at the same time it is depicted as an ordinary phenomenon that needs to be managed.

In comparison with 1989-1990, the way migrants are represented has changed too. The depictions of voiceless masses of people that are flooding into Guangdong province has given way to descriptions of smaller groups of people who are often interviewed by journalists. This change in depiction of new year population movements are also reflected in pictures of migrant workers. There is a tendency to use more pictures of small groups of people rather than of masses of people. It is in the Pearl River Delta media that this change has been most obvious²⁰⁰. The two

¹⁹⁹ As a social phenomenon, the “chunyun” population movements do not only concern rural migrants who are coming to Guangdong for work, but also other categories of people. This being said, the vast majority of people concerned by spring festival migration are people from the countryside.

²⁰⁰ The Beijing written press too changed the way it depicted migrant workers, but it did so later than the Pearl River Delta press.

hereafter photographs illustrate this change from masses of people towards small groups of smiling people:



Source : *Yangcheng Wanbao*, 03/05/94, p. 3.



Source: *SWB*, 18/01/98, p. 1.

Articles from 1994 and 1998-1999 on the new year migration may be divided into two main types: those that describe how the flows of people are managed on the one hand, and those that focus on those migrant workers who have decided not to go back home for the new year period.

5.6.1 *New year migration: exemplary official management and exemplary companies*

From 1994 on, the focus of most articles is on the capacity of officials to organize and manage the flow of people. The efforts of different departments in managing the incoming population are emphasized at length. The variety of measures designed and implemented by city officials such as those that aim at preventing migrants from entering in Guangdong and which are taken in accordance with the provinces of origin, or measures that require from companies not to hire people from outside Guangdong province are detailed²⁰¹. Other similar article focus on efforts by the railway administration to guide and spread the flows of migrants towards different railways and bus stations. They also explain measures such as increasing the number of trains, including using trains ordinarily used for goods, or other measures such as selling train tickets earlier so as to avoid the heaviest periods of traffic. Other types of measures described include the logistics at railway stations that aim at providing people with water and food:

“After the Spring festival, the mingong who are heading South have arrived suddenly. From the 17th of this month, 190.000 passengers go through Guangzhou train station every day. In order to disperse the passengers that are pouring in from all over the country, the employees of competent organs at the municipal and provincial levels, as well as employees from the transportation system have all entered into a even more difficult second battle of the Spring festival transportation (...) wagons that offer food have been added to provide hot water and the lunch-boxes that the peasant workers love, so that at least they may eat and drink water. The Guangzhou train station, in addition to suppressing all its employees’ holidays, has established medical brigades that are providing services to peasant workers. The train network has also been enlarged, 32 trains for transportation of goods have been used to transport peasant workers” (春运段增加餐车供应品种，备足开水和民工喜爱的盒饭，尽量让民工能吃上饭喝上水果 (...)) Keyun duan

²⁰¹ See for instance *NFRB*, 12/02/93, “Nanxia mingongchao jianqu pingwen”, p. 1 ; *NFRB*, 16/01/94, “Rang mingong pingan fanxiang guo chunjie”, p. 6.

zengjia canche gongying pinzhong, zubei kaishui he mingong xi'ai de hefan, jinguan rang mingong neng chi shang fan he shang shuiguo (...)202.

Interestingly, two photographs and a short legend are set on the left of the above-quoted article. The upper photograph shows migrants who are cramped and have just come out of carriages usually used for the transportation of goods, while the picture below shows two lines of buses that are waiting for passengers. The legend that goes with these pictures highlights the efficiency of the competent authorities to channel the peasant workers to their destination:

“A train has just arrived, 5,000 peasant workers have poured out of the train station like a wave (see vertical picture). In less than 40 minutes, all peasant workers who were standing in front of the station had been sent to their destination. Later, the long “dragon bus” was being formed, waiting for another train to arrive”.

The meaning conveyed by this text and corresponding pictures is worth stressing: between the two pictures, i.e. between the arrival of masses of peasant workers and their effective transfer, the competent state organs have intervened successfully. One could go further to suggest that the competent Guangzhou railway train station organs have allowed to transform disorder into order.



Source: NFRB, 22/02/94, “Mingong xiongyong nanxia, shuyun jingjing you tiao”, p. 1.

202 NFRB, 22/02/94, “Mingong xiongyong nanxia, shuyun jingjing you tiao”, p. 1; see also NFRB, 27/01/94, “Chunyun chaoyong qichezhan”, p. 1.

In other instances, it is the example of local governments that is highlighted. One such striking example is that of the Buji township government in Longgang district that has been collaborating with local factories and transportation companies to organize the transportation of 160.000 migrant workers. It is explained that from 1984 on, the Buji township got in touch every year with transportation companies both within and outside Guangdong province “in order to transfer in an orderly and planned manner the workers who are working in Buji township so that they can spend the New year at home. Once the New year celebrations are over, special buses are sent at precise time and places to bring workers back to Buji” (从 1984 某种程度上年开始，布吉镇每年都从省内省外联系大批客车，有组织有计划地运送在布吉打工的工人返送过年，待过完节，又派专车定时定点将工人接回布吉。 Cong 1984 nian kaishi, Buji zhen mei nian dou cong shengnei shengwai lianxi dapi keche, you zuzhi you jihua de yunsong zai Buji dagong de gongren fansong guonian,dai guo wan jie, you pai zhuanche ba dingshi dingdian jiang gongren jie hui Buji”). The overall cost of sending home and bringing workers back to Buji amounted to 10 million yuan and has involved more than one thousand buses. From November 1993 on, a special leading group was appointed to work in collaboration with 1.200 industrial companies located in Buji township in order to prepare this transfer of migrant workers. This leading group also helped those 3.800 migrant workers who lived far away to buy train tickets in advance and it also transported them to Guangzhou train station. The article ends with a female migrant workers saying:

“In our factory, salaries are high, welfare benefits are good, each year buses take us home and bring us back once the New year is over, all this makes it that our folks at home envy us a lot” (... 每年都派车送我们回家，过完年又从家；门口接我们回厂，令乡亲们好羡慕啊(...) Mei nian dou pai che song women huijia, guo wan nian you cong jia mengkou jie women hui chang, ling xiang qinmen hao xianmu a)²⁰³.

In this as in several other similar articles, migrant workers go straight from their factory to their hometown and then get back to their factory. Contrarily to “blind migrants” (盲流 mangliu), they do not wander in public space, near train or bus stations. Let us note here that the situation that is described is one of “organized and planned” transfer of population. Let us observe too that the local authorities display an exemplary attitude in this article since they collaborate with both

²⁰³ STQB, 02/02/94, “Fumu guan guanhui dagongzai, zhuanche huansong guo chunjie”, p. 2.

transport companies and with the industrial companies and they show a high degree of care for migrant workers as the title of the article makes clear:

“Parents-like official are taking care of migrant workers as they take them home with a special bus to spend the New year” (父母官关怀打工仔 专车欢送过春节 Fumu guan guanhuai dagongzai, zhuanche huansong guo chunjie).

The spirit of care, the sense of responsibility and of sacrifice of local officials is stressed further in a January 1998 article that focuses on population flows caused by heavy snow in the North of Hunan province. Facing a sudden increase in the number of people staying in Guangzhou train station because of the delayed departure of trains heading to Hunan, more than 1.400 police and Guangzhou train station employees are working in order to manage population flows and “guide passengers” (疏导旅客 shudao lüke). It is explained that although the number of people arriving at the station every day amounts to more than 90.000, “as the Guangzhou train station was well prepared, it was still able to face this situation and make so that the transfer of passengers remain rather orderly” (有备而战的广州火车站还是能应付, 旅客运输比较有序 you bei er zhan de Guangzhou huochezhan haishi neng yingfu, lüke yunshu bijiao youxu). The train station and police officials do all they can to serve and inform passengers, it is added:

“Not only the ladies selling tickets, or the train station personal, but even the police officials and the armed police, all of them worked ever so hard to the point of being exhausted. But a kind of powerful sense of responsibility urged them to hold on again and again” (不管是售票小姐还是客运人员, 甚至公安, 武警超负荷得劳作, 已令他们疲类不堪, 但一种强烈的工作责任感又驱使他们坚持再坚持. buguan shi shoupiiao xiaojie haishi keyun ren yuan, shenzhi gong'an, wujing chao fuhe de laozuo, yi ling tamen pilei bu shen, dan yizhong qianlie de gongzuo zerengan you qushi tamen jianchi zai jianchi)²⁰⁴.

The head of the Guangzhou train station explained that “even though one was so tired as to faint, one had to hold on and transfer all passengers”. In the end, a peasant worker expressed his gratefulness to the train station employees for their wholehearted service:

“The bad weather has prevented us from leaving, we have to stand this. But the railway personal have not only comforted us, they have also brought steamed bread and water to us. This made us feel really relieved”.

²⁰⁴ *STQB*, 27/01/98, “Chyun cike zui qingji”, p. 18; see also *SWB*, 23/02/94, “Guangzhou huochezhan caifang zhaji”, p. 3.

This text offers a nice illustration of the overall emphasis of most of the texts that deal with New Year population movements within the Shenzhen mainstream press²⁰⁵ and that focus mainly on the capacity of local authorities to *manage the flows quickly* and in *an orderly manner*. The stress is not so much on the trouble caused by these populations flows, except when they concern people who contravene the official regulations.

5.6.2 *Staying in Shenzhen for the New Year*

A number of other articles do not focus directly on the management of population flows, but rather on those migrant workers who have decided not to go back home for the New year. Such articles also exhort migrants not to go back. The overall meaning conveyed by such texts is that those who are not going back, even though they are not able to gather with their folks, will still feel as if they had gone back thanks to the family feelings that are nurtured in their companies. The articles that focus on migrant workers spending the New year within their factories are presenting model factories that care for their workers. Basically, we find the same kind of meanings being conveyed in these texts as within those which deal with the protection of migrant workers' rights or with right abuses, i.e. these factories consider their workers as members of a family and if this is so, the success of the company is guaranteed. The idea that is repeated in these articles is that as migrant workers have been working so hard for the whole year, they deserve to spend a nice Spring festival in Shenzhen and therefore the companies organize Spring festival meals and activities in collaboration with city, party and trade union organs. In one article for instance, the types of activities comprising meals, movies, outings in parks, etc. are described. A migrant worker was asked whether he was not home sick as he was staying far from home. He replied:

“Since 1986, I have spent 6 New year festivals in Jinghua company. Year by year, the New year activities are getting better and better (...) At home one could not imagine so many people eating such a New Year meal, it would even be harder to think of enjoying such a 16 dishes and one soup meal” ((...) 在老家不可能有这么多人吃团年饭，更不可能享受这 16 次个菜 1 汤的待遇 (...) Zai laojia bu keneng you zheme duo de ren chi tuan nian fan, geng bu keneng xiangshou zhe 16 ge cai 1 tang de daiyu)²⁰⁶.

²⁰⁵ This is true too as we have seen for texts from the Guangdong province official newspaper *Nanfang ribao*.

²⁰⁶ *SFRB*, 01/03/94, « 'Jinghua', dagongzai wenuan de jia », p. 2.

This exemplary company is then compared to the minority of companies that abuse migrant workers' rights. Eventually, the wish is expressed that "more companies in Shenzhen will become the home of migrant workers"²⁰⁷. While no explicit mention is made in this article of the role of party organs in organizing these activities within companies, it is made clear elsewhere that these New year activities are initiated and backed by party organs. For instance, in a short January 1994 article, 2,600 out of 3,000 workers of an electronics company are staying within the factory during the New year festival. The party secretary of this company explains that during this period "one needs to let these workers who have been working so hard on the production line during the whole year have really good fun" (要让这些流水线上辛勤柜子了一年的工人们痛痛快快地玩一玩.Yao rang zhexie zai liushuixian xinqin guizi le yi nian de gongrenmen tong tong kuai kuai de wan yi wan). For this company, it is explained, it is important that workers enjoy Spring festival activities. The company has therefore asked the local trade union to "organize the life of workers during this period so that they can spend a happy Spring festival within the great family that the company is". Asked why she had not gone back home while she was allowed to do so, a female migrant worker replied: "We do have days off to go back see our folks. But this is a very busy period for our company. We will go back once the New year period is over"²⁰⁸. Two meanings found in other similar texts are conveyed here. Firstly, the company or the factory is like a big family and it is working hand in hand with the party or with the trade union to create such a climate. Both the factory management and the party are caring towards migrant workers. Secondly, since they are treated with such attention, workers decide not to go back and to consider the interest of the company as more important than their own individual wish to go back to visit their families for the new year festival²⁰⁹.

As it is explained in a February 1998 article, a whole range of new year activities actually belong to the category of "Shenzhen is my home" (深圳是我家. Shenzhen shi wo jia). The New year activities ranged under the heading "Shenzhen is my home" were initiated, it is explained, in 1994. These activities that aim at fostering a sense of belonging to one community that can unite both Shenzhen permanent residents and migrant workers are backed by the Shenzhen government and by the Shenzhen Party Committee. The activities also aim at fostering the idea that "Shenzhen is a beautiful garden" that belongs to anyone who has offered some contribution

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* On the same page one finds an article and a couple of photographs that deal with the sanwu people who need to be cleared away. Hence, the hardworking and deserving migrant workers who enjoy the benevolence of their companies stand on the same page as those whose presence in Shenzhen is illegitimate.

²⁰⁸ *JWB*, 10/02/94, "San qian yuangong huan huan xi xi guo xin nian", p. 3.

²⁰⁹ See *JWB*, 13/02/94, "Shenzhen xuyao women", p. 3. for a similar line of argument. Note the title of this article: "Shenzhen needs us!".

to it” (深圳是一个美丽的家园，属于为深圳建设作出贡献的每一个人。Shenzhen shi yi ge meili de jiyuan, shuyu wei Shenzhen zuochu gongxian de mei yi ge ren). One of the organizers wished that these events “may *reveal* the confidence of the millions of young workers into the idea of “loving one’s work and becoming an elite”. A female migrant worker added that while she was working away from home, to be or not to be able to find a feeling of being at home was extremely important and that this was an acknowledgment of the value of one’s personal existence. She concluded by saying:

“Only if you acknowledge your individual value will you be able to be willing to make progress and struggle” (只有认识到自身的价值，才会有上进心，拼搏欲。Zhi you renshi dao ziji de jiazhi, cai hui you shangjin xin, pinbo yu).

Among the many activities organized, a singing and dancing evening under the name of “Good people are leading a peaceful life” (好人一生平安 hao ren yi sheng ping’an), as well as two literary and artistic evenings called “Millions of young workers are stepping into the new era hand in hand” (百万青工携手迈向新时代 baiwan qingong xieshou mai xiang xin shidai) and “To smile ten years long is not much” (笑一笑十年少 xiao yi xiao shi nian shao) were organized²¹⁰. In the Longgang industrial township, according to another February 1998 article, more than 40.000 migrant workers are said to have taken part to these activities which have been organized by villagers, the trade and industry federations as well as with Hong Kong businessmen. The activities include sport and cultural activities, as well as organizing small groups that aim at helping old people²¹¹. This as well as several other articles describing new year activities sponsor the idea that all kinds of differences and contradictions such as rural-urban, socio-economic, regional, generational, etc. may all be bridged under one common struggle for the development and prosperity of Shenzhen. The hereafter fragment of this February 1998 text illustrates this idea in an almost surrealistic way, so do the photographs that go with the text:

“One same poem was read by young workers in 10 different dialects hailing from all over China. It expressed their will to go on sacrificing their best years of youth for the construction of Longgang. As for

²¹⁰ *STQB*, 23/02/98, “Wenxin de jiyuan, renao de nian”, p. 21.

²¹¹ Helping (old) people out has been a regular practice required from students and State-owned enterprises employees during the Mao-era. The “study the Lei Feng spirit” activities belong to the same category. The Lei Feng spirit has been reactivated several times in the 1980s and 1990s. On the rebirth of Lei Feng during the reform era, see Béja, 1998. See also Landsberger, 2001.

villagers who were wearing traditional clothes, they expressed their feeling of happiness towards the prosperous life they lead since the beginning of reform and opening by singing a Hakka mountain song (...) Eventually the township leaders, foreign businessmen, young workers and villagers were all dancing hand in hand and were singing ‘tomorrow will be better’” (来自全国的青工用十多种方言朗读同一首诗篇，表达他们为建设龙岗甘愿继续奉献新春的心声 (...)最后镇领导，外商与青工，村民牵手跳起集体舞，齐唱“明天会更好”。 Laizi quanguo de qingong yong shi duo zhong fangyan langdu tong yi shou shipian, biaoda tamen wei jianshe longgang ganyuan jixu fengxian xinchun de xinsheng (...) Zuihou zhen lingdao, waishang yu qingong, cunmin qianshou tiaopi jiti wu, qichang ‘mingtian hui geng hao’).



Source. *STQB*, 23/02/98, p. 21.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked firstly at how migration was represented in late 1980s and early 1990s mainstream newspapers as well as in reportage literature. I have shown that some categories that were widely used in the late 1980s such as “blind migrants” were the product of official terminology and of the party-state design of policies and regulatory mechanisms aimed at controlling population movements in the early phase of the People’s Republic of China. Perhaps

more importantly, I have shed light on how much the official conception of spontaneous rural migration as being disorderly, as causing trouble and as requiring the energetic action of the party-state was rooted too in the 1950s. While the description of undifferentiated rural masses threatening ordinary life and social order was on the whole quite prevalent in the publications examined, there were debates in the late 1980s and these focused chiefly on the legitimacy of rural migration and of the presence of migrants in cities. These debates, I have argued, were taking place within larger struggles around the legitimacy of economic reforms. We have seen that, by being associated with the economic reforms and the market economy, migratory movements could be described in rather positive terms. Frequently this kind of discourse gives precedence to purely economic arguments, as a consequence of the modernisation model predominant in China's journalistic and intellectual circles (Xiang Biao and Tan Shen, 2005, p. 75). Although it inverted the image of migration as a source of disorder, it is no less homogenising. It made migrants' legitimate status depend upon their work, and in so doing it continued to assign them to a position opposed to that of the majority of people living in towns. Moreover, in many of the publications dealing with migration, even as early as the 1980s the emergence of a certain essentializing conception of the market and the market economy can be detected, bestowing upon it an actively liberating role. According to this approach, by bringing peasants into close contact with the market and the towns, migration will allow them to move from their "traditional subjectivity" to a "modern" one (Yan Hairong, 2003, p. 77). As will be documented in chapter 8, a similar conception of the market is widely pervasive in the Shenzhen mainstream press depiction of migrants in the mid and late 1990s.

In the second part of this chapter, I have looked at how new year migrations were depicted in the Shenzhen mainstream press in the late 1980s as well as in the mid and late 1990s. We have seen that the overall depiction of the new year population movements in 1989 and 1990 was on the whole not much different from the one depicted in the first part of this chapter. The use of the term "blind migrants" was quite widespread and the emphasis was on measures devised in order to control the flows of migrants. On the whole, migration was still considered as a phenomenon which disturbed social order. I have documented, however, how this phenomenon had become de-dramatized or normalized from 1994 on. I have shown that more neutral terms were being used to categorise migrants and that the stress was put on the capacity of city authorities to organize the population movements. I have argued though, that this emphasis on the capacity of party-state authorities to make so that people could reach their factories or work locations as soon as they had arrived, was a mark of an adapted but still pervasive bureaucratic conception of migration as necessarily orderly and planned. Another

important feature was highlighted and it will be further confirmed in the upcoming chapters of this thesis: migrants, at the individual and collective levels, have become the focus of an intense ideological construction. They are more and more associated with a number of positive values and their merits are vaunted repeatedly. Such a construction, I will show, is part of a larger construction of an image for Shenzhen and for the Shenzhen party-state itself.

The more positive representation of migrant workers which has occurred in the Shenzhen and more generally the Guangdong province press can be accounted for partly by the importance migrant workers occupy in the Pear River Delta Special economic zones, especially in the first of these, i.e. Shenzhen. In addition to this, one has already stressed that Shenzhen is a city whose population is mostly made of people from outside and among these people, migrant workers from the countryside are proportionally most numerous. As the inflow of foreign capital increased along the nineties, attracting cheap and young migrant labor became also more important for local authorities. But this shift in representation is also to be related to a general slow shift in official conceptions vis-à-vis rural-to-urban migration and in policies at the central and provincial levels aimed at managing rural migrants in cities (Solinger, 1999, pp. 91-98)²¹². In the Delta, earlier than elsewhere, migrant workers have been identified as a component of economic reforms one can not do without. This shift needs also to be thought along the influence of a growing body of Chinese social science research which did contribute to somewhat balance the chiefly “law and order” conception of migration with a more migrant-centred paradigm which insisted on the rights of migrant workers (Xiang Biao and Tan Shen, 2005).

One could think that in the 1990s, the “blind migrant” category and the meanings it embodied fell out of common usage. It actually did not disappear entirely. It still continued to be used intermittently, whenever there was a campaign aimed at controlling, incarcerating, and expelling migrants found without the documents needed to live in Shenzhen, i. e. the sanwu people. It is to the analysis of these campaigns that I now turn in the next chapter of this dissertation.

²¹² For instance from 1994 on, the Ministry of Labor included migrant workers within its scope of action, while until the end of 1993, it was only dealing with city workers. Solinger, 1999, p. 92. As to the policies of particular cities of the Delta, one should note that they may vary greatly. Since 2003, a series of measures aimed at protecting migrant workers’ rights in towns, as well as relaxing some of the rules governing their residency and access to jobs have been designed. For accounts of these measures and the limits to their application at the local level, see Froissart, 2005 and Zhao Shukai, 2003.

Chapter 6: Shenzhen's sanwu people : constituting the “interior Other” and affirming party-state power

In this chapter I will examine how the « interior Other » of the legitimate migrant worker, i.e. the sanwu people are being represented in the Shenzhen mainstream press from 1994 to 1999. The analysis will focus mainly on the 1994 and 1998 cleansing campaigns aimed at the Shenzhen sanwu people. In 1999, no such massive campaign took place and there were only a few articles dealing with the cleansing of the sanwu people. I will pay attention to how the sanwu people are depicted and also to how the Shenzhen party-state is producing a self-representation of itself through the campaigns. I will show that through the cleansing campaigns, the party-state is both theatricalizing its power and producing a self-referential reality.

In an upcoming chapter I show that the construction of an identity for Shenzhen hinges on “positive poles” (the ideal migrant worker, the permanent urban citizen, the modern entrepreneur, etc.), I document how it also rests upon opposing these positive poles to negative ones defined as the destitute, the unemployed and those who are not successful (Crane, 1994, p. 89). In Shenzhen, these “interior others” are embodied in the figure of the sanwu people (三无 *samwu* or 三无人员 *samwu rennyuan*). This category, which is the product of bureaucrats, encompasses all those people who have come to cities and have no legal job, no legal residence and no official identification documents. This is actually a catch-all category that may include a very large number of people with quite diverse, more or less legal occupations: undocumented workers in factories, odd job workers not registered with the city administration, street merchants, peddlers, prostitutes, beggars, street performers, drug dealers, thieves, etc.

The municipal authorities of most Chinese cities periodically launch cleansing campaigns which aim at expelling those who have not complied with city regulations in terms of residency permits, work permits, as well as in term of illegal constructions. These campaigns are backed by the mainstream media. Two such campaigns were launched in the first few months of 1994 and 1998²¹³. The number of articles covering the 1994 cleansing campaign within each of the three Shenzhen mainstream newspapers was as follows:

²¹³ On the whole we can say that the STQB articles that dealt with the cleansing campaign were rather focused on the policy lines, the action of state authorities, while in the SWB articles, the focus was more on describing the cleansing scene itself. In the SFB, the focus has been more on the illegal practices that allowed people to get in the zone as well as on stressing the need to fight corruption and to implement the cleansing and blocking measures severely.

Table 6.1: Articles on the 1994 cleansing campaign in *STQB*, *SWB* and *SFB*.

Newspaper title	Number of articles	Page n°
<i>STQB</i>	15	Mostly 2 and 3
<i>SWB</i>	25	Mostly 3
<i>SFB</i>	27	Mostly 1 and 2
TOTAL number of articles 1994 campaign	67	

For the 1998 campaign, no article that covered the cleansing campaign was published in the *STQB*, while 26 articles, all front page articles, were published in the *SWB*²¹⁴. For 1999, from January to March, only four articles were dealing with the sanwu people and the local authorities cleansing measures.

Not surprisingly, since these two campaigns aim at cleansing the sanwu people, one finds an important number of articles that carry the term “to cleanse” in headlines. For instance, in the 1994 cleansing campaign, within the 67 articles dealing with the three mainstream newspapers investigated, 35 had the term “to cleanse the sanwu people” or “cleansing the sanwu people” in their headlines. Reading through the headlines of the 1994 and the 1998 campaigns allows to observe that the sanwu people need to be “cleansed thoroughly” or that the result of the cleansing campaign is that the environment is perfectly cleansed from the sanwu people as can be seen from the hereafter table gathering a selection of headlines:

Table 6.2: publicizing the need for cleansing and the effects of cleansing the sanwu people

Article reference	Title Chinese	Title English
<i>STQB</i> , 16/02/94, 11.	福田彻底清理三无人员和地下工厂	“Futian is fully cleansing sanwu people and underground factories”.
<i>STQB</i> , 17/02/94, 1.	一堵二清三管，彻底清理三无人员	“Firstly block, secondly cleanse, thirdly

²¹⁴ I could not find articles covering the 1998 campaign in *SFB*, but I have only had access to January and to the first ten days of February of this newspaper.

		manage, cleanse fully the sanwu people”.
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Article reference	Title Chinese	Title English
<i>STQB</i> , 02/03/94 , 2.	罗湖区 清理 三无人员聚居区目击记	“A snapshot on Luohu district cleansing sanwu people”.
<i>SWB</i> , 27/01/94, 3.	清理 三 “ 无人 ” 员任重道远 社会各方仍须努力	“To cleanse the sanwu people is a heavy responsibility and there is a long way to go. The entire society still needs to make efforts”.
<i>SFB</i> , 05/03/98, 2.	彻底清理 “ 三无 ” , 好 !	“To fully cleanse the sanwu people is a good thing!”.
<i>SWB</i> , 15/02/98, 1.	拉开大网 清 “ 三无 ”	“Open wide the net to cleanse the sanwu people”.

Another interesting feature that can be gleaned from analyzing headlines covering these campaigns is that the action of cleansing should or does result in strengthening the urban management, that it has to or can pacify society or even purify the environment. Similarly, the sanwu people are also associated with filth and dirt in headlines:

Table 6.3: the sanwu people as disorder

Article reference	Title Chinese	Title English
<i>STQB</i> , 17/02/94, 1.	特区多了几分 安宁 , 深圳 清理 三无人 员纪实	“The Special zone is now more peaceful. Description of the cleansing of sanwu people in Shenzhen”.
<i>SWB</i> , 27/01/94, 3.	为了 净化 这方土地 罗湖区公安局 清 理 三无人员纪实	“In order to purify this earth. Description of the Luohu police cleansing the sanwu people”.
<i>SFB</i> , 12/03/94, 2.	清除 “ 三无 ” , 净化 环境	“To cleanse the sanwu people in order to purify the environment”.
<i>SWB</i> , 24/01/94, 1.	罗湖联合纵队 “ 披星行动 ” 水坝高压 走廊全面光复 , 头上千伏高压 脚下 十里垃圾 居间万余三无 今晨全被 端 窝	“The high-voltage corridor has been fully cleaned up. Above their head, a thousand volts. Under their feet, five kilometers of rubbish. Ten thousand sanwu people used to live there. This early morning this hotbed has been eliminated”.
<i>SWB</i> , 01/03/94, 3.	新安街道 端掉 三无窝 , 污染纳垢处一 扫而光	“A hotbed of sanwu people has been smashed in Xian’an street, polluting and filthy places have been swept thoroughly.”.

The third feature that may be noted from a brief analysis of headlines is the frequent use of terms and metaphors that relate to war or to the military.

6.1 Defining the sanwu people

Several articles of the three mainstream Shenzhen newspapers deal with the issue of the definition of the sanwu population in their coverage of the 1994 campaign. They tackle the issue of what this definition encompasses in terms of the people and of the nature of their occupations. Articles that touch upon this issue either do so to eventually strengthen or draw a clear border between the sanwu people and other legitimate groups or — but such article were quite rare — to point to the ambiguous nature of this definition and thereby to cautiously criticize the campaign itself.

6.1.1 *Playing on borders: othering the sanwu people*

As it was observed at the outset of this section, the sanwu people category is a catch-all category that can encompass people who are performing jobs usually belonging to the informal sector as well as people who carry out activities which may include illicit or criminal ones. Exactly whom this category is supposed to encompass is rarely made clear in the articles examined. On a few occasions though, we find officials who define what the category entails. It is the case in one March 19th 1994 article of the *SWB* in which a city government official points to the definition of the category by stating that the category relates to:

“the temporary persons who do not possess legal and up-to-date identification documents, who do not have a legal and legitimate job, and those who do not have a legal lodging” (无合法有效正当证件，无合法正当职业，无合法居所的暂住人员 wu hefa youxiao zhengjian, wu hefa zhengdang zhiye, wu hefa jusuo de zhanzhu ren yuan)²¹⁵.

Let us note that in this article a demarcation is drawn between those who are the target of the campaign and those who are not (the legal land legitimate residents). The title of the article itself is a warning as it stands that “The City Police departments explain again the policy: those who are

²¹⁵ *SWB*, 19/03/94, “Shi gong’an bumen chong shenqing zhengce. Shi mangliu mo jiaogu, fei sanwu mo xin huang”, p. 1.

“blind migrants” should not count on luck, those who are not ‘mangliu’ should not worry”. Another *SWB* March 19th 1994 article also distinguishes between the temporary migrant workers and the sanwu people whose occupations are illegal. It is explained that among the sanwu people there are many people who engage in prostitution, take drugs, make false medicine and have excess births and that it also includes “creasy people who are playing with monkeys, fortune tellers and beggars”. A police officer stressed however that the sanwu people should be distinguished from those temporary people who have temporary permits and that the prosperity of Shenzhen is due to the efforts of the temporary people that make 2/3 of the Shenzhen population. The sanwu people are explicitly opposed to the prosperity of the city and to the rights of legal temporary residents as well as to social stability. The illegal activities of those people who have small stalls, who are doing little trade, who are picking grabs, who are working in construction or who are rearing poultry and are living under bridges, in parks, and in messily built huts “not only disturb the appearance of Shenzhen, but they also severely endanger the health of the people of the Special zone” it is explained²¹⁶.

As we can see from the above mentioned article, the sanwu category is sufficiently large to include scrap collectors, people who have out-of-quotas children, beggars, as well as people who take drugs, engage in prostitution and produce false medicine. The sanwu people are also often associated with crime and social disorder. This can be so through crime figures as it is the case in the hereafter fragment:

“According to the police departments: at the moment, there are more than 300.000 sanwu people in the city and last year 93% of the criminal affairs, 90% of the traffic accidents, of acts of prostitution have all concerned sanwu people. In some hotels, in foreign invested companies, more than 40% of the workers are sanwu people. The sedimentation of these sanwu people has done extremely great harm to the work of security, fire prevention and hygiene of the city” ((...) 这些三无人员的沉淀已经给我市的治安，防火，卫生工作带来了极大的危害. Zhexie sanwu ren yuan de chendian yijing gei wo shi dailai le jida de weihai)²¹⁷.

That the sanwu people disturb the appearance, the environment, the prosperity and social stability of Shenzhen is repeated at length in the majority of articles in the newspapers examined. The hereunder fragment summarizes some of the disturbances and ills which the sanwu people are linked to:

²¹⁶ *SWB*, 19/03/94, “Tequ duo le ji fen an’ning”, p. 3.

²¹⁷ *SFB*, 05/03/94, “Chedi qingli ‘sanwu’ hao”, p. 2.

“To fully cleanse the sanwu people is also a good thing in that it performs an important function in purifying the investment environment, in putting an end to the “six disorders”, and to maintain the civility and orderliness of the city. Anyone knows that “the problem of selling disorderly and setting stalls in the Special zone is serious. Not only does it influence the appearance of the city, but it also blocks the traffic; in some fringe areas, the messy constructions are even worse; within the huts where sanwu people live, there are all sorts of “black factories”, “excess births troops” and serious hidden trouble for society. One can see everywhere in the streets of the Special zone gangs of beggars, girls selling flowers, they get around you like bees and deploy all sorts of tactics (...) as for those who show monkeys, those singers, fortune tellers, they are like many disharmonious notes in this modern city, one can find them in any street or corner!” (彻底清理三无人员就好在这将对净化我市的投资环境、杜绝六乱现象、保税区的文明和整洁起到良好作用 (...) 至于那些耍猴的，卖唱的，相命的，则似现代都市中的一曲又一曲不调谐音符，在特区大街小巷蔓延。Chedi qingli sanwu ren yuan jiu hao zai zhe jiang dui jinghua wo shi de touzi huanjing, dujue liu luan xianxiang, bao tequ de wenming he zhengjie qidao lianghao zuoyong. Zhiyi naxie shua hou de, mqj chang de, xiangming de, ze si xiandai doushi zhong de yi qu you yi qu bu tiaoxie yinfu, zai tequ da jie xiao xiang manyan)²¹⁸.

In the hereafter fragment of a March 1994 STQB article, the link between the sanwu and criminals is more direct:

“in Shenzhen, these criminals steal and rob, kidnap people and extort money, organize prostitution, cheat and organize fraud, they have become the cancer of society (...) All these places that are inhabited by the “sanwu people” are all huts built disorderly, the polluted water, mosquitos and flies multiply, and this creates a dead corner of hygiene”(这些犯罪分子偷盗抢劫，绑架勒索，卖淫嫖娼，行骗诈骗，成为社会的“毒瘤”(...) 凡在三无人员聚居的地点，都是乱搭乱建的窝棚，污水横流，蚊蝇滋生，造成一个卫生死角 Zhexie fanzui fenzi toudao qiangjie, bangjia lesuo, maiyin piaochang, xingpian zhapin, chengwei shehui de duli (...) fan zai sanwu ren yuan juju de didian, dou shi luan da luan jian de wopeng, wushui hengliu, wenying zisheng, zaocheng yige weisheng sijiao)²¹⁹.

The different occupations of the sanwu people are again described: fake beggars, street entertainers, prostitutes, bet organizers, fake chemistry sellers, etc. who “leave a disgusting impression of the city and generate chaos in society”. Many of them are using Shenzhen as a safe

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ STQB, “Wei hu shehui an ding de zhong da xing dong”, 08/03/94, p. 2. I found that the repetitive use of the term “dead corners” of hygiene and order could be usefully thought in relation with contrasting notions of “dead public spaces” often occupied by marginal groups with that of “festive spaces” designed for consumers. In both cases, Don Mitchell argues, these spaces “are premised on a perceived need for order, surveillance and control of the behaviour” of different publics. Mitchell, 1995, p. 119.

harbor to escape the birth planning policy. It is thereafter reaffirmed that the goal for Shenzhen is to become an international modern city and that the presence of the sanwu people “influences the healthy development of the city” and that it damages the image Shenzhen has to construct for abroad²²⁰. In this last fragment, the presence of the sanwu in Shenzhen and the kinds of occupations they are engaged in are described as “the cancer of society”. This metaphor of disease, of something contagious against which one ought to be cut off²²¹, as well as the whole construction of a threat to social order and hygiene go together with the need to expel the sanwu people. This may in some articles take the form of walls that have been built in order to prevent the sanwu people from getting in the city²²². The process of *othering* of the sanwu people also goes through their qualification as “the Gypsy tribe” (吉普赛人部落 jipusairen buluo), or in the case of their habitat by talking of “the gypsies fortress” (吉普赛城堡 jipusai chengbao). The association of the sanwu people with chaos (乱 luan) also goes together with the systematic depiction of their habitat as being “built messily” and as being filthy.

6.1.2 *The sanwu people and legitimate residents: severity and benevolence*

We have seen that cleansing campaign had as one of its main aim to provide legal residents with a peaceful work and living environment. Reading through the Shenzhen mainstream newspapers, I came across three full pages that are worth examining since they display articles that, even though do not explicitly relate to each other, can actually not fail to be inter-connected. One such page of the SFB has six articles that deal with the cleansing campaign and that either detail the principles, justifications and aims of the campaign or state some of the results it has already achieved. At the top right hand side of this page, one finds a short article which title is “Discussion on the phenomenon of doing good things” and which calls for launching a discussion on the difficulty of doing good things (many readers having reacted to an article called “Doing good things is really difficult”) based on the study Lei Feng spirit. It goes as this:

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ David Sibley observes how widespread and powerful the metaphor of “disease spreading from a deviant or racialized minority to threaten the normal majority with infection” is. Sibley, 1995, p. 26. On how the deviance of marginal groups may be crystallized on specific occasions in the case of European cities and how these groups were “abjectified as part of the dirt that needed to be cleared from the city”, see Atkinson and Laurier, 1998.

²²² See for instance *SFB*, 03/03/94, “Luohu qu qingli sanwu bu shou ruan”, p. 2.

“To rescue someone who is in danger is the traditional virtue of the Chinese nation, and Lei Feng is the exceptional representative and collective illustration of this traditional virtue (...) Nowadays, as we are heading towards market socialism, how can we maintain and develop our traditional virtue? ((...) 在向市场经济迈进的今天，怎么样保持和发扬中华民族的传统美德 (...) Zai xiang shichang jingji maijin de jintian, zenmeyang baochi he fayang zhonghua minzu de chuantong meide?)”

The remaining sections of the article provide illustrations of exemplary attitudes that stressed altruism. The end of the article concluded by writing that the role of the government was to do good things too, for instance by providing help to those who were in a difficult financial and social situation²²³. The bottom left article deals with those migrant workers (called “gold diggers” in the title) who “have come blindly” to Shenzhen thinking that finding work was easy and who find themselves in trouble, either having to go on searching for work or having to go back home²²⁴. The entire page is organized in three parts: central and most important in term of space: the cleansing, its results, means, objectives and justification; the upper right hand side article is devoted to what should be done to maintain and nurture the traditional virtue in today’s market socialism Shenzhen²²⁵; the remaining articles of this page are dealing too with police officers who are studying the Lei Feng spirit of self-sacrifice and who are doing their job in an exemplary manner, including some of the officers refusing bribes while arresting sanwu people²²⁶. Even if no direct link is drawn between these articles on this page, one cannot help but to relate the cleansing of sanwu people by the police and military police to the services offered to the legitimate ordinary people by the same police corps. For some people, it is discipline, control, arrest and repatriation, while for others it is being offered a disinterested service. This way, ordinary people are indirectly opposed to the sanwu people as to the nature of their relationship with the police and military police officials. The altruistic attitude towards Shenzhen residents and the good deeds of the checkpoint military police officers towards these people stand as a counterpoint to the harsh and severe treatment aimed at the sanwu people²²⁷.

Another striking illustration of contrasting different groups within one same page is that of SFB March 1st 1994. Three articles and photographs structure the architecture of this full page. As we can see below, one large photograph of fire brigade “soldiers” who belong to the police

²²³ SFB, 05/03/94, “Zuo hao shi nan’ xianxiang taolun”, p. 2.

²²⁴ SFB, 05/03/94, “Taojinzhe de jianhui”, p. 2.

²²⁵ Note that in the article justifying the cleansing campaign cleansing the sanwu people and maintaining the civility and orderliness of the city are connected explicitly. The notion of *civility* relates, among other things, to the values and principles that should be nurtured within spiritual civilization work. See our discussion below on Shenzhen spiritual civilization work.

²²⁶ SFB, 05/03/94, “Huangang bianjiazhan lizu benzhi xue Lei Feng”, p. 2.

²²⁷ Compare for instance SFB, 05/03/94, “Qingman Shatoujiao”, p. 2 to SFB, 05/03/94, “Futian jin luo migu qingli sanwu ren yuan”, p. 2 and to SFB, 05/03/94, “Chedi qingli sanwu hao”, p. 2.

and are standing very orderly. This picture has a legend that explains that a competition of soldiers parade has been organized. The legend goes: “The photo shows fire brigade soldiers who are ready for the battle” (严阵以待的消防队. Yan zhen yi dai de xiaofangdui)²²⁸. On the top right hand side of the page, there stands an article that deals with the depiction of a model factory where migrant workers are working exemplarily well and are treated by the factory management as if they were belonging to one family. The title of this article is “Jinghua, the warm home of the working boys”. In the middle right hand side, one finds two photographs of sanwu people who are on their knees, looking downward and who have been caught and sent to the repatriation centre. The legend explains that as the city government has declared the notice of fully cleansing the “sanwu people”, the city repatriation centre has had to face difficulties because of lack of personal and it has coordinated the joint effort of different department to do well the “take in and repatriate work, in order to guarantee the smooth progress of the great scale cleansing work” (积极配合收容遣送工作，以保障大规模清理工作的顺利进行. Jiji peihei shourong qiansong gongzuo, yi baozhang da guimo qingli gongzuo de shunli jinxing). According to the director of the repatriation centre, more than 1.000 people have already been arrested and repatriated²²⁹. Two more photographs on the left hand side show two children who are begging. The legend explicitly opposes the beggars to the prosperity and nice appearance of the city²³⁰ and asks for energetic action:

“On the prosperous streets of the city, one can see everywhere these scenes of children begging, this causes trouble to every single person passing by and at the same time it damages the appearance of our city. We exhort the responsible departments to take measures as soon as possible, either they are sent to the repatriation centre or they must be cleansed out of the Special zone” (市区繁华街道随处可见的儿童乞讨现象，困扰着每一个过往行人，同事也有损于我市的市容市貌。呼吁有关部门尽快采取措施，或将他们送进收容所，或将这些三无人员清理出特区. Shi qu fanhua jiedao suichu ke jian de ertong qitao xianxiang, kunrao zhe mei yi ge guowang xingren, tongshi ye you sun yu wo shi de shirong

²²⁸ SFB, 01/03/94, no title, p. 2.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* In another SFB March article, the attitude of severity towards the sanwu is expressed in a clearer manner as it is stated that: “(...) from March 1st to March 3rd a period during which 250 police officers were mobilized to apply the carpet style of cleansing (...) and to fully expel out of the Special zone the sanwu people such as beggars, street performers, scrap collectors, working in underground factories and those criminals who have remained (滞留) in this area”. The very last sentence of the article makes clear that for those girls who are selling flowers, for shoe repairers, beggars, newspapers sellers, scrap collectors, street vendors, etc. and other sanwu people, the police will implement the policy of “find one of them, cleanse one of them”, SFB, 10/03/94, “Wei le jinghua zhe kuai tud?”, pp. 1-2.

²³⁰ The contrast between the modern and nice-looking suit of the urban dweller and the beggar is also striking in this picture.

At least three meanings are conveyed through this full page. Firstly that of the orderly fire brigade that is ready for the battle²³¹. By applying strictly the regulations, the fire brigade officers will help bring back or consolidate social order. Secondly, the migrant workers within the model factory are not causing any problem since they are laboring conscientiously and they consider the company as their own family. They somehow represent the normalized migrant workers who are most of the time laboring within factory walls and who are not stagnating in the urban public space in the manner of the sanwu people. Finally, the pictures and legends on the sanwu people (both those who are kneeling and have been arrested, and the young beggars) should not be part of the prosperous story of Shenzhen, they should be taken off its scenery and sent back to the countryside, just as if they were out of this time and place which they do not belong to. Note that within the vast majority of the articles dealing with the sanwu people, the countryside is virtually absent, as if those who are called the sanwu people came from nowhere. It is stressed that they have to be expelled and cleansed out of the zone, implicitly assuming that their right place is in the countryside but very rarely mentioning it.

6.1.3 Questioning the sanwu as a category

Interestingly, among the 67 articles relating to the 1994 clean-up campaign, two of them actually did explicitly question the relevance of the sanwu people category. Although this may seem very few out of the whole lot of articles that asserted the party line regarding the campaign, it is surprising since there usually is very little room for questioning during such campaigns. One may posit that this could be a testimony of the fact that behind a façade of conformity which the coverage of the campaign endeavors to confer, there may well have been disagreements as to the usefulness of such a campaign. These campaigns have been increasingly criticized in post-Mao China (Bakken, 2005, pp. 1-28; Tanner, 2005, pp. 171-188). Furthermore, there often are contradicting views between different administrative organs at different levels as to the utility of such campaigns²³².

An article which expressed a somewhat dissenting voice actually followed the publication of an earlier piece called “Reportage on the gipsy tribes”. It is explained that many readers have written to the paper to ask why the sanwu people could not be completely cleansed. A seminar is therefore organized by the newspaper and the Office of the general management of security with

²³¹ Although the legend next to the photograph does not explicitly refer to the cleansing campaign, the fire brigade took part to it because of the hindrances they cause, it is said at length in many articles, to fire prevention work.

²³² See Béja, 1995; Xiang Biao, 2000 on campaigns that aimed at demolishing the Zhejiang village in Beijing.

high level officials of the police, the City management bureau, the Civil affairs department, and the Territory planning department. The ambiguity of the category of the ‘sanwu people’ was one question that was discussed during the seminar. It was first discussed in relation with the difficulties encountered by different administrative departments in managing this population. The Vice president of the Bureau of security of the police said:

“Many people among the “sanwu people” have not violated the law, they are not criminals. In fact, we have no right to catch them. When we actually catch them, we hand them to the civil affairs department”.

To this, the Vice director of the bureau of civil affairs replied that:

“It is only in the Special zone that there are sanwu people. When we send them to the Zhangmutou repatriation centre, officials over there do not consider them as sanwu people, they pay a little money and are let free”.

The Vice-director also added that the police did not have the right of enforcement regarding destroying the illegal huts, and that this was the responsibility of the Territory planning bureau. The Director of this bureau replied that very often the sanwu people pay a little money to the village committees and bureaus and they consider they are allowed to build their huts again :

“We can only destroy the huts but we may not catch them: one day we destroy their huts, and two days later they move elsewhere to build other huts”.

The sanwu people category is then further discussed. Another participant to the seminar raised the issue of the need to rethink what kinds of occupations the sanwu people category was and was not concerned with:

“When we were cleansing the big huts area, we realized that among these people some had regular jobs. They were raising poultry and pigs, or were growing vegetables , repairing bicycles, etc. If we do not further analyze the situation, and cleanse these people out, this will impact upon the life of residents or it will cause problems to everyone. For these people, we need to practice guiding and reinforce the management” ((...) 如果不加分析把这些人都清理出去 , 也会影响市民的生活 , 或者带来诸多的不便。对这些人要进行 ‘疏导’ , 加强管理. Ruguo bu jia fenxi, ba zhexie ren dou qingli chu qu, ye hui yingxiang simin de shenghuo, huo zhe gei dajia dailai zhuduo de bubian. Dui zhexie ren yao jinxing ‘shudao’, jiaqiang guanli”).

Yet, the Vice-director of Shenzhen Civil affairs bureau added that “Among this “gipsy tribe”, many of them had signed contracts in 1982 to come to Shenzhen, at that time Shenzhen needed them, and in fact it still needed them today:

“Vegetables, fish and meet are grown by these people (...) When we clear some of the tribes, some of them show us newspapers of the early period of the zone construction that say “Welcome to all the talents to offer their services to the construction of the zone” (我们去清理一些部落时，有些人拿出自己保存的特区建立之初的报纸，指着上面登的“欢迎全国各地的人才为特区建设服务” Women qu qingli yixie buluo shi, you xie ren nachu ziji baocun de tequ jianli zhi chu de baozhi, zhizhe shangmian deng de “Huanying quanguo gedi de rencai wei tequ jianshe fuwu”)²³³.

Eventually, it is agreed that having a regular job is the criterion that helps distinguish who does or does not belong to the sanwu people category and “as to those who engage in sexual activities, who disturb the security of society, they need to be the object of the law”. It is eventually added that “for those among the ‘tribe’ who have a regular job, they should be given documents, a stable lodging, and that the Planning department has to build outside population temporary lodging areas”.

The second article went a step further towards questioning the “three without” category, even if still with much caution. It starts by explaining the importance of the campaign for the maintenance of public order. Then it is argued that if all the illegal production sites exist it is because there is a demand from urban dwellers and particularly migrant workers whose revenues are very low. The following argument is then put forward:

“It is strange, while the strength of the cleansing the sanwu people campaign was so great, the underground factories may start their business again. Eventually, do they [the sanwu people] need Shenzhen or is it Shenzhen that can not do without them? A week after the big cleansing, we have gone back to the cleansing sites to notice that those sanwu people in the streets who were repairing bicycles, mending shoes, selling items on small stalls, picking up grabs and rearing animals, had built their simple huts again (...) Even though there was no water and while electricity had been cut, they still would not leave, why was that? Some people think that it is because the Shenzhen people have ways to earn money. As some Shenzhen people think that they will not make big money, therefore the jobs that Shenzhen people scorn are being taken by the sanwu people. In a certain respect, they fill up lacking services” ((...) 究竟是他们迫切地需要深圳，还是深圳少不了他们？(...) 在某种程度上弥补了服务行业的不足 Jiuqing shi tamen poqie

²³³ *SWB*, 27/01/94, “Qingli sanwu people ren zhong dao yuan. Shehui ge fang reng xu nuli”, p. 3.

de xuyao Shenzhen, haishi Shenzhen shao bu liao tamen? (...) zai mou zhong chengdu shang mibu le Shenzhen fuwu hangye de buzhu).

The official couplet is thereafter asserted again to allow for further questioning:

“Anyway, It is imperative to get rid of the sanwu people. These underground factories and their products have to disappear (...) But who will replace the sanwu people and the services they used to offer?” (不管怎么说, 三无人员必须清理, 那些地下工厂即其产品紧俏, 也不允许其存在. Buguan zenme shuo, sanwu ren yuan bixu qingli, naxie dixia gongchang ji shi qi chanpin jin xiao, ye bu yunxu qui cunzai)²³⁴

On the whole, the kinds of issues discussed in these articles are very seldom discussed in the Shenzhen mainstream press. As we have seen these questions include: arresting and detaining people who have not committed offences; the lack of coordination between administrative organs and the juridical ambiguity of the sanwu people category; the marketization of the right to stay in town or rent lodging as well as the issues of clientelism that exists between official of repatriation and deportation centres and migrants. It is noteworthy that these questions are discussed within such a flow of harmonious views on the need to cleanse the sanwu people out of the zone.

Before looking at what kind of representation of the party and state officials is constructed in the coverage of the cleansing campaign of 1994, I suggest going through one last piece in which the campaign is one more time questioned in a quite interesting way, to eventually reaffirm the necessity and legitimacy of the campaign though. It is the only article of the 1994 cleansing campaign in which the issue of rights of the sanwu people is discussed. It is also one of the few articles in which the sanwu have a voice of their own among the 1994 articles examined. In this article, the journalists are witnessing the cleansing of a sanwu people area where they watch bulldozers destroying huts “rows after rows”. The central question of the article is raised when the officials are asked not to destroy the Biyuan school, described as “a school within the tribe of “sanwu people” which has about 120 pupils. The very school was depicted by the journalists as such:

²³⁴ *SWB*, 28/03/94, “Shei lai mibu fuwuyue de buzhu”, p. 3.

“huts made of bamboo rods, asbestos tiles, and metal sheets that had turned into a classroom for young children (...) it was very dark in the room, the tables were old and it was packed and messy” (几间毛竹、石棉瓦和铁皮搭建起的窝棚成了孩子们的教室 (...) 教室光线很暗，破旧的课桌又挤又乱。 Ji jian mao zhu, shimian wa he tiepi dajianqi de wopeng cheng le haizimen de jiaoshi (...) jiaoshi guangxian hen an, pojiu de kezhuo you ji you luan).

The remaining sections of the article raised the issue of the national flag standing on the roof of the hut and whether this school ought or not to be destroyed. It is explained:

“a national flag had been put on top of the roof of the hut with bamboo rods (a legislation exists on how to hang our national flag), one could see from a distance our national flag with its five stars together with this messy school, which looked extremely disharmonious. What worried people was: “Does such a school harm the younger generation? (...) 那远远都能看见的五星红旗与杂乱的校舍配在一起。让人担心的是：这样的学校是否会误人子弟？ na yuan yuan dou neng kanjian de wuxing hongqi yu zaluan de xiaoshe pei zai yiqi, xiande ji bu xietiao. Rang ren danxin de shi: zheyang de xuexiao shifou hui wuren zidi?”.

Asked why she brought her children to such a school, a woman replied that she could do nothing about it as she did not possess the local household registration permit, nor the temporary residence permit. In such a situation, no school would ever accept her children she further explained. Aware of the fact that there were quite a number of such “sanwu people tribe schools”, the journalists asked whether it was necessary to destroy these schools. To this question they replied:

“The answer is surely positive. Just like destroying the shops, banks, restaurants, recycling stations of the sanwu people tribe, the officials of the clean-up Command bureau have given a deadline of 2 days for these people to go away”.

In the following paragraph, the journalists raise again the issue of the right to schooling for the children of the sanwu people to eventually come back to the official couplet which is worth quoting at length:

“The sons and daughters of the “sanwu people” are also our next generation, they also do have the right to receive an education, not to let them go to school is obviously very unfair. Such a school may also allow these children to study a few characters. But the root of the problem is not this one. These sanwu people and their sons and daughters need imperatively to leave the Special zone as specified by the Shenzhen

government regulations, return to their hometown village, so that these children may study peacefully in the village. Mr Lin who is teaching in this school has taken it to the wrong place. ‘Something can not exist without its basis’. Once these “sanwu people” and their children are cleaned-up and repatriated home, the tribe school will not exist any more. You “sanwu people”, you the mothers and fathers, have you ever thought about this: for your children, you ought to go back home, in addition it is also possible to develop and get rich at home” (三无人员的子女也是我们的下一代，他们有接受教育的权利，不让他们读书当然是不公平的 (...) 但问题的根本不在于此。这些三无人员及子女必须离开特区，返回自己的家乡，让这些孩子在家乡好好读书。 sanwu ren yuan de z inü ye shi women de xia yidai, tamen you j ieshou j iaoyu de quanli, bu rang tamen dushu dangran shi bu gongping de (...) Dan wenti de genben bu zai yu ci. Zhaxie sanwu ren yuan ji qi z inü bixu anzhaoshenzhen shi zhengfu de you guan guiding, likai tequ, fanhui ziji de j iaxiang, rang ziji haizi hao hao dushu (...))²³⁵.

While the issue of the schooling had been raised, while for the first time the sanwu people were not just an anonymous group constructed mainly as an object of policies, we see from this last fragment that in the end, the rather tautological solution to the issues raised is that the presence of these people is illegitimate as it is contrary to the official policy of the Shenzhen city government. Moreover, any notion of structural factors relating to rural constraints is absent, these people and their “school” are just not at the right place which is why they should go back to their hometown. Such an argument is actually reminiscent of the kinds of Mao-era rhetoric that was described in the chapter on the early representation of migration when peasant were told to go back and till the land peacefully. The symbol behind the question of whether the national flag may or not be hung above the sanwu school is actually a rather powerful one. It relates to the place of the countryside, of peasants and of migrant workers within the post-Maoist imaginary of reform and opening. Through this article, one may posit that the fact that it is a problem for the national flag to be hanging above this school somehow hints at the sanwu people, and therefore part of the rural population, being conceived of as a disgrace for Shenzhen, and perhaps for the nation, as an image of poverty that does not fit neatly into an imaginary of success which Shenzhen helps to construct. They represent, as Annagnost has put it, “the uncivilized crowd that has not been made into a modern citizenry, the unsightly (ugly) but indispensable presence in the heart of China’s civility” (Annagnost, 1997, p. 136).

Interestingly, another article relating to an ordinary school stood just above the article analyzed above. This article is part of a series of article published in the Shenzhen media under the heading of “how to be a person from Shenzhen” that was referred to earlier and which is part of the construction of Shenzhen spiritual civilization. It tells the story of a Shenzhen secondary

²³⁵ *SWB*, 20/03/94, “Zheyang de xuexiao neng liu ma?”, p. 3.

school that decided to raise money in order to pay a surgery to a young orphan. The reason for doing this is explained:

“it is absolutely necessary to make so that this child that has been rejected by his parents may obtain the *warmth of society*, so that he may grow *healthily*; in addition to this, through this activity we may stimulate the *intuitive good knowledge* of pupils, nurture their powerful sense of *social responsibility* of *concern for other people* and *concern for the Special zone*”(一定要让这个父母不要的孩子得到社会的温暖，使他健康成长 (...) 培养他们关心他人关心特区，关心社会的强烈责任感。Yiding yao rang zhe ge fumu bu yao de haizi dedao shehui de wenuan, shi ta jiankang chengzhang)²³⁶.

I think it is worth connecting this last piece with the preceding one on the sanwu school. On the one hand, the attitude towards the “sanwu people” children and schools is firm: they are not to be helped in Shenzhen and should leave. While on the other hand, “concern”, “warmth” and “love” should be offered to the orphan. Hence while in the first tale, the attitude towards the sanwu people was characterized by rejection in the name of respecting the policy of the City government, in the second tale, the central value put forward is selfless help and care for the one in need, i.e. the orphan in this tale. What is being put forward is the idea that being severe in one instance does not prevent society or the state through its administration to be benevolent in another instance. We can now examine how the party-state action is constructed through the coverage of the cleansing campaign.

6.1.4 *A recurrent narrative structure*

An important proportion of the articles covering the cleansing campaign share a similar narrative structure which roughly corresponds to:

Principles and aims of campaign – general mobilization + means of campaign – cleansing process – effective action: visible results.

²³⁶ *JWB*, 20/03/94, “Xuxiao da aiqiao, yiyuan xian aixin”, p. 3.

On the whole, the mouthpiece function of the written press stands out very clearly all over the campaign. This is the case first and foremost through city and party leaders who state the principles and aims of the campaign. It usually occurs through leaders convening a meeting during which the overall spirit and principles are stated as is the case in the hereafter SFB fragment in which the City government stated the overall objectives of the cleansing campaign:

“Shenzhen needs to become a big low tax area, from today on, there needs to be a unified understanding, a reinforcement of the management of the city, a normalized system of cleansing the sanwu people needs to be built and improved, so that the appearance of the city, the hygiene, security, etc. all get improved profoundly and so that this creates good conditions in order to promote the economic development of the city and make so that it moves strides progressively to become an international city” (深圳要建设成大保税区，从现在开始就要统一认识，加强城市管理，建立和完善清理三无人员的规章制度，使鹏城在市容，卫生，环保，治安等各个方面多种有巨大改变，为促进我市经济发展，逐步迈向现代化国际都市行列而努力创造优势. Shenzhen yao jian cheng da baoshui qu, cong xianzai kqishi jiu yao tongyi renshi, jiaqiang chengshi guanli, jianli he wanshan qingli sanwu renyuán de guizhang zhidu, shi Pengcheng zai shirong, weisheng, huanbao, zhi'an deng ge fangmian duozhong you juda de gaibian, wei cujin woshi jingji fazhan, maixiang xiandaihua guoji doushi hanglie er nuli chuangzao youshi).

During the work meeting, the figures relating to the sanwu people and to their participation in criminal activities are provided. The number of sanwu people is supposed to be between 300.000 and 500.000. In 1993, 120.000 of them got sent to the repatriation centres by the Civil affairs departments. The daily intake of sanwu people in such centres could reach up to more than 2.000 people, it is explained. Then, once Shenzhen Vice-mayor Wang Zhongfu had explained why it was important to cleanse the sanwu people and destroy massively their huts, Shenzhen mayor Li Youwei listed the six principles that are guiding the cleansing work. These principles are:

1. “Unify the thought and elevate the understanding”: the sanwu people have harmed the security of society, the fire work, and the hygiene of the city and they generate corruption;
2. “The domains and targets need to be made clear”: those who do not have a cross frontier permit, who have not made the employment formalities, those who do not have temporary permits and who do not have regular jobs all need to be cleansed;
3. “The responsibilities need to be made clear and a system of responsibilities needs to be set up at all levels”: all units should collaborate. The practices of corruption need to be dealt with seriously;
4. “A normalized system of cleansing the sanwu people need to be set up and improved : they need to be cleansed and those who offer them with advantageous conditions need to be punished severely;
5. “The operation needs to be well organized and all forces need to be concentrated;

6. “All new propaganda units need to report positively on the campaign so that the activities of cleansing the sanwu people become regular, systematized and normalized”²³⁷.

Ten days later, the same newspaper published another front page article on an important meeting attended by several top city and party leaders during which the more specific guidelines governing the method of the campaign were stated. At this meeting, the head of the police and Shenzhen standing member of the party committee He Jingyuan explained:

“each unit needs to organize forces to set up cleansing and verification teams (...) each area needs also to organize “sudden attack cleansing troops in order to implement “net-like cleansing” (...) the campaign needs to follow the “five manage”: to block effectively; to verify strictly; to cleanse thoroughly; to manage well; to expel quickly”(各区还要组成清理突击队，进行“拉网式”的清理 (...) 必须五管齐下：“堵，查，清，管，送”，要堵得住，查得严，清得净，管得好，送得快。Ge qu hai yao zucheng qingli tuji dui, jinxing lawang shi de qingli (...) bixu wu guan q ixia: “du, cha, qing, guan, song”, yao du de zhu, cha de yan, qing de jing, song de kuai)²³⁸.

Then the main targeted spots, “these places where the sanwu people are hiding”, are also stated, i.e. the dam area in Luohu district, several bridges, villages, several mountains, privately rented rooms, workers tents, graveyards, etc.

What we find in these two and many other articles is a method of announcing the campaign, its objectives and targets that is quite reminiscent of the Mao-era campaigns with their targets and quotas. In the last quoted-piece, the whole mobilization of the population is required by using the Mao-era vocabulary of the “contradictions within the people”²³⁹ :

“to cleanse the “sanwu people”, on the whole, belongs to solving the internal contradictions of the people. It is imperative to stress policy, to pay attention to the method, to do things according to the law, and to cleanse with civility (...) for this cleansing needs to organize the masses, to mobilise the masses and to rely on the masses (...) the army, the police and the people need to work together really well” (清理三无人员，总的来讲使属于处理人民内部矛盾的问题(...) 这次清理要组织群众，发动群众，依靠群众.qingli sanwu ren yuan ,zong de lai jiang shi shuyu chuli renmin neibu maodun de wenti (...) zheci qingli yao zuzhi qunzhong, fadong qunzhong, yikao qunzhong (...))²⁴⁰.

²³⁷ SFB, 17/02/94, “Guan hao chengshi, qingli sanwu zai chuang youshi”, p. 1.

²³⁸ SWB, 28/02/94, “Wo shi qingli sanwu ren yuan dongyuan da hui shangwu juxing”, p. 1.

²³⁹ Mao Zedong used this rhetoric of the contradictions within the people in 1956 at the outset of the One hundred flowers campaign. For him, there were two main kinds of contradictions in society: those contradictions that need to be treated through violence such as those between capitalist and socialist society on the one hand, and those contradictions which could be solved through discussion, political education and persuasion.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

One further parallel that may be drawn with the Mao-era is the stress put on thought work (see the stress put on unifying thought and elevating understanding as the first of six principles of the cleansing campaign). The rhetoric is very close to the Mao-era rhetoric of the mass line which required that the masses be fully mobilized to take part enthusiastically to mass movements. Another feature quite reminiscent of the Mao-era mass movements is that the means used for the campaign are very much publicized and that the campaign in its first phase aimed at somehow impressing and make so that the target of the movement (i.e. the sanwu people) realize that he/she should become aware of the errors they had made and act ahead of the effective launching of the campaign by destroying their lodging and leaving in advance of officials' action. In the case of the cleansing campaign, it is made clear repeatedly that the propaganda work ought to make so that the sanwu people leave Shenzhen by themselves. The parallel between the rhetoric of this campaign and the one used in the 1950s is also striking in Shenzhen Vice-mayor asking the sanwu people “to *understand* the cleansing operation, to go back home *happily* and to make contributions for the building of socialism in their hometown” (请三无人员理解此次清理行动，愉快会老家，在家乡为社会主义建设作贡献。Qing sanwu ren yuan lijie ci ci qingli xingdong, yukuai hui laojia, zai jiaxiang wei shehuizhuyi jianshe zuochu gongxian)²⁴¹. This last requirement from the Vice-mayor is typical, we have seen, of the Mao-era view of peasant's place to be exclusively in the countryside to till the land.

6.1.5 *Theatralizing state power*

In this last section, I will show that through the coverage of the 1994 cleansing campaign, state power is represented as particularly effective, as bringing about clear results. This, we shall see, is done partly through figures, through the use of specific terms and via the use of photographs that together convey a particular image of the Shenzhen party and state authorities. In order to get a better grasp of how this meaning of an effective state power is conveyed through figures of its mobilization and achievements, I suggest looking at a few illustrations which I have put into the hereafter table (see next page please).

²⁴¹ *SFB*, 15/03/94, “Zuotian shi lingdao laidao qingli xianchang”, p. 1.

Table 6.3 : publicizing mobilization and results of the cleansing operations

Ref. and title	Means/mobilization	Results Eng.	Results Ch.
<p><i>SFB</i>, 05/03/94, “The first war to cleanse the sanwu people is over” 2.</p>	<p>The 5 districts of Shenzhen city are implementing the City Party Committee and City government directives, within the first war to cleanse the sanwu people, the party has mobilized more than 5.000 people”.</p>	<p>“more than 20.000 sanwu people have been cleansed as the first war is over” “these last days, the districts of Luohu, Futian, Nanshan, Bao’an and Longgang have started waging a war at the fortified position against the sanwu people (...) The Luohu district alone has cleansed more than 6.000 sanwu people (...) and destroyed 2.5000 illegal constructions (...) each district and township is raising enthusiasm and gathering its troops to organize a bigger operation”.</p>	<p>清理三无人员 20.000 余名...罗湖，福田，南山，宝安，龙岗无区几天内先后打响清三无人员的攻坚战，仅罗湖区拆除 2.500 多间违章建筑 (...) 各区，镇再鼓干劲，集中兵力进行更大行动.</p>
<p><i>STQB</i>, 07/03/94, “The Futian district starts the ‘3 excellent’ campaign with determination”, p. 2.</p>	<p>5562 police officers mobilized from January the first up till March; 11829 security guards; 1013 cars and 3214 motorbikes mobilized; night and day patrols have been added.</p>	<p>“30 cases have been solved and 55 criminals arrested, 5 criminal gangs have been dismantled and 55 eople arrested (...) “all this has done a great contribution to protect the safety of society”.</p>	<p>(...) 破获案件 30 宗抓获案犯 55 人，打掉犯罪团伙 55 个(...)为维护社会治安做出了积极的贡献.</p>
<p><i>STQB</i>, 14/03/94, “The Longgang district has cleansed more than 5.000 sanwu people”, p. 2.</p>	<p>The Longgang police bureau has deployed its troops, all levels have been mobilized to launch actively the “self-cleansing, self-verifying” sanwu people</p>	<p>“within 10 days of campaign 5603 sanwu people have been deported, 1524 shacks, small stalls and shops along the public road have been cleaned-up and destroyed, 20 criminals have been arrested and</p>	<p>(...) 遣送三无人员 5603 人，清理和拆除公路沿线的窝棚，个体店铺，出租</p>

	campaign”.	48 affairs discovered”.	屋等 1524 间 (...)
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In some instances, photographs and their legends contribute to building an image of the state and party authorities that is controlling strictly the sanwu people at the checkpoints and who's action is fast and effective. I have chosen three sets of pictures from the 1994 cleansing campaign to illustrate how these photographs and legends convey such meanings. As can be seen below, the four photos show border stations officials who do their job of control. This series of pictures may be seen as a way of representing state officials who perform their job with much effectiveness, the result of their performance being that the sanwu people are left out of the zone. The legend of these photographs read:

“After the Spring festival, masses of mingong head South to look for work. All the officers of the Shenzhen Special economic zone are checking rigorously, blocking vigorously and controlling with determination the incoming “sanwu people” who are penetrating in the Zone” (全体官兵严格把关，严格查堵，坚决控制三无人员流入特区. Quanti bingguan yange baguan,yange cha du; jianjue kongzhi sanwu ren yuan liuru tequ)²⁴².



Source: *SFB*, 26/02/94, no title, p. 2.

²⁴² *SFB*, 26/02/94, no title,p. 2,

The second series of pictures shows sanwu people being registered, a bulldozer which is destroying lodgings and, eventually, sanwu people being locked into repatriation trucks. These three pictures offer, I argue, an illustration of how the power of the state, as an entity whose action brings about visible effects, is “theatralized”. The legend goes:

“No doubt that Shenzhen has been built assiduously by the tens of millions of laborers hailing from everywhere in the country. But for some time, since masses of sanwu people have penetrated into the zone, it has brought about many bad influences to the social order (security) and to residents’ life. People are expecting this cleansing, it will improve further the management of the city in order to create a good environment where everybody will be happy to work and live” (深圳是由千千万万的劳动者辛勤建起来的 (...).人们期待通过这次清理进行完善城市管理，造成一个人人安居乐业的良好环境. Shenzhen shi you qianqian wanwan de laodongzhe xinqin jian qilai).

The legends explaining each picture say:

“Picture 1: clarifying identity; picture 2: repatriation to leave the Zone; picture 3: “razing huts” (认明身份，遣送出关，夷平窝. Renming shenfen, qiansong chuguan, yiping wodian)²⁴³.

The three legends somehow refer to important attributes of state power since they refer to issuing official documents such as temporary residence permits or work permits, to controlling, locking and expelling people, and to deciding on what should be or should not be allowed as legitimate forms of habitat. Note that the last sentence of the legends opposes the sanwu people for whom Shenzhen will not be a cosy nest” and “the creation of a good environment in which everybody should be living and working happily”. Two types of urban dwellers are distinguished very clearly: the sanwu people whose presence is illicit on the one hand, and ordinary people who are residing in Shenzhen legally, either permanently or temporarily.

The last series of photographs show the cleansing process and some of its effects. The title in large characters on the right hand side of the pictures reads “To cleanse the sanwu people in order to strengthen the management of the city”. The legends go as follows:

Picture 1: “a bulldozer is destroying illicit shacks”; picture 2: “after the illegal huts have been destroyed, the area of Lianhua Mountain where sanwu people live has turned into ruins”; picture 3: while the cleaning-up

²⁴³ This term is particularly strongly connoted since the term 夷 « yi » relates to the notion of extermination. This term was used in ancient China to refer to the extermination of an entire family which was a form of punishment. The term 平 “ping” relates to making flat, to flattening. The term “yiping” somehow refers to the idea of getting fully rid of something. Therefore, the result of this action indirectly refers to the purification of the environment.

work has started on a big scale, some sanwu people are still staying in the area”; picture 4: “The police and city management personnel are cleansing the sanwu people”²⁴⁴.



Source: *STQB*, 15/03/94, p. 2.

Main headline: “To cleanse the “sanwu people” in order to strengthen the management of the city”.

²⁴⁴ *STQB*, 15/03/94, “Qingli sanwu ren yuan, qianghua chengshi guanli”, p. 2.



Source: *STQB*, 09/03/94, p. 9.

Main headline: “Shenzhen is not the cosy nest of the sanwu people”.

Through the material relating to the 1994 cleansing campaign presented up to now, we can see how pervasive expressions related to the military and to wars are. I have also stressed that the image of state authorities that is being constructed through this campaign is one of the party-state action that is quick and effective. A related feature of the representation of state and party-authorities is that their action has a transformative capacity in the sense that it is able to bring about an orderly and tidy environment. In such articles, the transformative action of the cleansing troops may be stressed very figuratively as in the hereafter fragment:

“A move to cleanse the sanwu people, like the wind and the rain, is washing the entire Shenzhen. People have realized happily that through 20 days of sudden attacks, the nights in the Special zone are already much quieter, the Special zone’s sky has got clearer” (一场清理三无人员的行动，恰似风和雨，洗涤着鹏城大地。人们高兴地看到，经过 20 天的突击清理，特区的夜晚已经多了几分安静，特区的天空也变得更加晴朗 Yi chang qingli sanwu ren yuan de xingdong, qiasi feng he yu, xidi zhe Pengcheng da di. Renmen gaoxing de kandao, jingguo 20 tian de tuji qingli, tequ de yewan yijing duo le jifen anjing, tequ de tiankong ye bian de gengjia qinglang)²⁴⁵.

²⁴⁵ *SWB*, 19/03/94, “Tequ duo le ji fen an’ning”, p. 3. The photographs within this page show again police officers in front of “sanwu people” who are about to be expelled. In other photographs of the sanwu people, they often either bow their heads or kneel down.

The 1994 cleansing campaign was ended by city and party leaders who are paying visits to the cleansing sites in order to check the results obtained through the campaign²⁴⁶. Interestingly, another way to stress the visible results achieved is to acclaim how beautiful and how green Shenzhen is now²⁴⁷ and that this allowed Shenzhen to get several awards such as “Hygiene national city”, “The advanced city that has exterminated rats”, “Clean and neat city”. This way of ending the campaign stresses even further the opposition between the unsightly presence of the sanwu people and the economic development and the construction of an image for Shenzhen as it was once more made clear that “those areas where the sanwu people lived and which have been cleansed need to be made green and beautiful”²⁴⁸.

6.2 The 1998 cleansing campaign

Now that the 1994 cleansing campaign has been examined, we can turn to the 1998 campaign. Let us first remember that the socio-economic conjuncture in 1998 is different from that of 1994 since, as was highlighted in preceding chapters, 1998 is marked by the economic slowdown caused by the Asian financial crisis and by the increasing tensions on the labor market linked to the laying-off of state-owned enterprises workers. As was stressed in the introduction of this chapter, the 1998 campaign is not covered as widely as the 1994 one. The duration of the campaign is also shorter than the 1994 campaign which lasted over a month, while the 1998 campaign only lasted a couple of weeks. On the whole, major differences can be observed both as to the outlay and to the content of the articles in 1998 when compared to 1994. I suggest looking hereafter at the features of the 1998 campaign in terms of its form and content

6.2.1 *Different outlay, tone and content*

An important change in how the cleansing campaign is covered in 1998 is that headlines are much bigger and photographs much more numerous. It is the whole tone of the titles and articles that has changed to become more lively and somehow sensationalistic. The articles carry more interviews. Journalists carry out a style of on-the-spot reportage, sometimes even

²⁴⁶ *SFB*, 15/03/94, “Zuotian shi lingdao lai dao qingli xianchang”, p. 1.

²⁴⁷ In the second part of the article, the author somehow also highlighted both the need and the limits of cleansing campaigns such as the one that had just come to an end, calling for a normalization of the management of the city. *SFB*, 27/03/94, “Shenzhen meili bu meili”, p. 1. The title of this article reads “Is Shenzhen not beautiful?”.

²⁴⁸ *SFB*, 15/03/94, “Qingli sanwu yao zai jie zai li”, p. 1.

pretending to be migrants themselves and going through the Shenzhen border to check the snakeheads' methods and to verify how effective the checkpoints control methods are. Changes in reporting style need to be related to the larger mutations that the Chinese press has undergone in the nineties and which I pointed to above in chapter 2.

A look at a selection of titles of the 1998 cleansing campaign shows the different overall tone when compared with 1994 titles which focused more on official policy. With the 1998 campaign, the main meaning being conveyed is that the sanwu people *are trying by all means to penetrate into the Special zone* and that the officials encounter difficulties at blocking them. While the action of the local officials is stressed too in the 1998 campaign, doubts on the effectiveness of the cleansing campaign are sometimes expressed. The case of sanwu people being caught several times and being freed the day after they had been arrested is highlighted in several articles. In such articles, it is explained that this situation is due to the fact that sanwu people nurture clientelist relationship with police and security officials. This is worth stressing since no mention whatsoever was made of the issue of clientelism between officials and the sanwu people in the 1994 campaign. In the 1998 articles a cautious reference to this issue is made²⁴⁹.

In the 1998 campaign articles, a similarly to the 1994 campaign, we find a recurrent association of sanwu people with disorder and with the deterioration of the environment. In the 1998 campaign however, this goes together with stressing the need to implement rigorous border controls along with the need to keep cleansing those who have already got into the zone. We can see a focus on sanwu people trying to get in as well as on the strengthening of border controls from the selection of hereafter headlines:

Table 6.4: a selection of the 1998 cleansing campaign headlines

Article reference	Title Chinese	Title English
<i>SWB</i> ,09/02/98, 1.	深圳，警惕，三无卷土重来。 关外： 打着大包小包者又多了，关内：卖花 女和乞讨者又多了。	“Shenzhen, beware! The sanwu people are back. Outside the frontier, those carrying small and big bundles are manifold again. Within the frontier: here are prostitutes and beggars again”.
<i>SWB</i> , 10/02/98, 1.	夜幕下，看看关前黑交易.	“During the night, a glimpse at the underground trade”.
<i>SWB</i> , 10/02/98, 1.	南头关：蛇头猖獗生意旺.	“Nantou checkpoint: the snakeheads are rampant, their trade flourishing”.

²⁴⁹ See for instance, *SWB*, 10/02/98, “Buji wuzheng chuanguan xianqing duo”, p. 1; *SWB*, 13/02/98, “Qing le liang liang bai you lai yipi”, p. 1 and *SWB*, 13/02/98, “Yao cha loudong”, p. 1.

Article reference	Title Chinese	Title English
<i>SWB</i> , 10/03/98 , 1.	想进来吗？	“Do you want to get in?”
<i>SWB</i> , 11/02/98, 1.	三无是怎样进特区的？	“How have these sanwu people got in?”
<i>SWB</i> , 11/03/98, 1.	一趟列车数千乘客有证无证难以查验.	“In one train, several thousands passengers, difficult to check those who have and those who do not have permits”
<i>SWB</i> , 11/02/98, 1.	盲目找工难，劝你早返乡.	“To look for work blindly is difficult”
<i>SWB</i> , 13/02/98, 1.	这些小盲流从哪里冒出来？清了二百又来一批.	“Where have these small blind migrants come from? You cleanse two hundreds of them and a load of them arrives”.
<i>SWB</i> , 13/02/98, 1.	拉开大网清三无.	“Open the net widely to cleanse the sanwu people”.
<i>SWB</i> , 15/02/98, 1.	南头关打蛇头.	“One strikes the snakeheads at the Southern checkpoint”.

Along with a more lively way to cover the campaign, it is noticeable that the sanwu people are not so much an abstract mass of people as they were in the 1994 campaign²⁵⁰. On the one hand, we can perceive a clearer focus on people performing different informal and illicit trades such as prostitutes, beggars, street peddlers, etc. One can observe as well a depiction of the unfortunate fate of mingong (民工, peasant workers) who are trying to enter the zone or who have done so but could not find employment. The two hereafter front-pages with their pictures and legends give an illustration of these trends. In the first front-page, the main headline warns that the sanwu people are back again in Shenzhen, while the smaller headline distinguishes between the peasant workers (民工 mingong) who are numerous at the gates of Shenzhen and the girls selling flowers and beggars who are within the zone²⁵¹. The main legend that goes with the three pictures of this front-page goes as this:

“Yesterday, at the station (...) the journalists could realize that as the high peak of migrant workers was about to arrive, the sanwu people who get in through all sorts of illicit channels are more and more numerous” ((...) 随著打工者返深高潮的来临，通过各种暗道进入深圳的三无人员也渐渐多了.

²⁵⁰ There is a tendency to rather represent small groups of people as well as narrate individuals' stories rather than to mention an abstract category of the sanwu people.

²⁵¹ *SWB*, 09/02/98, “Shenzhen, jingti, sanwu juan tu chong lai. Guanwai, dazhe da bao xiao bao zhe you duo le, guan nei : mai hua nü he qitao zhe you you le”, p. 1. See the first headline in the above table.

Suizhe dagongzhe fan Shen gaochao de lailin, tongguo gezhong andao jinru Shenzhen de sanwu renyuan ye jianjian duo le”).



This front-page article conveys the idea that Shenzhen is surrounded by incoming sanwu people and mingong (民工 peasant workers) who have arrived along with migrant workers (打工者 dagongzhe). Hence a distinction is made between the dagongzhe (打工者), i.e. those who are coming (back) to Shenzhen and have a regular job waiting for them in Shenzhen, the sanwu people such as beggars and young girls selling flowers, and the mingong (民工 peasant workers) who are trying to get in by all means in order to look for work in the zone. It is unclear therefore whether the mingong are considered as being part of the sanwu people once they have got in the zone, depending perhaps on how long they will need to find a regular job. What seems clearer from this article and other articles is that the mingong who are trying by all means to get in the zone are, similarly to the sanwu people, disturbing both the security and the Shenzhen environment:

“Many sanwu people either are staying outside of the Zone or are trying all they can to get in (...) buses and mini-buses when they get to Nantou station turn back, mingong from the interior get out of them carrying small and big bags. Those who can not get in are lying or sitting on the square outside the zone ; they eat and drink there, the rubbish are thrown on the floor, this influences very strongly the security and the environment of this entry to the zone” (进不了关就三五成群地坐卧在关外的广场上，就地吃喝，杂

物乱扔，给关口的治安，卫生环境带来很大的影响 Jin bu liao guan jiu san wu cheng qun de zuowo zai guanwai de guangchang shang, jiudi che he, zawu luan reng, gei guankou de zhi'an , weisheng huanjing dailai hen da de yingxiang).

The last sentence of this article indeed is a demand for tighter controls at the border:

“ (...) This is why, as the wave of peasant workers is coming, we call on the competent departments that every border control station hold firmly the entrances of the zone and block severely the sanwu people, in order to create an excellent environment for the healthy economic development of the Special zone” ((...) 严堵三无人员入关，为特区经济建设的健康发展创造一个优良的环境. Yandu sanwu ren yuan ru guan, wei tequ jingji jianshe de jiankang chuangzao yi ge youliang de huanjing)²⁵².

In this text, those people who are trying to enter the zone or who have managed to get in to look for employment are on the whole described as being lost and unable to know what to do as they are unable to find a job. In the above-quoted text, this meaning is rendered through an interview of a young man who is waiting for a relative to pick him up. Asked what he would do in case this relative did not show up, he was described as “looking at a loss about what to do”²⁵³. The second fragments I want to quote hereafter do too confer the meaning that people who have come to Shenzhen to look for work are either at a loss or are in serious difficulties and that some of them have had no alternative but to head back home. We see pretty well the warning that is addressed to those who are willing to try their luck in Shenzhen. People are warned against the dangers that going through the border via illicit means may imply. People are also warned that officials are checking rigorously the border and that those who would still give it a try are likely to get caught and be sent to repatriation camps²⁵⁴. We may also perceive from the hereafter legends of a nine-pictures front-page that we are dealing here with small groups of people rather than with masses of undifferentiated people. The legends of this 11th of February article goes as this (see picture hereafter:

Main headline: “How have the sanwu people got in?”.

Left hand top: “A group of mingong from Anhui are about to go back home. They are playing poker waiting for the train”.

Right hand-side series of six pictures:

1) This young person from Hunan, just arrived in Shenzhen, she bought a job offers newspaper

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ See also for instance *SWB*, 10/02/98, “Xiang jinlai ma ?”, p. 1 and *SWB*, 11/02/98, “Mangmu zhao gong nan, quan ni zao fan xiang”, p. 1.

²⁵⁴ *SWB*, 10/02/98, “Yemu xia kan kan hei jiaoyi », p. 1 ; *SWB*, 10/02/98, “Buji wuzheng chuanguan xianqing duo”, p. 1.

- 2) These three guys from Hubei had arranged that a fellow villager come to greet them, but he is nowhere to be found.
- 3) These three more or less 15 years-old young girls, after having just entered the zone, they are discussing which job centre they should go to. They are planning to look after other people's children? What will their lot be?
- 4) These four guys from Jiangxi have entered the zone through Buji gate, but now they do not know where to go to look for work.
- 5) At the city employment centre, this young girl from Henan with a very worried face, she has been in Shenzhen for 7 days already and has not found an appropriate work yet. What is she thinking about?
- 6) On the street, this lady from Sichuan told journalists, she has been in Shenzhen for more than one week already, she had no choice but to distribute advertisement notices.

Middle-page pictures:

“Another group of working sisters (打工妹 dagongmei) is getting on a train heading to Shenzhen”.

“The disappointment of father and son, he said work was not easy to find, they are planning to go back”.

The people who are looking for work are described as “gold diggers” who have “poured blindly into Shenzhen (盲目蜂拥而来. Mangmu fengyong er lai)”. It is explained that these mingong have not the proper *suzhi* (素质 quality) in order to find work in Shenzhen and that Shenzhen, “is not their gold-rush paradise, instead of finding all sort of illegal ways and facing all kinds of dangers in order to get into the zone” they “had better try to find a solution in accordance with their quality²⁵⁵”. One should note that in 1998, the Shenzhen mainstream media published quite a few articles reflecting on the difficulty for many people to find employment in Shenzhen. To require from peasants that they find a solution “in accordance with their quality” is characteristic of conceiving peasants as only fit for specific work and not others and this, I argue, is an illustration of deeply socially embedded representations of peasants in contemporary China which is here mobilized in a specific circumstances of tensions on the labor market²⁵⁶ (see next page for the *SWB*, February 11th 1998 front-page).

²⁵⁵ *SWB*, 11/02/98, *art. cit.*

²⁵⁶ In a very interesting article on “suzhi education” in the countryside, Rachel Murphy argues that “the educational system disseminates a meritocratic ideology that labels and filters out low *suzhi* rural people, legitimizing structural biases (...) The labelling and filtering of rural people means that particular types of knowledge are seen as appropriate for them while others are not”, Murphy, 2004a, p. 14.



Source: *SWB*, 11/02/98, p. 1.

Interestingly, we come across the use here of the expression of blindness to refer to the migration of mingong who are looking for work in Shenzhen. Along with this expression comes the idea that they had illusions as to how easy it would be to find employment in Shenzhen and in the end they look *out of place* in Shenzhen and are asked to “go back peacefully” to their hometown. This notion of being out of place and being at a loss is further strengthened by the fact that nothing is said about why these people left their hometown in the first place except that their decision was based on illusions (i.e. blindness)²⁵⁷. A striking illustration of this resonance with earlier representations is provided by a February 1998 editorial in which the high buildings in Shenzhen are supposed to have generated the decision to leave the village for Shenzhen in mingong’s minds and that their migration embodies a « high degree of blindness » (很大的盲目性 hen da de mangmuxing):

²⁵⁷ This category also embodies a certain image of the countryside. My informants usually rejected being assimilated to the category of “mingong”. One of them told me: “I want first to tell you that I do not consider myself as a mingong. The job I am doing is not a mingong job. This word is pejorative. I am not a mingong! They often are dirty. Mingong is a word that belongs to the government and it uses it a lot. Among peasants, many have not studied much, that has to do with the rural conditions. This low level of education has to do with history and politics. The government says the peasants are responsible for this, I don’t agree!”. Fieldwork notes, Guangzhou, January 2006.

“among the mingong many are those who have heard that in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, the buildings were so high and so numerous, that one could make so much money and who were impressed. Then, the idea of coming to Shenzhen to “dig for gold” has sprouted”, but they did not know at all that in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, it is not that easy to get gold out of a stone and that not everyone who is longing for his dreams may find a home to go to; they did not know that many of them have had to go back home because they could not find work, or that many of the mingong became the many times cleansed sanwu people because they stayed in the Special zone while their documents had expired. As for the issue of the sanwu people, in our interviews we have realized deeply that among the wave of mingong there is an extremely high degree of blindness” (在这些民工当中有不少听说广州深圳的摩天大厦多么多么高，钱争得如何如何多而心动，于是萌发道深圳的念头 (...) 民工潮的流动有着极大的盲目性. Zhaxie mingong dangzhong you bushao tingshuo Guangzhou Shenzhen de mo tian dasha duome duo duome gao, qian zheng de ruhe ruhe duo er xin dong, yushi mengfa Shenzhen de niantou)²⁵⁸.

In this editorial, one should also note the wish expressed by the editorialist that thanks to the collaboration between the incoming regions and outgoing regions, “the wave of mingong may change from blindness to orderliness” (使民工潮从盲目流动转为有序流动. Shi mingongchao cong mangmu liudong zhuanwei youxu liudong). This wish as well as the characterization of the great degree of blindness are tropes that have been repeated many times in the articles that dealt with peasant migration towards the end of the 1980s²⁵⁹.

While these mingong are sometimes interviewed in the 1998 articles, their replies reinforces their depiction as being out of place. Similarly to the peasants of the 1950s and the mingong of the end of the 1980s, these mingong are required to acknowledge that they ought to go back to their hometown. The legitimacy of their presence in Shenzhen, just as that of the sanwu in the 1994 campaign as well, is not discussed: their place is in the countryside or at least outside the Special zone.

²⁵⁸ *SWB*, 15/02/98, “Wu chuan mo qing xin”, p. 1. See hereafter for a picture of this front-page.

²⁵⁹ See Zhao Shukai, 1996 for arguments against this idea of rural spontaneous migrations as being disorderly. Such a conception, as I have stressed in chapter 5, is linked to a bureaucratic conception of organized migration as *the* legitimate and orderly form of population mobility.



Source: *SWB*, 15/02/98, p. 1.

In order to conclude this analysis, I wish to quote a February 1998 editorial that concentrates most of the features of the 1998 cleansing campaign. Firstly, the distinction is made in the first paragraph between the “working mingong” (打工的民工 *dagong de mingong*) and the numerous mingong who do not have the proper documents and are forced to remain outside the zone:

“Just after the Spring festival, the working mingong hailing from Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, etc. come swarming (...) Many mingong who would like to come to Shenzhen to work, do not have the proper documents have no choice but to stay at the gate and think of the many channels they could use to get in” (春节刚过，从湖南，湖北，贵州等地到深圳打工的民工就蜂涌而来了。在南头,布吉检查站，许多想到深圳打工又没有合法证件的民工不得不滞留在关口并想方设法通过各种渠道进入特区。Chunjie gang guo, cong Hunan, Hubei, Guizhou dengdi dao Shenzhen dagong de mingong jiu fongyong er lai le. Zai Natou, Buji jianchazhan, xueduo xiang dao Shenzhen dagong you meiyou hefa zhengjian de mingong bu de bu zhiliu zai gunkou bing xiangfang sheaf tongguo gezhong qudao jinru tequ).

Secondly, among the sanwu people, people doing specific trades are pointed to and their presence is described as disturbing the environment and social order:

“At the same time, people will have noticed that the beggars, girls selling flowers and people sweeping cars are more numerous again. This situation warns people: beware the sanwu people are back again! The sanwu people are an old big problem of the Special zone. At the station, at the airport, the girls selling flowers try to sell flowers to you, as soon as they see you, the young boys who sweep cars use their black piece of cloth to sweep your window and then they show you their ever so dirty hands to ask for money... The problem of sanwu people staying in the Zone has influenced directly Shenzhen’s image”(人们开始发现特区内的乞讨，卖花女，擦车仔等又开始多了。这样情形提醒人们：警惕，三无人员卷土重来 (...)三无人员滞留特区带来的问题，已经直接影响了深圳的形象。Renmen kaishi faxian tequ nei de qitao, maihuanü, cachezai deng you kaishi duo le. Zheyang qingxing tixing renmen: jingti, sanwu ren yuan juantu chonglai).

Eventually, the need to strengthen the control at the border in order not to have to spend great amounts of money to cleanse the sanwu people out each year is stressed:

“This phenomenon warns us: the root of solving the sanwu people problem is by tying firmly the “bamboo fence”! No matter how many tricks the sanwu people have, no matter how great their competence, they can not just fly over the border! Moreover, as to the snakeheads who are openly tempting the mingong outside the gate, are the authorities going to catch them? It may not be as in the past years when we waited until masses of sanwu people were in the zone and then we had to spend great amounts of personal, of material and of money to cleanse them and repatriate them! (根治三无，关键在于扎紧篱笆！三无人员门路再多，蛇头的本领再大，总不能长了翅膀飞越二线进来 (...) 每年，市委，市政府都要耗费大量的人力，物力，财力，清理滞留特区的三无人员。Genzhi sanwu, guanjian zai yu zhajin liba! Sanwu ren yuan menlu zai duo, shetou de benling zai da, zong bun eng zhang le chibang feiyue “erxian”jin lai (...) Meinian shiwei, shi zhengfu dou yao hao fei daliang de renli, wuli, caili, qingli zhiliu tequ de sanwu ren yuan)”²⁶⁰.

As has been shown above, the emphasis within the coverage of the 1998 campaign was more on depicting people trying to get into the zone and those who had entered as being lost while unable to find regular employment. Towards the end of the campaign however (between February 12th and February 16th, it is again the cleansing process, its means, and its results which are detailed. On the 16th, the SWB front-page reads in big characters “This year, Shenzhen is planting big

²⁶⁰ SWB, 10/02/98, “Zhajin liba”, p. 1.

trees” (今年深圳种大树. Jinnian Shenzhen zhong da shu)²⁶¹. While on the right hand side of the same front-page, one may read that one thousand rented houses had been controlled in Nanshan and that in Shekou eighty people without proper documents had been cleansed as can be seen from the hereunder photograph and legend:

Legend: “Yesterday, the Nanshan patrolling brigade has been mobilised to cleanse in a centralized way 103 sanwu people such as girls selling flowers, beggars, etc. On this photograph, the Patrolling brigade n° 1 is cleansing a sanwu people who is selling messily on Changxing road” ((...) 这是一中队巡警在常兴路清理乱卖的三无人员. Zhe shi yi zhong dui xunjing zai Changxing lu qingli luan baimai de ‘sanwu ren yuan’).



Source : SWB, 16/02/98, p. 1.

Main headline: “This year, Shenzhen is planting big trees”.

Similarly to the way the 1994 campaign was ended-up, the results of the cleansing are made visible through stressing how “green” Shenzhen has now become.

6.2.2 High visibility in public space and low discursive visibility

²⁶¹ SWB, 16/02/98, “Jinnian Shenzhen zhong da shu”, p. 1.

The question of knowing whom the sanwu people category can encompass as well as the issue of its practical use need to be raised. An important informal sector developed in Shenzhen within the segmented labor market at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties (Scharping and Schulze, 1997, pp. 178, 182; Liu Kaiming, 2003, pp. 62-65; Li Ruojian, 1994, p. 37; Zhou Daming, 2000, pp. 111-112; Zhou Daming, 2006, p. 14). Many of the people who are sometimes included into the sanwu people category are part of this informal sector. No statistics are available as to the size of this sector, but estimates for the 1990s and early 2000s range between 300.000 to 600.000 people (Wang Tianchou, 1993, p. 44; Liu Kaiming, 2003). According to Liu Kaiming, it is likely though that these figures are highly underestimated since the 2000 national population census showed that for the township and village enterprises of the two major industrial districts of Bao'an and Longgang, only 50% of the migrant workers in factories had applied for temporary registration (Liu Kaiming, 2003, pp. 62-63). Within the sanwu population, Liu Kaiming argues that there would be about 50.000 people who are engaged in illegal activities, while for the remaining 250.000 to 500.000 people, "no matter what people may think, they are a component of the economic prosperity of this city", he went on (*Ibid.*, p. 62)²⁶².

This category contains a hidden ambiguity in its application, and it is precisely this ambiguity which gives it both its symbolic and performative power. As I noted above, it covers odd-job workers, unlicensed petty entrepreneurs and traders, in-house personnel, unregistered migrant workers laboring in underground and legal factories, as well as those engaged in minor repairs to such items as bicycles or shoes, beggars, street entertainers, prostitutes, but also people engaged in various sorts of traffics or thefts. Depending on the socio-political context, this category may be more or less inclusive. It has been argued, one should note, that Chinese officials tend to interpret the rules concerning the presence of migrants in cities in a very flexible manner (see Solinger, 1999; He Xin, 2003; Li Qiang, 2003; Zhao Shukai, 2003). This category, enacted through various formal and informal practices of control affecting residency and employment, and more generally the use of urban space (Zhang Li, 2001a), allows to govern the people who are targeted by it in a highly flexible manner. On the one hand, it allows the kind of affirmation and orchestration of state power which I have documented in this chapter. Through the cleansing campaigns, which also aim at trying to tame criminality, the party-state authorities can demonstrate their capacity to wipe out the sanwu people. But the everyday way to govern those labeled sanwu people relies far more on keeping silent or "invisibilizing" the various social relationships and relations of domination between local officials and sanwu people (Stoecklin,

²⁶² Still according to his estimates, within the unregistered population, there would be more than 100.000 people working in registered or unregistered Shenzhen factories; more than 50.000 house maids and other people working for local families; more than 50.000 transportation and construction workers; more than 50.000 scrap collectors; more than 10.000 beggars, as well as a small number of girls selling flowers and young kids who sweep cars.

2000, pp. 246-247). Although no study documents such everyday politics, several authors have hinted at the various forms of pay-offs required from migrant workers, if not of outright racketing, by local officials in the Pearl River Delta (Tan shen, 2004; Dongguan diaochazu, 1995; Chan, 2003; Lee Qingkwan, 1998)²⁶³. We shall see in chapter 10 that for many migrant workers, the Pearl River Delta environment outside factory walls means precariousness and the fear of being controlled by the police. On the whole, the various administrations in charge of managing the migrant population in Shenzhen as in other Chinese cities are far more concerned with charging fees from migrant workers than at providing them with services²⁶⁴. In his appraisal of management agencies, Zhao Shukai pointed to the “precautionary pattern of management” of these agencies, observing that they were very much concerned with “receiving applications and charging fees (...), checking and fining, and punishing illegal activities”. Detention and repatriation were described as “the most serious problem” of this pattern of management (Zhao Shukai, 2003, p. 172)²⁶⁵. The experiences of several informants I met during my fieldwork confirmed this pattern as well as a kind of clientelist relationship between migrant workers and local officials. The case of a sweet potatoes seller from Hunan can serve to illustrate this. As we were talking about his job in Dongguan, the sweet potatoes seller suddenly told me angrily:

“In Dongguan, out of ten officials, there may be one good man within the lot. When they come to control hygiene, they chase us! Well, it is true that police officers’ revenues are not very high. When we are in trouble, if it is a small problem, we pay a little. If it is more serious, you have to give more. I used to have a tricycle, but it has been confiscated by a policeman. I know the regulations. I went to the police station and told them that I was not riding in the city centre and therefore I should not have had my tricycle taken away. But they simply would not listen to me! He said I had to pay one hundred yuan to get it back. But that tricycle had already cost me three hundred yuan! I was angry, I shouted at him and left. I could not go to court, you need money for that²⁶⁶.”

²⁶³ Several studies on Beijing migrant settlements shed light on such everyday politics. See for instance Xiang Biao, 1999 and Xiang Biao, 2000; Zhang Li, 2001a and Zhang Li, 2001b; Béja et al., 1999a and Béja et al., 1999b; He Xin, 2003.

²⁶⁴ This feature has been denounced all along the 1990s and, according to several informants working in close contact with migrant workers, there is no indication that this general attitude is changing in Shenzhen and Dongguan, except for the fact that massive detention is not possible any more since the abolishment of the system of retention centres in 2003. Fieldwork notes, Shenzhen, January 2006.

²⁶⁵ As far as I know, no statistics are available on the number of people who have been detained in Retention centres. According to a person in charge of an organization which organizes trainings for migrant workers in Shenzhen, in the 1990s, 1 million people would have gone through such centres in Guangdong province each year, of which 400.000 people would have been detained in the Shenzhen centres. He insisted that these practices were highly lucrative for local governments. Fieldwork notes, Shenzhen, January 2006.

²⁶⁶ Fieldwork notes, Shenzhen, January 2006.

Because they are most visible within the public space, people such as scrap collectors, peddlers or day laborers are also more exposed to such practices²⁶⁷. One of my regular informants used to have a regular job in a factory which he lost in 2003. He then has bought a motorbike and has become a “lakezai” (拉客仔)²⁶⁸ and has had too his motorbike confiscated several times²⁶⁹. These people often deploy strategies to avoid being controlled. One peddler in Foshan told me that, as he had not paid the fee for temporary registration, he avoided certain places and would get out to sell his sugar canes between midday and three pm and would stop until five pm to start again after five²⁷⁰. Visibility seems central in the politics of those labelled sanwu people in several respects²⁷¹: in ordinary times their *discursive visibility* is not high within the media, except on the occasions of cleansing campaigns; the relationship of subordination and of clientelism are generally invisibilized, while in public space their visibility is usually rather high even though they can deploy tactics to be more or less visible at certain moments and in specific spaces²⁷².

Actually, the category of sanwu people may target anyone in the public space, but it is more likely to target those rural people who are most visible, i.e. those who embody most clearly that they hail from (the poorest areas of) the countryside: through the colour of their skin, the kinds of clothes they wear, etc²⁷³. The reason why the environment of the Pearl River Delta has been often described as a kind of no-man’s-land has to do with the fact that any person who would be controlled by security officials and who would happen not to carry the necessary permits along, may be labelled sanwu and have to pay a fine or, if unable to do so, be detained. One should note that the frequency of controls and practices of quasi-racketing vary a lot from one city to another and there are periods when they are more frequent. It is interesting to observe that the pervasiveness of more or less formal forms of control in the public space contrasts with the highly insufficient frequency, not to mention effectiveness, of controls within factories²⁷⁴.

²⁶⁷ According to a study of 2000, in Beijing, between one third and one fourth of rural migrants had had some of their belongings confiscated and forced to pay fines to get them back. This proportion reaches nine out of ten for those rural migrants who are more exposed in their work and whose jobs are low in prestige. Li Qiang, 2003, pp. 126-137. See also Li Peilin, 2003, pp. 163-171.

²⁶⁸ Someone who is providing transportation to people on his motorbike for a fee. The “lakezai” are targets of the sanwu cleansing policies, see Wang Tianchou, 1993, pp. 44-45.

²⁶⁹ He recently has had to pay three thousand yuan as a fine and could not get his motorbike back. Telephone conversation, 21 August 2007.

²⁷⁰ Fieldwork notes, Shenzhen, January 2006.

²⁷¹ This concept of visibility ought to be investigated more systematically than what I am simply hinting at here.

²⁷² A related promising issue which I have only hinted at within the scope of this work is the one of the relationship between the construction of the *discursive visibility* of various categories of people by state agents and within the workplace on the one hand and the *dynamics of visibility* of these categories within public space and the nature of their (more or less prestigious) occupations within the economy on the other hand.

²⁷³ I have observed this several times while travelling by bus in the delta. The Shenzhen checkpoint officials would only control those people who looked like hailing from the countryside, that is, those whose skin was darker.

²⁷⁴ In a 1999 study, Shi Xianmin observed that the proportion of labor inspectors for the number of workers was 1/23.200 in Shenzhen in comparison with 1/4.000 for Hong Kong. Shi Xianmin, 1999, p. 122.

I suggest now to turn to the conclusion of this chapter.



Odd-job workers (daily laborers) in the streets of Foshan (winter 2004).

6.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the sanwu people, a largely encompassing discursive and bureaucratic category, was constantly opposed to social order, to prosperity and the image of Shenzhen as a modern international city. Similarly to the “blind migrants” of the late 1980s, within the 1994 campaign, the sanwu people have been depicted as a uniform voiceless and faceless mass of people often associated to the metaphor of disease and chaos. The sanwu people have also frequently been opposed to the legitimate, both permanent and temporary, residents. Along with this opposition, a differentiated treatment applied to these two “groups” by the Shenzhen party-state authorities has been orchestrated within the 1994 campaign: i.e. benevolence, manifested through “concern” and “love” for the legitimate inhabitants who included migrant workers legally laboring in factories on the one hand, and on the other hand, cleansing, manifested through controlling, arresting, repatriating the sanwu people, as well as destroying their illegal lodgings. By cleansing the sanwu people out of Shenzhen and by getting rid of their housing, “civilized citizens, civilized households, civilized streets and civilized

communities” are designated by the Party-state and “widespread participation and unifying social vision” are publicized (Cartier, 2002, p. 1527)²⁷⁵.

I have also shown that the way the cleansing campaigns were organised pointed to the Mao-era mass-line movements (运动 yundong). The means used, the mobilization of the entire society, the social pressure applied at the local level (Li Zibin, 2000, pp. 504-505)²⁷⁶, the depiction of the cleansing process itself and its visible results all were reminiscent of Mao-era mass-line movements. I have also argued that the 1994 cleansing campaign, more than the 1998 one, corresponded to a way for the party-state to “theatralize” its power. Such affirmation of the party-state power may be thought of as a ritual which affirms the principles of authority and of hierarchy and which belongs to the second dimension of the public transcript, i.e. “public mastery and subordination” (Scott, 1990, p. 111). In this sense, this campaign has an important self-referential dimension in the sense that it tends to depict party-state authorities which through their cleansing operations manage to restore social order and embellish the image of Shenzhen as an international modern city. In this respect, both the 1994 and 1998 campaigns may be conceived as ways to represent the fear of chaos (乱 luan), which may aim at reinforcing the legitimacy of the party-state “as the only alternative to chaos” (Annagnost, 1997, p. 86). The kind of climate of “moral panics” which the campaigns tend to convey allows for a strengthening of some core principles and values which define the party-state such as order and unquestioned authority. In addition to this, it affirms who belongs and who does not, as well as “the sanctity of territory and the fear of transgression” (Sibley, 1995, p. 43).

The 1998 campaign did not so much represent the sanwu people as an undifferentiated mass of people and focused rather on small groups of individuals. In some articles of the 1998 campaign, the issue of the relationship between the sanwu people who were trying to get into the Special zone and the police or checkpoint officials was dealt with on a few occasions and brought in a little more social complexity as to the nature of this relationship. The efficiency of the cleansing campaign was cautiously questioned through hinting at clientelist relationships between

²⁷⁵ Carolyn Cartier observed that « Only streets without informal buildings and shops merit the designation civilized and officials commonly report having to demolish illegal housing, widely attributed to migrants, and also migrant schools ». But she also noted that people through their built environment showed a great capacity of resistance as the cleansing and demolishing operations had to be carried out repeatedly. *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Shenzhen’s former mayor Li Zibin explained that the dynamism of each area of the city had to be mobilized and “that pressure was then transformed into impetuous”, *Ibid.*, p. 411. In an official talk delivered in 1996, Li Zibin insisted that those departments that had been decorated for their comprehensive governing of social order had to be taken as examples and one had to “synthesize and popularize these experiences; all departments in charge of comprehensive governing and all grassroots units had to learn from these advanced models, in order to create an atmosphere of ‘emulate, study, catch up with, help, and surpass’ in the entire city”. *Ibid.*, p. 498. This emphasis on “emulate, study, catch up with, help, and surpass” (比, 学, 赶, 帮, 超. bi, xue, gan, chao) is somewhat reminiscent of slogans promoted during the Great leap forward (1958-1960).

sanwu people, snakeheads and officials. On the whole however, I would argue that these articles that focused on snakeheads methods, and on the cracks in official controls, as well as on the various ways through which sanwu people were trying to get into the Special zone were somehow “preparing the ground” for the cleansing process by displaying the image of the Special zone as being under threat, which in fine strengthened the need for effective cleansing by party-state authorities. In this sense, the way the presence of the sanwu people is problematized in the Shenzhen mainstream press is somehow reminiscent of the basic problematization which was identified in both 1950s and later 1980s representation of migration, i.e. “Presence of migrants—social disorders—need to control, arrest and expel – effective action”.

The analysis of the 1998 cleansing campaign has also shown that the category of mingong (民工 peasant worker) re-appeared in a context of tensions on the labor market. Interestingly, in the 1998 articles, a distinction is made between people who perform a legitimate work, i.e. those who *dagong*, and those who are looking for work, are stagnating outside or within the Special zone and who therefore may become part of the sanwu people category. Hence, the mingong category seems to stand in between the sanwu people and the legitimate migrant worker. It allows perhaps to include those people who may not be categorized so easily as sanwu people, nor as legitimate migrant workers (打工者 *dagongzhe*) since they are simply looking for work, but who could turn into sanwu people category if they contravene official regulations by overstaying without proper employment.

The sanwu people referred to in this chapter have “a positive Other” within the Shenzhen mainstream press: the legitimate, hardworking and exemplary migrant worker. How this figure of the legitimate migrant worker is constructed will be the focus of chapter 9.

In the next chapter however, I will explore how the issue of labor abuses is dealt with in the Shenzhen mainstream press in the mid and late 1990s.

Chapter 7: Labor abuses in the Shenzhen mainstream press

Before looking at how the issue of the violation of labor rights of migrant workers is depicted in the Shenzhen mainstream newspapers, I firstly examine how this issue was covered in the first few issues of the “World of Dagong” page. As we shall see in the next chapter, the “World of dagong” representation of migrant workers is very personalized. Indeed most of the texts focus on people’s individual stories depicted with emotion. In the first few issues of the “World of Dagong” in 1994, the issue of migrant workers’ rights was dealt with in such a way. After having looked at these “World of dagong” texts, I will turn to the rather cold and depersonalized, and more technical way to talk of workers’ rights in the Shenzhen mainstream newspapers²⁷⁷.

7.1 Migrant workers’ rights in the “World of dagong”

On the whole, in the first few issues of the “World of dagong” page, one finds a concern with the general issue of migrant workers’ rights such as labor rights, lodging and accommodation. Such a concern is expressed for instance in an article from February 4th 1994, a woman migrant worker is angry at the low pay she gets for her labor, she writes:

“(…) the Shenzhen I had been dreaming of for so long is actually so miserly. Thirty days a month, 240 hours of work, over time work in the evening, a little over time work every day and the little we get is this miserable salary. During these thirty days, I have endured so much pain, I have felt sick, could not get a leave, I have been forced to work when I was sick, I got insulted by the group leader when there were second choice products; to have one’s hands injured by sharp machines and to bleed, all this actually made my eyes wet with tears” ((...) 手被锋利的机架割破，鲜血直流，这一切迫使我的眼睛湿润了。shou bei fengli de jijia gepo, xianxue zhiliu, zhe yiqie poshi wode yanjing shirun le) .

She then is wondering what she could buy with so low a salary but eventually has not choice but to accept it²⁷⁸. Note that the article ends on a note that, contrarily to the vast majority of the “World of dagong” articles, is not optimistic. One finds in it the contrast between migrant

²⁷⁷ As there were a rather small number of articles covering the issue of rights in the *STQB*, *SWB* and *SFB*, I have extended my enquiry to the *Nanfang Ribao* and *Guangzhou Ribao*.

²⁷⁸ *STQB*, 04/02/94, “Di yici ling gongzi”, p. 9. See also *STQB*, 28/01/94, “Ruci hou ci bao bi”, p. 9, for a similar line of argumentation.

workers' hard labor and suffering on the one hand and the fact that such efforts have not been rewarded properly on the other hand. Such a contrast is found again and again in many of the texts sent by migrant workers to the editors of migrant workers' magazines, most often put forward in a much more straightforward manner though than in this article. Such a contrast has not been encountered after February 1994 in the "World of dagong" pages, neither has it been in the 1998-1999 articles. On the contrary, one of the main tropes emphasized again and again is either that migrant workers who have fought and have been willing to learn knowledge and techniques have been rewarded or will be soon or later.

In the first few issues of the "World of dagong", authors also write about how far migrant workers' initial expectations of Shenzhen is from what they are facing once they get there in terms of salaries, work and living conditions. Another common topic is the striking contrast between the conspicuous wealth in Shenzhen and the precariousness of many migrant workers' condition. Greater social recognition for migrant workers and consideration for their rights is sometimes called for by non-migrant authors too²⁷⁹. Three pieces relate directly to the issue of violation of migrant workers' rights in Shenzhen factories. It is worth looking at them since one may perceive how it is attempted to strike a balance between the protection of migrant workers' rights on the one hand and the will not damage Shenzhen's image as a heaven for foreign investments on the other hand. The first of these articles is an editorial that starts by mentioning a former editorial in which the "consciousness of being the master" among workers of State-owned enterprises had been criticized. The editorial goes on:

“(..) since the news of a dagongzai having been slapped in the face has been revealed by the medias, I think it is very important to raise the questions of the need for *dagongzai* also to have a ‘master’s consciousness’ (主人翁意识. Zhurenweng yishi) ».

To slap somebody in the face, it is then explained, is “a typical shame to *someone’s dignity* (...)”. It is stressed that the main issue is to know why the persons who have been slapped in the face “do not have a correct attitude of resistance”. On this issue, the author argues that salaries are much higher in Shenzhen than in the interior of the country. Therefore, we learn that for migrant workers from the countryside finding a job here is extremely difficult, that “all he can do is to swallow it”, and that “it is not possible to obtain both dignity and bank notes”. Interestingly, the next section deals with an important contradiction relating to the status of labor in Shenzhen and

²⁷⁹ *STQB*, 07/01/94, “Women xuyao fantang”, p. 9; see as well *STQB*, 21/01/94, “Kan dianshi de gushi”, p. 9; *STQB*, 18/02/94, “Wo xiang you yi zhang chuang”, p. 9; *SWB*, 23/01/93, “Gongdi yingchun”, p. 2.

more generally with how to conciliate the labor conditions of migrant workers in the Special economic zones with the nature of Chinese market socialism.

This article also hints, implicitly at least, at the issue of how to build legitimacy in a changing political economy (of labor) and how to build a new discourse on society:

“(…) the laboring people have fought so many battles and wars, precisely to obtain a status of being a master. For today’s citizens in this socialist country, it is not possible to forget this quality of master. Migrant workers are not slaves, if only this basic human dignity is hard to guarantee, then how to even talk of [being] the master? They need to remember at any time their status of being the master and need to be keen at using the law to protect themselves and to react correctly when a boss hurts human dignity or other rights ” (劳动人民经若干年的奋斗抗争，才挣得一个主人地位，如何今身为社会主义国家的公民，主人资格仍然不容抹杀，不能淡忘. Laodong renmin jing ruogan nian de fendou kangzheng, cai zhengde yige zhuren diwei, ruhe jin shenwei shehuizhuyi guojia de gongmin, zhuren zige rengan burong mosha, bun eng danwang)²⁸⁰.

Having referred to the need for migrant workers to be able to use the law in order to protect their rights, in the remaining part of this text the extent of the abuse of migrant workers rights is largely minimized as it is explained that “obviously bosses who are slapping migrant workers are extremely few” and that “bosses who are applying harsh management to migrant worker may not be criticised”. At the same time it is emphasized that “it is necessary to respect the *dignity and rights* of dagongzai [and that] to slap a dagongzai in the face may absolutely not happen again”. It should be noted that since the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone has been created in 1979, one of the earliest and perhaps most sensitive criticism addressed to the Shenzhen Special economic zone had to do with the labor conditions in Shenzhen and the idea that it contradicted with Chinese socialism.

In the second piece, the issue of non-payment of migrant workers’ salaries is denounced, but, again, the problem is said to concern only a small minority of companies. More importantly, while the problem is denounced and while the protectionism that protects those companies that violate the legislation is also condemned, a migrant worker explains that he and his work-mates have benefited from the rapid and effective action of the newspaper and of the labor supervision organs. Through such combined action, not only did they get their delayed salaries, but each worker also received 100 yuan extra pay²⁸¹. Hence, the article may be read as a testimony of the effective combined action of the state and of the city official newspaper. Moreover, in the last

²⁸⁰ *STQB*, 21/01/94, “Dagongzai fei nongnu ye”, p. 9.

²⁸¹ *STQB*, 04/03/94, “Laoban, bie zai tuoqian gongqian le”, p. 9.

paragraphs of the text, optimism is expressed as to the implementation of the new labor legislation. The issue is expressed as being chiefly a problem of consciousness, both on the part of migrant workers and of employers :

“What is a matter of rejoicing is that these few non-payment of workers’ salaries have all been correctly solved through the common efforts of the concerned organs of the city government and of the labor bureau. And another reason for which these issues have been solved is that workers’ consciousness of protecting their legal rights has been reinforced. When the legal rights have been violated in an unjustifiable way, the number of legal cases have increased, some of them have even confronted the bosses in court. This means that this legislation has already penetrated deeply into the heart of dagongzai (...) Concerned persons have pointed out that as the legislation has just been published, the number of legal prosecution for non-payment of salaries will increase, but as the legislation is increasingly applied, and as the entrepreneurs’ legal consciousness progressively improves, this intolerable issue [of non-payment of salaries] will decrease” ((...) 在合法权利受到侵犯时，投诉的人数也多了起来，有些甚至能与老板对质，这说明“条例”已深入百万打工仔的心里 Zai hefa quanli shou dao wuli qinfan shi, tousu de renshu ye duo le qilai, youxie shenzhi neng yu laoban dangting duizhi, zhe shuming “tiaoli” yijing shenru baiwan dagongzai de xinli”).

According to such an argument, the state legislation on labor should penetrate the consciousness of migrant workers and of employers and this ought to result in better conditions for migrant workers.

Let us now look at the third article that dealt with labor rights. The story of a female migrant worker who has been locked into a cage with two dogs for having stolen shoes in the factory where she was working is narrated. The need for improved management according to the law and for the establishment of trade unions in these factories is stressed. The interesting element in this piece is that the presence of the trade union within factories is associated with having a “home/family” that can take care of migrant workers. It is stated:

“If such a ‘home’ is not set up, then things such as to put somebody with a dog in a cage will happen again. If there is no home/family to support the employees, to speak for them, once their rights are abused, to whom can they tell it? And also who can then talk of having the status of a master?” (如果没有为职工撑腰，替他们说话的‘家’，权益收到侵犯向谁诉说？又何谈主人翁地位的稳固。Ruguo meiyou zhigong chengyao, ti tamen shuohua de ‘jia’, quanyi shoudao qinfan xiang shei sushuo?)²⁸².

²⁸² *STQB*, 11/03/94, « You ganyu yu gou tong long », p. 9.

7.2 Rights abuses in Shenzhen mainstream newspapers

I will show in the following sections that the issue of rights is dealt with in the *STQB* as well as in the other Shenzhen mainstream newspapers, using a very different vocabulary that departs from the one used in the first few issues of the “World of dagong”. A vocabulary far more technical and referring to migrant workers not as “working boys” (打工仔 dagongzai) or “Working sisters”(打工妹 dagongmei), but as “laborers from outside”(外来劳工 wailai laowugong), or even sometimes “employees” (职工 zhigong), or “workers”工人 (gongren), these last two terms being used for permanent workers and employees. While the issue of migrant workers’ rights has vanished in the “World of dagong” pages, the idea of migrant workers as needing a home (*jiu*) is a recurring in 1994 and 1998-1999 as a way to talk of the relationship between migrant workers on the one hand and the party-state as well as society at large on the other hand.

7.2.1 *Making clear the scope and nature of the abuses of migrant workers’ rights.*

In several articles the various forms of abuses of workers’ rights such as overtime work, confiscating workers’ identity documents, delays in payments of salaries, bad treatments and lack of security measures on the worksite are described. For instance, in one March 1994 *STQB* article that relates to a Guangdong province delegation to the National Peoples’ Congress meeting that had raised the issue of workers’ rights abuses at the 8th session of National peoples’ Congress meeting. Three major kinds of abuses were listed. The first kind of violation has to do with delays in payments of salaries and excessive overtime work. It is stated that workers are working between 10 and 12 hours a day in most of the “sanzi” enterprises and that in some extreme cases, the maximum length of labor may reach 28 hours without interruption or up to 280 overtime hours per month per person. The second sort of violation relates to the absence of safety measures and unemployment benefits due to the low rate of signing of labor contracts, with proportions of workers signing contracts as low as 10 to 30% within several of the Pearl River Delta Special Economic Zones. The third type of abuse has to do with harsh factory rules

and violation of individuals' rights (厂规苛刻, 侵犯人身权利 changgui keke, qinfan renshen quanli)²⁸³. The factory regulations detailed in this article relate to severe limitations of migrant workers' use of their time and space and often consist, it is explained, in listing forms of penalties for any infringement on factory regulations. Eventually, it is announced that the new legislation protecting the rights of employees set up by the Standing Committee of Guangdong province people's assembly started being implemented from March 1st 1994. The Standing Committee members said that "to increase labor controls, to do things resolutely according to the law is the fundamental solution to stop practices of exploitation and of oppression (杜绝盘剥和欺压行为 panbo he qiya xingwei)"²⁸⁴. Several articles stress the existence of a gap between the labor legislation and its lack of implementation that results in the frequent abuse of workers' rights. For instance, a series of three *STQB* articles detail specific items of the "Shenzhen Special Economic Zone labor regulation" and confront them with the labor situation in Shenzhen. In this series, the regulations on payment of salaries, on the signing of contracts and on overtime work are detailed. In each case, the seriousness of the abuses of such regulations by "some companies" is stressed. Cases of infringement of workers' rights as well as figures relating to the number of complaints are listed. At the end of these articles, solutions to solve these problems are put forward²⁸⁵. We can see from these articles a recurring feature of how the issue of migrant workers' rights is dealt with in the Shenzhen mainstream newspapers under scrutiny, i.e. the focus on the extent of abuses goes together with an emphasis on the need to implement labor legislation in the Pearl River Delta factories and with explicitly detailing the content of core items of the labor regulations. One should note however, that while the extent of abuses is qualified as being "serious" or "very serious" (严重 yanzhong or 很严重 hen yanzhong), at the same time the extent of these abuses is often minimized and the outlook on the future is resolutely optimistic. The contribution to economic development of foreign companies is highlighted and it is often stated that "only a minority of companies do not respect the law"²⁸⁶.

This tendency to highlight the seriousness of abuses while at the same time stressing that such abuses only concern some or a minority of companies may be read as a will to conciliate at the level of discourse or ideology both the interests of foreign investors and the rights of migrant

²⁸³ The abuses described are on the whole similar to those highlighted in Chan, 1998 and Chan 1995 ; Tan Shen, 2004 ; Pun, 1999 and Pun 2005; Liu Kaiming, 2004 and Liu Kaiming, 2005.

²⁸⁴ *STQB*, 30/03/94, "Huan wo hefa quanyi", p. 9.

²⁸⁵ *STQB*, 24/02/94, "Tuoqian laowugong gongzi wenti yanzhong", p. 14; *STQB*, 03/03/94, "Laowugong wugu kaichu", p. 14; *STQB*, 07/03/94, "Changqi jian jiaban, shenti shou sunhai", p. 14.

²⁸⁶ *STQB*, 28/01/94, "Gongren hefa quanyi bu rong qinfan", p. 1. See also *STQB*, 24/02/94, "Baiwan laogong zhuangkuang yi xi yi you", p. 14; *SFB*, 10/02/98, "Dagongzhe ni dongde baohu ziji ma?", p. 2.

workers. A clear will to protect the environment for investors is expressed in several articles. This emphasis on the need to protect the environment for investors is associated with the affirmation of the will to go on with the policy of reform and opening. A January 1994 article illustrates this dual emphasis most clearly as the two hereafter fragments show:

“We welcome foreign businessmen to come to establish factories and companies, we will continue to endlessly create a good environment for investments, provide investors with all sorts of advantageous policies and measures. Therefore, great amounts of foreign investments continuously enter Shenzhen and this has stirred the economic development of Shenzhen. While foreign investors make profit legally, they also get the legal protection of our country. We have always proceeded this way and we shall always keep on doing things this way.

“all foreign companies, including Hong Kong, Taiwan and Chinese overseas companies, that are coming to China to invest and create companies, must imperatively respect our national laws; they must run their business according to the law; they must absolutely respect the laborers, respect the dignity and legal rights of laborers. This is the minimum requirement. We have seen that the majority of foreign companies do respect the law. But there is a minority that do not respect our national laws and regulations, that do not respect laborers, that employ workers illegally, that injure and beat workers, that maltreat them, that confiscate part of their salary and postpone payment and whose workers work in terrible environment (...) We believe that as to this minority of bosses who abuse human rights, who oppress workers and who run their business illegally, the competent authorities have to make them change their practices and as to those who still do not comply, they must be punished severely according to the law” (... 到我国投资兴业, 都必须遵守我国的法律...都必须尊重广大的劳动者, 尊重劳动者的人格和合法权益...我们看到大多数的外商是这样做的。但是也有少数外商不遵守我国的法律...我们认为, 对于那些少数侵犯人权, 虐待工人, 违法经营的老板, 有关部门必须令其改正对不听劝告, 不加以改正者必须依法从严惩罚. Dao wo guo touzi xingye, dou bixu zunshou woguo de falü (...) dou bixu zunzhong guangda de laodongzhe, zunzhong laodongzhe de renge he hefa quanyi (...) Women ka dao daduoshu de waishang shi zheyang zuo de. Danshi ye you shaoshu waishang bu zunshou woguo de falü (...) Women renwei dui naxie shaoshu qinfan renquan, lüedai gongren, weifa jingying de laoban, youguan bumen bixu ling qi gaizheng, dui bu ting quangao, bu jia yi gaizhengzhe bixu yifa congyan chengfa)²⁸⁷.

7.2.2 *Reacting to right abuses*

In several articles, the issue of the abuse of migrant workers' rights is described as having an impact on social order and economic development as well as damaging Shenzhen's reputation.

²⁸⁷ *STQB*, 28/01/94, “Gongren hefa quanyi bu rong qinfan”, p. 1.

In addition to highlighting the extent of labor rights abuses, measures to counter such abuses are also detailed in several articles. Three main types of measures are found in most articles that offer solutions to the issue of labor rights abuses²⁸⁸. The first kind has to do with the increase of controls within factories by the competent authorities. The implementation of large scale control campaigns organized by the Labor Protection Bureau are publicized and the need to carry out controls more often is stressed repeatedly. The second main type of measures put forward recurrently has to do with improving both companies and migrant workers' knowledge of labor regulations. Two articles offer interesting illustrations of sponsoring chiefly these types of measures. In a February 1994 piece, the policy of the Bao'an District as to the normalisation and legalisation of the management of wailai "outside labor force" is explained. This policy includes improving the propaganda work towards both employers and employees so that they apply the labor regulations themselves. It is explained that a journal called "Labor inspection journal" has been published, a TV programme on the employment situation has been designed in collaboration with a Sichuan province television channel. Several other means of information such as special columns in newspapers or advertisements have also been used in order to propagate the labor regulations. In October 1993, a verification campaign of the employment situation and production safety situation has been carried out of almost 5.000 companies and more than 20.000 "Shenzhen labor regulation" leaflets have been distributed. These steps, it is said, "have rectified irregular practices and the employers and employees have both been taught about the labor legislation. It is also explained that the management personal needed to be trained in order to elevate its quality (素质 *suzhi*). Here too we have a summing up of the measures applied such as the training of 5.000 management personal of companies including factory directors and managers. This "has efficiently improved the level of management of these companies". In addition to these successful measures, a third type of measure is also repeatedly put forward: the level of integrated management of the outside labor force has been improved. In 1993, it is explained, the District departments of labor, police, office for complaints, trade unions, women association, and civil affairs have collaborated to rectify the situation in 25 companies where serious problems subsisted. 404 cases of injuries and deaths that occurred in factories have thereby been solved and as a result these organs "have done the work they had to achieve in order to guarantee the legal rights of companies and of the vast number of laborers". The measures described in each case have generated immediate effects, which, as I shall argue

²⁸⁸ See for instance *STQB*, 30/01/94, "Laodong jiufen handai jieju", p. 2; *STQB*, 21/02/1994, "Shenfenzheng bei kou, xingdong shiqu ziyou", p. 14.

hereunder, is an important feature of how the issue of abuses of migrant workers' rights is dealt with in the Shenzhen mainstream press²⁸⁹.

As noted above, very strong emphasis is put on the need for migrant workers to be or become conscious of the labor regulations and thereby to be able to have their rights respected. A major keyword in this policy orientation is that of urging migrant workers to “use the law as a weapon” (用法律作为武器 *yong falü zuowei wuqi*) in order to protect their legal rights. In a 1994 letter to the editor of the *STQB*, a reader asked:

“Why are our *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* so weak? (...) With the law as a shield, if they knew how to use the law in order to protect their legal rights, the *dagongzai* would not be so weak any more (...) In order to raise the consciousness of the law of migrant workers, we must imperatively rest on the efforts of all departments of society (...) The *dagongzai* just need to know that the law exists, they need to know how to use the law as a weapon, then they will be able to protect themselves, then they will be able to stand upright” (我们的打工仔、打工妹为什么这样软弱? (...) 有了法律作后盾, 懂得用法律来维护自身的合法权益, 打工仔就不会那么软弱了(...) 只要打工仔心中有法, 懂得用法律作武器, 那他们就能保护自己, 他们的腰杆就会挺起来. *Women de dagongzai, dagongmei weishenme zheyang ruanruo?* (...) *You le falü zuo houdun, dongde yong falü lai weihu zishen de hefa quanyi, dagongzai jiu bu hui name ruanruo le* (...) *zhi yao dagongzai xinzhong you fa, dongde yong falü zuo wuqi, na tamen jiu neng baohu ziji, tamen de yaogan jiu hui ting qilai*)²⁹⁰.

In addition to highlighting the extent of abuses of migrant workers' rights, to linking this issue to social stability and to the image of Shenzhen, as well as detailing the different types of measures being carried out, the feature that comes out most forcefully out of these articles on migrant workers' labor rights is that of party-state authorities that care for migrant workers, and that are acting immediately and most efficiently to solve labor abuses. The result of such effective action by party-state authorities is expressed by migrant workers' gratefulness. Hereafter I will show how this party-state action is built in a couple of texts. Similar narrative structures will then be put into a table to better illustrate the regularity of such structures. A February 1994 article offers a particularly evocative illustration of a narrative structure that may be summarized as such:

²⁸⁹ *STQB*, 09/02/1994, “Wei wailai laowugong paivou jienan”, p. 11.

²⁹⁰ *STQB*, 31/01/94, “Tigao dagongzai de falü yishi”, p. 14.

migrant workers' rights abused (they are helpless) – party-state immediate intervention/mediation – problem solved+ migrant workers grateful

Several articles start by depicting cases of workers' actions such as strikes, sittings, often caused by delays in payment of salaries at the period of Spring festival. The consequence of such delays is that migrant workers are left without resources unable to go back home during the Spring festival holidays. In this article February 1994 article, the case of two to three hundreds workers who are sitting in front of the People's government and who are demanding that the government helps them get their salary back is depicted²⁹¹. The way this specific situation is solved is characteristic of the manner in which the state and party authorities are depicted in their function of mediator and, in the end, of protector of migrant workers' legal rights. Firstly, the representative of the city mayor gets to the site as soon as he was told of this situation. With the Police, the officials of the Labor Inspection Bureau and the Armed Police, he manages to invite the petitioners to get into the reception room and start a discussion with six migrant workers' representatives:

“On the one hand, he investigated the situation in detail. On the other hand, he severely reprimanded the petitioners on their errors and on the harmfulness of their deeds. Through being educated, the petitioners recognized their error and immediately got back to their factory dorms. In the afternoon, once informed of the situation, the head of the city government bureau required that the competent authorities organize an enquiry and solve this problem as quickly as possible” (经过教育这批请愿工人承认了错误，马上撤回住所。当日下午，市政府办公厅负责人听取情况汇报，并要求有关部门组织调查组，尽快解决好这件事。Jingguo jiaoyu zhepi qingyuan gongren chengren le cuowu, mashang chehui zhusuo. Dangri xiawu, shi zhengfu bangongting fuzeren tingqu qingkuang huibao, bing yaoqiu you guan bumen zuzhi diaochazu, jinkuai jie jue hao zhe jian shi).

The Shenzhen labor bureau officials had already tried to solve the issue of delays of payment in this factory the preceding year in December. Eventually the People's court of the Luohu District made the decision to require that some of the material of the factory (mainly some silk) be sold in order to solve the living difficulties workers were facing. The Labor Bureau also paid 40.000 yuan to the workers to solve the subsistence problems and the transportation costs of the 300 workers:

²⁹¹ The delay in payment amounted to four months.

“In order to make sure that this sum of money got as soon as possible in the hands of workers, five officials of the city mayor bureau, the Luohu District people’s court and of the City Labor Inspection Unit got to the Jingdou Silk suits factory in order to communicate the spirit of the city government decision. When workers were holding the money in their hands, they were moved to the point of not being able to utter a single word, some of them even cried” (当工人们捧着发到的钱款时，激动得说不出话来，有的甚至流下眼泪。Dang gongrenmen pengzhe fadao de qiankuai shi, jidong de shuo bu chu hua lai, youde shenzhi liuxia le yanlei)

In this text, state authorities are reacting instantly and with much efficacy to solve this problem. Firstly through careful listening, persuasion and education the government officials firmly affirm the norms of conduct that are expected from workers. Secondly it organizes its competent organs to act quickly so as to protect workers’ rights. In the end, we have state authorities that are benevolent, caring for workers’ rights and able to protect these rights.

Migrant workers, on their part, are grateful to the state authorities. We need to stress again that in many other similar articles, the state and party authorities react immediately and their action is followed by immediate effects, i.e. workers’ rights are restored²⁹². The second article is the only one that has been (supposedly) written by a migrant worker who is expressing his gratefulness for the efficient action of the authorities in solving their issue of delay in payment. In the first part of the article he explains their situation: 200 employees in a hotel have not been paid since September while they had worked very hard for their boss. They were despaired since without their salaries they could not go back home for the Spring festival. A supplier of this hotel found this situation unjust and decided to denounce this case to the mayor telephone hotline. This phone call resulted in the immediate reaction of the city leaders:

“Within two hours the city leaders had convened employees of the Labor Bureau, the City Complaint Bureau, the City General Trade Union, the City Trade and Industry Bureau, the City Intermediate Court, the Luohu District Government, as well as the Luohu branch of the Police Bureau, in order to start the mediation work. All these people worked very hard, from March 3rd at 5 pm until the 6th at 3 am through the night, in the end they made so that this labor conflict got solved. We got this year’s salary for January very quickly. For this, we are very grateful to the above-mentioned organs and people for the care and help they have provided us, the nation of workers, with” (我们很快领到一月份的工资。为此我们深深感谢上述各部门和有关认识队我们打工一族的关怀和帮助 Women hen kuai lingdao yi yuefen de gongzi.

²⁹² Above this very article, the newspaper editor specifies the rights of foreign companies to invest in Shenzhen as well as their duty to respect workers’ rights. The “imperative need for workers to elevate themselves, to augment their quality (suzhi) and their legal consciousness and to ‘protect their rights through legitimate means and legal methods’ is affirmed as well.

Weici women shen shen ganxie shangshu ge bumen he youguan renshi dui women dagongyizu de guanhuai, bangzhu)²⁹³.

We can see from this article too that migrant workers are grateful for the successful action of the city leaders. In this very article, this gratefulness is expressed both within the text and in the title of the article itself. In the preceding article, it is interesting to note that some migrant workers were moved and grateful to such an extent that they even shed tears²⁹⁴. I can not help but to tentatively draw a parallel between this image of migrant workers who are crying as a result of the party-state action and those tales and images of peasants or other subaltern groups that were crying in the struggle sessions (斗争会 douzheng hui) during which they narrated the bitterness of the past (i.e. ancient society, before liberation and before the party intervened) and the great hopes that they could nurture in the future.

Interestingly, in one text, the newspaper is referred to explicitly as the “party newspaper” (党报 dangbao) that represents migrant workers’ voice and that guides them:

“Many migrant workers have told this journalist that the series of reportage on the abuse of migrant workers’ rights has expressed migrant workers’ true voice” (不少劳工对笔者说，深圳特区报连续报到劳工合法权益受到侵犯问题说出了他们的心里话。Bushao laowugong dui bizhe shuo, Shenzhen tequbao lianxu baodao laowugong hefa quanyi shoudao qinfan wenti shuo chu le tamen de xinli hua).

Three workers (工人 gongren), it is said, have come to the newspaper office to take part to a seminar. One can read about this :

“They said that they had read the whole series, that the rights of workers (gongren) had been violated, the party newspaper has spoken for workers (gongren), at the same time it has helped workers understand the labor legislation, how to protect one’s legal rights with the law They have cut and photocopied the whole series of articles to let the dagongzai and dagonmei who can not read newspapers react to it; their reaction has been very strong (党报为工人说了话同时也使他们懂得了劳动法规，怎么样来依法保护自己的

²⁹³ *STQB*, 07/03/94, “Jie qian tuoqian gongzi wenti huo jie jue, dagongzai zhi han ganxie ge fang qingli”, p. 14.

²⁹⁴ See also this February 1998 article in which a migrant worker “who had lost his hand shed tears after he received his financial compensation”. *SFB*, 04/02/1998, “Wei le wan ming wailaigong de quanyi. Bao’an zhuihui tuoqian gongzi jiu bai yu wan yuan jishi”, p. 1.

合法权益。Dangbao wei gongren shuo le hua tongshi ye shi tamen dongde le laodong fagui, zenme lai yifa baohu ziji de hefa quanyi).”²⁹⁵

An interesting element that can be inferred from such texts is that through its official medias, the party-state is representing the interests of migrant workers and that the fact of reading these articles is conceived of as having a kind of enlightening function for migrant workers²⁹⁶. After having read the articles, they tend to become conscious of their rights and can therefore better protect them according to the law. Through such tales it is also the guiding function of the party that is expressed in the sense that these tales are exemplary, either through the action of the party-state authorities or in the behaviour of migrant workers themselves²⁹⁷. Before getting to some concluding remarks concerning this chapter, I suggest looking at the hereafter table which further illustrates the recurrent narrative structure highlighted in these articles.

²⁹⁵ *STQB*, 14/03/94, “Hefa quanyi shou sun xielie baodao zai gongren zhong yinqi qianglie fanying”, p. 14. See also *SWB*, 31/01/1994, “Buji laoguanzhan weihu laogong quanyi. Qi jia gongchang gongren nadao tuoqian gongzi”, p. 3.

²⁹⁶ I am using the term migrant workers although in the text it is often referred to them as “workers” (工人 gongren).

²⁹⁷ See for instance *SWB*, 21/01/1994, “Sun changzhang bu buchang fadao daren. Dagongmei wei zuo gong you shou shangcan”, p. 3.

Table 7.1: Recurrent narrative structure in Shenzhen mainstream press articles dealing with rights

Art. ref.	Rights abused	State authorities immediate action	Problem solved (& gratefulness)
<i>STQB</i> , 02/02/94, p. 9.	They were excited and required powerfully that the City government help them solve their problem of delay in payment of salaries (...) There are 300 people in this factory, from December 1992, the company has had more than 5 months of delays which amounts to 299.000 yuan.	(...) the head of the city government bureau required that the competent authorities organize an enquiry and solve this problem as quickly as possible (...)	When workers were holding the money in their hands, they were moved to the point of not being able to utter a single word, some of them even cried”.
<i>STQB</i> , 05/02/94, p. 2.	The Shengxiong company accumulated delays in payments of salaries of the labor force (...) more than 100 workers got in great trouble because of this, they could not go home before the Spring festival.	When the City Labor Bureau and the City Bureau of Complaints learned of this situation, they were very concerned and they interceded through several channels.	They went to the worksite at once to negotiate. The City Inspection brigade and the city bureau of complaints immediately made sure that the laborers got their salary paid and get their deposit back.
<i>STQB</i> , 21/02/94, p. 14.	(...) because their salaries had not been paid, several tens of peasant workers (mingong) became angry. Their subsistence was endangered and those injured did not get compensation.	Once the Bureau of Complaints got their complaint, it ordered the competent organs to enquire into this important matter at once.	Eventually the company had to pay the salaries and medical treatments of these peasant workers as well as a a complement for daily expenses. It also had to pay for the expenses of their return trip home (...) All this made that this case of abuse of laborers’ rights got solved.
<i>SWB</i> , 31/01/94, p. 6.	(...) the workers of 8 factories were worried because they had not been paid, they decided not to go to work any more.	Once the Township Labor Management Station learned this, it went to these 8 factories to carry out an investigation and discovered that cases of delays in payments of salaries were serious. It immediately required from the factories that it pay these salaries very quickly .	As you protect so warmly the legal rights of workers, from now on, when we encounter any problem, we will address our complaints to the Labor management station, and we will not have to worry any more”.

7.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the issue of migrant workers' labor rights was dealt with in the Shenzhen mainstream written press. On the whole, it seems that articles dealing with the issue of labor rights belong to a different register than those of the "World of dagong": we found here much fewer individual stories than in the "World of dagong" corresponding to a de-personalized way of talking about the issue. The many expressions referring to the "sweat and blood" of migrant workers were rare and the categories used to refer to migrant workers were seldom those of "migrant workers" (打工者 dagongzhe), "working sisters" (打工妹 dagongmei) or "working boys" (打工仔 dagongzai), but more technical or formal terms such as "wailai laowugong" "labor force or workers from outside" (外来劳工 wailai laowugong), "employee" (职工 zhigong) or terms such as "worker" (工人 gongren) which are seldom used to refer to migrant workers.

We have seen that many articles dealing with this issue tried to strike a balance between the protection of migrant workers' rights and the concern of preserving Shenzhen's image in term of the environment for investors. The role of mouthpiece of the party is confirmed in that the press constructs a vision that corresponds to an idealized situation of migrant workers' rights. The guiding function of the party press was observed through publicizing the labor legislation and its exemplary implementation thanks to the party-state action and institutions. Denouncing labor rights abuses was an occasion to represent party-state institutions and officials that show a high degree of concern for migrant workers and whose action is quick and effective. In these texts, we find a definitely optimistic outlook on the future of the conditions of migrant workers within Shenzhen factories. The great exemplary visibility of the party as well as the focus on "concern and loving care" can be read too as the affirmation of the historically embedded claim to be governing through benevolence (Shue, 2004, pp. 41-42).

At the background of publicizing such exemplary situations there seems to be an idea of "illuminating" other people's action in the future (migrant workers in the protection of their rights, officials in their making sure that the labor regulations are respected, and managers within factories who are supposed to implement the labor regulations). I have pointed to the strong emphasis found in many articles on "persuasion" and "education" referring to the need to

improve the knowledge of the labor regulations of both employers and migrant workers through a diversity of measures depicted above²⁹⁸.

Such a recurring emphasis allows to hint at a similarity with the Mao-era strong emphasis on political communication as an integral and key component of party-state-lead policies. We find the same stress on making a very extensive use of all means of political communication. The wide use of the medias is operating at the level of initial implementation and at the level of reporting upon the success of such campaigns, with the publicly expressed hope that this will stir up further people to follow such exemplary cases. The emphasis on bringing about a consciousness of legality among workers, officials and factory management personal is also reminiscent of the Mao-era conviction that a person's correct mindset is decisive in determining people's acts and the course of reality.

One could argue that widely publicizing the Shenzhen labor legislation or the labor law is eventually somehow paying off since one can witness for the last few years that more and more migrant workers use key elements of this legislation to put forward their claims²⁹⁹. One can obviously also see the importance of empowering migrant workers through the knowledge of regulations. Since the beginning of the 21st century, more and more individuals such as lawyers or "NGOs" and other burgeoning institutions are active in publicizing the various labor regulations among migrant workers³⁰⁰. This being said, the emphasis on education as key to solving labor right abuses keeps silent the entire socio-economic and political elements of context within which these issues are located and how powerfully such context constrains potential protest or claim-making. The discourse on educating migrant workers also intersects with discourse on the low quality of peasants and its concomitant geographic and spatial hierarchizations which take for granted that since many migrant workers hail from regions of the interior of the country, "their quality (素质 *suzhi*) is low, their consciousness of legality is weak, therefore when their rights which ought to be protected are abused, they often choose to tolerate such abuses and have an attitude of submission"³⁰¹. Finally, one can't help but to highlight the fact that while the Shenzhen

²⁹⁸ In a March 1994 article for instance, as a way to solve the issue of the lack of respect of conditions of employment by companies, it is stressed that "the competent organs should increase the study of the "Shenzhen Special Economic Zone labor regulation" at the level of companies, they should do things according to the regulations, supervise and urge companies to hire workers according to the employment procedures". See *STQB*, 03/03/94, "Laowugong wugu kaichu", p. 14.

²⁹⁹ This trend is not limited to labor abuses but also applies to the case of peasants' various forms of resistance as the work of O'Brien and Li Lianjiang or Yu Jianrong show. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, 2005; Yu Jianrong, 2006. Other fields where a similar trend can be observed is that of environment or issues of land property.

³⁰⁰ See for instance the Women and Gender Research Center located at Zhongshan university which publishes cartoon-like leaflets that detail migrant workers' labor rights, see Lu Ying, 2003; another example is that of the Shenzhen Contemporary Society Observation Research Centre headed by Liu Kaiming which publishes a monthly magazine called *Forum* and which organizes various sorts of trainings for migrant workers.

³⁰¹ *SFB*, 10/02/1998, *art. cit.*, p. 2.

Special economic zone has generated huge amounts of revenues for local authorities for more than two decades out of migrant workers' labor, only a tiny amount has been invested in the improvement of labor conditions or in means of labor supervision (Shi Xianmin, 1999; Liu Kaiming, 2003). The emphasis on "education" and on its results or potential results seems to weigh very little against the fact that Shenzhen's migrant workers' conditions have not improved during the 1990s and that their salaries were lower in 2000 than in the early 1980s.

The values and attributes embodied by exemplary migrant workers in the "World of dagong" special page within *Shenzhen Special zone daily* will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 8: 'The world of dagong'. Representing the legitimate migrant worker

This chapter aims at describing the “dominant public transcript of migrant workers”, i.e. how migrant workers are discursively represented mainly through the official newspaper of the municipality of Shenzhen called the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*. I have focused on a weekly special page devoted to migrant workers that started in January 1994 in the *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*. I have focused on 1994, 1998 and 1999, from January to March as well as August. I will examine with which values and attributes migrant workers are recurrently associated and the main features of legitimate figures of migrant workers will be documented. Recurring narrative frameworks will be highlighted. Through this special page dedicated to migrant workers, not only are migrant workers and the notion of “dagong” constructed in specific ways, but it is also the images of Shenzhen and of the party that are being shaped.

8.1 The “World of dagong”: a special page for the “happy nation of migrant workers”

In order to look at how migrant workers are being discursively constructed, worker, I suggest first examining the very first article that is dedicated to the opening of the “World of dagong page”. Doing so will allow to highlight some core elements that are recurring within the discursive construction of migrant workers and of Shenzhen. Such recurring elements, along with those that will emerge later on, will be developed in a more systematic way in 1998-1999, but several of the core elements are already included in this opening article. In this article, the special page is presented to the paper’s readership. Let us look at the two hereafter fragments:

“Millions of migrant workers who have created the myth of Shenzhen, we eventually possess a world that is ours (...) It is migrant workers who have shaped the modern city we live in. For its prosperity, they have paid so much of their blood and sweat, they have accumulated so much joy and sorrow (...) “migrant worker” has been the pronoun for physical workers : but today, its connotation has gone far beyond this domain. Blue collars are *dagong*, white collars are also *dagong*, all the workers who are laboring

industriously are *dagong*. Today, for this enlarging community of *dagongzhe*, we have created solemnly this special page called ‘*Dagong shijie*’ (The «World of *dagong*»). In this world, you will see a ‘happy nation’ that silently makes sacrifices for the construction of Shenzhen (...); each migrant worker who has a tasteful life in the SEZ, this no doubt will reveal the interest of labor » (我们终于拥有了一片属于自己的世界 (...)(他们付出了几多血汗，同时蕴藏几多酸甜苦辣 (...))你会看到为建设深圳默默奉献的‘快乐一族’。Women zhongyu yongyou le yi pian shuyu ziji de shijie (...))Tamen fichu le jiduo xuehan, tongshi yuncang le jiduo suan tian ku la (...))Ni hui kandao wei jianshe Shenzhen momo fengxian de kuaile yizu)

302.

Let us note first the language and celebratory tone rather characteristic of most of the editorials and of some articles within the “World of *dagong*” pages³⁰³. Such a tone, as well as some of the terms used, as we will shall see in further details in the later sections and chapters of this dissertation, may on the one hand be at odds with some of migrant workers’ voicing of their much complex and often contradictory work and living experiences in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta. On the other hand, it may concur with some of migrant workers’ writings such as letters sent to the editors of magazines dedicated to migrant workers. The stress on migrant workers’ merit and contribution to the economic development and prosperity (they have “*shaped*” Shenzhen) of the zone is being emphasized repeatedly in the body of articles of the Shenzhen mainstream written daily press for 1994, 1998 and 1999, as well as in some of the reportage literature. This is true too of the idea that such achievements have been attained through their silent suffering and sacrifices (see the reference to their “silently making sacrifices for Shenzhen”). Their depiction as a happy crowd (the “happy nation”) does correspond too to the general depiction that is made of them within the “World of *dagong* page” as well as within other Shenzhen daily papers such as the *Shenzhen Evening News*.

Another feature of many of the “World of *dagong*” that needs to be highlighted here is that one can perceive a trend toward romanticizing the *dagong* life and experience. Such a process of romanticizing *dagong* will become even more pervasive as the migrant literature is developing in the second half of the nineties and as the repertoire of idioms and formulas related to narrating the *dagong* experiences is getting richer. The overall depiction of *dagong*, as part of this romanticization, is that it is something rather “light”. One important formula found repeatedly in the migrant literature is that “the outside world is both very exciting, and very wunai” (外边的世

³⁰² *STQB*, 07/01/94, “Zhouwu women zoujin ‘*dagong* shijie’”, p. 9.”

³⁰³ The articles in the “World of *dagong*” should be divided in two main types: articles written by journalists (including editorials) and articles which are (said to be) written by migrant workers.

界很精彩，外边的世界很无奈。Waibian de shijie hen jingcai, waibian de shijie hen wunai), an expression found in the mainstream press as well. The emphasis in such texts is definitely on the positive dimensions of dagong and of vagrancy described as a process in which mainly young people from the countryside are floating (漂泊. piaobo), trying their luck (闯一闯 chuang yi chuang) in different places, learning and gaining in maturity through different experiences including failures. In such writing, the very idea of leaving the village is often associated with notions of autonomy and of self-determined choice. The hereafter fragment gives a nice illustration of these features since it contains several core keywords of the dagong literature:

“Looking at all these tickets with all their different forms and colours reminded me of my vagrant life (漂泊的日子. Piaobo de rizi), I could not help but to have a feeling of vastness and sadness. But at the same time it also produced a feeling of self-satisfaction, because I am the one who chose this path of leaving the village to face the world and all of the money used was money I made myself (...). Thinking about my vagrant life outside, I had to provide for everything from food, lodging to work (因为必经外出闯世界这条路是我自己选的 (...) 想想在外飘泊的日子里，衣食住行全靠自己 Yinwei waichu chuang shijie zhetiao lu shi wo ziji xuan de (...) Xiang xiang zai wai piaobo de rizili, yi zhi zhu xing quan kao ziji)³⁰⁴.

There is indeed a tendency in these early articles of the “World of dagong” to both refer to difficulties and concerns that are central to the lives of migrant workers such as the precariousness of their condition once they are in the city and at the same time to refer to this reality in a clearly optimistic way. As I will demonstrate later, one of the major difference between the narration of migration and life in Shenzhen in the Shenzhen daily press and that found in migrant workers’ magazines or in interviews is that even in those early pieces of the “World of dagong” that deal with the difficulties migrant workers encounter in Shenzhen, one does not have such a weighty feeling such as the one often encounters in migrant letters sent to magazines³⁰⁵. In one such “World of dagong” tale, a journalist tells the story of a person who is looking for a job but who does not manage to find one and does not even find a shelter. I suggest looking at how the text begins and how it eventually ends as an illustration of how the contrast is built into the text:

³⁰⁴ *STQB*, 18/02/94, “Kao xugong lücheng”, p. 9.

³⁰⁵ Let’s note that the mixture of sadness and happiness is also characteristic of a largely accepted way to describe the dagong experience as both sweat and sour as expressed by the idiom “Sour, sweat, bitter and spicy” (酸甜苦辣. suantian kula). I discuss further this category and its use in migrant workers’ narratives in chapter 10.

“When one sees how beautifully men and women are dressed in the streets of Shenzhen, who would have thought that among these beautiful men and women there would be somebody who would not find a stable shelter and who would be scared of being left outside in the streets” (...)

“Today’s Hu Fang is still moving around like a member of a nomadic tribe, but in an extremely sad situation there comes happiness and he often sings cheerfully the song “I would like to have a home, not too big a place, so that when I want to sleep I can have a bed...” (今天的胡方，依然如游牧部落般走居不已，悲极生乐，常会高唱一曲： “我想有个家，一个不需要太大的地方，在我想睡觉的时候，能够有亦张床。 Jitian de Hufang, yiran youmu buluo ban zou ju biyi, beiji sheng le, chang hui gaochang yi qu : « Wo xiang you yi ge jia, yi ge bu xuayao tai da de difang »)³⁰⁶ .

This latter fragment is characteristic of the sort of romanticization referred to earlier, with people floating freely. It denotes a certain “lightness” and is definitely optimistic. As I will show later, the feeling of fear of being left on the street without job, without shelter, possibly without the required permits, is a very often expressed feeling among migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta (see *infra*). The interesting feature in this quote article is that while the feeling of fear of being left out on the streets is expressed in the first section, the potential serious consequences of this situation for this migrant worker are largely counterbalanced or trivialized by the stress on the likely improvement of his situation expressed by his singing cheerfully.

Now that the main features of the first issues of the “World of dagong” has been highlighted, I suggest turning to the main features of the hegemonic discourse on migrant workers in the “World of dagong” pages of 1994, 1998 and 1999.

8.1.1 *Hard work, sacrifices, contributions and belonging*

In my comment of the opening article of the “World of dagong” page, the emphasis on the contribution and sacrifices that migrant workers have been doing for the economic development of Shenzhen has been observed. Their contribution and merit has been praised not only in the Shenzhen press, but also in several other publications³⁰⁷. In such writings, migrant

³⁰⁶ *STQB*, 18/02/94, “Wo xiang you yi zhang chuang”, p. 9.

³⁰⁷ See for example *STQB*, 14/01/94, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 28/01/94, p. 6 ; *SWB*, 13/02/94, p. 3 ; *SWB*, 21/02/94, 1 ; *Guangzhou Ribao*, 04/02/94, 1 ; *STQB*, 04/02/94, 6 ; *STQB*, 25/03/94, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 22/08/94, p. 6 ; Dong Jie et al., 1990, pp. 67-71; Liu Kaiming, 2003, pp. 1-12, 66-83; Foshan Wenyi zazhishe, 1998; Yang Panghai, 2000, pp. 1-13; Xie Jiangmin and Shi Xiaowen, 2000.

workers are sometimes labeled “builders of the Special zone” (特区建设者. tequ jianshezhe)³⁰⁸. Statements such as “without these migrant workers (dagongzhe) Shenzhen would be an empty city”, “migrant workers are the ones who have shaped the modern city we live in”³⁰⁹ exemplify this idea of merit and their role in the city’s prominence. It is stressed repeatedly that it is through their painful labor, their steadiness, industriousness and perseverance that they have been able to contribute to economic development and prosperity³¹⁰. As can be seen from table 10.1 in chapter 10, the stress on hard labor, on industriousness and on the fact that such efforts are most often rewarded is the most recurrent one in the 1994, 1998 and 1999 texts examined.

The idea of making contributions is often expressed in combination with that of having a sense of belonging. More precisely, the idea is that it is because they are contributing to the region’s prosperity that they ought to have a sense of belonging. Indeed, several stories of the “World of dagong” raise the issue of migrant workers’ not being able to stay permanently in Shenzhen, while at the same time “feeling at home”, or having a sense of belonging. While in these tales it is made clear that migrant workers can not stay permanently in Shenzhen it is stressed though that they too can feel that Shenzhen belongs to them through their contributing to building it and thanks to the sense of pride this contribution gave them. Let me illustrate this with three fragments. In one article, a former migrant worker comes back to Shenzhen and sees buildings he contributed to build “with his own blood and sweat”:

“A few years ago, I had already left my family to work (dagong) in Shenzhen and I gave my most beautiful four years of youth to Shenzhen (...) When I entered the hotel that crystallized my blood and sweat, my tears started to flow down. When I see the many clients in the hotel now, I feel extremely proud, it was as if this hotel was mine” (我已经把最美好的青春岁月留给了深圳 (...) 走进这家凝聚着我的心血和汗水的酒店大门时, 激动的泪水一下了就盈满了眼眶, Wo yijing ba zui meihao de qingchun suiyue liugei le Shenzhen (...). Zoujin zhe jia ningjuzhe wode xinxue he hanshui de jiudian shi, jidong de leishui yixia le jiu ying mang le yankuang)³¹¹

He thereafter remembers his years of work in construction. At the beginning, as the work was heavy, the pay low, and as he missed his family, he felt very much depressed and lost. Cramped with ten co-workers in a tiny, humid and dark tent, he was thinking of himself as somebody who

³⁰⁸ *STQB*, 01/14/94, p. 6 ; *SWB*, 02/21/94, p. 1 ; *STQB*, 94/02/04, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 94/03/25, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 94/08/22, p. 6. The term “builder of the zone” has been opposed to that of “gold diggers” in the debates on the values of Shenzhen society that ensued within the “Shekou storm”. On the “Shekou storm”, see the next chapter.

³⁰⁹ *STQB*, 01/25/98, p. 9 ; *STQB*, 03/22/98, p. 9 ; *STQB*, 03/22/98, p. 9 ; *STQB*, 03/29/98, p. 9 ; *SWB*, 24/02/94, p. 7.

³¹⁰ See *SWB*, 13/02/94, p. 3 or *STQB*, 28/01/94, p. 9 for illustrations.

³¹¹ *STQB*, 22/03/98, “Wu hui rensheng”, p. 6.

is building a luxurious hotel for other people by shedding his blood and sweat, then he felt even more “nervous and unstable, sad and hopeless”. It is the attitude of his co-workers that helped him change his outlook and own behavior:

“(…) my co-workers did not think that way. They were working silently (…) I remember one day as I was building a wall with a worker called A Xin: ‘Look at this wall, we have built it up’. From then on, I started to observe this wall with admiration and peace, and found it very beautiful. This is only because I could have such a way of thought that I could persevere and remain here” (正是因为有了这样的想法，我才坚持着留下来。Zheng shi yinwei you le zheyang de xiangfa, wo cai jianchi zhe liuxialai).

“When we remember our years of *dagong*, perhaps we shall feel somewhat pained, grieved and helpless, but we do not regret it. On the contrary, we feel extremely happy that we have been able to do a few very real things for Shenzhen (想到苦涩，辛酸和无奈，我们并不感到后悔而是为深圳能做一些实实在在的事情感到由衷地高兴。Xiangdao kuse, xinsuan he wunai, women bing bu gandao houhui er shi wei Shenzhen neng zuo yixie shi shi zai zai de shiqing gandao youzhong de gaoxing)”

The second piece narrates the story of a migrant worker who was feeling somewhat despaired in the face of adversity and whose hopes of success faded. He regained hope thanks to his work-mates’ attitude while they were celebrating the construction of a building :

“I remembered a poem that said ‘The bridges of the Special zone have been built by migrant workers!’ I remembered that migrant workers too are the masters of Shenzhen. There is not one achievement of the Special zone, not one single success of Shenzhen that is not soaked with the blood and sweat of migrant workers, why should I lament myself ?” (特区立交桥是我们打工仔扛起来的…我们打工族也是深圳的主人，特区的成就，深圳的成果无一不漫透着我们百万打工者的血汗自己有什么理由顾影自怜。Tequ lijiaoqiao shi women dagongzai kang qilai de (…) women dagongzu ye shi Shenzhen de zhuren, tequ de chengjiu, Shenzhen de chengguo wuyi by mantou zhe women baiwan dagongzhe de xuehan, ziji you shenme liyou gu ying zi lian).

Thinking of Shenzhen, “this thousand-stars shining city”, thinking of the “unique sense of pride of his fellow builders” (*jianshezhe*), this migrant workers was moved. His concluding statement was that

“as Shenzhen is the resting post of our youth, we should therefore extend our youth in this resting post, since we have walked on the road to *dagong*, so it is a youth without regret and a shameless destiny” (打工是

我们的青春的驿站, 就该在这驿站上延伸自己的青春, 既然走了打工之路, 就是无悔的青春和无悔的生命. Dagong shi women qingchun de yizhan, jiu gai zai zhe yizhan shang yanshen ziji de qingchun, jiran zou le dagong zhi lu, jiu shi wuhui de qingchun he wuhui de shengming)³¹².

In these two texts, migrant workers' merit and efforts, exemplified by their "sweat", "tears" and "blood", are embodied in Shenzhen's buildings which eventually provide them with a sense of pride and belonging. In another text with a strikingly similar plot, a migrant worker explains that as these tall building were growing and as he was among this armed cement, he turned more powerful, more and healthy and more mature³¹³.

It is worth mentioning that the sentence "migrant workers too are the masters of Shenzhen" quoted in the above fragment is actually a slogan launched by the Shenzhen trade union in the beginning of the 1990s³¹⁴. This slogan is an echo of the Mao era when the workers of State-owned enterprises were considered "the masters of the country". These workers were called *gongren* and they enjoyed a very advantageous status under the planned-economy system, something migrant workers could not even dream of. Migrant workers are very seldom labeled *gongren*. The mobilization of this slogan and highlight put in several articles on this way of feeling that Shenzhen is theirs is interesting since it seems so much at odds with what is expressed by migrant workers in much sociological work and in some of the migrant literature³¹⁵. This slogan is also symbolically loaded since it refers to the social category upon whom an important part of the Maoist regime rested which is in this case used for migrant workers. I shall come back to discuss this slogan later in the next chapter where I examine how it is mobilized by migrant workers in their writing of letters to the editors of migrant workers' magazines.

It is clear from most of the World of dagong articles that migrant workers from the countryside are not supposed to stay permanently in Shenzhen. The sense of belonging does somewhat balance this impossibility of staying permanently in Shenzhen. In a few instances, migrant workers are given a permanent residence permit because of their outstanding achievements. Such tales belong to the repertoire of model workers who are being rewarded for their exemplary attitude at work and with their workmates. One particularly interesting example of such tales is that of ten outstanding temporary workers who are being praised for their

³¹² *STQB*, 25/03/94, "Dagong wode guangrong de xuanze", p. 9.

³¹³ *STQB*, 29/03/98, "Huainian Shenzhen", p. 6.

³¹⁴ For a severe criticism of this rhetoric of "migrant workers too are the masters here", see Dong Jie et al., 1990, pp. 67-72 and Liang Yibo, 1992, p. 6.

³¹⁵ I am aware that there may be tendency from migrants to stress the positives aspects of their migration. On this, see Pieke, 1999, pp. 1-27 and Sayad, 1991.

achievements for which they were given a permanent resident permit. The reasons for granting them with this permit is described as being their “painful labor (艰难劳动 jiannan laodong) and the outstanding results they have achieved (创造出的出色成绩 chuangzao chu de chuse chengji)”. It is then stressed that “if, as them, you are earnest and pragmatic (脚踏实地 jiaotahsidi), if you try to learn and make progress (求知进取 qiuzhi jinqu), if you are steady and industrious (勤奋努力 qinfen nuli), if you make contributions (作出贡献 zuochu gongxian), perhaps that one day you too will possess a Shenzhen green card” (深圳绿卡 Shenzhen lüka). In this article, there is a strong emphasis on notions such as “painful labor” and the qualities of pragmatism, steadiness, industriousness, the will to “learn and make progress”, and to “make contributions”. Such are, as the author of this article puts it, the necessary sought-after attributes that may decide on somebody’s legitimate claim for permanent residence. Later, however, it is specified that, because Shenzhen is such a small place, it “does not allow for many migrant workers to get a ‘green card’. But one can not say however that they will not be able to express their capacities in the future”. The author goes on to state that it is also very valuable to go back to one’s place and make some contribution over there:

“What is most important is to use fully the advantageous conditions offered by Shenzhen, to take advantage of one’s best years of youth, to learn useful knowledge, techniques (充分利用特区有利条件乘着大好的青春岁月，多学一些实在有用的知识。Chongfen liyong tequ youli tiaojian chengzhe dahao de qingchun suiyue, duo xue yixie shizai youyong de zhishi). This is the intelligent attitude”.

The very last sentence of the article concludes that

“one may not have a Shenzhen ‘green card’, but what one can surely not fail to possess is to have ideals and aspirations, knowledge and competences, and dignity” (决不能没有理想抱负知识才能和人格尊严。Jue bu neng meiyou lixiang baofu zhishi caineng he renge zunyan)³¹⁶.

Shenzhen is thus a place where people are expected to make the most of their potential. Interestingly this March 1994 article on the ten model workers sums up most of the values and

³¹⁶ STQB, 18/03/94, “Meiyou ‘luka’ you ruhe?”, p. 9.

attributes that will be further stressed and more systematically pursued in the 1998 and 1999 texts. None of these elements disappear, depending on periods, on the objectives pursued in editorials. Some values and attributes get to the fore at time, other are underplayed, just to emerge again later.

8.1.2 *To pay with one's sweat and blood*

Another prominent feature of the World of dagong articles is the mention of sacrifice through migrant workers' "sweat and blood" and the fact that they ought not to complain. According to the logic of such rhetoric, their contribution to the city's prominence and to local prosperity, through their labor, their sacrifices, makes so that any lamentation they could express may be submerged by this sense of pride. I suggest hereafter to examine further the notion of *offering* and *sacrifice*. We have come across numerous articles that emphasized that migrant workers were making sacrifices, paying with their "sweat and blood" (fuchu xuehan) and "offering their youth respectfully (fengxian qingchun) to Shenzhen. This terminology is again very much reminiscent of Mao-era China. The term "to offer one's youth respectfully" was a term used during the Cultural revolution" (1965-1976) for young people who were sent to the countryside in order to educate the "rural masses" and also get educated in return. They had to do so wholeheartedly, even though coming back to the cities was thereafter made extremely difficult. Youngsters were "offering their youth respectfully to the country" (把青春奉献祖国 ba qingchun fengxian gei zuguo)³¹⁷. In the "World of dagong" articles, migrant workers have to make sacrifices for their company and for the Special zone. The collective interest, which in the 1950s was considered as "the interest of the whole people" and used to be mobilized to prevent peasants from coming to the cities and to send urban dwellers to the countryside, is now being assimilated with the interest of the company and the development of the zone. A similar stress on collective values is highlighted by Xu Feng in her work on Workers in Suzhou factories. She wrote that the "thought work" (思想工作 sixiang gongzuo) sponsored by the party on the shop-floor of a State-owned factory aimed "at convincing workers that their personal interest are the same as the factory's and the whole country's"(Xu Feng, 2000, p. 172). The hereafter fragments illustrates this point quite well:

³¹⁷ See Shirk, 1982 on how former students were viewing being sent to the countryside as well as their strategies to avoid being sent down to the villages. See also Bonnin, 2005.

“Last autumn when I arrived at this bicycle factory named “Zhonghuaren” in Shenzhen, this internationally-renown city, I have walked my first step into life (...) Over here, what impressed me most was not the beautiful scenery and startling lights of Shenzhen, it was all these migrant workers who were struggling endlessly in a strange land for their own ideals and convictions. On their bodies, what I saw was courage, what I learned was firmness ((...) 那些为了自己的理想与信仰在异地他乡生生不息奋斗着的打工者们。在他们身上我看到的是勇气，学到的是坚强！Naxie weile ziji de lixiang yu xinyang zai yidi taxiang sheng sheng bu xi fendou zhe de dagongzhemen. Zai tamen shenshang wo kandao de shi yongqi, xuedao de shi jianqiang !).

The author then explains that the company had to face a very important and urgent command from the world’s biggest bicycle retail company. Within three days, 30.000 bicycles had to be produced and this “represented a serious challenge for ‘Zhonghuaren’. However, that is where the ‘miracle’ happened”. For three days and nights, thanks to their perseverance and endurance of suffering, they managed to meet the order on time. As to how to explain their achievement, the author went on:

“They did not do anything extraordinary, they just offered their youth silently to ‘Zhonghuaren’ (...) Yesterday, they have suddenly waken up Shenzhen with the sound of their feet, they have created the Chinese miracle. Today, they have stepped into the new century. They have initiated a more beautiful and more resplendent tomorrow” (他们没有丰功伟绩，也没有经世之举，只是默默地为中华人奉献了自己的青春 (...) 开创了更加美好灿烂的明天。Tamen meiyou feng gong wei ji, ye meiyou jing shi zhi ju, zhi shi momo de wei Zhonghuaren fengxian le ziji de qingchun (...) kaichuang le meihao xianlan de mingtian)³¹⁸.

The fact that the company for which migrant workers are striving is called “Zhonghuaren”³¹⁹, meaning Chinese people, allows for a rather plain symbolic reunion of the interest of the company and of the nation at large. Let us remark here also that these sacrifices have to be made for a better “tomorrow”, this again is quite reminiscent of the Mao-era rhetoric which insisted on the bettering of the future (Croll, 1994). In another article called “I sacrifice my youth to the running water”³²⁰, the sacrifice of migrant workers' youth takes on a poetico-ideological form:

³¹⁸ *STQB*, 29/03/98, “Pigfan de ‘Zhonghua’ ren”, p. 6.

³¹⁹ We shall see later that this factory is a model one. Several articles deal with it to exemplify either the attitude of workers or that of the management.

³²⁰ The term “running water” (流水 liushui) may be read as a shortening for *liushuixian* (流水线) which means the production line.

«The reason why the production line is so beautiful is because it uses youthfulness to dress up These ranges of youngsters sitting there are the green grass and flowers along the water, they are *contending vigorously*³²¹. The value of youth is flowing away smoothly along the production line. I am immersed in the production line, neither impulsive nor weak, my youth is getting stronger (...) When my hands and eyes move, embracing the production line's rhythm, my heart feels so good (...) What makes me even more relieved is that, in my assault towards the 'zero fault' goal, every day 'red stars' are shining on my attendance record and the red flag is flittering in the wind » (流水线之所以美丽，是因为它以青春妆成。那排排一溜年轻人，是水边的情操和花朵，在争奇斗妍。青春的价值，随著流水线缓缓地流去。...我的青春因流水线的流动而充实 (...) 当我的双手和眼睛合着流水线的节拍而移动时，我的心是多么得益 (...) 更使我欣慰的是，在向零缺陷招标进攻时我的考勤表里，每天红星闪闪发亮，红旗迎风飘扬 *Liushuixian zhi suoyi meili, shi yinwei ta yi qingchun zhuangcheng. Na pai pai yi liu nianqing ren, shi shuibian de qingcǎo he huaduo, zai zheng qi dou yan. (...) Qingchun de jiazhi, suizhe liushuixian huan huan de liuqu. Wode qingchun yin liushuixian de liudong er chongshi (...) Dang wo de shuangshou he yanjing he zhe liushuixian er yidong shi, wode xin shi duome deyi (...) Geng shi wo xinwei de shi, zai zouxiang ling quexian mubiao jingong shi, wode kaoqin biao li meitian hong xing shan shan faliang, hongqi yingfeng piaoyang*)³²².

Here again, we find a vocabulary that echoes Mao-era ideology and the link between productivist exaltation, national pride and construction is explicit: the model worker's attitude marked by red stars on his attendance record is associated with the country's flag "flittering in the wind"³²³.

To sum up my arguments at this stage, in the World of *dagong*, '*dagong*' refers to a very linear discursive chain: in the face of hardship, striving, hard work, self-sacrifice, suffering, a spirit of making progress and going forward should lead to improvement in productivity and economic development of the Special zone. In the above fragments, the rhetoric of sacrifice, hard work, and a pioneer spirit all meet in the figure of the (model) migrant workers. His body and soul are fully turned towards production. He exists as a 'legitimate' Shenzhen person solely through his contribution to economic development.

8.2 Shenzhen and its environment

³²¹ This phrasing may be derived from the well-known expression "let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred school of thought contend" (*baihua qifang, baijia zhengming*) or "let a hundred flowers blossom, weed through the old to bring the new" (*baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin*) used by Mao during the "One hundred flowers Campaign" (1957), which itself came from the Warring Kingdoms period (403-221 B.C.).

³²² *STQB*, 08/03/98, "Wo ba qingchun fuchu 'liushui'", p. 6.

³²³ A common expression describing the Chinese national flag in Chinese is « the five red stars flag is flittering in the wind » (五星红旗迎风飘扬 *wu xing hongqi yingfeng piaoyang*).

In many articles of the “World of dagong” as well as in the “Shenzhen Evening News” one finds a stress on the idea of passage, of crossing borders from either the countryside or more generally the interior of the country to Shenzhen and the South. In this process, the countryside or the interior are spaces where people *can not* fulfil their plans nor can they fulfil themselves. Shenzhen and the South are constantly depicted as an environment which provides conditions to migrant workers that are lacking in other parts of China. Because of such contrasts between the hometown and Shenzhen or the South, coming to Shenzhen also implies going through an individual transformation. I suggest looking hereafter at how this contrast is built in the “World of dagong” articles. I will try to show that Shenzhen is the object of a systematic construction. To do so, I am paying attention to what Shenzhen is associated with and how the general picture of Shenzhen relates to the elite public transcript of dagong.

If, as we shall detail hereunder, the village or the interior are places which do not provide appropriate conditions for achieving people’s plans, then this allows to depict the migration decision as being the result of a *choice* that is motivated chiefly by *dissatisfaction* in one’s personal situation. Interestingly, in tales that emphasise this crossing of borders and the changes it implies at the individual level, the characters of these tales are not only migrant workers from the countryside but also people with other backgrounds such as doctors, teachers, older people with a high educational profile. We need to remember that Shenzhen as a city of immigrants does attract people from all over China in addition to migrant workers from the countryside. Such people are often referred to as “talents” (人才 *rencai*) and a discourse on Shenzhen as the place that attracts talents is quite pervasive since the launching of Shenzhen’s Special zone (Kjellgren, 1999). The extension within the same “World of dagong” page to other categories than migrant workers from the countryside page is quite in line with the idea put forward in the first issue of the special page. This extension corresponds to a trend in official parlance and to a certain extent in popular discourse to refer to dagong in relation with all social groups and not only migrant workers. It actually means extending the scope of dagong, enlarging the people and activities that may be ranged under that heading. This relates to its definition as a category and to how this category relates to other categories within the whole social stratification. We shall see that from 1998 on, the emerging category of laid-off state-owned enterprise workers (下岗 *xiagang* or 下岗工人 *xiagang gongren*) has turned into an important target group within the “World of dagong” pages along with migrant workers.

In those texts where the migration decision is mainly depicted as a choice resulting from dissatisfaction with one's former situation, we find tales that stress that people, migrant workers but also those that are labelled "technical talents", have abandoned their stable jobs in the interior of the country to search for a living on their own in Shenzhen³²⁴. The people described are all hard working. The idea that Shenzhen is a place where people are left on their own, where they need to test themselves and where they are facing challenges is also conveyed in this text. In one tale, the values of hard work, of self-determined choice and enterprising spirit, of not being satisfied with one's lot are stressed along with the idea that people quit advantageous positions in the interior to get to Shenzhen³²⁵. It tells the story of a man who has left his good work position in the interior to "jump into the sea" (下海 xiahai) in Shenzhen where in one year he has changed twice work to become a director of the office of the manager. This man is said to be admired for his work spirit. At the end of the text, the idea of doing things on one's own and not being afraid of starting from scratch is pursued by raising the question: "If you do it on your own, why should you be afraid to start from scratch?"³²⁶. This association of dagong with autonomy is quite frequent not only in the "World of dagong", but also more generally in other accounts of migration by migrant workers. It should be observed too that leaving the village for Shenzhen and the South is also very frequently associated with "trying one's luck in the world" (闯一闯世界 chuang yi chuang shijie)³²⁷. On the whole a recurring idea attached to leaving one's hometown for the South or Shenzhen is that the advantages that Shenzhen may provide people with are so important that they often decide to give up their good work position at home. It does confirm the idea that one is migrating as a result of free choice and not as a result of constrained choice.

8.2.1 *Hometown, interior versus Shenzhen and the South*

³²⁴ It is interesting to observe that the case of some people who chose to leave their work in Beijing to go to Shenzhen is narrated. Note that within the construction of this hierarchy of places, Shenzhen is then ranked higher than Beijing as a desired place. See *STQB*, 11/03/94, "Xiaoyuan dagonglao", p. 6.

³²⁵ This idea of quitting a stable, stable and dull job in the interior in order to get to Shenzhen is repeated in several articles in the 1998 and 1999 articles examined.

³²⁶ *STQB*, 04/03/94, "Chao le laoban guo danian", p. 9.

³²⁷ This expression is used quite frequently migrant workers in their written narration of labor in Shenzhen and other cities of the Pearl River Delta.

The village or the interior are constantly opposed to Shenzhen and the South³²⁸. This is especially clear in 1998 and 1999. The contrast between the interior on the one hand and Shenzhen or the South on the other hand allows for further emphasizing the fact that individuals are feeling dissatisfied with their lot and that therefore they are willing to leave for Shenzhen where they will be able to fulfil themselves and make the most of their potential. The hometown or the interior is repeatedly associated with inertia, with quietness and innocence, while Shenzhen is characterized by its competitive environment and by the challenges and opportunities it offers. At the same time however, the hometown is the place where family ties are strong, as such it is often linked to “warmth”. An example of such a contrast is provided in a January 1998 article. It is one of a series that urges migrant workers not to go back home for the Spring festival and spend it in Shenzhen³²⁹. The values and principles that define Shenzhen in comparison to the countryside or the interior are emphasized. The migrant worker author explains that for the last three years he has spent the festival in Shenzhen and that this year too he will not go back home despite his mother’s asking him to do so:

“I want to go back and on the other hand I do not wish to. On the one hand, it is true that I miss the warm and stable way of life of my hometown ; on the other hand, I want to break this sort of calmness in order to taste a way of life that possesses competition and challenge (...) After these days, tears, industriousness, bitterness and sadness have given way to a peaceful and steady feeling of replenishment and success, I really do not wish to abandon the fruit gained on the way. Shenzhen, this immigrant city is both romantic and realistic for me, it really is tasteful. It is full of challenges, competition, potentials for making use of capacities, coldness, warmth, all this can not be replaced by the warmth of home (我又想打碎这种平静, 去尝试一种富有竞争的, 挑战性的生活方式 (...)那些曾经流泪, 努力, 辛酸换来一种踏实, 宁静的充实感, 成就感 (...) 它充满着挑战, 竞争, 施展, 冷漠, 温情, 这些都是回家的温馨不可替代的. Wo you xiang dasui zhezhong pingjing, qu changshi yizhong fuyou jingzheng de, tiaozhanxing de shenghuo fangshi (...) Naxie cengjing liulei, nuli, xinsuan huanlai yizhong tashi, ningjing de chongshigan. Ta chongmanzhe tiaozhan, jingzheng, shizhan, lengmo, wenqing, zhexie dou shi huijia de wenxin buke tidai de)³³⁰.

³²⁸ See for instance *STQB*, 18/02/94, “O, Na yi dai chepiao”, p. 9 and *STQB*, 18/03/94, “Taojin meng”, p. 9; *STQB*, 15/02/98, “Wujia you mei”, p. 6; *STQB*, 01/03/98, “Xiaomei”, p. 6 and *STQB*, 08/03/98, “You shi yi nian...”, p. 6.

³²⁹ This should be linked to the policy of the municipality that is to keep as many migrant workers in Shenzhen during this period.

³³⁰ *STQB*, 25/01/98, “Liuxialai guonian”, p. 6. See also for instance *STQB*, 15/02/98, “Wu jia you mei”, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 17/01/99, “Dagong xin dei diandi”, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 24/01/99, “Dagong lu shang wo chengzhang le”, p. 6.

In the end, the message is that although going back home means feeling the warmth of one's family, the competition and challenges that Shenzhen is providing are worth not going back. In this fragment, it is also emphasized that Shenzhen is an immigrant city³³¹. In another article from February 1999, the depiction of the hometown and the sort of irrepressible need to leave it is literally embodied into the blood of the main character. This is how his feelings about home are described:

“I was feeling that my hot blood was boiling... Within the incomparably warm place that my family was and incredibly smooth feelings that my folks provided, I still felt it somewhat not satisfying (感觉到自己的热血在浮腾...在温暖无比的家里和温馨无限的亲情中显得多么微不足道. Ganjuedao ziji de rexue zai futeng... Zai wennuan wubi de jiali he wenxin wuxian de qinqing zhong xiande duome wei bu zu dao)³³².”

A recurring expression used to depict the South in the press and in the dagong literature is “this warm earth the South is” (南方这个热土. nanfang zhege retu) associated with dynamism, competition, challenges and opportunities. It is then easily opposed to the countryside or the interior as crystallising apathy:

«It is in 1996 that I stepped for the first time on this warm earth that Shenzhen is (...) At first, I had difficulties adapting myself, the work was stressful, at all time one faced a feeling of crisis. The philosophy of “adapting to subsist/survive” urged me to work very hard all day, I also swap away the inertia that had nurtured my body and soul in the interior (我是1996年才踏上深圳这块热土的(...) 初来乍到, 真有点不适应, 适应生存的哲理鞭策我整日埋头苦干. Wo shi 1996 nian cai tashang Shenzhen zhe kuai retu de (...) Chu lai zha dao, zhen you dian bu shiyng, shiyng shengcun de zheli biancwo zhengri mai tout ku gan”)³³³.”

I shall come back hereunder to the notion of adaptation, and to the feeling of crisis referred to in this fragment since they are important elements in the construction of the image of Shenzhen. What I wish to stress at this stage is the contrast between the warm earth Shenzhen is and the inertia that needs to be swapped away from the author's body and soul. While the Shenzhen environment is active and is polishing people's determination and selves, the interior contaminates the body and soul with inertia. The incredible height and the dazzling lights of

³³¹ See Xia Guang, 1999, pp. 1-5 for further interesting descriptions of Shenzhen as an immigrant city.

³³² *STQB*, 14/02/99, “Tashang guijia zhi lu”, p. 6.

³³³ *STQB*, 10/01/99, “Xiangyue 1999 nian”, p. 6.

Shenzhen are also referred to in depictions of Shenzhen as in the hereafter fragment where they are linked to nurturing aspirations:

“I got used to working through the night (...) Just like all the other vagrants that go through the forest “of huge buildings, I am longing eagerly to possess one day too my own fascinating sky-scraper dazzling lights window, to become a real Shenzhen person (...)” (我时常象所有穿行鳞次栉比的高楼大厦中的流浪者，渴望有朝一日能拥有高楼大厦万家灯火闪烁的窗口 Wo shichang xiang suoyou de chuan xing lin ci zhi bi de gao lou da sha zhong de liulangzhe , kewang you zhao yi ri neng yongyou gao lou da sha wan jia deng huo shan shuo de chuankou)³³⁴.

Another text within the same page tells the story of a migrant worker, nurturing a dream of being successful in Shenzhen is symbolised by the possession of a kite and the idea of flying higher in Shenzhen’s sky:

“For many reasons I left my school children with tears, with my packs on my back, I arrived in Guangdong this warm earth, and I entered the ranks of the those who are trying their luck in the Special zone(来到了广东这块热土，加入了深圳特区闯荡者的行列。Laidao le Guangdong zhekuai retu, jiaru le Shenzhen tequ chuanguangzhe de hanglie) (...) Thinking about my monotone childhood at home (...) I often also imagine my own future as more and more magnificent (...) I need to fly conscientiously higher and further in the Shenzhen sky (也时时构想自己将越来越美的未来。我要努力在深圳的天空上飞得更高更远！Ye shishi gouxiang ziji jiang yue lai yue mei de weilai. Wo yao nuli zai Shenzhen de tiankong shang fei de geng gao geng yuan!)”³³⁵.

In an earlier piece from February 1998, the author associates Shenzhen’s skyscrapers and avenues with youth and a pioneer spirit:

“In the countryside when you raise your head, it is the sky, when you look down there are mountains everywhere; but over here it is skyscrapers everywhere, wide and straight avenues, an atmosphere of youthfulness and a struggling and pioneering spirit can be felt everywhere (到处充满着青春的气息和拼搏的闯劲。Daochu chongman zhe qingchun de qixi he pinbo de chuangjin)”³³⁶.

³³⁴ *STQB*, 08/03/98, “Bie le wode 1997”, p. 6.

³³⁵ *STQB*, 08/03/98, “You shi yi nian”, p. 6.

³³⁶ *STQB*, 15/02/98, “Wujia you mei”, p. 6.

The emphasis on Shenzhen's impressive heights also allows for a further stress on migrant workers' need to make every efforts to find an appropriate place in such environment. The move to Shenzhen entails an enlargement of one's environment and of one's mental universe; the stress is therefore also put on the need for migrant workers to learn and become more mature³³⁷:

Being outside trying one's luck, I have seen the world, I have learned many things, my wings have become stronger slowly, in the course of my vagrancy, I have grown up and I have become more mature. This heavy bag full of train and bus tickets, I want to ask you: where is my next stop?" (在外闯荡，见到了世界，开拓了视野，学到了许多东西，翅膀也逐渐丰硬，我在飘泊中渐渐长大，成熟。Zai wai chuangdang, jiandao le shimian, kaituo le shiye, xuedao le xuduo dongxi, chibang ye zhujian fengying, wo zai piaobo zhong jianjian zhangda chengshou)³³⁸.

The village is also sometimes construed as the place of innocence and ignorance. As we shall observe from this fragment, the village is also a place where people, and more specifically young people, are wasting their time, while Shenzhen and the South are most often depicted as places where people ought to make the most of their youth by taking advantage of the favourable environment. The text tells the story of a young woman migrant worker who has been working in Shenzhen for the last four years. She explained what her feelings were when she started to think about going back home:

"It was four years that I was working in Shenzhen (...), I could not help but to sing loudly again and again "I am going back home...". At that time, my home village meant rivers, large green planes, a paradise. This is why I decided to leave my job and go back home".

Once home, she explained, she quickly felt lost:

"The ignorance and backwardness of my small village, as well as the free time after agricultural work had been done all made so that I always had the feeling of loosing my time. Every night, I kept thinking of Shenzhen, of the factory where I used to work, of my workmates. The glimmering streets, the tension and competition, I missed all this very much" (而小村的愚昧落后及农忙后的闲散总让人觉得是在虚度年华。Er xiaocun de yumei luohou ji nongmang hou de xiansan zong rang ren jue de shi zai xu du nian hua).

³³⁷ As we shall see later, the idea of migrant workers having to replenish a lack through hard work and studying has been emphasized in 1998 and 1999.

³³⁸ *STQB*, 18/02/94, "Wo na yi dai chepiao", p. 6.

These, she tells us, were not the only advantages of Shenzhen. Others included a modern factory where salaries were improving year by year. In addition to this, leisure, educational and cultural facilities were provided by Shenzhen to migrant workers, all of which were lacking in the village. Once back in Shenzhen, the author concludes by stating:

“In fact, my heart belongs completely to the Shenzhen of agitation (原来我这颗心只属于繁忙，竞争，改革开放的深圳。Yuanlai, wo zheke xin shuyu fanmang, jingzheng, gaige kaifang de Shenzhen)”³³⁹.

8.2.2 *Reform and opening : a competitive environment*

As it has just been highlighted above, Shenzhen is associated closely with *reform and opening*, with the idea that its *competitive environment* offers *challenges and opportunities*, as well as the possibility for people to *liberate their potential*. In several articles the promising role of Shenzhen and its milieu of competition is emphasized, conveying the idea that self-achievement is made possible mainly thanks to the adversity found in Shenzhen and its atmosphere of emulation. This point is expressed most forcefully in a text in which a migrant worker is recalling his 7 years of *dagong* in the South. He writes:

“The South is very fair, it has provided us migrant workers with an opportunity for fair competition, so that everybody can stand on the same starting line. Among these *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* who, coming from all over the motherland, are on the front line of reform and opening, there are those who go with the great wind and big waves and who have reached the shore of success; there are those who lament facing the task ahead, and who have decided to go back home, and there are as well those who are still struggling hard among the waves... I probably belong to the last sort (南方很公平，它提供了一个公平竞争的机会。Nanfang hen gongping, ta tigong le yige gongping jingzheng de jihui (...). 在我们这些从祖国四面八方赶到这改革开放的前沿阵地的打工仔，打工妹中... Zai women zhexie cong zuguo simian bafang gandao zhe gaige kaifang de qianyan zhendi de dagongzai, dagongmei zhong...)”³⁴⁰

As we shall see hereunder, the construction of the South and Shenzhen as places where there is (fair) competition and where people can therefore fulfil their potential is pursued more thoroughly in the 1998 and 1999 articles. So is the idea that everyone is starting from the same

³³⁹ *STQB*, 15/02/98, “Shenzhen wo huilai le”, p. 6.

³⁴⁰ *STQB*, 15/02/98, “Jintian wo shengri”, p. 6.

line in this competition. Furthermore, the South, in the hereafter fragment from the same text as well as in several other accounts, is described as an active or productive environment:

“The South is a place that polishes people’s determination. Over here, there are people who succeed, while others fail; there is joy and there is sorrow. When I fail or when I am in distress, I really want to go back to my place to spend my peaceful life of the past. But when I think over it: I can not go back, I should not go back. Because I have understood that I love deeply this warm place the South is” (...) I have spent another birthday away from home. The past is already history, today is a new start for me!” (南方是一个磨练人意志的地方. (...) 自己已深深地爱上了南方这块热土. Nanfang shi yi ge molian ren de yizhi de defang. ziji yijing re’ai nanfang zhe kuai retu!)³⁴¹.

Shenzhen is depicted as an active place too in the sense that it offers the conditions that allow for liberating and making the most of one’s potential. In contrast with other parts of China and with the system of the planned economy, it becomes a liberating environment. Such an idea is conveyed in an article called “To challenge the banal”, a former State-owned enterprise worker who had been sent to Shenzhen wrote that

“ the reason why he had been sent to Shenzhen was that he disliked the banal work and way of life in the interior, so that his own pioneering forces may be liberated in a Shenzhen that is full of opportunities and challenges” (让自己的创业的冲劲能在充满机会和挑战的深圳得以释放. Rang ziji de chuangye de chongjin neng zai chongman jihui he tiaozhan de Shenzhen deyi shifang)³⁴².

This idea of liberating one’s potential has to be related to the association of Shenzhen with youth. A core element of the Shenzhen imagery is indeed that Shenzhen is the very place where young hardworking people can fully use “their best years of youth”. The reading of the Shenzhen mainstream daily press, as well as of some of the reportage literature, does indeed provide evidence of the pervasiveness of this association³⁴³. In some articles of the «World of dagong», one may even speak of an essentialisation of values associated with youth such as dynamism or enterprising. One particularly striking example of such essentialisation is provided

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² *STQB*, 98/02/22, “Tiaozhan pingyong”, p. 6. Elsewhere, it is stated that it is people’s thought that needs to be liberated. A former State Owned Enterprise worker is explaining why there is such a huge gap between the interior and Shenzhen: “I think, if the economy in the interior is not prosperous, is it not mainly because our thought has not yet really been liberated? Is it not that our potential strengths have not been exploited yet?”. See *STQB*, 17/01/99, “Dagong xin dei diandi”, p. 6.

³⁴³ See Xia Guang, 1999, for illustrations of this association of Shenzhen with youth. This volume is actually a selection of transcripts of a radio programme in which a female journalist replies to the queries of people who are living in Shenzhen. It is striking how much the kinds of expressions and ideas I found in this book are similar to the ones I have examined in the Shenzhen press. See pp. 1-47 for illuminating examples.

by a March 1998 Shenzhen Special Zone Daily article that in addition to stressing the values of youth such as strength, vitality and dynamism, also highlights some of Shenzhen's founding values such as creation, courage, intelligence, and going forward. This short article starts by mentioning a book on Chinese people in the United States. It writes that as in the United States, when you meet Shenzhen, "you will encounter opportunities and challenges", and that it is full of youth and dynamism. I suggest looking at the full text since it is so characteristic of the Shenzhen imaginaire :

"(...) when you start from scratch, it is also a self-challenge, however, they have been successful (从头开始，也是自我挑战，然而他们成功了。 Cong tou kaishi, ye shi ziwo tiaozhan, ran'er tamen chenggong le). Shenzhen as the frontline of reform and opening, as the pearl of new-born cities, possesses many opportunities, it possesses challenges, it matches the emotions and spirit of the generation of young people. Many people come here to look for their value (深圳作为中国改革开放的前沿，作为中国新兴的城市明珠，他富有机遇，富有挑战，正合年轻一代的心潮。不少人来到这里，寻找自己的价值。 Shenzhen zuowei Zhongguo gaige kaifang de qianyan, zuowei Zhongguo xinxing de chengshi mingzhu, ta fuyou jiyu, ta fuyou tiaozhan, zhenghe nianqing yidai de xinchao. Bushao ren laidao zheli, xunzhao ziji de jiazhi).

When you encounter Shenzhen, you may have nothing to rely on, but you cannot not possess skills; when you encounter Shenzhen, you need courage, but what you need even more is intelligence; you need family feelings, but what you need even more is warmth (...) People here for ever possess a heart that is full of dynamism and youthfulness. This is precisely why this day and night busy city becomes ever more glittering. When you encounter Shenzhen, you fully realize that the helm of destiny needs to be held firmly in your hands (...) (这里的人们永远拥有充满活力年轻的心。正因如此，才使日夜繁忙的城市变得璀璨夺目。遭遇了深圳，让你真正懂得了命运的舵永远得牢牢把握在您的手中。) ³⁴⁴.

In this text, we observe a clear focus on being able to face challenges and opportunities and of people who are trying to fulfil themselves. A concurring meaning is that if you are armed with determination and if you nurture competences (which Shenzhen should allow you to do), then your fate is almost entirely depending on yourself, as referred to in the above-quoted fragment that you can hold your fate "firmly in your hands". Indeed, not wasting one's youth away entails too that (young) people are ready to do their best to learn useful knowledge and techniques while they as young people are in Shenzhen. Such a rhetoric is pursued not only in articles that deal

³⁴⁴ *STQB*, "Zaoyu Shenzhen", 01/03/98, p. 6. See also *STQB*, 29/03/98, "Fendou", p. 6 for another example of the emphasis on the positive dimension of a competitive environment that allows people to be tested.

with migrant workers, but also as I shall show hereafter in texts that address state-owned enterprises laid-off workers.

8.2.3 *Adaptation, rescaling and replenishment*

As I have noted above, the competitive environment provided by Shenzhen is very much emphasized in the «World of dagong» articles. The positive aspects of competition associated with the need not to be satisfied with one's lot and keep making continuous progress are stressed already in 1994. We can see however from table 10.3 the emergence of the theme of competition in the 1998 and 1999 articles. I will show in this section that through this strong emphasis on the virtues of competition, a new narrative structure is being put forward that allows to include the state-owned enterprises laid-off workers within the target group of the “World of dagong” columns.

Let us first examine an August 1994 article which title is “Migrant workers are growing within competition”. Two journalists witness the success of the Jinghua electronical limited thanks to the company's capacity to value temporary workers' talents. In this company where, it is explained, one half of the management staff comes from the ranks of temporary workers, those workers who have been able to be successful are said to be never satisfied with their lot. It is then explained how Zhang Ping, a female worker raised from an ordinary worker to become in 3 months a group leader:

“(…) at that time she was just an ordinary worker working on the production line, but her powerful character made that she would not be satisfied with this lot. Once in the factory, she worked conscientiously while at the same time asking advices to the older workmates, gathering practical experience (….) As her work field enlarged, she found that her knowledge was not sufficient and she started distance classes in psychological management. She made rapid progress and in 1989 she became the vice director of the “jixin” factory” ((...) 她一面认真工作，一面向老师傅请教，积累实践经验。Ta yimian renzhen gongzuo, yimian xiang lao shifu qingjiao, jilei shijian jingyan (...))³⁴⁵.

The values of perseverance and self-study are thereafter emphasized. It is explained that what accounts for Jinghua's success is that it has never stopped nurturing longings but “the most

³⁴⁵ STQB, 22/08/94, “Dagongzhe zai jingzheng zhong chengzhang”, p. 9.

important thing has been that it may not be separated from the competition environment of the company”. According to a Jinghua member of the director’s office, the strong competition in Jinghua “makes it that you cannot help but to work consciously, and to complement yourself. If you manage to achieve this, you too will be rewarded by your company” (在京华公司，强烈的竞争环境，逼得你不得不好好工作，充实自己。做到这一点，你也同样能从公司得到回报 Zai jinghua gongsi, qianglie de jingzheng huanjing, bide ni budebu haohao gongzuo, chongshi ziji. Zuodao zheyi dian, ni ye tongyang neng cong gongsi dedao huibao)”. The text goes on:

“With this system of promoting talents, you only need to take part to the competition, work consciously, and you will always get an opportunity for success. In reality, an opportunity is next to each of us, the thing is to see how you are going to size it. 有了为才是举的竞争机制，只要你努力参与竞争，努力工作，总会找到一个成功的机会。其实机会在每个人的身边，就看你如何去捕捉它。 Youle weicaishiju de jingzheng jizhi, zhi yao ni nuli canjia jingzheng, nuli gongzuo, zong hui zhaodao yige chengong de jihui. Jishi, jihui zai meige ren de shenbian, jiu kan ni ruhe qu bozhuo ta ”

Eventually, the concluding section of the text associates the capacity to keep working industriously to being able to carry one’s destiny in one’s hands. In the second February 1994 text I suggest looking at, one may already find core elements that will be repeated recurrently in 1998 and 1999 articles, i.e. the positive role competition, more precisely the feeling of crisis or insecurity³⁴⁶ that may bear on workers or employees, as well as the idea that one needs to be daring, never stop studying and change jobs to face new pressures³⁴⁷. In this February 1994 article, a migrant worker explains his feeling somewhat lost at the new tasks he is being given in the factory. He writes:

“From there on, I had a kind of presentiment of insecurity³⁴⁸. I always thought that the danger of being fired was going to fall on my head. But the afterward experience proved that it is this sense of crisis that made that I could develop smoothly by working (dagong) for two years in this factory” (后来的经历证明，正是这种危机感使我...能得到顺利的发展. Houlai de jingli zhengming, zheng shi zhezhong weijigan shi wo (...) neng dedao shunli de fazhan).

³⁴⁶ The very notion of crisis is included in the title of the article which is “The feeling of crisis makes me sail smoothly”.

³⁴⁷ *STQB*, 15/08/94, “Weijigan shi wo yi fan shun feng”, p. 9.

³⁴⁸ This is where the turning point or the element of change is and this will lead to the second change which is that he is going to start studying and be very industrious at work.

Thereafter he decides to study by himself every evening after work since he is scared of losing his job because of his not mastering the necessary technique. Having seen other workers fired and being aware of how difficult it is to find work, he explains that he therefore has been extremely cautious at work and has persevered this way for one year. He then decides to leave this job despite the attempts by his manager to keep him in the company. He says:

“Eventually I still left it, in order to change my field of activity and become an editor, and to experience a new crisis... Actually, in our human society each employment is not for one single person only, others are competing with you. You must absolutely feel this crisis at all time and show your competence through wholehearted work, this is the only way you will be able to protect your position and develop smoothly. “The earth will still keep turning around without you”, this is the powerful warning sent by those who manage to occupy each good job position” (每一个职位都不适于一人，都有别人在与你竞争。你必须时刻感觉这种危机，并用尽心尽力来表现你的称职，才能保护你所拥有的职位). Meiyi ge zhiwei bu shiyu yiren, dou you bieren zai yu ni jingzheng. Ni bixu shike ganjue zhezhong weiji, bing yong jinjin jinli biao xian ni de chengzhi).

Although in this last article one may find the basic elements of the “rescaling-replenishment” narrative structure that will be explored hereafter, these elements are not articulated in other 1994 texts.

One of the emerging notions in the 1998-1999 articles that I have observed is that of the capacity of people to *adapt* to the demands of society and more precisely of the labor market. A pivotal notion in some of these texts is therefore that of *adaptation*. Along with the idea of being able to adapt to the environment and to the labor market thanks to one’s own individual attitude and attributes, it is the absence of any mention of structural obstacles standing on migrant workers’ way that is also thereby emphasized. A quasi-linearity from one’s efforts to the possibility of success is conveyed in many “World of dagong” articles as well as in the other Shenzhen newspapers examined. There is an interesting parallel to be drawn between this last point and the mobilization of model workers within the party ideological work that Xu Feng documented in a State-owned factory in Jiangsu province. She argued that “model workers are used as examples that one can achieve personal development at any job position” (Xu Feng, 2000, p. 174)³⁴⁹. What we may infer from this is that in a universe where one has to rely on steadiness, perseverance, one’s individual competencies, the will to learn and to make sacrifices in order to grasp opportunities, those who *do not* possess such attributes are very much likely to be left over

³⁴⁹ This is actually somewhat reminiscent of Mao-era politics when the political attitude of individuals was judged crucial for any achievement in the material realm.

and be the only one to be blamed for this. As my analysis shows, there is a strong tendency in the «World of dagong» texts to focus on success stories or in the vast majority of articles on optimistic tales. In the rare tales in which people are not successful, it is again due to a change in their attitude, as well as their inadequacy and inability to adapt to the environment³⁵⁰.

In the texts under scrutiny, I found that three notions are strongly conditioning people's adaptation. They are the capacity to learn by oneself and to capitalize from one's experience (see chapter 10, categories B1, B2 in table 10.1) ; the lowering of one's initial expectations in terms of types of employment and level of revenues; self-confidence and the idea that people should nurture ideals and remain optimistic about their lot (see A1, A2, C1). As I shall demonstrate hereafter, a series of new terms has emerged in the 1998-1999 texts concomitantly with the emerging narrative structure.

8.2.4 *Self-study and learn from experience*

The narrative structure found repeatedly in the 1998-1999 articles is grounded on the idea that in a Shenzhen where competition is at all time very strong, one has to become aware of one's shortcomings, do one's best to study eagerly by oneself and learn useful skills. Along with this idea of studying by oneself, one finds that of being tested by society and being able to learn from one's life experience. The outcome of nurturing such an attitude in the face of competition and difficulties is “replenishment” (充实 *chongshi*) or “reward” (回报 *huibao*)³⁵¹. I have come across several tales of migrant workers or former state-owned enterprises who managed to rise from ordinary worker to a higher work position through “asking and self-studying” combined with

³⁵⁰ In articles that highlight failures, we find tales of descending trajectories, where people first were successful but who get into trouble because of a change in their personal attitude. One such trajectory describes a young female migrant worker who thanks to her endeavors, her earnestness to learn and her constant thrift manages to climb up the enterprise hierarchy. Then, because of her becoming lazy and showing ill will, she eventually gets fired, because her attitude negatively influenced the production process. The very last sentence of the article is: “Yezi has finally paid a very painful price for her attitude”. *STQB*, 02/15/98, “Yezi guniang”, p. 6; see *STQB*, 02/15/98, “Wu jia you mei” on the same page for a similar story.

³⁵¹ It is explained that people come to Shenzhen in order to replenish themselves and “charge batteries” (充电 *chongdian*). See for instance this February 1998 tale in which a migrant worker writes: “ (...) in dagong except fostering a spirit of being victorious on oneself, of facing all sorts of difficulties, and of continuous self-strengthening, what is even more important is to learn how to look for work, how to master a few specific skills that help solving real difficulties (...) I think again of Shenzhen, I really want to go back among this tide that is full of tough competition and developed technologies in order to charge my batteries(还想去深圳，真的想再去那种竞争激烈，科技发达的潮流中充充电. haixiang qu Shenzhen, zhende xiang zai qu nazhong jingzheng jilie, keji fada de chaoliuzhong chong chongdian.)”, *STQB*, 15/02/98, “Haixiang Shenzhen”, p. 6.

steadiness and perseverance³⁵². Moreover, it is remarkable how in such tales any experience (good or bad) is capitalized as an element that helps improving people's capacity to compete and potentially become successful.

Let us examine two articles from the "World of dagong" page from March the 1st 1998³⁵³. The reason for looking at the articles from this March 1998 page is that it is the first in which the issue of state-owned enterprises laid-off workers (下岗工人 xiagang gongren) is addressed. On the same page, one comes across articles on exemplary migrant workers and on a laid-off worker, with migrant workers serving implicitly as models for the laid-off workers³⁵⁴. In the first of these two texts we find the tale of a worker from the countryside who despite his low level of education has developed technical devices thanks to his spirit of self-study. He first worked in a factory kitchen when he was 21. The journalist narrating this tale writes:

"(...) while he was only working in a factory kitchen, he was extremely eager to learn. He studied assiduously and got very quickly certificates from universities in hotel management and became a third grade chef. He was very well aware of his low level of education, but he believed in the idea of replenishing this lack. He would not fail to ask questions, he persevered, he kept self-studying assiduously, to elevate himself (...) He often said: love and going forward is the greatest pleasure in life!" (他渴求知识，刻苦学习...持之以恒，坚持刻苦自学，提高自己 (...) 他常说：爱心，进取是人生最大的乐趣。Ta keqiu zhishi, keku xuexi (...) chi zhi yi heng, jianchi keku zixue, tigeao ziji (...) Ta chang shuo: aixin, jinqu shi rensheng zui da de lequ).³⁵⁵

Except the emphasis on the need to be willing to study and learn by oneself, I think the key sentence in this article is "He was very well aware of his low level of education, but he believed in the idea of replenishing this lack". In this tale, as in several other tales of the 1998-1999 articles, becoming aware or acknowledging one's lack and then doing one's best to replenish it are the turning point that allows for, if not solving difficulties, at least for a potential improvement in one's lot or for conceiving the future possibility of such a change.

In the second text, the first tale of a former state-owned enterprises worker is told. A xiagang woman is ready to lower her expectations even though she is an experienced worker.

³⁵² See for instance *STQB*, 03/02/98, *art. cit.*, p. 6 and *STQB*, 15/02/98, "Haixiang Shenzhen", p. 6.

³⁵³ On this same page, we also find the article referred to above that compared Shenzhen to the USA and that vaunted the fact that Shenzhen was full of dynamism and youthfulness, of opportunities and challenges. Its also stressed that people coming to Shenzhen above all needed skills and intelligence.

³⁵⁴ Another article on this page narrates the successes of a model migrant worker who too self-studied assiduously at night after work. He worked in a Shenzhen clothing factory for two years, often working extra hours and not leaving the factory. He had never put a foot on Shenzhen's streets. After two years, he mastered tailoring clothes. He eventually went back home in order "to replenish" the culture of his hometown, *STQB*, 01/03/98, "Shenghuo de qiancaizhe", p. 6.

³⁵⁵ *STQB*, 01/03/98, "Dagong dachu zhuanli", p. 6.

This female laid-off worker is hired in an electronic toy factory as a floor sweeper while she is described as having a “very rich experience in mechanical machining (...)”. She says to the person about to hire her:

“Do not look at me as somebody who is working in an office, in fact I am capable of enduring suffering. I can do any dirty, difficult tasks” (...) I want to do it (floor sweeping). It has been one week since I have been here and I have spent all my money. In the Special zone, to be able to find a job is already not bad at all!³⁵⁶”.

While she has a family to support, she says she only wants to earn money with her two hands. She eventually refuses the job offer made to her by the factory boss. The general meaning conveyed in this text is that laid-off workers (or at least some of them) are not quite fit for Shenzhen, that they need to start from scratch and be ready to perform some dirty and difficult work. Through the dagong experiences, migrant workers and former state-owned workers may learn to know themselves and to develop their capacity to study useful knowledge and techniques, as well as their capacity to find work and adapt to a competitive environment³⁵⁷.

8.2.5 Rescaling

It comes out of the 1998 and 1999 «World of dagong» texts that studying by oneself and being able to learn from one’s experience are possible if people are ready to become aware of their lack and lower their expectations in terms of types of job and of levels of salaries. I call this process “re-scaling” since it relates to re-evaluating one’s position in the socio-professional hierarchy. In the 1998 and 1999 texts, we come across a number of exemplary tales in which people decide to leave their former job and are ready to re-consider their expectations in order find work in Shenzhen. From mid-February onwards, a special column of the “World of dagong” entitled “Searching again for work according to me” is launched. According to the text advertising for the new column, laid-off workers and Shenzhen people who are jobless and who are facing the obstacles of “not getting highly qualified jobs and not being willing to do lower

³⁵⁶ *STQB*, 01/03/98, “Qingjiiegong Alian”, p. 6.

³⁵⁷ In some texts with a very similar plot, the persons addressed are not laid-off workers nor migrant workers but administration employees, as in this January 1999 text in which an employee abandoned “his light and peaceful job” at the township administration and decided to take the dagong road southward”. The last paragraph reads like this : “Knowledge was a life revelation for me, it replenished my life (...) Therefore, on the road of life, I stepped again on the road of youth, I started a new journey” (又踏上了青春的步伐，开始了新的征程. You tashang le qingchun de bufa, kaishi le xin de zhengcheng), *STQB*, 24/01/99, “Dagong lu shang, wo chengzhang le”, p. 6.

jobs” are invited to write to the new column of The “World of dagong”. The introductory text for the column states that such workers will face issues such as “how to raise their own quality (suzhi), how to change their search for work ideas”³⁵⁸. This gives credit to the idea that laid-off workers (or at least some of them) are not quite fit for Shenzhen, that they need to start from scratch and be ready to do the kinds of tasks they usually scorn.

The notion of having to re-evaluate one’s work position in the social hierarchy is also built in several texts on the comparison between the types of work people used to do in the interior before they moved to Shenzhen and the new tasks they are performing in Shenzhen. The jobs performed in the interior are indeed often depicted as stable and dull. Such a depiction allows to qualify state-owned enterprises laid-off workers as too choosy for the Shenzhen labor market. They therefore are in need of lowering their demands and have to start from scratch. The depiction of work in a state-owned enterprise or in an administration as being “light” (devoid of stress) or “boring” is captured nicely in a January 1999 text which tells the tale of a successful couple of laid-off SOE workers. When they first arrived in Shenzhen, the woman accepted to wash dishes in a hotel while her husband decided to attend a training in order to become an insurance intermediary. The former work is compared to the present one:

“The pain of running everyday as an insurance intermediary may not be compared to having a rest, sitting in an administration drinking tea and reading a newspaper”.

All along the text, they are described as working very hard and having changed several times jobs. The text implicitly conveys the idea that, contrarily to this couple, laid-off workers are not daring enough and are too narrow-minded to be successful in Shenzhen³⁵⁹.

The emphasis put on the idea that work in Shenzhen is very different from people’s former work helps build the image of Shenzhen as a place that *transforms* people. A place that makes it as if, once in Shenzhen, everyone has to start from scratch in order to compete in one common race³⁶⁰. In order to take part to this competition, people therefore need to reconsider their standards of self-judgment, which often entails underplaying some of their past experiences and credentials. In one February 1998 text, this takes the form of a highly educated woman whose major was English and who kept taking her former achievements and revenue as basic standard. This “of course was the cause of her trouble” and difficulties in finding work. Her husband then tells her that as the economy of Southeast Asia is not flourishing, her expectations,

³⁵⁸ *STQB*, 15/03/98, “Wo kan zai jiu ye”, p. 6.

³⁵⁹ *STQB*, 31/01/99, “Shenghuo bu xiangxin yanlei”, p. 6.

³⁶⁰ In her analysis of Chinese tabloids in the 1990s Zhao Yuezhi points to a similar way of representing the laying-off of state-owned enterprises workers. See Zhao Yuezhi, 2002.

should not be too high. At the same time however, he reminds her that she should never lose confidence in herself and ought to be ready to climb again each time she falls down³⁶¹. In another text, the idea that Shenzhen is a place where people need to start from scratch is expressed through the tale of a university graduate who decides to underplay his university degree he had acquired and let down his former status:

“Half a month later, I went to a hotel to work as waiter (...) I did not dare any more to show my university diploma that I had got after so many efforts (...) During that period, as I was holding the bucket to the toilets and as I was offering the kinds of kneeling down services to others, I kept my tears and was not thinking that I was a university graduate, I was just considering myself as an apprentice who did not understand anything ((...) 我都咽着泪水不去想自己是一个大学生，只把自己当成一个什么都不懂的学徒。Wo dou yanzhe leishui bu qu xiang ziji shi yige daxuesheng, zhi ba ziji dangcheng yige shenme dou budong de xuetu)³⁶²”.

Later he was told that the reason why he had been appointed to the position of group leader was that he had put down his university student air and that he was willing “to become a primary student again”. Hence, in this text, starting from scratch means for a highly educated person to re-evaluate her position in society and be ready to start working as a waiter, a rather low-status kind of job. In another instance, the lowering of a female migrant worker takes the form of doing the laundry in a hospital without being paid a salary. As this worker was working so fast and steadily, she eventually got rewarded. The coda of this tale is expressed in the very last sentence of the text: “the person who can help you best is yourself”³⁶³.

The message sent to former state-owned enterprises workers, although not always expressed explicitly is quite clear: everyone should be ready to lower his work expectations in order to adapt to the Shenzhen labor market. Through the repetition of such exemplary tales, we may posit that there is a will to stimulate people, to exhort them not to give up searching for any kind of work, to remain self-confident and keep a positive outlook on their lot and future. A new keyword is mobilized in such tales or editorials. It is to “urge oneself” or “spur oneself” (鞭

³⁶¹ Interestingly, in another text, the fact of lowering one’s expectations is referred to as “fanshen”

(翻身): “Before the women made her “fanshen”, she found that many works were too demanding, “dirty and tiring, the pay too low, bosses too bad, and that she could not stand all this”. *STQB*, 29/08/99, “Shei xie shei?”, p. 6. The term “fanshen”, meaning to topple one’s body, takes us back in the revolutionary era when it entailed changing one’s entire look on society and using Marxist criteria of analysis to become aware of one’s exploitation.

³⁶² *STQB*, 28/03/99, “Cong xiaoxue zuoqi”, p. 6.

³⁶³ *STQB*, 28/03/99, “Cong tou zuoqi”, p. 6.

策自己. biance ziji)³⁶⁴. Several of the 1999 texts are more or less explicit warnings addressed to state-owned enterprises workers or laid-off workers. The message sent to them is that if they do not look for work actively and are not willing to study new knowledge and techniques by themselves they are likely to either get laid-off or be unable to find employment on the Shenzhen labor market. The three hereafter fragments offer a nice illustration of the tone of these warnings. They also convey the idea that people are now left on their own and their success relies mostly on their individual attitude:

“When you feel at a loss, don't forget: life does not believe in tears, only those strongly determined talents will manage to reach the shore of victory” (生活不相信眼泪，只有坚强的人才能抵达胜利的彼岸. Shenghuo bu xiangxin yanlei, zhiyou jianqiang de rencai cai neng dida shengli de po'an)³⁶⁵.

“Many people (...) do not make plans actively, nor do they take hold of their life conscientiously, they spend their time in a mediocre and unambitious way. These kinds of people not only will find it hard to be successful in their achievements, it is also very likely that they will be the object of the work unit personnel reduction plan”³⁶⁶.

“During all this period, Xiaorong had not stopped going forward, through self-studying she got a specialized technical degree. This because she knows that in a society of tough competition, only those who endlessly keep replenishing themselves may continuously make progress, otherwise they will be eliminated” (竞争激烈的社会中只有不断地充实自己，才能不断进展，否则就被淘汰. Jingzheng jilie de shehui zhong zhiyou buduan de chonghsi ziji, cai neng buduan jinzhan, fouze jiu bei taotai)³⁶⁷.

As I have shown above and highlighted already above, many of these texts share a common feature: it is the very fact of acknowledging one's lack that allows for the lowering of expectations, for the will to study by oneself while working and eventually to adapt to the competitive environment. I suggest now to turn to a further feature of the tales of migrant workers in the “World of dagong”.

Confidence, dreams and ideals

³⁶⁴ Note that the literal meaning of “bian” (鞭) and “ce” (策) are to whip.

³⁶⁵ *STQB*, 31/01/99, *art. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁶⁶ *STQB*, 28/03/99, “Zouchu zhiye sheji de wuqu”, p. 6.

³⁶⁷ *STQB*, 28/03/99, “Cong tou zuoqi”, p. 6. On this March 28th page, three articles conveyed a very similar kind of warning. See also *STQB*, 28/03/99, “Shengming cong xiagang kaishi”, p. 6.

As long as you are confident in your capacities, as long as you keep nurturing dreams and aspirations, your future should become brighter. I identified this as another core structure that was found in many of the «World of dagong» articles. If the plot of all tales does not necessarily end with a positive transformation of the initial situation, at least the potential for positive change is stressed. The need to keep a positive outlook on the future and keep nurturing expectations are related explicitly to Deng Xiaoping's thought in one editorial which starts by raising the problem that migrant workers tend to complain too much in relation to their work. The text refers to the need to study Deng Xiaoping's theory and the spirit of the party's 15th Congress. It stresses that the essence of Deng Xiaoping's thought is to do real things which may help to solve problems objectively. By having such an attitude, migrant workers, it is argued, should realize that there is no point in complaining about one's lot since it does not help solving problems. The fragment I selected hereunder speaks for itself and again crystallizes some of the main values and idioms that have been highlighted up to now. It reads:

“(…) let's hope that the many *dagong* friends (*dagong pengyou* 打工朋友) will recognize this point, at work and in life make fewer complaints, do more concrete things, be diligent to think things over, compete with people in diligence, in perseverance and constancy, as well as in hardworking attitude. It is only this way that you will be able to get out of the shadow of oppression, of resentment, and of grumble, and thereby look at life with an attitude of exerting oneself and making progress. By doing this our life of *dagong* will be replenished, it will be more full of youth and hope” ((...) 在工作和生活中少发牢骚，多干实事，勤于思考，与人比勤奋，比恒心，比刻苦，只有这样才能从郁闷，怨恨走出来(...) 从而使我们的打工生活过得更加充实，更加充满朝气，更加充满希望。Zai gongzuo he shenguo zhong shao fa laosao, duo gan shishi, qinyu sikao, yu ren bi qinfen, bi hengxin, bi keku. Zhiyou zheyang cai neng cong yumen, yuanhen, laosao zou chulai (...) conger shi women de dagong shenghuo guode gengjia chongshi, gengjia chongman chaoqi, gengjia chongman xiwang)³⁶⁸.

The emphasis on nurturing dreams and expectations is well captured in another editorial. It explains what the meaning of the term “*kuaile*” (happy, joy) means for migrant workers (or more generally for those who “*dagong*”). It emphasises the importance of remaining optimistic when facing hardship. The hereafter fragment gives a good idea of the content and tone of the editorial:

“Those who like us are *dagong* outside are particularly in need of a cheerful mind (...)
 If you are travelling far, then the destination is your joy;
 if you are a laborer, then the hard and assiduous work is your joy;

³⁶⁸ *STQB*, 22/02/98, “Shao laozao, duogan shishi”, p. 6.

if you do not have a diploma, then the hard self-study is your joy. Therefore, we believe that to say that one his happy does not mean that one is rich or that one is successful, but joy does manifest itself through our goals in life and through our continuous fight in our undertakings (...) Because brightness is in his [the one who is happy in effort and hard work] heart, brightness is in his hands” (你是一个打工者，你的勤奋工作就是快乐，你没有文凭，你的刻苦自学就是快乐 (...) 光明在信中，光明在手中. Ni shi yige dagongzhe, nide qinfen gongzuo jiu shi kuaile, ni meiyou wenping, ni de keku zixue jiu shi kuaile (...) Guangming zai xinzhong, guangming zai shouzhong) ³⁶⁹.

Such editorials are highly interesting since they often crystallize major values and attributes of the public transcript or hegemonic framework. It is the case in this text of the mention of hard work, the need for self-study, as well as the need to keep fighting and nurturing plans. The last couplet dealing with brightness expresses nicely the optimistic spirit characteristic of the vast majority of articles analysed not only in the “World of dagong” pages but more generally in the Shenzhen newspapers analysed. Almost all of the «World of dagong» texts are clearly in line with this optimistic framework. In two texts I found that the optimistic outlook was somewhat questioned but just to be further emphasized at the very end of the text. In the first text the optimistic outlook on the future allows to think positively of the future of an injured young female migrant worker :

“Confidence is strength. Xiaomei’s dream of studying will definitely be achieved” (信心就是力量。小妹，求学梦一定能圆. Xinxin jiu shi liliang, Xiaomei qiuxue de meng yiding neng yuan)³⁷⁰.

The second piece is the only one I found which questioned the “you just need to work hard, do your best to study while working and never give up your plans and you should be successful” couplet since it narrates the story of an unsuccessful migrant worker who has been forced to go back to his village. But again, the very last sentence of the text leaves no ambiguity as to the eventual validity of the couplet:

“I persevere and remain confident , you only need to have a longing and never stop being conscientious, and you will always reach your target (我坚信，只要有追求，再不懈努力，目标总能实现的. Wo jianxin, zhi yao you zhuiqiu, zai buxie nuli, mubiao zong hui shixiande.)”³⁷¹.

³⁶⁹ *STQB*, 28/02/99, “Xiao dui rensheng”, p. 6.

³⁷⁰ *STQB*, 01/03/98, “Xiaomei”, p. 6.

³⁷¹ *STQB*, 01/03/98, “Mengxiang dushu”, p. 6.

Except the stress on nurturing expectations and keeping an optimistic outlook, one should note that from 1998 on, a series of expressions and keywords occur repeatedly. The emergence of such expressions are often, linked to specific narrative structures. As we have shown, this was the case with the term “to urge oneself” (鞭策自己 *biance ziji*) which was linked to the stress on lowering one’s demands and keeping struggling to find work with high spirit³⁷². We have emphasized too that to “replenish oneself” (充实自己 *chongshi ziji*) or “to charge batteries” (充电 *chongdian*) were expressions found several times in the 1998 and 1999 texts and that they were related to attitudes of self-studying and learning from one’s experience in Shenzhen. Another recurring expression is that of “finding one’s place”, “finding one’s direction” or “knowing oneself again”, as well as “to look for oneself again”. It is hard to account for the emergence of such expressions in the *STQB*, but I suggest that it may have to do with the growing interest on individual psychology and management as well as the promotion of social Darwinism as well as to a trend toward individualism within Chinese society³⁷³. To a certain extent, the migrant literature, along with a variety of other channels, contributes to the popularization of such terms and the meanings they embody. We shall see in the next chapter of this dissertation that such expressions are used in many texts written by migrant workers. Below is a table that gives a snapshot of some of these expressions within the “World of dagong” pages.

Table 8.1: adapting to competition

Date	Fragment Chinese	Fragment English
<i>STQB</i> , 15/02/98, p. 6.	还想去深圳，真的想再去那种竞争激烈，科技发达的潮流中 充充电	I would like to go again to Shenzhen, I really want to go back among this tide that is full of tough competition and developed technologies in order to charge my batteries.
<i>STQB</i> , 08/03/98, p. 6.	青春的价值，随著流水线缓缓地流去。... 我的青春因流水线的流动而 充实	The value of youth is flowing away smoothly along the production line... My youth is replenished because of the floating of the production line”.

³⁷² See for instance *STQB*, 28/03/99, “Shengming cong xiagang kaishi”, p. 6 ; *STQB*, 01/08/99, “Chen women hai nianqing”, p. 6; *STQB*, 15/08/99 , ”Meiyou gongzuo de rizi”, p. 6.

³⁷³ On how the notion of “self” has become a positive one for the generations of youths born in the 1960s and 1970s, see Luo Xu, 1995, p. 559-561. On the promotion of values related to individualism in education manuals in the 1990s see Tyl, 2001, pp. 4-17. See also Landsberger, 2001, pp. 541-571.

<p>STQB, 17/01/99, p. 6.</p>	<p>我用打工换来的血汗钱重返学校，为的是充足电，再到社会打出一片新天地</p>	<p>“I have used the money exchanged with my blood and sweat to go back to school. My aim is to charge my batteries, to go again into society in order to create a new universe”.</p>
<p>STQB, 28/03/99, p. 6.</p>	<p>(...) 竞争激烈的社会中只有不断地充实自己，才能不断进展，否则就被淘汰 (...)</p>	<p>After having fought hard, their life had come to a turning point, their revenues had gone up, last year in May they bought a house in Longhua. Xiaorong had not stopped going forward, through self-studying she got a specialized technical degree. This because she knows that in a society of tough competition, only those who endlessly keep replenishing themselves may continuously make progress, otherwise they will be eliminated.</p>

Table 8.1: adapting to competition

Date	Fragment Chinese	Fragment English
STQB, 15/02/98, p. 6.	从中 重新认识自我 ，加强学习，提高自身适应显示环境的能力	Through his several dagong experiences he “learned to know himself again , improved the capacity for studying and his capacity to adapt to a real environment.
STQB, 15/02/98, p. 6.	那时他才真正地意识到：苦难是人生的最好的老师。他 找到了自我的价值	At this moment, he only fully realized: trouble and difficulties are life’s best teacher. He found his personal value” .
STQB, 15/02/98, p. 6.	小伙子貌端体健，无论对生活还是工作都充满信心... 已经找到了自己的发展方	This lad was very tall, no matter if it was in life or at work he was always fully confident... He had already found his own development direction” .
STQB, 01/03/98, p. 6.	不少人来到这里，寻找 自己的价值	Many people come here to look for their own value .
STQB, 01/03/98, p. 6.	如今我来到了深圳，仍苦苦地寻找 着自己的人生位置	“Today, I have come to Shenzhen, and I am still searching painfully for my own place (...) ”.
STQB, 15/03/98, p. 6.	做了几年的苦行僧，也算 找到了自己的位置	“After several years of hard living like a monk, I think I have found my place” .
STQB, 15/03/98, p. 6.	在这几年的打工中，我 又重新寻找了自我	“With these few years of dagong, I have searched again for myself” .

8.3 The factory as family: warmth, love and prosperity

While there is an overall emphasis in the “World of dagong” articles on individual values that are related to social mobility and the capacity to face competition, I have come across a number of texts that stressed both such values along with those that are traditionally associated to model workers both in the Mao and post-Mao era such as altruism, solidarity for the poor regions of the country and patriotism. Some of the model workers and model factories in the «World of dagong» pages do indeed exemplify values such as altruism, helping other people and sharing a sense of concern for poor areas of the country. A recurring feature of the “World of

dagong” articles dealing with model factories is that of the love (关爱 guan'ai), attention and care (关怀 guanhuai) that migrant workers should be provided with by society. Along with the emphasis on such notions, the construction of the factory as a place that brings warmth (温暖 wenuan) and is considered as a family (家 jia) for migrant workers emerges as well. Within such factories, migrant workers are again described as a happy crowd, often referred to as “the happy nation of dagong” (打工快乐一族 dagong yizu).

In the articles that may be defined as describing model factories, the notion that is most recurrent is that for migrant workers the factory is just like their own family. In addition to feeling warmth (温暖 wenuan)³⁷⁴, migrant workers also get solicitude (关怀 guanhuai) and love (爱 ai) in the factories described. Let us look at what the characteristics of these models factories are.

First of all, the atmosphere within these factories is often described as joyful as in the hereafter fragments:

“The more than one hundred dagongmei and dagongzai dressed neatly were all joyful and colourful, the were very happy, wishing a new year of prosperity and flourishing success to the company, they were raising their glass to their boss, thanking him for all the love he is giving to the personnel, this scene was extremely moving (...) (上百穿著整洁的打工仔打工妹笑逐颜开喜气洋洋举杯祝愿他们的公司在新的—年里产销两旺, 生意兴隆...真诚地感谢他对员工的一片爱心. Shangbai chuanzhe zhengjie de dagongzai, dagongmei xiao zhu yan kai xiqi yangyang, jubei zhuyuan tamen de gongsizai xinde yi nianli chanxiao liangwang, shengyi xinglong....zhencheng de ganxie ta dui yuangong de yipian aixin)³⁷⁵.

“In the employees’ club of factory n° 2 of Zhonghua, it was colourful, full of lights and plenty of laughter could be heard. In the middle, it was written “Happy birthday” while the two parallel sentences wrote “the giant dragon is rising in the air” and “Zhonghua rises quickly” (中华自行车二厂职工俱乐部里彩灯闪烁, 笑语阵阵, 生日快乐的横联挂在中央, 两边是巨龙腾飞, 中华崛起. Zhonghua zixingche er

³⁷⁴ Warmth is the very term often used to describe migrant workers’ hometown and families.

³⁷⁵ *STQB*, 10/01/99, p. 6. The title of this text is “All that is poured onto workers is love” (洒向员工都是爱).

chang julebu li cai deng shan shan le, xiaoyu zhenzhen, shengri kuaile de henglian guazai zhongyang, liangbian shi julongtengfei, Zhonghua jueqi)³⁷⁶.

The major reason put forward to account for such a joyful atmosphere as well as for the excellent work environment in these factories is that the relationship between bosses and workers is described as similar to that of somebody to his family members. This relationship is characterized by solicitude and love exerted by the factory manager towards migrant workers. In the first of the above-quoted fragment, the factory manager, who created his own company after having “jumped into the sea”, is asked by his friends about his success:

“One needs to treat well the personnel, just as if one were feeding and providing clothes to one’s mother and father, one meets them in one single heart, one holds them together in one single feeling” (要善待员工犹如衣食父母. Yao shandai yuangong you ru yi shi fumu)³⁷⁷.



³⁷⁶ *STQB*, 21/01/94, p. 9. In these model factories, birthday parties as well as celebrations of traditional feasts are celebrated frequently. See for instance *STQB*, 31/01/99, p. 6 in which it is explained that “As the factory boss organizes birthday celebrations, the personnel feels the warmth of a big family”.

³⁷⁷ *STQB*, 10/01/99, “Sa xiang yuangong dou shi ai”, p. 6. We find another nice illustration of the proximity between managers and workers in an August 1994 text in which a university graduate employee explains that his former American and Taiwanese general managers often “treated the employees of the factory as the members of a family” by organizing diners with all of them, often eating with the employees in the canteen, always ready to talk to them, *STQB*, 29/08/94, “Wode liang ge waiguo laoban”, p. 9.

Source: *STQB*, 10/01/99, p. 6.

The proximity between factory managers and workers results in most of these texts in an improvement of the efficiency and the prosperity of the factory. In some texts, especially in the 1999 texts, the solicitude factory managers express towards workers is materialized in outstanding work conditions in terms of safety and leisure. Such factories are also model ones in the sense that they respect perfectly well the labor regulations and legislation. One such above-mentioned factory is designated as “the house of safety” for migrant workers and its workers are therefore working harder and more efficiently. It provides migrant workers with facilities such as sport grounds, reading rooms and a karaoke room³⁷⁸.

It needs to be stressed that articles on model factories, in the same vein as those texts on model workers, serve to illustrate what other factories should do, how they ought to be influenced and take after such models. I would like hereafter to provide two illustrations of the model factory as the ideal one which may reconcile the conflicting aspects of the Shenzhen politics of labor into one ideal figure. One such factory has been the object of several articles, including one above quoted article that was singled out as an illustration of model workers’ attitude of abnegation and wholehearted sacrifices³⁷⁹. The journalist who visited this factory started his depiction by writing that he “had heard that Zhonghua had created an extraordinarily beautiful environment for workers” (中华为打工者创造了一个极美的环境. Zhonghua wei dagongzhe chuangzao le yige jimei de huanjing). There was grass and flowers everywhere just like in the hall of the Shenzhen National Trade Building. A Taiwanese general manager is quoted as having said after having visited the factory:

“This is the biggest, newest, most beautiful and most modern bicycle factory I have ever visited”.

It is thereafter explained that Zhonghua is a tripartite company (Hong Kong, USA and China). According to Shi Zhanxiong, the general manager:

³⁷⁸ *STQB*, 10/01/99, “Saxaing yuangong dou shi ai”, p. 6. This factory is a model one in one more respect since its general manager also offered financial and material help to the hometown of some of his staff whose hometown had suffered from floods. Hence in this case, the model factory allows to get factory manager and workers close together as well as it allows for a narrowing of the rural-urban gap.

³⁷⁹ See *STQB*, “Pingfan de ‘Zhonghua’ ren”, 29/03/98, p. 6.

“Other people must know that Chinese companies are excellent, that Chinese products are excellent and at the same time one needs to tell the whole world that Chinese laborers are excellent (要向全世界宣告中国的劳动者是优秀的. Yao xiang quan shijie xuangao zhongguo de laodongzhe shi youxiu de).

In the design and construction of this company, 6 millions yuan (1/6 of the overall cost) have been spent to provide workers with a high quality living and work environment”. The vice-director’s ideal is said to be “to change the laboring environment of workers”. He tells the journalist about the advantage of the windows they have installed in terms of sun rays and also in terms of optimal ventilations³⁸⁰. The factory is also designed in order not to consume too much energy and to let in enough day light. As for the material that has been chosen to build the factory, the rule has been to select the best from each country and what was best for workers’ health. For instance, the welding workshop has been elevated by 2 meters in order to improve the air environment. Between each workshop there are three pounds surrounded by grass which further improved the factory environment. A dormitory that can contain up to 1.500 persons was built. Each person has a bed, a small table and a cupboard. The dormitory is as clean as a military camp. As to the cultural and leisure facilities, one may read:

“Zhonghua has not hesitated to spend a lot of money in order to build a healthy and beautiful mind for dagongzhe, it has established a library, TV room, a karaoke room, a tennis and basket-ball court, a swimming pool, an outdoor dancing floor and each week a dancing evening is organized for the personnel” (中华为塑造打工者的健康体魄与美的心灵不息花费重金建设了图书馆，电视室，卡拉 OK 室网球场，篮球场，游泳池，露天舞台和哥厅 (...) Zhonghua wei suzao dagongzhe de jiankang tipo yu mei de xinling, buxi huafei zhong jin jianshe le tushuguan, dianshishi, kala OK shi, wangqiuchang, lanqiuchang, youyongchi, lutian wutai he geting (...)).

When asked how the vice-director had thought about all this, he replied:

“Think about it a little, if the personnel feels happy living and working here and that they therefore produce two additional bicycles everyday, think of the benefit for the company”.

As for the production of bicycles, every three seconds a bicycle is produced and in 1993, 1.840.000 bicycles were produced, of which 2/3 were exported which is the greatest export in the world. The article ends by relating the visit of the factory by officials of the People’s National Congress inspection team who stated:

³⁸⁰ In order to install such windows the company has invested 5 additional million yuan.

“beautiful thinking, beautiful products, beautiful environment, beautiful future”(美丽的思路，美丽的产品，美丽的环境，美丽的前景。 Meili de silu, meili de chanpin, meili de huanjing, meili de qianjing)³⁸¹.

Let us now look at the second text that may serve as an example of the model factory framework which I would summarize as such:

“care for migrant workers — factory = family (warmth) + rights protected — factory is growing fast”.

In this text, the journalist started by stating that in Shenzhen, one can often hear that some factory bosses do not apply the labor law, often oblige workers to perform extra hours, pay salaries late or confiscate part of workers’ salaries, and that the conditions and the work environment are bad. He then contrasted this situation with that which they had seen in the factory they visited:

“But when we entered the ink company , the factory surrounded by flowers, the well regulated work order, or when you hear the migrant workers’ laughter in the room where they can have a rest, it makes you feel as if you had arrived home. (当我们走进公司时...花园式的厂房...休息室打工者欢快的笑声，就让你到家的感觉。 Dang women zoujin gongsi shi... huayuanshi de gongchang...xiuxi shi dagongzhe de xiaosheng, jiu rang ni dao jia de ganjue).

One may read thereafter that the company stops production each year to organize a trip. In addition to the modern equipment and spacious workshop, what impressed the journalists most was that in each workshop there were rooms where workers could have a rest:

“Inside there are chairs and tables, air-co, water heater, a washroom and a room to change clothes. At 3.30 pm. We entered a workshop, the workers were having a rest, some of them were drinking water, others were reading newspapers”.

³⁸¹ STQB, 25/02/94, “Zhonghua”, p. 6.

From the eighties on, this factory organized the 5 days of work a week and almost no extra hours are done. Two years earlier, the company invested several hundred thousands yuan in the building of a culture room for the staff that included an outset for karaoke. Every week-end the personnel may go there “to dance and sing, play pool, they can relax happily”. Each year a few outstanding workers are selected to go abroad for training. One of them because he worked industriously and loved studying, was steady and competent at work, had started as a simple worker, to raise all the way from group leader to vice workshop-leader. He was chosen as “one of 10 outstanding young workers” and got a Shenzhen household registration as a reward and encouragement. Last year, the company organized for him to go to Japan to participate to a training session:

This once baby hailing from a mountainous area had not even dreamt of coming one day to Shenzhen to work, he could even get a Shenzhen hukou (household registration certificate), his wife could also move to Shenzhen and he was able to go abroad for training. The personnel of the factory have seen hope out of his body: over here, you just have to work well and you will have a bright prospect” (公司员工们从他身上看到了希望：在这里只要好好干就有奔头。Gongsi yuangongmen cong ta shenshang kan dao le xiwang; zai zheli, zhiyao haohao gan jiu you bentou).

The two journalists then interview the Japanese director of this factory about the care for the personnel that characterizes this company, he said:

“In China there is a famous saying that says: “Unity is strength”. We have transformed our many years of running this factory into a concept: “Care is strength (...)” The investments in affection have brought great rewards: the company has become one of the best in the ink production (...) its sales and profits increase each year, last year they increased by 30%. The loving care from the company leaders for their personnel exerts a very subtle influence to transform it into a famous brand and high profits so that the company’s products and sales increase continuously” (感情投资带来了丰厚的回报。Ganqing touzi dailai le fenghou de huibao)³⁸².

These two articles, one from February 1994 and the other from January 1999, depict ideal factories. In these two pieces, as well as in other similar texts examined, we have a clear focus on the atmosphere of warmth and loving care within the factory walls. It is interesting that the emphasis is put on this kind of family atmosphere since so much has been written in the scientific and reportage literature, as well as in much press accounts, on the dehumanizing

³⁸² *STQB*, 31/01/99, “Dagong kaixin shi, mianfei luyou qu”, p. 6.

regimes of the work-place. As I have shown in chapter 4, it has been observed repeatedly in several scholarly work that in addition to the appalling work conditions found in many factories of the Pearl River Delta, migrant workers, and among them even more so female workers, were subjected to very harsh discipline and often derogatory treatments. The work environment described in these two texts is again very much at odds with what is described as commonplace practices in the Pearl River Delta. The cultural emptiness in and around the factory environment has also been decried at length. These idealistic depictions give the exact opposite image of what is commonly said and written about life in the Delta Factories. Hence these depictions rest on a certain apprehension of reality which they turn upside down so that all its asperities (i.e. the troubling elements, those that create tension within the whole system of signs of the party) are erased in the figure of the ideal factory. In the second text, we can observe that in such environment, workers can only but achieve outstanding results through their attitudes of hard-work, tenacity and through their willingness to study while they are laboring. Here again, work models are chosen within the factory so as to serve as examples to emulate as is clear from the above-quoted sentence “The personnel of the factory have seen hope out of his body: over here, you just have to work well and you will have a bright prospect”. The Pearl River Delta factory can turn into a place where migrant workers, factory managers and party-state leaders can meet³⁸³.

We have just highlighted that one important meaning pursued in the articles that depicted model factories was that migrant workers were provided with love and care from the factories’ management and from the party. Actually, a concurring idea that migrant workers need to benefit from solicitude from the entire Shenzhen society is sponsored too in the «World of dagong» pages. In the specific case of Shenzhen, this needs to be related to the general image of Shenzhen that the press is trying to convey, especially the strong concern from the Shenzhen municipal and party authorities to convey a positive image of Shenzhen³⁸⁴. On the other hand, the need to care for migrant workers’ souls and bodies may be related too to the “spiritual civilization campaigns”³⁸⁵ which again relate directly to the general appearance of Shenzhen. The idea

³⁸³ *STQB*, 25/02/94, “Chuxi jiaban”, p. 6. In this text, the city leaders care so much for the workers of this factory that they pay a visit to them on the first evening of the Spring festival. One migrant worker is quoted as saying: “I had not noticed it, but it was already 9 pm, someone shouted “The city leaders have arrived!”. I raised my head and saw our general manager who was accompanying them. Usually it is on television that we can see them, but this time they were so close to us”. Interestingly in this text, an implicit contrast is marked between Shenzhen streets during the New Year Eve that are so quiet and cold on the one hand, and the factory that is so lively, colourful and full of joy (不知不觉已近 21 点了, 有谁喊 “市领导来了”。急抬头, 见老总陪著一行人来到跟前。平时都是在电视里见到他们, 眼下却这么近距离地相对着。Buzhi bujue yijing 21 dian le, you shei han « Shi lingdao lai le ». Ji taitou, jina laozong peizhe yi xing ren laidao genqian. Pingshi dou shi zai dianshilie jian dao tamen)

³⁸⁴ See Kjellgren, 1999; Cartier, 2002.

³⁸⁵ The stress on building a spiritual civilization has on the whole to do with getting the ills of the market under control, see Kjellgren 1999; Luo Xu, 1995, pp. 541-542. I come back to the spiritual civilization campaigns in the following chapter.

conveyed in editorials that deal with the “spiritual construction of the zone, is that “the entire society needs to care for migrant workers, to create the conditions to satisfy their correct needs in terms of techniques, culture and leisure”³⁸⁶.

I have indeed come across a few texts that similarly put forward the idea that people in Shenzhen are on the whole friendly and generous towards migrant workers. Hence for instance we find tales in which migrant workers get seriously injured but who, thanks to the solicitude of Shenzhen people (hospital nurses, officials or ordinary people), either regain hope or even get back to work. In such tales the solicitude Shenzhen people devote to migrant workers is said again to be equivalent to that one would devote to one’s own family members³⁸⁷. Texts that emphasise the altruistic attitude of Shenzhen people towards migrant workers somehow contribute to the construction of an image of Shenzhen as a place where everything becomes possible and where no human energy can be wasted, as can be inferred from this fragment:

“(…) people’s true feelings and love that have lit again the fire of the will to go on living and to face the challenge of this illness (...) There are true feelings among the people, Shenzhen is not the wasteland of love. We believe that a young flower would not possibly wither on this warm earth full of friendly feelings” (我们相信，年轻之生命之花不会在这片充满情谊热天的热土上枯萎 (Women xiangxin, nianqing zhi shengming zhi hua bu hui zai zhe pian chongman qing yi re tian de retu shang kuwei)³⁸⁸.

On the whole, the picture we get from the “World of dagong” pages is that of a place that can conciliate principles that are originally part of the Maoist repertoire such as altruism, with more individualistic values linked to competition and the capacity of individuals to strive on their own for upward social mobility.

8.4 Conclusion

The analysis of the « World of dagong » shows that this special page provides a space for a very intense ideological construction of migrant workers. The exemplary figure described within the “World of dagong” embodies a series of values and attributes which lead them towards

³⁸⁶ *STQB*, 25/02/94, “Bu dapai gan shenme”, p. 9; see also *STQB*, 15/03/98, “Dagong ru dajing”, p. 6.

³⁸⁷ One such text ended this way: “An unlucky dagongmei has luckily encountered noble-minded doctors and nurses and therefore she could recover. We really do not know how many such moving stories occur in Bao’an Hospital (...) Humanism, has found the best illustration through the personnel of Bao’an People’s Hospital”. *STQB*, 25/03/94, “Aixin wu jia”, p. 6; see also *STQB*, 22/03/98, “Kegui de di er ci shengming”, p. 6 for a very similar plot.

³⁸⁸ *STQB*, 22/08/94, “Zhenqing dianran shengming zhi huo”, p. 6. Note the use in this case too of the term “challenges” just as it is used in so many texts to refer to finding work or being successful in one’s endeavours.

individual and collective success. Such success may take the forms of social mobility, of having a sense of belonging to Shenzhen, of contributing to the zone economic development and to local prosperity, or to self-fulfilment. One can suggest that some of the values which are part of the dominant public transcript of dagong such as self-sacrifice, altruism or industriousness belong to the Maoist repertoire, while others such as self-studying or the capacity to learn from one's experiences would rather belong to the traditional repertoire of values. Still, other values and attitudes such as self-confidence, the capacity of self-adaptation and of seizing opportunities are often coined neo-liberal or social Darwinist values which are perhaps closest to what official ideology stands for in post-Mao China (Link et al., 2002, p. 5).

According to Crane, in the construction of an identity for Shenzhen, socialist values such as self-sacrifice and collectivism are being played down in favor of a rhetoric of pioneering and newness (Crane, 1994, pp. 76, 83, 89). My analysis of the mainstream Shenzhen press representation of migrant workers does qualify Crane's argument in the sense that the figure of the legitimate migrant worker concentrates altogether a rhetoric of sacrifice, hard work, self-education, pioneering spirit and of individual's capacity to face competition. Instead of conceiving these values as belonging to different conflicting repertoires, one ought to think of them as being potentially reworked in a new context and as intersecting in novel ways with values belonging to other repertoires. For instance, we have seen in this chapter that the Maoist principle of negating intellectuals' diplomas was being reworked within the context of laying-off of state-owned enterprises at the end of the 1990s³⁸⁹. In this case, a principle that was used to rationalize sending intellectuals to work in factories or to the countryside is aptly adapted to the new emphasis on the need for individuals, and particularly so for workers from state-owned enterprises, to lower their expectations and be prepared to adapt to the competition on the labor market³⁹⁰. I have shown indeed in this chapter that the way dagong and migrant workers were being represented could be altered to better fit the changing socio-economic conditions. In her depiction of how Chinese tabloids represent the issue of laying-off of state-owned enterprises workers, Zhao Yuezhi has argued that the meaning the tabloids were conveying was that "there is nothing to fear" in losing "their undesirable jobs in state enterprises" as long as they were ready

³⁸⁹ I am grateful to Jean-Philippe Béja for having highlighted this Maoist principle to me when discussing an earlier version of this chapter.

³⁹⁰ As Solinger shows for the city of Wuhan, in the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century, some occupations that used to be performed solely by migrant workers such as street peddlers were more and more being performed by former state-owned enterprises workers. Such changes are indicative of the scale of the reworking of the social hierarchy. See Solinger, 2004, pp. 50-66. She notes that in some instances in the late 1990s, the term "peasant worker" was used to designate former state-owned enterprises workers or unemployed people, *Ibid.*, p. 58. I have noticed in the last two or three years that some of the low prestige jobs such as transporting goods on tricycles or repairing bicycles were sometimes performed by urban dwellers in the streets of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, or Foshan.

to “make psychological adjustments, lower their expectations, accept low-paying and low-status jobs, and settle in their places in the new division of labor in the “socialist market economy” (Zhao Yuezhi, 2002, p. 123).

The highly pervasive emphasis on exemplary behaviours which has been highlighted in this chapter can be considered as an instance of the “good ruler syndrome” which for Borge Bakken characterizes much of cultural and political practices in both ancient and contemporary China. This would be part of a process of parading virtuous behaviours (Bakken, 1999, pp. 168-175). Such an approach would in a sense complement the argument of a strong self-referential dimension of representing migrant workers.

One last feature needs to be pointed to at this stage. I have documented the fact that within the dominant public transcript of migrant workers, it was also the building of an image and an identity for Shenzhen that was at stake. In many of the texts that were examined in this chapter, the idea that Shenzhen and the South need to be models for the rest of the country is particularly pervasive. The dominant public transcript of *dagong* and of migrant workers needs to be considered against the background of Shenzhen as a laboratory for economic reforms and opening that exemplify socialism with Chinese characteristics and which must become a model in term of its building of spiritual civilization. I suggest therefore, in the next chapter to look more closely at what Shenzhen spiritual civilization embodies in the late 1980s and 1990s. As we shall see, this will help shed light on what has been documented in the above four chapters.

Chapter 9: Shenzhen myth-making. Constructing Shenzhen Spiritual Civilization

The argument I want to make in this discussion is that the figure of the legitimate and exemplary migrant worker which embodies industriousness, individual improvement, collectivism and discipline *and* the construction of its negation, i.e. the unsightly “sanwu people” which have been documented in the four preceding chapters have to be understood against the background of Shenzhen’s specific status within the process of economic reforms. After having highlighted this specificity, I relate the values underscored in the construction of an official public transcript of migrant workers with Shenzhen’s role as the party’s model in term of spiritual civilization work.

From the start, Shenzhen has been conceived by the Chinese communist party as a testing ground for post-Mao economic reforms. As a city that was almost built from scratch, Shenzhen has been more than other areas of China associated very closely with the market, with Deng Xiaoping’s thought and with migrants. A close relationship between the legitimacy of economic reforms and with Shenzhen’s legitimacy has also been established along the 1980s and 1990s.

At the ideological level, Shenzhen has been the object of an intense process of myth making. In this process, earlier than in other areas of the country, the Special zone has been constantly opposed to what Maoism represented in terms of economic failure (Crane, 1994, p. 76). From its initial officially attributed role of “testing ground for economic reforms” (改革开放的试验场 *gaige kaifeng de shiyanchang*), Shenzhen has been attributed a leading role in developing spiritual civilization in parallel with material civilization (Li Youwei et al., 1995; Wu Zhong, 2000). A number of themes are commonly associated with Shenzhen, which for Björn Kjellgren represent Shenzhen’s fundamental “ideologico-cultural baggage”. One of the most pervasive theme is that of Shenzhen conceived as an eldorado, i.e. as a place where it is possible to get rich quickly³⁹¹. It is indeed in Shenzhen that the idea that people can work for themselves and not necessarily for the country or for the collectivity has been legitimated as Luo Xu has

³⁹¹ As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Shenzhen has been compared with the United States in terms of its youthfulness and its nurturing the capacity to face challenges, as well as autonomy and dynamism. Both Kjellgren and Cartier confirm that among propagandists in Shenzhen, the city is compared to the United States for it too is a place where “one dares to try, one can pursue one’s dream”. Kjellgren, 1999, p. 202; Cartier, 2002, p. 1527.

shown in his analysis of the “Shekou storm” in 1988 and 1989³⁹². Another major theme associated to Shenzhen is that of *adaptation* in the sense that there are two kinds of people in Shenzhen, those who are able to adapt to the fierce competitive environment and those who were not fit enough and therefore had to go back to where they came from. For O’Donnell the notion of adaptability is linked to the early representations of Shenzhen because those able “to transform both her or himself and the socialist world” have been privileged in the construction of Shenzhen and that such a transformation has been intimately linked to progress. (O’Donnell, 2006, p. 1). The two other themes with which Shenzhen has been identified from its inception are that of a city that allows high levels of consumption and a place characterized by novelty (Kjellgren, 1999, pp. 159-202).

The construction of an image for Shenzhen has also been influenced by the fact that, as the first and biggest Special economic zone, it has been closely associated to the very legitimacy of reforms and has become an important focus of political and ideological struggles all along the 1980s and 1990s (*Ibid.*, 1999, pp. 57, 107-108; Cartier, 2002, p. 1520)³⁹³. Shenzhen has been the focus of several attacks by conservatives within the party such as Chen Yun in 1982 whose target actually was the economic reform. Deng Xiaoping already intervened in 1984 to back Shenzhen Special economic zone by making a widely circulated statement that “Shenzhen’s development and experience prove that our policy of establishing Special economic zones is correct” (深圳的发展和经验证明，我们建立经济特区的政策是正确的. Shenzhen de fazhan he jingyan zhengming, women jianli jingji tequ de zhengce shi zhengque de) (Li Youwei, 1995; Ni Yuange et al., 1999, p. 333; Zhang Gaoli, 2000; Zhang Zibin, 2000). From 1982 to 1985, the criticisms targeted at Shenzhen were made by drawing historical comparisons with treaty ports of the semi-colonial era in the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century and by pointing to its alleged high rate of criminality. In the beginning of the 1980s, this contributed to create a climate of political instability which initially impacted negatively upon foreign investors (Kjellgren, 1999, pp.

³⁹² Shekou is a small district in the Shenzhen Special economic zone. In January 1988, the Shekou branch of the Communist Youth league organized a symposium at which Beijing experts in ideological education voiced their impression of Shenzhen and Shekou. The Beijing ideologues criticized the “gold diggers” who were only interested in making money and not to contribute to the development of the zone. Local youths who participated to the discussion strongly rejected the idea of making contributions to the state. A nationwide debate ensued as newspapers covered the Shekou incident which thereafter became a “storm” and lasted for more than a year. The very issue discussed nationwide were the impact of the commodity economy on people’s values and according to what moral standards the special economic zones had to be judged. Reform in Shenzhen, Luo argues, had created ideological contradictions between the spirit of self-sacrifice and collectivism on the one hand, and newly sponsored values of “individually digging gold”. Luo Xu, 1995, pp. 541-551.

³⁹³ Shenzhen is often called the city of “immigrants” (移民城市 yimin chengshi). Interestingly, the term “immigrant” (yimin) is usually not used for temporary rural migrants but for state-sponsored migration or for international migrants.

126-130; Li Youwei, 1995). In 1992, after Deng Xiaoping's Southern trip, the so often debated ideological issue of deciding whether Shenzhen was socialist or capitalist was put to an end as Deng Xiaoping stated that using the plan or the market did not relate to a question of distinction of nature between capitalism and socialism. In his Southern tour talks of 1992, Deng made it clear that "the important experience of Shenzhen was that of daring to pathbreak" (深圳的重要经验就是敢闯. Shenzhen de zhongyao jingyan jiu shi gan chuang) and that "development was the ultimate principle" (发展才是硬道理. fazhan cai shi ying daoli) (Zhang Gaoli, 2000, p. 3). Deng also stated that what mattered most was to "develop the productive forces" (*Ibid.*, p. 5). The socialist market economy could thereafter be extended to the whole country (Tian Xiaowen, 2001, pp. 75-92). Since then, Kjellgren observes, the exceptionality linked to Shenzhen's status had been weakened, but with Jiang Zemin's visit in 1993, Shenzhen kept a specific role in three important ways since it "could continue as model for the Inland in the strengthening of the market system, the building of the 'socialist spiritual civilization', and also to find a new role for the party in this brand new China" (Kjellgren, 1999, pp. 147-148). I suggest to look hereafter at what the specificity of spiritual civilization work in Shenzhen has been in the 1990s since this will help shed light on major features of the public transcript of migrant workers which have been detailed the preceding chapters.

9.1 The development of spiritual civilization

While in several official publications on Shenzhen, the concept of developing both material and spiritual civilizations is related to Deng Xiaoping's Southern tour, according to Bakken, this theoretical development was first introduced in 1982 by the party secretary general Hu Yaobang. The basic principle was that the construction of socialism depended upon constructing both material civilization *and* spiritual civilization. Spiritual civilization includes cultural, scientific and ideological dimensions (Bakken, 2000, pp. 54-55). In an officially sponsored volume reviewing twenty years of development of Shenzhen³⁹⁴, it is explained that:

"as Shenzhen is an open window to the world, flies and mosquitoes have come in with the wind. As much foreign investments, scientific and management experiences have been introduced, the corrupted thought, the ill moral principles and ways of life of capitalism, as well as pornography, gambling, prostitution, drugs,

³⁹⁴ The volume editorial committee includes the Vice-secretary of Guangdong province Party Committee and Secretary of Shenzhen Party Committee, M. Zhang Gaoli.

and other ugly things have also come in. They have contaminated people's thoughts, damaged the social climate, and disrupted social order (...) Western enemy forces have used this window to promote capitalist principles of 'freedom, democracy and human rights' (...) and this generated confusion and chaos in people's thoughts and moral values" (Wu Zhong et al., 2000, p. 244)³⁹⁵.

The author goes on to explain that the challenge was then to be able to absorb the positive factors in foreign culture in order to create a new socialist culture. In order to do this, Shenzhen's spiritual civilization had imperatively to solve two issues: "how to deal with the absorption, the borrowing as well as the control and criticism of foreign culture" and "how to deal with inheriting, developing as well as transforming elements of Chinese traditional culture" (*Ibid.*, pp. 244-245). In this publication as well as in an earlier one edited by Shenzhen's former mayor Li Youwei, it is emphasized that during his Southern tour, Deng Xiaoping had stated clearly that what distinguished socialism with Chinese characteristics was that both material and spiritual civilization had to be developed. This is often referred to as "sizing with both hands, both hands need to be firm" (*Ibid.*, 2000, p. 239; Li Youwei et al., 1995, p. 218).

The 1995 party-state sponsored volume provides a helpful description of Shenzhen's role in term of spiritual civilization. It explains that before Deng's talk in 1992, in the early years of the Special zone, a defining image of Shenzhen's spirit was that of a "bull clearing the wilderness" (拓荒牛 *tuohuangniu*). At a 1987 meeting of the Shenzhen work group on thought work, the defining values of the Special zone spirit were "synthesized into 'opening up', 'creating', and 'devoting one's life' ('开拓', '创新', '献身'. 'kaituo', 'chuangxin', 'xianshen')". In the second half of 1990, the City Party Standing Committee added to these values that of "unity" (*tuanjie*) and changed "sacrificing oneself" ('献身' *xianshen*) into "offering a contribution respectfully" ('奉献' *fengxian*) (Li Youwei, 1995, pp. 231-232; Ni Yuange et al., 1999, p. 347). This new synthesis was then officially called "the Shenzhen spirit" and was approved by Jiang Zemin. According to the same officially sponsored publication, within the process of rejection of a series of "erroneous moral values" such as neglecting people's legitimate rights, egalitarianism, and conservatism, new values have been nurtured in Shenzhen's socialist market economy such as "deciding for oneself, strengthening oneself, autonomy, competition, taking risks and facing danger, equity, effectiveness, legality, etc." (自主, 自强, 竞争, 感冒风险的观念, 平等, 效

³⁹⁵ It is striking how much this rhetoric uses similar metaphors to the ones found in the cleansing campaigns that were documented in chapter 6.

率观念，以及法制观念。Zizhu, ziqiang, jingzheng, ganmao fengxian de guannian, pingdeng, xiaolü guannian, yiji fazhi guannian). Within this process of establishing new moral values, it is explained, the building of Shenzhen spiritual civilization rests on rearing “a new four haves person” (培育‘四有’新人”peiyu ‘si you’ xin ren”), i.e.: “a new person with ideals, culture, ethics, and discipline” (*Ibid.*, p. 234; Wu Zhong et al., 2000, p. 9)³⁹⁶. The discussion called “How to be a person from Shenzhen” which took place in 1994 and referred to in chapter 8 is part of the spiritual civilization work that aimed at “mobilizing the participation and consciousness of moral construction among Shenzhen people”. On the ground of this discussion, of Deng Xiaoping’s thought as well as on the basis of the party basic guidelines, the City Party Committee published the “Norms of the Shenzhen inhabitant behaviour” addressed at all inhabitants. These norms may be summed up as “love one’s country, build Shenzhen, open up and create, unite and offer contributions, do all one can at work, serve the public, respect discipline and the law, fair competition, be civilized and polite, and love the environment” (*Ibid.*, pp. 238-239).

9.2 Spiritual civilization and migrant workers

Within the three volumes dealing with the construction of spiritual civilization in Shenzhen, one can find sections that focus specifically on spiritual civilization work aimed at the migrant population. In one of these volumes published in 2000, it is explained that in a city of more than 4 million people, among which about 2/3 are holders of temporary registration permits, there are big differences between the highly qualified permanent population and the “low quality workers from outside”. This situation of bi-polarization generates “enormous problems in terms of the building of spiritual civilization for Shenzhen”. Among these problems are those of “psychologically feeling at home” and cultural identification of the migrant population³⁹⁷. The “difficult issues that still needs to be solved are said to be:

³⁹⁶ According to Xu Feng, the idea for spiritual civilization work to mould this new person was adopted at the 3rd plenum of the 14th Party Congress in 1994 that also specified that “ (...) the establishment and achievement of socialist market economy ultimately depends on the improvement of population quality [人口素质 renkou suzhi] and cultivation of talented people [人才 rencai]”, Xu Feng, 2000, pp. 34-35, 97. According to Bakken, in such a conception, “population quality represents hidden productive forces” and the focus is on the utility and value of human life which need to be fostered. Bakken, 2000, p. 70.

³⁹⁷ A 1999 study is quoted as showing that more than one half of the migrant population did not nurture a feeling of belonging in Shenzhen. The reasons put forward to account for such a trend are said to be related to the legal status

(...) how to make so that for the so many migrants Shenzhen may become their own 'home'; how to make so that the migrants who are coming from all around the country and who speak different dialects can gather together to form a common ideal of generalized aspirations and respect common ideals and rules of behaviour” (怎么样使大量的移民将深圳当成自己的家，把根扎在这里；如何将来自各地，讲不同方言的移民凝聚在一起，形成普遍追求和遵守共同理想和行为准则. zenmeyang shi daliang de yimin jiang Shenzhen dangcheng ziji de jia, ba gen zha zai zheli; ruhe jiang laizi gedi, jiang bu tong fangyan de yimin ningju zai yiqi, xingcheng pubian zhuiqiu he zunshou gongtong lixiang he xingwei zhunze) (Wu Zhong et al., 2000, pp. 245-246).

In addition to these issues it is added that another important issue is to see how to solve the problems of education and management of this population. Eventually, as “so many of the workers from outside have a rather low quality”, in an environment of fierce competition, they often are under heavy psychological pressure. Therefore, what most of them need, it is said, is to get spiritual consolation”³⁹⁸. Interestingly, it is also emphasized that for these migrant workers, “training activities to foster employees’ ideals, ethics, norms and technical abilities should be organized so as to elevate their general quality and their consciousness of being the master” (提高他们的综合素质和主人翁意识. tigao tamen de zonghe suzhi he zhurenweng yishi) (*Ibid.*, p. 246-249). In a later publication called “Walking towards modernization: 20 years of experiments for Shenzhen”, it is stated that Shenzhen needs to establish a whole series of values adapted to the socialist market economy. In addition to nurturing the values of collectivism, patriotism, of the development of both individual and collective interests, fostering efficiency and equality, it is stressed that competences and achievements need to be given the priority. It should be observed here that Deng Xiaoping emphasized heavily in his Southern tour talks as well as in his other writings the need to try things out, to do concrete things and not to spend too much time in ideological debates. His famous saying “seeking truth from facts” and of practice as the criterion for judging truth have been widely publicized and to some extent practiced in Shenzhen. Along with the reform of the employment system, the promotion of people according to their merits and not chiefly according to their achievements in the ideological sphere has been implemented earlier than in other parts of the country. As to the need for Shenzhen to give priority to competences and people’s achievements, one can read:

of many migrants, as well as factors such as the cultural level of migrants or the rural environment of migrants before they migrated.

³⁹⁸ If they were to lack such consolation or provision of comfort, it is stated, they “could easily try to get support from religious or even all kinds small informal organizations”, *Ibid.*

“(…) the confirmation of individual value depends on one’s capacity to create and of one’s achievements at work and not on one’s level of diplomas. It is precisely because there are such values and mechanisms that numerous builders of the Special economic zone have been provided with a wide space to develop themselves. Over here, if it is gold it will necessarily shine” (正是因为有了这样的观念和机制，从而为一大批经济特区建设者们提供了发展自己的广阔空间，在这里，是金子总会发光的. zheng shi yinwei you le zheyang de guannian he jizhi, cong'er wei yi dapi jingji tequ de jianshezhenmen tigong le fazhan ziji de guangkuo kongjian, zai zheli, shi jinzi zong hui faguang de) (Wu Zhong et al., 2000, pp. 249-250).

Eventually, in these texts dealing with spiritual civilization in Shenzhen, it is emphasized that one should educate both cadres and officials on the one hand, and ordinary people on the other hand. People ought to be “encouraged to dare to open up, dare to innovate, dare to be the first and walk roads other people have not walked before, as well as climb peaks others have never climbed”. In addition to this, exemplary people should be rewarded and decorated, “one should use various ways to make so that entrepreneurs and other model personalities who possess a spirit of innovation be known of all” (Li Youwei et al., 1995, p. 233). Zhang Zibin, who was then Shenzhen mayor, pointed similarly in 1996 to the need for legal training to be provided to migrant workers in order “to strengthen their legal consciousness”. He added that the “progressive models among these workers ought to be paid attention to, nurtured, and publicized instantly, so that a good climate of respect of discipline and of the law be established” (Zhang Zibin, 1999, p. 506). Having reviewed the core values defining the “Shenzhen spirit” as well as the values sponsored within Shenzhen’s construction of spiritual civilization, it becomes clear that values such as autonomy, adaptation to “fair competition”, self-transformation, risk-taking, making contributions, as well as the promotion of the “new four hases person” and of bringing about a consciousness of legality and “of being the master” among migrant workers are very pervasive within the Shenzhen mainstream press. So is the use of models to embody exemplary behaviours which are supposed to be studied. The Shenzhen mainstream press is in this sense playing perfectly well its role of mouthpiece of the Party.

So far, the demonstration of the kinds of values that are fostered by the party within Shenzhen spiritual civilization work in the 1990s has focused chiefly on positive values that aim at rearing “the new person” for Shenzhen and for the whole country’s socialism with Chinese characteristics. But spiritual civilization also implies defining this *new person* or the legitimate migrant worker in opposition to the kinds of behaviours and people that are to be rejected, this includes the destitute, the unemployed and those who are not successful (Crane, 1994, p. 89). In Shenzhen’s case, these people whose presence is undesired and unsightly are the *sanwu* people.

As we have seen in chapter 6, the cleansing of the sanwu people is also part of Spiritual civilization work. This stands out very clearly within the publications dealing with spiritual civilization work since an important dimension of this work is said to be to ensure the safety of urban dwellers and social order. The cleansing campaigns are actually part of the “strike hard campaigns” (严打运动 yanda yundong or 严打大会战 yanda dahuizhan) which are launched periodically from 1983 on in the whole country in order to fight against criminality³⁹⁹. In an official speech, Shenzhen’s former mayor Zhang Zibin gave in 1996 at the “Meeting for decorating examples of comprehensive governing of social order in Shenzhen”, he explained that all levels of government had to implement the Guangdong province and Shenzhen city regulations on temporary household registrations and that a series of measures had to be taken which included

- “1. Cleanse and repatriate resolutely the sanwu people (...) as for the illegal huts and houses, on the ground of doing well the education and propaganda work, they must be destroyed resolutely and those people who are still stagnating there have to be persuaded or repatriated (...)
2. The management and verification of spots where sanwu people concentrate must be strengthened (...)
3. The second line management must be strengthened so that the sanwu people are prevented from entering into the Special zone. As for those snakeheads who are bringing in sanwu people, they must be struck fiercely at and punished according to the law”.

In the same talk, Li Zibin also stressed that the “legal rights of the floating population had to be protected” since most of them respected discipline and laws. He ended his speech by making clear that the work of education and propaganda had to be done properly and that “the legal education of the of teenagers and of the workers from outside had to be seized particularly well” since Deng Xiaoping said that “legal teaching starts from babies”. He added that in addition to rearing a “four haves new person”:

“Each Party Committee, each levels of government, as well as departments in charge of labor, industry, youth, women, all had to show concern and loving care for workers from outside, to develop widely legal teaching, improve their conceptions of legality and pay attention to discovering and nurturing advanced examples and publicize them instantly, in order to establish a good atmosphere of respecting discipline and the law” (*Ibid.*, p. 506).

³⁹⁹ On the “strike hard” campaigns, see Tanner, 2000 and Tanner, 2005. Tanner notes that the first “strike hard” campaign” was launched in parallel with the campaign against spiritual pollution in 1983. Tanner, 2000, p. 21.

9.3 Conclusion

It is interesting to observe both within the cleansing campaigns and in the official utterances on Shenzhen spiritual civilization that have been examined, how clear-cut a distinction is drawn between the sanwu people on the one hand, and the migrant workers who are laboring and residing legally in Shenzhen. As I stressed earlier, for the former group the party-state exerts its force and severity, while it provides “concern and loving care” (关心和爱护 *guanxin he aihu*) to the latter. This hints at the diacritic function of the state and at differentiated state-produced discourses *and* practices towards specific groups that occupy specific spaces⁴⁰⁰.

I have shown how much many of the core values and attitudes of the official public transcript of *dagong* highlighted in the Shenzhen mainstream press were actually part of an ensemble of defining values for Shenzhen defined by the party as part of the construction of Shenzhen spiritual civilization. Considering the nature of the Shenzhen newspapers analysed, the fact that one can observe such a concordance is hardly a surprise. It remains to be seen in which respect these values circulate within society. Some of them actually are core ones within post-Mao’s Chinese society, others are more auto-referential for the party. In the next chapter, I am looking at whether and how these values and principles are found within migrant workers’ narratives.

⁴⁰⁰ I find Ong’s concept of *graduated sovereignty* insightful. She defines it as “a series of zones that are subjected to different kinds of governmentality and that vary in terms of the mix of disciplinary and civilizing regimes. These zones which do not necessarily follow political borders, often contain ethnically marked class groupings, which in practice are subjected to regimes of rights and obligations that are different from those in other zones”. Ong, 1999, pp. 6-7.”

**PART III: ARTICULATING
MIGRANT WORKERS' NARRATIVES**

Chapter 10: Migrant workers’ narratives and experiences: struggles over the definition of *dagong*

In this chapter, I confront the dominant dominant public transcript of migrant workers which was documented in the preceding chapter with migrant workers’ own narratives about their experience of work in the city as they are mediated through two different sites : in-depth interviews and a body of unpublished letters to the editor of several migrants’ magazines. I shall endeavor to uncover the ways in which migrant workers’ narratives confirm or, on the contrary, contest the pivotal elements of the hegemonic construction. After having highlighted the major distinguishing features of migrant workers’ narratives, I will examine three different ways in which migrant workers’ narratives relate with dominant discourse about them, about Shenzhen and the “South”. These three narrative modes include a “migrant workers’ affirmation” of the dominant discourse, a “reversed echo” of this discourse, and the strategic usage of pivotal elements of the dominant discourse that serve to back claims made by migrant workers. Before looking at the distinguishing features of migrant workers’ narratives, I suggest examining briefly the hereafter tables which gather the main values associated with *dagong* as well as with migrant workers’ hometowns.

Table 10.1: occurrences of the main values and meanings in “World of *dagong* texts” 1994, 1998 and 1999

<i>World of dagong</i> 1994 (61 texts)								
A1/ 7	B1/9	C1/9	D1/20	E1/8	F1/3	G1/3	H1/3	I1/4
A2/4	B2/7	C2/8	D2/8	E2/7	F2/2	G2/3	H2/0	I4/3
		C3/1	D3/0			G3/1		
		C4/0				G4/1		
		C5/1				G6/1		
						G7/1		
						G8/0		

<i>World of dagong 1998 (63 texts)</i>								
A1/15	B1/12	C1/12	D1/33	E1/1	F1/1	G1/1	H1/11	I1/10
A2/7	B2/22	C2/0	D2/9	E2/2	F2/0	G7/1	H2/1	I2/6
		C3/2	D3/2					I4/7
		C4/3						
		C5/3						
<i>World of dagong 1999 (56 texts)</i>								
A1/6	B1/3	C1/14	D1/16	E1/8	F1/1	G1/1	H1/2	I1/0
A2/3	B2/10	C2/0	D2/2	E2/6	F2/6	G8/1	H2/1	I2/5
		C3/4	D3/4					I4/1
		C4/13						
		C5/9						
A1/28	B1/24	C1/35	D1/69	E1/17	F1/5	G1/5	H1/16	I1/14
A2/13	B2/39	C2/8	D2/19	E2/15	F2/8	G2/3	H2/2	I2/11
		C3/7	D3/6			G3/1		I4/11
		C4/16				G4/1		
		C5/13				G6/1		
						G7/2		
						G8/1		

Main values and meanings related to “World of dagong” articles

A Hope, ideals

- A1 To nurture ideals and ambitions
- A2 To be self-confident

B Wish to learn (experiences), study and self-study (techniques)

- B1 To learn from experience, accumulate experience.
- B2 To study techniques and knowledge

C Competition, challenges, opportunities

- C1 Capacity to face competition, to seize opportunities and face challenges, optimistic outlook
- C2 Entrepreneurship capacity
- C3 Capacity to change job (professional mobility).
- C4 Capacity of adaptation
- C5 Capacity to rely on one's own strength

D Industriousness, hard work, sacrifice

- D1 Perseverance, tenacity (reward, self-fulfillment)
- D2 Sacrifice/contribution = prosperity, economic development, pride for contribution.
- D3 Search for work relentlessly

E Factory/society = warmth, care

- E1 Fraternal factory life, like family, care and attention.
- E2 Society, party: care, warmth and concern for migrant workers

F Education, rights

- F1 Necessity to educate migrant workers, spiritual education of migrant workers
- F2 Respect dignity, protect rights, have a master's consciousness.

G Dagong = hard condition

- G1 Hard and long labor (work condition, security).
- G2 Low revenue
- G3 Unpaid revenue
- G4 Humiliation, insult to dignity
- G6 Right abuses
- G7 Loneliness
- G8 Dagong = frustration (*wunai*).

H Altruism and patriotism

- H1 Altruism, material disinterest

H2 Patriotism

I Village/Lieu d'origine

- I1 Village/hometown = warmth, family ties
- I2 Village/hometown = calm, banal
- I4 Village/hometown = poverty, desolation.

Table 10.2: Occurrences of the main values and meanings in migrant workers' published texts

Migrant magazine published (48)⁴⁰¹								
	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	V3.1	V3.2
			D3.1/ 1	4.1/20	D5.1/0			
			D3.2/2	4.2/14	D5.2/9			
			D3.3/5	4.3/6				
			D3.4/0	4.4/7				
			D3.5/6					
			D3.6/6					
			D3.7/6					
TOT	14	6	26	47	9	4	14	13

Table 10.3 : Occurrences of the main values and meanings in migrant workers' unpublished texts

Migrant unpublished letters (34 texts)								
	D1	D2	D 3.1/4	D 4.1/9	D 5.1/2	D6	V3.1	V 3.2
			D3.2/5	D 4.2/3	D 5.2/4			
			D 3.3/4	D 4.3/4				
			D 3.4/4	D 4.4/4				
			D 3.5/3					
			D 3.6/6					
			D 3.7/9					
TOT	8	9	35	20	6	12	10	11

⁴⁰¹ Number of occurrences of main meanings and values. In some cases, values that were initially separate have been merged with other similar values.

Main values and meanings related to migrant workers' magazines (published and unpublished texts)

1. D Dagong

D1 Separation from relatives, family ties

D2 Loneliness, tasteless labor

D3 Long and hard labor

- D3.1 Low revenue
- D3.2 Unpaid revenue
- D3.3 Humiliation, insult to dignity
- D3.4 Hopeless efforts, aggravation of situation
- D3.5 To make sacrifices, to pay with one's blood and sweat
- D3.6 Right abuses
- D3.7 Hard labor

D4 Self-fulfillment, good use of potential (youth)

- D4.1 Perseverance, tenacity pay off
- D4.2 Optimism, to nurture dreams and ideals, self-confidence
- D4.3 To learn from experience, accumulate experience
- D4.4 To study techniques and knowledge

D5 Failure and disillusion

- D5.1 Impossibility to fulfil oneself, failure
- D5.2 Disillusion, efforts not rewarded

D6 Instability, fear of (public security officers, police) controls

2. V Village

- V3.1 Poverty
- V3.2 Absence of econ. resources, education and health costs hard to pay for

Looking at tables 10.1, 10.2 and 10.3, one may pinpoint features that are recurring in both “World of dagong” texts as well as in migrant workers’ published and unpublished writings. I will first highlight the similarities between the two bodies of texts. Secondly, I will focus on what differentiates the “World of dagong” from migrant workers’ writings. The feature that stands out most starkly among the “World of dagong” texts is the idea that relentless efforts pay off. We can see that D1 which expresses this meaning is the most recurrent one within this body of texts (69 occurrences). Categories linked to learning from experience and to studying techniques and knowledge (B1 and B2) are also highly recurrent. On the whole, similar categories are quite widespread too within the two bodies of migrant workers’ writings. One finds that D4.1 (efforts pay off) comes up 29 times among the 82 texts written by migrant workers. D4.3 and D4.4 (to learn from experience and to study techniques and knowledge) come up 20 times together. Nurturing ideals and being self-confident are two values that are quite pervasive both in the “World of dagong” body and within migrant workers’ writings (see categories A1 and A2 in table 10.1 and category D4.2 in table 10.2). Let us now look at meanings we find in the “World of dagong” texts and which did not appear or which appeared only occasionally in migrant workers’ writings. From the comparison of the two bodies, we can see that the ideas that factory life is fraternal and resembles family life or that society and the party are providing care and warmth to migrant workers are recurrent within the “World of dagong” texts and did not come up within migrant workers’ writings. These features strictly belong to the dominant construction of factory life and of Shenzhen society. Altruism similarly comes up 16 times within the “World of dagong” texts, while it is totally absent in migrant workers’ writings. Let us examine what values or meanings are characteristic of migrant workers’ writings. As will be explained hereunder, the painful and humiliating dimensions of dagong stand out markedly within migrant workers’ writings (see D3 categories in tables 10.2 and 10.3 hereabove). Comparatively, these dimensions come up only occasionally within the “World of dagong” articles. Tales which focus on failures and on disillusion are come up 15 times within migrant workers’ writings (see categories D5 in tables 10.2 and 10.3) and are virtually absent from the “World of dagong” texts. This stands true too for the idea that living in the Pearl River delta’s cities entails instability and fears of being controlled by public security officers (see category D6 in tables 10.2 and 10.3). Finally, the emphasis on the difficulties for rural families in coping with education and health expenses is another distinguishing feature of migrant workers’ writings which will be discussed hereafter. Looking comparatively at the two bodies of migrant writings (published and unpublished texts), one may observe that these two bodies differ from each other in some respects. We can see for instance that D6 (instability and fear of controls) is more recurrent in unpublished texts than in

published ones (12 occurrences for 4 only in the published texts). Similarly, positive meanings associated with *dagong* are far more recurrent within the published texts (see categories D4 in tables 10.2 and 10.3). Such differences may, I suggest, be accounted for by the fact that the unpublished texts have not been reworked by editors yet⁴⁰². But we have to remain careful about such explanations since it would not account for the fact that we have more texts focusing on failure and disillusion in the published texts than in the unpublished ones.

I suggest now to examine how migrant workers describe their migration and work in the Pearl River Delta. I have focused on how migrant workers explain the motives of their migration. By so doing, we can highlight major features of migrant workers' narratives. I first highlight the general background of many of these narratives, i.e. the rural environment. Then, I consider the complexity of how people explain their migration decision. Eventually, I discuss the various ways in which living and working in the South are represented in migrant workers' writings and in interviews.

10. 1 Specific features of migrant workers' narratives and experiences

10.1.1 *Depressing rural conditions: the cost of health and education*

A dimension that, I argue, characterises the content of migrant workers' writings as well as that of the interviews is the pervasive constraints of the rural environment that bear on the lives of migrants. The depictions of these constraints are not general statements about rural conditions but more a *lived reality* causing intense suffering. It is the depiction of the countryside that is on the whole pretty dark. Reading through migrant workers' writings, especially so the body of unpublished letters, one cannot help but to have an uneasy feeling of weight due to the background of many of these tales which is rather sad and sometimes dramatic. In a number of unpublished tales, the narration takes place with a background of problems affecting the narrators' families such as divorce, alcoholism, violence against children, etc. I found one tale characteristic of such a tragic background. In this tale, a 20 year-old girl hailing from Western Guangxi is ill and is complaining at not being able to leave the village for work. The hereafter fragments provide a good hint at the situation this person is depicting:

⁴⁰² See chapter on methodology on this issue.

“ I apologize for writing this letter to you, I really don't know what to do. My name is Wang Jun, I am a girl, I am 20 and am single. I come from a very poor mountain village in Western Guangxi. Generations after generations one lives from cultivating the land over here. (...) (家住广西西部的一个贫困山村 Jia zhu Guangxi xibu de yi ge pinkun shancun (...))

It has been more than one year and seven months that I have been sick and that I have been looking for doctors in order to cure this disease. It has not improved yet. I have stayed in a big hospital and the medical expenses were very expensive. A family such as mine has no economic resources whatsoever, it can absolutely not afford these expenses. I am nervous and I am crying. Who can come to help me, who can save me? (住进大医院，药费又贵，象我现在这样的家，没什么经济来源，根本消费不起，我心烦，流泪。谁能来帮我，救救我。。。。。。 Zhujin da yiyuan, yaofei you gui, xiang wo xianzai zheyang de jia, mei shenme jingji laiyuan, genben xiaofei bu qi. Wo xin fan, liulei. Shei neng lai bang bang wo, jiu jiu wo...)

I am angry at the inequity of destiny, why is it that I was born in such a poor family? I am looking at those who are leaving the village for work as they are nurturing hopes, what about me? All day long I am suffering from this disease, this is so hard and I may not earn a little money for myself, for this destitute family! (我抱怨，命运的不公平，为何让我出生在贫苦人家。我眼睁睁地看着别人怀着希望出去外面打工，而我呢？(...)不能为自己，为这个贫贫苦苦的家挣点钱！ Wo baoyuan mingyun de bu gongping, weihe rang wo chusheng zai pinku renjia. Wo zheng zheng kan zhe bieren huai zhe xiwang chuqu dagong)

In August, my mother got seriously sick. In order to cure her, our family has contracted heavy debts and has borrowed 10.000 yuan. At the end of this year, we are broke. But I hope that, through this column of fraternity and help, I will get a little compassion. I hope too that I may get the money that will allow me to cure this illness and be able to get out for work⁴⁰³ ((...) 但愿我能通过你们这个爱心互助这个栏目得到一点爱心，也希望我能付钱去治病出去打工。 Danyuan wo neng tongguo nimen aixin huzhu zhege lanmu dedao yidian aixin, ye xiwang won eng fuqian qu zhi bing chuqu dagong)⁴⁰⁴.

A poor person that desperately needs help

(一个极为需要帮助的可怜人. Yi ge jiwei xuyao bangzhu de kelian ren)

⁴⁰³ In several letters one finds people who are writing to the magazine in order to ask for financial help to pay for medical expenses.

⁴⁰⁴ Towards the end of this letter, we also learn that the author's father got sick as well, that this affected his mental health and that allowing the five members of this family to enjoy three meals a day had become difficult as they had contracted up to 13.000 yuan of debts. One yuan is equivalent to approximately 10 euro cents.

⑨
 爱心互助会主持人：
 你好！很冒昧的打扰你，给你写这封信时，我也是
 万般无奈。我叫黄全超，今年20岁未婚，家住广西西部
 的一个贫困山村。世代以种田为生。家人有年近80岁
 多病的奶奶，还有父亲、弟、妹，弟妹还在读书。
 自从我生病起，每天药费很贵，每天一年多7个
 了，因为寻医治病，我的病万未见好转。住进大医院，收费
 又贵。象我现在这样的家，没有什么经济来源，没有请医
 不起，我心烦、流泪，想求求帮帮我，救救我。——
 我抱怨命运的不公平，为何让我出生在贫苦人家，我
 眼睁睁地看着别人收着希望去外面打工，而我呢？
 整天被病痛折磨，痛苦，无奈，不能为自己，为这个家，苦苦
 的支撑着钱。我感觉到心不忍，更因为我欠了那么多
 钱，但身不由己，如今一袋50斤的对青，一日三餐的
 生活都有点困难。为了治我的病，家里钱向堆借都借
 光了，还有我妈妈又在今年8月份刚病世。为了给妈妈
 治病，家里欠债近1万块钱，现在将近年底，过年，流
 里一分钱都没有打。但原计划想通过你们这个爱心
 互助这个栏目，得到去爱心，也希望你们能帮。

Going through this letter's fragments allows to get a glimpse of the kind of situation described in many letters. Obviously all tales are not that gloomy, but a number of them do share this depressing background made of poverty and illness. These conditions are somewhat characteristic of the discrepancies between economically advanced and well-off eastern areas on the one hand and rather poor Western inland areas on the other hand where standards in terms of health and education are much lower than in the eastern coastal regions.

The depiction of rural constraints is most pervasive in migrant workers' explanation of why they left their village. Some of the letters convey indeed that these people did not migrate by the sole virtue of their *choice*, but that they were somehow compelled to do so by the conditions in which they and their family lived⁴⁰⁵. Indeed, in 10 unpublished letters and in 11 texts from migrant workers' magazines, the decision to leave the village is explained as being mainly the consequence of one's family being burdened with heavy debts, and with being unable to pay for health or education expenses (see category V3.2 in tables 10.2 and 10.3)⁴⁰⁶. In several texts, we find people whose father or mother have passed away because of diseases. In other texts, the

⁴⁰⁵ Anita Chan makes a similar argument in her analysis of women migrant workers private letters with their families. She states: "The overall impression made by the letters is that the young people would not have gone to the factories had their families not been under such financial strain (...) Their apparent freedom of choice needs to be set against the poverty trap they were in at home". Chan, 2002, pp. 181-182.

⁴⁰⁶ According to a survey conducted in a rural county of Hubei province, 40% to 50% of rural households' net incomes goes into education if all of the children are at school. See Unger, 2002, p. 184.

decision to leave the village is explained as a necessity in order to pay for medical expenses of one or sometimes two family members. But probably even more pervasive than constraints related to health, education stands out markedly in many texts as well as in interviews with migrant workers⁴⁰⁷.

As it has been highlighted in the analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream written press, a strong emphasis was put on taking advantage of the environment of Shenzhen in order to learn from experience and study techniques and knowledge (see in table 10.1, categories B1 and B2). We can see from table 10.2 that a quite similar rhetoric is found too often in migrant workers' writings (see categories D4.3 and D4.4 in tables 10.2 and 10.3) and sometimes in interviews⁴⁰⁸. In several letters⁴⁰⁹ however, the authors explain that they could not go on studying at secondary school or that they could not afford to enter university and that these were the main reasons for leaving the village. Others explained that they decided to "go out for work" (*chulai dagong*) in order to enable one of their siblings to go on with schooling. On the whole, we get some insights into the weight of the constraints of the rural environment and into how they may bear on the life chances of migrant workers. In these texts, we can see feelings of disappointment, sadness or frustration at being unable to go on studying and having "to go out for work". But at the same time, to leave the village for work is often explained in these tales as the result of an individual *choice*, as assuming the responsibility for one's own lot or one's family destiny. The opening sentence of a letter written by a seventeen years old female migrant worker illustrates this contradictory dimension rather well:

"Having finished three years at secondary school is not too bad for children in the countryside. I do not know why, but I have always found that the countryside was rather backward. After I had done my first three years junior middle school, I had to quit school, my parents had done their duty, but I found this situation unfair. I was angry at my parents for having taken away my right to study. Each time I saw them tilling the fields all day however, I felt very sad. So that they did not have to worry any more, I *decided* not to study any more and to step into the road of dagong with my eldest sister (每当我看到父母不分日夜地干活，我心里好难过。为了不让他们担心，我决定不再读书了，和姐姐一起踏上了打工之路。Dang mei dang wo kandao fumu bu fen ri ye de ganhuo, wo xinli hao nanguo. Wei le bu rang tamen danxin, wo jue ding bu zai dushu le, he jie jie yiqi tashang le dagong zhi lu)"⁴¹⁰.

⁴⁰⁷ Note that in some instances, the difficulty to pay for education expenses gets intermingled with difficulties to pay for medical expenses in how migrant explain why they left their village. See for instance *Wailaigong*, 06/95, "Zhi wo jing'ai de mama", p. 25.

⁴⁰⁸ This feature will be discussed at length in a following section.

⁴⁰⁹ See letters 2, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 26 for instance.

⁴¹⁰ Unpublished letter n° 11.

This notion of *constrained choice* ought to be considered against the background of the heavy constraints of the rural environment and the discrepancies between the countryside and cities in terms of levels of revenues. Leaving the village for work (出来打工 chulai dagong) is often thought of as a venue that will offer opportunities, as being made of promises and desires. The point I want to make is that there could be a game of compensation between the disillusion linked to not being able to go on with one's studies and with a rural environment that is experienced as not offering much prospect on the one hand and the expectations that are associated with leaving the village for work on the other hand. The very first sentence of one of the letters may serve to substantiate this argument:

“After having been waiting for a long long time, I stepped into the train that was heading South with the weighty feeling of having failed at the senior school examination. I have heard that the ground is paved with gold over there, that it is so colourful over there...” (久久的期待，幼稚的童心，带着高考落榜沉重的心情踏上了南去的列车，听说那里遍地黄金，听说那里色彩纷呈。Jiu jiu de qidai, you zhi de tong xin dai zhe gaokao luobang chenzhong de xinqing, ta shang le nan qu de lieche, ting shuo nail biandi huangjin, ting shuo nail secai fen cheng)⁴¹¹.

The importance attached to education by rural families is probably one of the most recurring features that came out of the analysis of migrant workers' writings and of the interviews. For instance, my informants explained to me that their parents, even though they had not gone further than primary school or had not gone to school at all, were very much aware of the importance of education for the future of their siblings. Being able to attend higher education along with joining the army have been two main venues for rural people to leave the countryside during the Mao era and raise upon the social hierarchy⁴¹².

Now that the job allocation system of university graduates does not exist any more, being able to graduate from university still remains a decisive factor in determining people's socio-professional upward mobility. Most rural people are well aware of this and it is very often part of a family strategy to do all it can to allow one member of the family, more often a male member than a female one⁴¹³, to study at university even if that means dropping out of school for other

⁴¹¹ Unpublished letter n° 15, see also *Wailaigong*, 02/1995, “Yuanli xiaoyuan”, p. 24.

⁴¹² See Potter and Potter, 1984 for a detailed analysis of the rare ways for social mobility during the Mao-era. See also Selden and Cheng Tiejun, 1994.

⁴¹³ According to one informant hailing from Guizhou province, 2/3 of the girls in his village were not attending middle school because of the traditional discrimination against girls who are going to leave the household once married. In Chinese this is expressed via the sentence “attach importance to males and neglect females” (重男轻女 zhong nan qing nü).

members of the family. Such a concern is very strong both among the families within the countryside and among those who are working in cities. A shoe repairer explained to me for instance that, while he and his wife were working in Guangzhou virtually every single day of the year except when they were seriously ill or on the afternoon of the first day of the year, they were using up to 70% of their revenues to pay for the education expenses of their three children, two of whom were still studying in their primary school at home in Henan and the eldest one was attending his first year at junior middle school in Guangzhou. He told me one night that his dearest wish was that his eldest child could one day be able to attend university:

« I am only able to use my hands. My hands are my capacity. If you don't study, it's not possible. Later, my children will write. What they will use will be their hands and their head. Me, it is only my hands. I have not talked about it to my wife, but I would love that our children could go to university. This would cost us around 20.000 yuan a year. It really scares me! Knowledge is gold” (我只会靠我的手。我的手就是我的本事！不读不行 (...) 知识就是黄金. Wo zhi hui yong wo de shou. Wo de shou jiu shi wo de benshi. Bu dub u xing (...) zhishi jiu shi huangjin)⁴¹⁴.

It is worth noting that when migrant workers talked about the fact that they had wanted to go on studying, they often not only talked about themselves but also made thoughtful comments about the larger conditions of rural people or about the issue of the difficult access to education. On the one hand they use very down-to-earth and concrete examples when they talk about their own experiences and on the other hand they link their reality to larger issues or to structural phenomenon.

10.1.2 *The strength and weight of family ties*

Through looking at migrant workers justification of why they decided to leave their hometown, another interesting feature is that the authors often recognize and are thankful for the hardship their parents have gone through in order to pay for their or their brothers and sisters' education expenses. This expression of gratefulness is often followed by putting forward the will to help alleviate their parents' burden by leaving the village in order to look for work. The capacity to alleviate one's parents' burden generally goes together with a sense of pride, with taking one's responsibility. 'Taking one's responsibility to alleviate one's parents'

⁴¹⁴ While he was saying this, he mimed himself at work with his two powerful hands, full of scars, glue and shoe polish. It was as if these two hands were a testimony of his life, as if they were participating to his narrative. Fieldwork notes, Guangzhou, winter 2006

burden is linked in several narratives to the idea of growing up, of becoming an adult⁴¹⁵. Life in the village is often represented as a universe of innocence devoid of constraints in opposition to the life of dagong which often entails being able to get along on one's own in an alien world. In some tales, people explain that they actually left their families without their parents knowing it or that they left against their parents' will⁴¹⁶. In the hereafter fragment, a young migrant worker writes about his first experience in Shenzhen in 1993. In the first paragraph of this text, he explains why he decided to leave the village. In this fragment we come across the idea found in several other texts that even though getting out of the village for work means being separated from one's parents and that the author *could not help but to* leave for dagong:

“It was in 1993, I was sixteen, I had just received my identity card and I had planned to go to Shenzhen to look for work. Because my family was so poor, I had to allow my brother and sister to study as well as to care for my grandfather's medicine aimed at his high blood pressure. My parents were really worried for money. Therefore, in order to alleviate my parents' burden, I *decided* to tell my parents that I would go to Shenzhen for work. Even though they did not want me to wander away while I was so young, covered with debts as they were, they could not help but to let me go” (为了减轻父母的负担对父母说要去深圳打工。父母虽然舍不得我这么小年纪就外出奔波，但家四壁举债度日的处境让我父母不得不让我去打工 Wei le jianqing fumu de fudan, dui wo fu mu shuo yao qu Shenzhen dagong. Fu mu suiran she bu de wo zheme xiao nianji jiu chuqu benbo, dan jia tu si bi ju zhai du ri de chujing ling wo fu mu bu de bu rang wo qu dagong.)⁴¹⁷

In another text, a female migrant worker writes a letter addressed to her mother explaining that while the work is very hard and dull, while they are working like machines, she does not regret her decision. She writes:

“I have cried, I have been very upset, but I have never regretted the choice I made at the beginning. Mam, do you know? It was not your fault, it was my own choice”

What is interesting is that the author clearly points to her realizing that her mother could not cope with the expenses as she was taken to the hospital and her father was getting sick too, and that she therefore wanted to drop out of school. But even so, her mother still ordered that she went on with secondary school. Let us look at the following section:

⁴¹⁵ Migration conceived of as a process of growing up and as a rite of passage is, a popular trope that has been related to a process of infantilization of migrant workers by some scholars. See for instance Lee Ching-Kwan, 1995; Jacka, 2006 and Pun, 2005.

⁴¹⁶ See for instance *Wailaigong*, 07/95, “Baba wo yiding huilai”, p. 27; *Wailaigong*, 06/95, “Mama Xiexie wusi de ai”, p. 24.

⁴¹⁷ Unpublished letter n° 14.

“In your eyes, to study is the only way out, to allow your sons and daughters to study is parents’ greatest duty. I was even more aware of the hardship you had been going through these last years, everybody in the village praised you and dad for what you had achieved, the house and allowing four kids to go to school (...) Eventually, when I finished my three long years at junior middle school, the day I left school, I stepped onto the bus to the South. Mam, this was my own choice”.

(在你眼里，读书是唯一的途径，供儿女读书是父母最大的义务 (...) 我读完了漫长的的三年高中，离校的同一天我踏上了南下的列车。妈妈这是我自己的选择 Zai ni yan li, dushu shi weiyi de tujing, gong er nü dushu shi fu mu zui da de yiwu (...) Wo du wan le manchang de san nian gaozhong, li xiao de tong yi tian wo tashang le nanxia de lieche).⁴¹⁸

The text actually shows in a very balanced way the tension between the importance attached by rural households to allowing children to attend secondary and higher education on the one hand, and the costs of schooling that constrain parents to send one or more children to leave the village for work.

On the whole, in both many texts and in interviews, the relationship between migrant workers and their parents is described as a complex one, made of a mix of respect⁴¹⁹, admiration along with the will to gain one’s autonomy from one’s parents and trying one’s chance on one’s own in the outside world. In many stories, migrant workers, faced with the hardship and loneliness of their life of dagong in the city, also write of their family as the site where they can get love, care and support from their parents to get over difficulties. But what also stands out is the pressure exerted by families that bears on the shoulder of those who have left for dagong. A pressure made of family expectations that those who have left for dagong be successful and be able to send enough remittances home. Such expectations are also built against the background of existing norms and examples of migrant workers who were capable of sending money to their families. Several migrant workers explained to me that they would not dare go back home until they had achieved something which often meant being able to send money home. One of my informants put it this way:

“At the moment, I really do not want to go back home. I would be ashamed to go back now. Why? It has been 7 or 8 years since I have gone out and I still don’t have a fen. At home people would ask me: ‘How much money have you made?’ I still don’t have a wife. If I went back home, no money, no wife...I would lose face” (我目前真不想回家，回家没面子。出来已经七、八年，一分钱都没有(...) 要是回家，

⁴¹⁸ *Wailaigong*, 06/95, “Zhi wo jing’ai de mama”, p. 25.

⁴¹⁹ Several texts make explicit reference to the value of « filial piety », see for instance *Wailaigong*, 02/95, “Yi feng jiashu”, p. 25 and *Wailaigong*, 06/95, “Dai er guihui jia shi”, pp. 24-25.

没老婆，没钱，没面子 wo muqian zhen bu xiang huijia, huijia mei mianzi. Chulai yijing qi, ba nian, yi fen qian dou meiyou (...) Yaoshi huijia, mei laopo, mei qian, mei mianzi)⁴²⁰.

The family expectations also relate to a series of roles and attitudes that are expected from migrant workers such as to work conscientiously, to be eager to learn knowledge and techniques as well as to persevere and be courageous in order “not to ruin the hopes of the family”⁴²¹. This is worth noting since, as we can see, in many tales, the “make efforts, be eager to learn, work conscientiously” genre of discourse that had been identified within the Shenzhen mainstream press (see categories D1 and D2 in table 10.1) originates here from migrant workers’ families. This register of discourse intersects with similar party-state sponsored discourse as can be seen from my analysis of the Shenzhen mainstream press. At the same time, it is addressed to migrant workers by their families. Such discourse, however, may act as a pressure, but also as a resource that can provide support and encouragements to migrant workers. I suggest now to turn to an examination of how the village is represented in migrant workers’ writings as well as in interviews.

10.1.3 *The hometown: poverty, negative potential and stagnation*

We have seen in our analysis of the “World of dagong” that the village was on the whole represented as a place marked by poverty, ignorance and apathy. An interesting feature about the way the countryside is represented in the “World of dagong” is that although it was qualified as a place where people could not achieve their plans, there is no real depiction of rural conditions. In the “World of dagong”, the construction of Shenzhen as “the” site where people have to be able to make the best use of and train their capacities is so pervasive that the village simply is without substance, as if it were out of the picture. It is a place people want to leave because they are dissatisfied with their lot, but to which they fundamentally belong and will have to go back to in the end. Furthermore, while there is a tendency in elite representations of rural people to qualify them of having a “low quality” (素质很底 *suzhi hen di*) and to associate material poverty with a specific subjectivity, in migrant workers’ narratives, as we shall see the rural conditions are often anchored to larger issues.

First of all, similarly to its depiction in the “World of dagong”, the hometown is described in many narratives as poor. Such a qualification, however goes with a further characterization of

⁴²⁰ Fieldwork recording, Foshan, Summer 2001.

⁴²¹ *Wailaigong*, 04/96, “Dagong zhi shi ge yizhan”, pp. 14-15.

the scarcity of economic resources and economic development and how much this affects the lives of rural people, how much it makes their existence vulnerable. In their depiction of their hometown, migrant workers use very concrete objects as well as specific events to describe their hometown conditions. For instance, in one fragment, reference will be made to the use of a yoke to carry water, while in another fragment reference is made to the kind of food people eat to illustrate how poor they are. The hereafter table gives a snapshot of such depictions.

Table 10.4: Depicting the countryside

Interv. ⁴²²	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Li	<p>I come from Guizhou province: over there you don't have three days of clear weather, you don't have three li⁴²³ of plain, and people are poor. This saying means, this place, our hometown, is very poor (...) There is also something else with my hometown, it is the drought, there is no water. Sometimes, you need to walk 20 or 30 li to get water. Nowadays, you still have to carry water with a yoke. It is still the yoke, and two buckets, there is no running water, you also have to carry coal with the yoke (...) Over there, you can grow tobacco (...) there are the coal mines too (...) those who are working in mines can get... up to 1000 yuan a month, but it is very dangerous, they need to dig themselves and carry the coal on their back (...) In case of accident there is no compensation. Why? We have this saying: "In the morning you get out of your house, if at night you are not back, you have surely stayed in the hole" (...) Usually, when someone has died, you just burry him, that's all. A family in my village once lost three sons in a mine accident (Zhang asked: There is no compensation?). No, no compensation, nothing!</p>	<p>我来自贵州，天无三日晴，地无三里平，人无三分厘。这个俗语意思是说，这个地方，我们家乡，很穷 (...) 天旱，没水，有时候，20、30里要担水。现在还是那个担的，两个筒，没有自来水，还要背煤 (...) 万一出事，不给赔偿。为什么，家乡有俗语“早上出去，晚上不回来肯定是在洞里” (...) 一般死人，葬了就行。我记得有一户人家，三个儿子，三个儿子去挖煤，一下子全部死掉〔张问：没赔偿？〕没有，没有赔偿，什么也没给。</p>

⁴²² These interviews were carried out during the summer 2001 in Foshan and were recorded.

⁴²³ One li is equivalent to 500 meters.

Inter. ⁴²⁴	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Zhang	<p>I am from Guangdong province, from Yanghsan district (Qingyuan). Our hometown is rather backward in many respects, really. There is a lack of water (...). At home we only have 4 fen⁴²⁵ of humid land, that is less than half a mu⁴²⁶. There is also one mu of dry land. On dry land you grow corn, on humid land you grow paddy and cereals. Look, one mu of dry land, you can get 400 jin of corn. That makes 200 yuan a year, if you add the 300 yuan you get for what you grow on the humid land, all together that's only several hundred yuan as yearly revenue. With this money you still have to buy seeds, fertilizers, etc. If you add all this, you got nothing left! (laughter). Life in my village may be summarized with 5 words : the mountain is poor, there is no water any more, the land is vast, cereals are scarce, the people is poor (...). The mountain is poor: mountains are really very numerous over there.</p>	<p>我们家乡各方面比较落后一点，真的，缺水 (...). 我们家乡只是四分水田，半亩都不够。还有一亩旱地，旱地就是种那个玉米，水田就是种那个水稻，谷吗。一亩旱地，加起来就是 400 斤。才 200 块是不是？200 你再加上那四分水田就是 300 块，所以一年的收入才有几百块，几百块你还要出售什么农药，种子，等等。加起来就没有钱！家乡可以用 5 个词汇来概括：山穷，水尽，地大，物稀，民穷。</p>
Xu	<p>In my village, corn and rice are the main foodstuff. On the economic level, tobacco is the main economic resource of the village. For one year, if you take off the food, tobacco allows you to buy the fertilizers, things like that. At the Spring festival you can buy a few presents when you pay a visit to your friends and relatives. And that is it! There is no money any more. Some want to go to school but they can not, there is no money left (...). Our level of living is very low. Some poor families do not manage to feed themselves. No oil in their food. It is like this song "There is not even a drop of oil in what they eat". In my village it is more or less like this.</p>	<p>(...) 我们村子的经济来源是烟草。烟草，一年，除去吃的，够买肥料，等等。还有春节的时候，给亲戚朋友买一点小礼物，就完了！就没钱了！有些上学是上不起的，没钱了(...) 生活水平很底，大概是很底的。那些穷的家庭，菜里没油，就象那首歌“菜里没有一滴油”，就和这个差不多。</p>

⁴²⁴ Fieldwork recording, Foshan, summer 2001.

⁴²⁵ One fen corresponds to 66,666 square meters.

⁴²⁶ One mu corresponds to 0,0667 hectares.

Another related feature of the countryside as it is represented in both migrant workers' writings and in interviews is the fact that agricultural tasks are devalued, as if agricultural work was not considered work any more. Except that for many migrant workers the countryside remains the place where people can get warmth from their family and friendship, I many accounts it symbolises *worthlessness*. On the ground of objective differences in socio-economic conditions, the development of migration itself contributes to the devaluation of the hometown and to an increase in the value attached to the South and to cities. This is something that has been well researched in the field of the sociology of migration. As Sayad has shown, the whole conception of the hometown is being reworked through the development of migration and through the movements of goods, values and images that result from it (Sayad, 1991⁴²⁷). In the interviews I have carried out, this process of devaluation can be observed by the fact that migrant workers very often use the negative potential⁴²⁸ to describe their hometown. The hereafter table gathers a few fragments that show this devaluation of agricultural tasks and the use of the negative potential:

Table 10.5: Devaluation of the countryside

Interv. ⁴²⁹	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Xu	<p>I come from the North-West of Jiangxi, the Xishui district (...) Up to now, there is not a single company : it is still <i>completely empty</i>. Even at the township level, not a single factory. Not a single one. Well there are a few very small factories (...) The problem is that <i>there are no place to sell the goods</i>. There has not been any systematic development. In these conditions, for most people to go out to dagong is the only way out. <i>They can not stay at home</i>. Those who stay grow rice. Before, people grew corn, but not any more now. With the increase in the price of fertilizers, people <i>can not afford them</i> any more.</p>	<p>(...) 到现在为止，企业还是一片空白(...) 小厂是有，可是没地方销售。没有系统地去开发。在这种状况下，对大部分人打工是唯一的出路。在家里呆不住(...) 不出去打工的种水稻，以前还种玉米，现在不种了。农药涨价了，人家买不起。</p> <p>年轻人认为种田没有经济来源。卖粮食没有钱，赚不到钱。粮食价格太底。有时候没地方卖，卖不出去 (...) 我家里人鼓励我出来打工。我在家里没有出路。</p>

⁴²⁷ Frank Pieke develops this point in his introduction to Pieke and Mallee, 1999.

⁴²⁸ The negative potential is a grammatical form that one uses when one can not do something even though one would like to or one would have tried to do it.

⁴²⁹ These interviews were carried out during the summer 2001 in Foshan and were recorded.

Inter. ⁴³⁰	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Zhang	<p>In my hometown, there used to be a few small factories, cement works. The salaries were not high, one or two hundred yuan. Now they have all gone bankrupt. No really, over here, except working in the fields, <i>there is nothing to do</i>. You are talking about economy? It has <i>not developed at all!</i> It has been so many years since economic reform has started, but it has <i>not arrived here yet!</i> (...) This is like this, <i>there is absolutely nothing</i>. Except to work in the fields or to go out for work, there is <i>nothing else</i>. Once a migrant worker gets some money, he will send it to his family. They usually have very little money left though. With three or four fen of land, what can you earn? You may get three or four mao for one jin. You <i>will not manage to make any money</i>.</p>	<p>(...) 除了种田没有什么搞的。你说搞什么经济？根本没有搞上。改革那么多年来说，它还没到我那个地方！(...) 什么也没有 (...) 赚不了钱。</p>
Li	<p>To work in the fields is very painful and, most of all, <i>it is not worth it</i>. This land you work on, when you go to sell your cereals, you <i>do not get much</i>. This is <i>worthless</i>. In one year you get so little for your work. I was watching these people working in the fields, I did not want to do like them.</p>	<p>(...) 种田也辛苦，也不值得。你种的这些田，那些粮食，卖掉了，你也没有多少钱 (...)</p>

We need obviously to take into account the fact that in such depictions of their hometown migrant workers think of it with their present standards of comparison (Scharping, 1997). Everything seems to be constantly rethought along urban norms of consumption, of living and cultural standards, as well as types of employment. While the South symbolises reform and opening, the village is depicted as being sealed-off (闭塞, 封闭 *bise, fengbi*). Migrant workers often depict migration as a chance “to see the world” (见世面 *jian shimian*), “to try one’s luck in the world” (闯一闯世界 *chuang yi chuang shijie*), to endeavour to achieve one’s plan, and to fulfil oneself. The village or hometown is contrasted with “the outside world” which is then the site where one may achieve oneself. One of my informants nicely summed-up this by saying:

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“Once out of the valley, there is a sky. Once I was out, thanks to my efforts, I have been able to find a job in the South (...) So, I find that in the South, there is a vaster world. This vast universe... When you are in the valley, and that you watch the sky, it is so small. Once out of the valley, I realize how big this sky is. Then I can fulfil myself” (走出山沟，是个天(...) 在山沟里看这个天是很小的。走出这个山沟看了就很大。那么，我的自身价值就乐意体现 Zouchu shangou, shi ge tian (...) zai shangou li kan zhe ge tian shi hen xiao de. Zouchu zhe ge shangou kan le jiu hen da. Name, wode zishen jiazhi jiu keyi tixian)⁴³¹.

Moreover, in their description of their hometown, migrant workers often use *specific objects* that can be associated to a certain level of socio-economic development and of consumption as in the two hereafter fragments:

Table 10.6: Specific objects as symbols of socioeconomic standards

Interv. ⁴³²	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Li	Look, <i>the telephone</i> for instance, they started to install it in 1998. It is only in 1998 that it got connected! In this village, the <i>telephone!</i> (shouting). Before that it was the <i>old way</i> . Don't you think this is backward? We got the telephone only in 1998!	你看，电话，1998年才开始装的。1998年才装上了！电话！（...）你说落后不落后？（...）
Zhang	On the whole, my village was... I am telling you, in 1983, we had the first black and white television. But now <i>we still have that very black and white television</i> (laughter)! You see? In 1983, we had that black and white television and it is still black and white! (laughter). On the whole, I find that <i>my hometown has not changed at all</i> . I am telling you, no change! Although it is Guangdong province, although it is reform and opening, in my hometown nothing has changed. Well, we can say it has changed when compared with the former generation. Of course, in these places where the economy is developing, it's ok. <i>But in these place where people leave in order to dagong... I am telling you, nothing has changed.</i>	(...) 1983年我们是第一个黑白电视机。我们现在还是那个黑白的！你说是不是？我那个家乡，没什么变化的（...）

⁴³¹ Fieldwork recording, summer 2001, Foshan. See Jacka, 2006, pp. 249-253 for a discussion of female migrant workers accounting for migration as a way to see the world and have a good time.

⁴³² Fieldwork recording, Foshan, summer 2001.

Hence in this last fragment, the village, which is located in the north of Guangdong, is described as the place that has not changed when contrasted precisely with the South-east of Guangdong province that is the harbinger of economic reform and opening⁴³³.

Most of the migrant workers I have interviewed had stayed already for several years in the Pearl River Delta cities and could not conceive of any more to go back to their hometown for good. They explained to me that they “did not know what they would do in their hometown”. One of them said, “I would have absolutely nothing to do, I would really have no way out”. This was one of their major concern: to be forced, one day, to go back home⁴³⁴. If for those who have lived in the Pearl River Delta’s cities for several years, going back for good to one’s hometown is a rather feared prospect, however migrant workers’ hometown is often described as the place where they can get support from their relatives and where they may find friendship.

Hereafter, I look at how migrant workers explain why they decided to leave their hometown in order to work in the Pearl River Delta.

10.1.4 *Rationale for migration: a variety of motives*⁴³⁵.

As was stressed in the preceding chapter, in the Shenzhen mainstream press as well as in the early written press representations of migration in China, in these texts, the explanation of why people leave their village for Shenzhen and the South relies on a rather simple and straightforward causality. People leave their hometown because they are compelled to do so

⁴³³ One of my informants used one of Deng Xiaoping’s sayings in order to explain how different the hometown was from the South in that for him nothing had changed during the five years he had left. Hence, he quoted Deng Xiaoping saying: “I am back after 50 years, this mountain is still the same, this river has not changed and this path is still the same. These people are still the same people. Fifty years without change”. Fieldwork recordings, summer 2001, Foshan.

⁴³⁴ One informant told me of this concern: “Anyway, if I had to go back home, I think it would not suit me. I often say to myself, I often think about this: If I have to go back home, how would I do? What would I do? Where would I go to earn money? How would I subsist? I need to find a way to go on living here!” Fieldwork recording, Foshan, Summer 2001. On the impact of labor migration upon returned female migrants, see Murphy, 2004, pp. 243-278; Fan, 2004, pp. 177-206.

⁴³⁵ The way in which human mobility is explained has a big influence on the kinds of connotations attached to this phenomenon. Too often we learn from questionnaires that people migrate because they want to live a better life or to escape from poverty. See Skeldon, 1990. Frank Pieke proposes that we rethink migrations in terms of “migration configurations”, putting greater emphasis on the “social and political context” on the one hand, and taking “an anthropological view of mobility as a discursively constituted event” on the other. Pieke, 1999, p. 8. Douglas Massey calls for an integrated approach, urging that any analysis of the causes of migrations should take at least four elements into account: the structural forces within the places of origin which encourage migration, the structural forces which work to attract the migrants, the “motives, goals, and aspirations of those who respond to these structural forces (...)”, and the economic forces which come into play and connect the place of origin to the destination. See Massey, 1992, pp. 34-52. For a detailed study of the theories of migration as applied to China, together with a complex theoretical model, see Scharping, 1997, pp. 9-55.

because of poverty, or because they are dissatisfied with their conditions at home. Explanations of why people left their village for cities were on the whole mono-causal. We have seen that in migrant workers' writings, migration was explained both in relation with too costly education and health expenses, as well as with a will on the part of individuals to gain autonomy from their family and try to get along on their own. What in-depth interviews as well as informal discussions with migrant workers show is a much more complex picture in which people's motives are often multiple and more ambivalent⁴³⁶. In the hereafter paragraphs, I will show and discuss some of the reasons migrant workers have put forward to account for why they decided to leave their village⁴³⁷. In the first interview, I think what can be observed is how much people's conception of their migration may be dependent upon the specific circumstances against which migration is taking place. I mean here that as in the case of Zhang which is detailed below, the general poverty of his village along with his specific plight made that each time he mentioned the context of his leaving his village, he stressed with much emotion that he could not help but to leave, even if it was at the cost of being separated from his family. In this case, all along the interviews and in other conversations I have had with him from 2001 to 2006, Zhang stressed that he had been and was still compelled to leave and work in Foshan⁴³⁸. I suggest first to look at the hereafter fragment:

“One year later I got married, at the end of the year, there was nothing left to eat! Nothing was left! We were completely broke (...) There were no more cereals. When you get married, you have to spend money, invite people at the wedding banquet (...) I borrowed 200 yuan to the bank, but three years later I still had not given that money back to the bank and we were still broke! There was nothing to do. I had to go out and work (...) I did not really want to leave. But that year, nothing was left at home. Even corn was gone... Nothing was left. In these conditions, I had to get out (...) Nothing to do! Just married, I had to go out for work. I had just got married” (没饭吃! 什么都没有! (...)没粮食了(...)还是要出去的(...)没办法! 刚刚结婚蒙药出去打工。刚刚结婚。Mei fan chi! Shenme dou meiyoul (...) Mei liangshi le (...) haishi yao chuqu de (...) Mei banfa! Gang gang jiehun, yao chuqu dagong. Gang gang jiehun).

⁴³⁶ Jacka details various ways female migrant workers in Beijing perceive migration, see Jacka, 2006, pp. 247-261.

⁴³⁷ For the sake of the demonstration I will mainly use materials from in-depth interviews and discussions with two migrant workers, even though I will also additionally draw on other interviews when appropriate.

⁴³⁸ Another of my informants had a different conception of his migration. He explained to me that he had nurtured a desire to migrate for a long time already. He told me : “My father was a railway worker. He had seen the world. I used to listen to his stories. There was the radio too. In the eighties, our family was the only one that had a radio. It was as if we knew a little more than other villagers. We knew that the outside world is marvellous., that it was marvellous. A man pursues necessarily a marvellous life (...) Hence, since then, I had that idea in my mind: to get out and try my luck”, fieldwork recording, Foshan, summer 2001.

In the second fragment from the same interview, Zhang described his dagong experience with five words. I think we may glean from it how sad, or even tragic the background of this first experience was:

“ This year when I got back to my hometown, I have had to ask how old my children were! I really did not know (...) That is what I mean with “leaving my wife” and “being separated from my children”. I really don’t know what to do and what to think. My children, when were they born? When is their birthday? I really don’t know. But why do I say that my biggest faults are « betraying my mother » and « turning my back on my father”. My father is more than seventy and he is still tilling the land. He still has to carry water with the yoke⁴³⁹. People tell me “Your father is so old and you are still leaving him!” It is as if I went against the will of my father (...) My mother was very seriously hurt, she was stuck in bed, she could not move at all (...) I should have looked after my parents and children (...) « Being separated from my children”, “turning my back on my father”, “betraying my mother” and eventually not knowing what to think and what to do (laughter)” ((...) 我父亲现在七十多岁，还是种田的，还是要担水(...) 离妻，别子，背父，叛母，
最终还是无奈 Wo fuqin xianzai qishi duo sui; haishi zhongtian den, haishi yao danshui (...) liqi, biezi, beifu, panmu, zhongyu haishi wunai).

In the fragment we have just examined, to leave the village was not described as an individual project, neither as a way to learn knowledge, nor as a venue for self-fulfilment. Five years later I asked Zhang and my other regular informants to tell me how they explained their migration. While Li stressed the fact that the South meant for many a hope to be able to improve one’s lot and learn some new things, Zhang again stressed reasons linked to the survival of his family. Hereafter is a fragment of their discussion:

Zhang: “When I left my hometown it was to survive”⁴⁴⁰.

Li: “But you were not without having a goal, for instance when you saw all these tall buildings in town!”.

Zhang: “It was not possible for me to stay in the village. It was different, we could not eat any meat any more. I could not even think of anything like an ideal. It was subsistence, I was doing all sorts of jobs for subsistence; money and finding food was more important. I had just got married and for other people I should not have left. I had a very young child.

⁴³⁹ Five years later he made a similar reference to his parents having to carry the yoke: “Thirty years ago people were already speaking of modernization of agriculture and what has changed? My mother is still carrying water with the yoke. If my parents are still alive it is because I am able to send them money. My friend Ma, he had the same education level as me, he was in such trouble that he eventually committed suicide by throwing himself under a bus!”.

⁴⁴⁰ Zhang interestingly spoke of how little peasants in his hometown could earn for growing rice, the argument was very similar to the one he developed in the summer 2001.

In the second series of fragments I am quoting hereafter, I will show that another informant named Xu has put forward a variety of reasons to explain his decision to leave the village. Firstly he explained that it was the example of other people who had left the village that somehow tempted him to leave for the South. He spoke of the “wind of dagong” and of the process of “spilling Guangdong province over”:

“At school this wind [the wind of dagong] was blowing. The people who had gone out to work, those who were back from Guangdong and who were ‘saguang’, those who are working outside... in my hometown we call them the “bosses”, the “Guangdong bosses”. That meant that those who had gone out to work had earned money, quite a lot of money. They brought back big bags and within these bags there was money or clothes. Really nice clothes! At that time some of us were still wearing clothes with holes and patches of cloth. Thus they brought back clothes, televisions, recorders, things that were worth money. At Spring festival, those who were paying a visit to their relatives were saying ‘Ah, the son of Mr so-and-so has gone to Guangdong and has brought back this or that’ (学校在吹这个风。出来打工的人，洒广回来的人，打工的那些人。。。。。。在我家乡把他们叫做老板，广老板 (...) 我们那里有的穿的是布贴的 (...) 比较值钱的东西. Xuexiao zai chui zhe ge feng. Chulai dagong de ren, saguang huilai de na xie ren, dagong de na xie ren...zai wo jiaxiang ba tamen jiaozuo ‘laoban’, ‘Guang laoban’ (...) Women nali youde chuan de shi butie de (...) bijiao zhiqian de dongxi).

What this migrant workers is referring to is sometimes called the « reproduction of desire », that is the reproduction of the desire to migrate which is part of the process of the reproduction of migration itself. Li Minghuan has shown for instance in the case of international migrants from Zhejiang province that the process of chain migration as it had developed had changed standards as to what poverty was and that it was appropriate to talk of a relative norm of poverty (Li Minghuan, 1999, pp. 181-198). Even though it is possible to find employment in or near the village, the norm is defined chiefly via the marks of success of those who have come back and are working outside the village. Hence, migration has turned into the main venue for self-fulfilment. Indeed, within several letters as well as through interviews, one can perceive how much norms of conduct are influenced by those who have left the village for work in the South. The capacity to go out for work and to send money back home, to allow the consumption of prized goods has become the norm par excellence for rural people (Sayad, 1991; Li Minghuan, 1999). This of course is not peculiar to China and it has been superbly documented by Sayad in the case of Algerian migration to France. One of Sayad’s informants spoke this way of France:

“France penetrates us into our bones. Once you have that into your head, you can’t get it out of your mind (...) France has settled down into yourself and it does not leave you any more. You keep having it in front of your eyes. It is as if we became haunted (...) Even in conversations, what are men in the village talking about? About France! The old ones tell their stories again and again (...) the young ones who are waiting to leave dream of France. Our village is eaten by France (...) These people you see them coming back, they are wearing nice clothes, they bring back cases full of things, they got money in their pockets” (Sayad, 1991, pp. 33- 34).

Xu himself took part to the process of reproduction of the desire to leave the village when he came back to his village. This is how he described his first return home after he had worked in the Pearl River Delta for two years:

“I had to go through Guangzhou, and that’s where I saw this hi-fi. Wonderful! I bought it! (laughter). I bought it to bring it home, because... in my village there was no such hi-fi. Then I went back. But when you stay away like me, there surely are people who have helped your family from time to time. Therefore I bought some alcohol, a lot of alcohol. I also bought some fruits: apples, bananas. No, no bananas, but some leeches and mandarins. I bought one box of each (...) I am telling you, the first time I was back in the village, there were so many people! Around me...It was as if the whole village had come to my place. (...) That evening, the main room was packed with people. I gave them fruits. At that time, these fruits were very expensive. One would only offer such fruits when someone fell sick in the village (...) All of them had come to ask me questions. First they asked me how much I had earned. That was what they were most interested in (laughter) (...) They wanted to know what my salary over there was. I told them that I got 700 yuan: ‘Ah, so much! So much! I have to go there too!’ (通过广州看到了那个音响，好漂亮啊！(...) 很多人呢！周围，全部我家乡人来到我家里(...) 一个是问我赚到多少钱，这个是他们最关心的(...) 这么高呀，我也去! Tongguo Guangzhou kan dao le zhge yinxiang, hao piaoliang a! (...) hen duo ren ne! Zhouwei, quanbu wo jiaxiang ren lai dao wo jiali (...) yige shi wen wo zhuan dao duoshao qian, zhege shi tamen zui de (...) zheme gao ya, wo ye qu!).

Xu added later in the interview that this « wind of dagong » is what made that he started to nurture the idea to leave the village. It is interesting to note that in the above-quoted fragment, Li stressed that he had brought back home several things that were expensive, things that people in the village could usually not afford. He also referred to the fact that his fellow villagers admired him for what he had achieved outside the village. I suggest examining a second fragment from an interview with Zhang, as we can see he refers to a very similar process when he first went back home:

“The first time I went back, I was working in an alcohol factory. I went back to the village and the villagers admired me. It was during Spring festival. I was talking to my friends and relatives. I gave them some cigarettes, some alcohol and some biscuits. We were talking together. We were talking about the outside world: “What is better than in the village?” They have not seen the world, therefore I told them about things of the outside world. They admired me very much, I had left the village. I had seen more things than them. The old ones came to our house, my parents cooked a little more, they were listening. In the village, people were attracted by Guangdong province. It was more developed than our area. There were things I did not tell them... In Guangdong one does not earn as much as people think” 回到家乡，家乡人羡慕我 (...) 我们聊一下天 (...) 他们没有见过世面，外面的东西，我介绍给他们听 tamen meiyou jianguo shimian, waimian de dongxi, wo jieshao gei tamen ting.

Zhang hinted in his last sentence at the darker side of his dagong life which he said he remained silent about. Another informant similarly explained that people did not believe him when he would tell them that life outside the village was very hard. This tendency to underplay the negative sides of migration and to rather focus on the visible marks of success was hinted at too in several migrant letters I examined⁴⁴¹.

In addition to the “wind of dagong”, Li stressed a second reason which helped account for his decision to leave the village. He explained to me that he felt ashamed after he had failed at the senior middle school exam that allows to gain access to university and that he did not want till the land:

“The reasons I decided to leave the village... There was the fact that I had not been able to enter university. Moreover, at home I could not stand the idea of having to work in the cultivation of tobacco. You could not make any money (...) Then I said to myself I had better leave. At that time one thing was clear: I hoped to escape from this hometown (...) I had always had good marks at school. Very good marks. After I had failed, people would have said things behind my back: ‘Eh, look at the child!’”. What they meant was that I did not do as their children who went straight from school to work in the fields. I had some very good results, therefore I should have been able ‘to jump out of the gate of the countryside’. But I had failed! People would surely have found something to say about it... People were going to make fun of me. I wanted to escape from this mockery, my marks were really too low” (一个原因是高考落榜，再一个是我受不了那个烤烟。赚不到钱(...) 只是说要避开家乡(...) 他们的意思是他的成绩好肯定能走出这个农门。 Yi ge yuanyi shi gaokao lobang, zai yige shi shou bu liao na ge kaoyan. Zhuan bu dao qian (...) zhi shi shuo yao bikai jiaxiang (...) Tamen de yisi shi ta de chengji hao kending neng zouchu nongmen).

⁴⁴¹ Here again the comparison with the work of Sayad is interesting. One of the migrants interviewed by Sayad wondered for instance if the people who looked “so tall”, happy and proud to be back in the village, were the same people as those who in France “appeared so tiny, hidden in their beds”. Sayad, 1991, p. 38.

In this fragment, Xu put forward a series of elements linked to pride and to losing face. Leaving one's hometown because one has failed at the university entrance exam is a regular feature of how young migrant workers explain why they left for work. Xu, similarly to some other migrant workers, left home without his parents and friends knowing it. Another important element needs to be highlighted in this fragment, it has to do with the sentence "Then I said to myself I had better leave". In the Shenzhen mainstream written press as well as in migrant workers' writings, when migrant workers explain why they decided to leave for work, I have noted a tendency *to reply with a series of specific and clear objectives* such as "to study some knowledge", "to learn from experience", etc. In this interview, such objectives are also put forward but are not framed within such an orderly narrative. They very often are balanced by other arguments found in other parts of the interview or in other interviews. In addition to the sentence "Then I said to myself I had better leave", Li later explained that when he first migrated he did not know what he wanted to do. Interestingly he initially said to me that he found that he "had to get out and try his luck in the world", after which he added "Of course, at that time I did not say that I wanted to leave to try my luck in the world. I just found this fun. I was only 18, I was still an 18 year-old child"⁴⁴². From a grand and neatly thought project, the decision to leave becomes a more humble and more complex process. This warns us not to take for granted all too unambiguous explanations that would seem to corroborate or be in accordance with dominant modes of explanation. I shall come back to this thorny issue and attempt to qualify it further in a later section. But for now, I turn to the last set of reasons that Li put forward, those linked to his hometown officials:

"Over there, those officials, those who work in the local government, they go against the feeling of the people. Therefore I could not stand staying in the village any more (...) These corrupted officials, I could not stand that. Those whom I call "dog officials. "Dog officials" is an insult. Therefore I did not want to live in such an environment. This is why I left these mountains" (那些做官的，这些当政府的，他们就不善于其他的民情。于是在家乡呆也呆不住了 *naxie zuo guan de, zhe xie dang zhengfu de, tamen jiu bu shanyu zhe ge minqing. Yushi zai jiaxiang, dai ye dai bu zhu le*).

We have seen that many of the migrant workers' writings addressed the issues of prohibitive education and health expenses in relation to the meagre revenues that agriculture

⁴⁴² Another of my informants similarly first told me he had left to study some techniques and gain some new experiences but later said that he had first gone out to make a little money on his own. Fieldwork recordings, summer 2001, Guangzhou. Jacka develops a contrasting argument on migrant workers who explain that they decided to leave their village just to see the world and have fun in that such a narrative often hides more serious reasons not expressed directly. See Jacka, 2006, pp. 249-252.

allows. But the political dimensions of these issues are often left untold in these writings⁴⁴³. Indeed, not surprisingly criticisms addressed at local cadres and relating to corruption in the countryside were absent from the “World of dagong”. In migrant workers’ magazines or unpublished, such articles were rather rare. The situation is different if one looks at interviews. Most of the informants with whom I carried out in-depth interviews explained to me that on the whole they had a rather negative view of their hometown local governments. Either these local governments were described as not doing much to encourage local development by neglecting agricultural infrastructures for instance, or worse that they were corrupt and tried to find ways to grab money from peasants⁴⁴⁴. More importantly perhaps, what these informants expressed was a feeling of abandon of their localities by local authorities, sometimes coupled with the idea that central authorities were on the whole very far from the rural conditions they experienced. A feeling of unfairness and sometimes of utter outrage often accompanied this expression of a largely neglected countryside. For instance, migrant workers would react at statistics supposedly reflecting the achievements of economic development in the countryside. Hereafter is an illustration of such a reaction by Li:

“Now, when I hear the statistics that in my village the average revenue would be of one thousand yuan per person per year. Where do you find such revenues? Ma was right the other day when he said: ‘Let them go and see how people live over there!’ ” (哪儿有这样的收入？上次李说得对，还是让他们去看我们那里人过什么样的生活！ (...)) Na’er you zheyang de shouru? Shangci Li shuo de dui, haishi rang tamen qu kan women naili ren guo shenmeyang de shenghuo! (...)⁴⁴⁵.

Five years later, the same informant also reacted to the recent measures aimed at suppressing a series of agricultural taxes and at improving the living of peasants:

“Nowadays people say that things are going to improve. But look, the expropriations of peasants, nothing is done to halt this and people are left without land. Ok, I agree that the attitude towards migrant workers has changed a little, but look at education, peasants do not have a fen for it. What has been done to change this? The Communist Party has done nothing for peasants, they are sitting in their offices. Let them go check how it is over there! They don’t know anything about what reality is like over there. The peasants who do

⁴⁴³ Corruption in villages and the pressure put on peasants through levering various taxes have been rampant and have been the cause of much rural unrest from the mid eighties on. In this see Unger, 2002; Yu Jianrong, 2006; Bernstein and Lü Xiaobo, 2003; O’Brien and Li Lianjiang, 2006.

⁴⁴⁴ Fieldwork recordings, summer 2001, Foshan ; fieldwork notes, December-January 2003-2004 and 2005-2006.

⁴⁴⁵ Fieldwork recordings, summer 2001, Foshan.

not have a fen left to pay for the schooling of their children leave blindly for cities”⁴⁴⁶ (... 你看一下学费，农民一分钱也没有了，共产党为解决这个什么也没作，他们在办公室坐着。他们对我们那边的状况真是一无所知 (...) ni kan yixia xuefei, nongmin yi fen qian ye meiyou le, Gongchandang wei jie jue zhe ge shenme ye mei zuo, tamen zai bangongshi zuozhe. Tamen dui nabian de zhuangkuang zhen shi yi wu suo zhi (...))⁴⁴⁷.

From this fragment we can get a sense of the kind of distrust towards local and central authorities. In one informal talk with a shoe-repairer, the feeling of abandon turned into one of being “eliminated by society”:

“Nowadays we are back with a gap between the countryside and cities that is as wide as fifty years ago. Look at the gap between here and the countryside! The countryside is really too poor (...) Zhu Rongji once said he too was ‘dagong’. This has nothing to do with our life of dagongzai! We peasants have been eliminated by society. Now that my house in Henan has been destroyed by floods, I really have nowhere to go back to”⁴⁴⁸.

On the whole, an analysis of the interviews and informal talks carried out between 2001 and 2006 shows how complex people’s experiences of migration and their narration of it may be and how much they have thought about the meaning of what they were going through.

A difference within written narratives and those produced during interviews or discussions. This could be linked usefully to the fact that these different genres of performances with different constrains, different conditions of production and of reception. This idea shall be pursued further in the upcoming sections of this chapter. For now, let us observe that within the interviews and discussions, people have the space to develop their arguments around specific topics. When an issue is discussed, they can freely come back to this issue later in the discussion even if another topic is discussed. There is a kind of echo between different sections all along the interview. While the written narrative is often constructed as a coherent whole, with its initial situation, a change and often a concluding end to the narrative, there is much more room in loosely lead interviews for contradictions and therefore for destabilizing what may have seemed

⁴⁴⁶ Interestingly, in the last sentence this migrant worker is using the term “blindly” which migrants themselves seldom use. We may infer from his argument that he is using this expression in relation with the shortcomings or the absence of effective outcomes of central policies.

⁴⁴⁷ Fieldwork notes, January 2006, Guangzhou. Another informant held a similar line of argumentation in an interview I had with him, he said: “I would really like that our Premier Zhu Rongji go to our... if he could go to the countryside, get down to grasp the situation just like emperor Kangxi did (...) Nowadays Zhu Rongji and Jiang Zemin sometimes go to the countryside but the places they go to are not the ones they should be going to. What they see in comparison with the real people... They will have seen nothing from the real people”. Fieldwork notes, summer 2001, Foshan.

⁴⁴⁸ Fieldwork notes, December 2003, Foshan.

so coherent and convincing in written narratives. What we may witness in interviews, in informal discussions and observation are elements of individual biographies as well as the uncertainties of projects built around migration. Such projects, we may infer from the fragments hereabove, are often rather ambiguous and may not be subsumed under one simple heading such as “improve my or my family living standards”, “study some techniques and knowledge” or “fulfil myself”. It is important to try to shed light on such stories since they help demystify homogenising representations of rural masses who are fleeing away from the countryside in search of illusions.

10.1.5 *Living and working in Shenzhen and in the South: a more ambivalent picture*

We have seen in chapter 8 that in the “World of dagong”, working in Shenzhen and the South were repeatedly associated with competition, challenge, opportunities, and that as such this environment provided the conditions for people to liberate their potential energy. An important distinguishing feature of both migrant workers’ writings and interviews is that Shenzhen and more generally cities of the Pearl River Delta are represented in a more ambivalent way. This does not mean that some of the features of the way Shenzhen and the South were represented were not found in migrant workers’ writings or in interviews with them. On the contrary, as will be discussed in another section of this chapter, these dominant features were quite pervasive too, but they were also balanced by depictions of the harsh and precarious environment migrant workers are facing. Cities are not unanimously depicted in a positive light as providing all that which the countryside is lacking. For instance, a 17 years old migrant worker simply wrote that “although the outside world is very rich, although it is not old like the village” she “did not find any kind of interest in this place” and that she therefore loved her village even more⁴⁴⁹. One informant similarly explained to me that he had not been impressed the first time he arrived in Shantou to work and that he “had not had the feeling of having arrived in an industrial modern city”⁴⁵⁰. Hence, in migrant workers’ magazines and within interviews we come across somehow dissonant voices, voices seldom heard or read among what has become a trope, i.e. that cities in the South are necessarily desired and impressive places located much higher than the countryside on the geographical and social hierarchy in post-Mao China. As we shall see hereafter, living and laboring in the Pearl River Delta is also often tantamount to hardship, precariousness and subalternity.

⁴⁴⁹ Unpublished letter n° 11.

⁴⁵⁰ Fieldwork recordings, summer 2001, Foshan.

10.1.5.1 Precariousness and subalternity

A rather pervasive theme of the condition of many migrant workers in urban setting was the hardship and fears associated with looking for work and more precisely with the fear of having to spend the night outdoor and of being controlled by police or public security agents. This feature of the much precarious and subaltern condition of migrant workers in urban setting is quite pervasive both in interviews as well as in migrant workers' writings. The hereafter table shows a few examples of such fears or concerns.

Table 10.7: Fears relating to the environment

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Unpublished letter n° 18	Suddenly I was in trouble, I had no money left at all. When I was in the greatest trouble: <i>nothing to eat, to have no place to stay and to spend the night in the streets.</i> During the day, I had no choice but to start grabbing empty water bottles, cans, etc. under the despising look of people.	突然遭经变故，我两手空空。最困窘时没吃没住，夜宿街头。白天不得不在人们如刺的目光下去捡空矿泉水，易拉罐等。
Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Unpublished letter n° 14	(...) if I can't find her, I <i>will not have a place to stay for the night</i> and I will not have the money to stay in a hotel, I <i>could be caught by the public security</i> , that would be even worse. I was somewhat troubled.	如果找不到她我就没有地方留宿，没有钱住旅店，背治安捉到就更麻烦，心里有点担忧。

<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 02/95, “Liulang zhi lü”, 23.</p>	<p>With the other people who were on the bus with me, we waited, frozen, in the streets for the sunset. As we had just sat down, <i>three security officials holding electrical rods arrived, just like devils falling from the sky, threatening the wanderers that “impact the look of the city”</i> (...) Our dreams that had not yet come about vanished suddenly. Ai! Is it so that the streets of this city may not even allow exhausted transient guests to stay around a little?</p>	<p>我和同车的人瑟缩于街头，等待黎明的莅临刚坐下，三个巡夜的治安如同鬼魅般从天而降，手里抓着电棒对着我们这一群影响市容的浪者张牙舞爪 (...) 流浪意犹未尽的梦顿时无影无踪 唉！这都市的大街道难道连疲惫的过客都不许稍作停留。</p>
<p>Zhang⁴⁵¹</p>	<p>I had to look for work for two months, but in comparison with many others, I am lucky, <i>I have not had to sleep on the streets</i>. Why? Because I know many people. I am quite good at talking. I know a few friends, I have a few friends. We trust each other. During these two months I have got acquainted with this friend from Sichuan. It is because I knew him that I could sleep with him. I have not had to sleep outside.</p>	<p>我比很多人幸运的是我没有睡过大概。为什么？因为我认识的人还是比较多一点。另外我的口才在某一些时候还是不算很差 (...)</p>

In the last fragment, as to controls by security officials, Zhang also added interestingly that he had never been controlled since he knew how to avoid them:

“During these two months, I have not been controlled. Because I know that they are carrying out controls. I avoid these controls. If I know that they are coming, I run away, I avoid them. When they come to carry out controls, I am gone (laughter)”.

One can feel among migrant workers a longing for greater stability⁴⁵², for having “some place to establish oneself” (立足之地 *lizu zhi di*), even more so for those who have been living in cities for several years already. Migrant workers also clearly associate instability to the fact that they are on the whole unprotected in their labor relation. One informant had described this situation in a rather uncompromising but lucid way:

⁴⁵¹ Fieldwork recordings, summer 2001, Foshan.

⁴⁵² Jacka makes a similar observation in Jacka, 2004, p. 284.

If I could earn enough money, I would love to establish myself over here. But the problem is that our dagong is not stable. Once you don't have a job, it gets really tough. Then you cannot but go back home (...) A factory where I used to work once did not pay our salary for four months. Four months without a salary. What can you do but to leave? In my family people are waiting for this money to subsist. Me too, I have to subsist. If you don't give me my salary, how can I dress myself, how can I feed myself? I can't do anything. But the thing is that the boss does not want you any more (...) Today in China, factories don't provide you with any protection, or it is very rare. In your foreign countries, there are protections. (...) In China in the State-owned enterprises there are some. But not in the private factories. They take advantage of laborers. They reduce costs. If you fall ill, if you get wounded at work or if you don't work very well any more, then they don't want you any more. Their subjectivity is very strong: if it wants you, it wants you. If it does not want you, it does not want you. No law protects me"⁴⁵³ ((...) 我们这些工作，打工不固定 (...) 他们站着打工人的便宜 (...) 它想要你就要你，不想要你不要。没有法律来保护我 Women zhexie gongzuo, dagong bu guding (...) Tamen zhan zhe dagongren de pianyi (...) Ta xiang yao ni jiu yao ni, bu xiang yao ni, bu yao. Meiyou falü lai baohu wo).

The idea that looking for work is associated with fear or concern of having to spend the night outdoor and of being controlled is clearly linked in many migrant workers' narratives to a defining feature of their condition which is that it is precarious and linked to subsistence. The hereafter two fragments of interviews catch neatly this feature:

"The dagong is a work that is unstable, often migrant workers are just able to subsist. So for me this fear is linked to subsistence, when you lose your work you become scared and you worry. Look at me, when I have had to hide in a dormitory of a factory to sleep and to eat. This feeling of fear can not be avoided"⁴⁵⁴.

«Today I have a child, my situation is not stable. Everyday I have to solve the problem of food, of subsistence. I am living day by day. I feel really at a loss" (不稳定，得过且过，真迷惘 bu wending, de guo qie guo, zhen miwang)⁴⁵⁵.

To sum up the above-mentioned arguments, I suggest looking at how migrant workers distinguish themselves from white collars. Hereafter is a short fragment of an informal discussion among three migrant workers. One of them made the following comment about the distinction between blue and white collar work:

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ He described this feeling with much emotion. Fieldwork notes, January 2006, Foshan.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

“There are the white collar workers, the blue collar workers, and the black collar workers! The black collars, they are the dagongzai [the working boys], those who sweat so much that their collar gets black. When I hear that officials dagong, I say ‘this is not true’. They are not unstable like us, the dagongzai. The dagongzai are doing physical and painful work and their salary is low” (打工仔做的是体力活, 苦力活 Dagongzai zuo de shi tilihuo, kulihuo)⁴⁵⁶.

Hence, migrant workers also often define themselves as “people from below” (底层的 diceng de). There is a clear hierarchization between them and “people from above” (上层的人 shangceng de ren), i.e. white collars, bosses and officials. Such a hierarchization can be observed in social interactions. For instance, when I was carrying out interviews with odd-job workers in the streets of Guangzhou, Foshan, Dongguan and Shenzhen, I could notice that when locals intervened in the conversation I was having with odd-job workers, they would preferably not face or even address the odd-job worker so as not to be associated to them. An interesting illustration of such hierarchization took place on a marketplace in Guangzhou, a shoe repairer was sitting on his small chair, a 50 years-old urban lady came next to us and started to talk about him, saying how “honest” (老实 laoshi) and « trustworthy » (坚信 jianxin) people like him were. She probably stayed there speaking for 5 minutes. During her monologue, the shoe repairer did virtually not utter a word. It was as if there was an authorized speech that was prevailing upon another one of lesser value, as if his words had stepped backward. Such a subaltern status does not mean though that migrant workers have no agency of their own. On the same marketplace, a few minutes after the 50 years-old lady had left, a customer asked the shoe repairer to repair his shoe heel. While the shoe repairer was repairing the heel, the customer did not say anything, neither did I. Once the heel was repaired, the customer said with much disdain: “Rub my shoes, free of charge!” (擦鞋! 免费! caxie! mianfei!). The shoe repairer replied: “Come back tomorrow, I have just arrived!”. After, the customer had insisted several times, as the shoe repairer still refused to do it for free, the customer threw a one yuan note at the shoe repairer for rubbing his shoes and left angrily. As we can see from this interaction, the hierarchical relationship was clearly affirmed as the customer scorned the shoe repairer and threw the money at his feet, but the shoe repairer somehow refused to relinquish his agency by refusing to work

⁴⁵⁶ Fieldwork notes, Guangzhou, Summer 2001. Five years later, another informant made a similar distinction as he explained that “white collars have studied, they don’t do physical tasks, no painful work. They are not the dagongzai (working boys), we are black collars”. Fieldwork notes, January 2006, Foshan. 苦力 (kuli) is the term that was used to refer to the “coolies” in the nineteenth century.

for free. Hence he somehow resisted the effects of the social hierarchy⁴⁵⁷. This status of “people from below” is nurtured by migrant workers magazines as well as by some of the reportage literature. It is interesting to observe that migrant workers often tend to show a sense of pride in identifying themselves as “people from below”. As we have seen from the fragment on the distinction that was made between white collars and blue collars, they seem not to be willing to give up some of the meanings attached to the concept of *dagong* as there is a tendency in official parlance to widen the scope of people who are said to *dagong*. In this sense, *dagong* may be conceived as a site of struggle for contending definitions of it. It seems that migrant workers are trying to appropriate this term and what it contains, because it is an important part of their process of identity-making.

10.1.5.2 Hard labor.

Depictions of the painful factory labor, long working hours, the experience of prejudice and humiliation in the work-place, and the labor rights abuses constitute the core elements of the narrated stories in many texts as well as in interviews. Feelings of loneliness, of leading a bland existence and of hopelessness⁴⁵⁸. The depiction of such issues needs to be somewhat distinguished from the way it is described in interviews in terms of their styles. In written accounts the style is more literary, sometimes poetic even when the event or topic being narrated is very serious or tragic. The literary style of most of these writings makes them less blunt than oral accounts from interviews. There is a specificity in the ways the reader is addressed in migrant workers’ writings which may be linked to the fact that many of the experiences being narrated in magazines *are linked intertextually* to other tales told in more or less similar ways, using terms and narrative frameworks that are familiar. This difference in style may obviously also relate to the kinds of constraints that writing to a magazine entail. As was emphasized above, most of these magazines are more or less directly under the supervision of the party propaganda committees and the issue of labor abuses — how one writes about it — is a very sensitive topics in post-Mao

⁴⁵⁷ I remember observing another interaction on the same spot another day. A middle-aged man, apparently a rather poor urban dweller, had come to have one of his shoe mended. The shoe repairer asked 2 yuan for the job. The customer said it was too expensive as he did not have much money, the shoe repairer agreed to ask only one yuan. In this case, I could not observe such a hierarchical relationship between the two men. On the contrary, I felt there had been some kind of mutual understanding between the two men. It seemed the shoe repairer had shown some sympathy to the fate of the other man.

⁴⁵⁸ Similar elements stand out also in Anita Chan’s analysis of letters written to and by female migrant workers found after a blaze in a Shenzhen factory. Chan, 2002, pp. 180-182.

China, perhaps even more so in the Pearl River Delta. For now I suggest to look a few written accounts that relate to right abuses as well as to bad conditions, long and exhausting working hours.

Table 10.8: Written narratives depicting tough labor conditions

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
<i>Wailaigong</i> , 07/96, 8-9.	“Why is it that our eyes are as red as overdone peaches? Why is it that our minds are as dry as a desert? Why is it that our heart is as insensitive as a dead body? Is it because of a broken heart? Is it because of feeling nostalgic for our hometown? No! These are the marks left by the extra hours worked through the night for bosses”.	为什么我们的眼睛红肿得象熟透了的桃子？为什么我们的大脑就象沙漠一样荒荒？为什么我们的心就象死尸一样的麻木？是遭遇情变的伤心？是乡愁的困扰？ 不，是为老板加班熬夜而打下的烙印。

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Unpublished letter n° 32	<p>The first impression I got when I got on this worksite was one of dirt, disorder, and bad quality (...). In the tent, it was incredibly messy. On the ground there were melon shells, plastic bags. Outside: piles of rubbish (...) it is in such an environment that we lived.</p> <p>“The sun has gone down already, it is nine o’clock, don’t even think of talking of extra hours, we still have at least half an hour of work (...) The stars start to climb into the sky of the night and to fix our sweat on our bodies without a sound.</p>	<p>挤入工地，给我的第一个印象是脏，乱，差 (...).工棚内是一片狼籍。地上瓜子壳，塑料装等。门外是一堆垃圾(...)我们就生活在这样的环境里</p> <p>天黑了，已是晚上九点，不要说什么下班，至少还有半小时工作时间。此时星星爬上了夜空，默默地凝视着我们身上的汗水。</p>
Unpublished letter n°21	<p>Work outside made me exhausted, not knowing what to do or think; the loneliness and emptiness of my soul. I needed so much a haven of kindness and softness.</p>	<p>打工的疲劳，无奈；心灵的寂寞，空虚。我也极为需要一个温柔的港湾。</p>

In interviews however, the tone of the depiction of the harshness of dagong is much more direct and rough, one does not find the literary forms that are so pervasive in written accounts. Abuses are sometimes denounced crudly too in migrant workers’ magazines, but often the use of specific literary forms somehow makes that they will appear less bluntly. The interviews render more closely the idea of harsh exploitation and dreadful conditions that have been reported both by the media, by scientific literature as well as by non governmental organizations. When I asked one of my informants to describe his happiest moment while he was working in Dongguan, he replied:

“In the factory, I have never had any satisfaction. The only moment I was happy was when we were getting our salary every month. Then I would pay a visit to my friends. Thirty days without seeing them....Everybody would sit, there were several bottles of beer. It was very lively, a bit when we were young.. We were drinking, getting drunk, then we relaxed. We would let all our trouble off”.

He then explained with much force how disciplined his work environment was and how it affected his mind and body:

“The toughest was to stand until you got blisters. Your feet were swelling too. Everyday, because you had to stand all day long, your feet were swelling. It was very painful. We were staying like this for fifteen hours; we had half an hour to eat. When we went to the toilet, we had to be quick: five minutes! If you exceeded five minutes, they would take some money out of your salary. These were the factory rules, the discipline. It was very severe (...) We worked like machines that kept running continually, to end up stupid. At first, he was an intelligent person, but afterwards he became dumb. Everyday you would have to do the same thing. When you work, you are not allowed to speak, you can not talk to each other. Therefore, our mouth... it started to stink. That’s it, when you work (*dagong*), the only thing you can move are you hands, this mouth, it does not have a chance to speak, and as no air is getting out of it, it stinks” (laughter) (脚都肿了(...)很辛苦(...))就是厂规，纪律，很严，不自由。就象个机器，不停地运转，人都变傻了。本来是个聪明的人，然后就变傻了(...)你在打工，不准说话，不准聊天的。那个口发臭了 Jiao dou zhong le (...) Hen xinku (...) jiushi changgui, jilü, hen yan, bu ziyou. Jiu xiang ge jiqi, buting de yunzhuang, ren dou bian sha le. Benlai shi ge congmin de ren, ranhou jiu bian sha le (...) Ni zai dagong, buzhun shuohua, buzhun liaotian de. Na ge kou fachou le (...)).

I find the use of a *stinking mouth* to characterize this dimension of his experience of *dagong* a very powerful idiom that neatly synthesizes this person’s subordinate status in the factory. Some of the interviews shed light on these extremely harsh conditions without necessarily giving highlighting positive or exemplary meanings. This is an important point of distinction between written accounts sent to magazines on the hand and interviews on the other hand. While the former often displays an exemplary dimension, it at least contains some element worth learning or knowing about for the reader who most of the time is a migrant worker himself. In interviews however, this exemplary dimension may from time to time be found, but it may also be literally absent from entire passages.

Now that we have examined the main distinguishing features of how the experiences of *dagong* were defined by migrant workers through their writings and through interviews, I suggest to turn to the different way in which migrant workers narratives articulate with the official public transcript of *dagong*. We shall look at how some key categories and narrative structures of the official public transcript are articulated into migrant workers’ narratives, or said differently how such official public transcript relate to migrant workers’ public transcript. I hereafter detail three major modes of relationship between the two transcripts. These modes range from a “migrant workers’ affirmation” of the dominant discourse, to disillusionment about such discourses, to strategic uses of core elements of the dominant discourse that serve to back claims made by migrant workers.

10.2 Migrant workers' narratives and the dominant public transcript: three narrative modes

10.2.1 *Confirmation ?*

In this section I will show that some migrant workers, in their letters to the editors of migrant workers' magazines, do mobilize categories that are central to the dominant public transcript and that circulate widely throughout society to explain how (well) they have fared. On the whole, we can observe how the major narrative structures and categories that have been defined as being part of the hegemonic public transcript permeate migrant workers' writings. This, I will demonstrate, should *not* be conceived of as an unquestioned illustration of a widespread acceptance or "internalization" of the dominant mode of rationalization of social mobility and stratification in post-Mao China. In other words, this confirmation is far from implying that it may be taken as testimony of the straightforward effects of the hegemonic discourse⁴⁵⁹. To provide an alternative explanation, I put forward the notion of "genre" and the concept of hegemony conceived of as a "common discursive framework" in order to highlight the possibility of strategic framing on the part of migrant workers. I also point to the centrality of some values which circulate widely in migrant workers' narratives. The analysis of interviews with migrant workers also allows me to nuance the great pervasiveness of core categories and narrative structures belonging to the dominant public transcript within migrant workers' writings.

10.2.1.1 "Sour, sweat, bitter and hot"

The first way in which we can observe the pervasiveness of core categories of the hegemonic public transcript of dagong is found in the way the dagong experience is constructed as a challenge, an experience that will allow to test one's capacities and oneself, i.e. a rite of passage one has to go through that will allow to grow or fulfil oneself (Jacka, 2006). We have

⁴⁵⁹ In this respect I follow James C. Scott's suggestion to be cautious about any interpretation of the supposed effects of the dominant ideology since it is extremely difficult to distinguish between strategic moves and ethical submission. This is what Scott calls the "radical indeterminacy". Scott, 1990, p. 92.

seen that the ideas of learning from experience, studying by oneself and being tested by society were core ones within the hegemonic public transcript of dagong that was studied in chapter 8. Dagong allows to learn from experience if one is armed with determination, but it also includes failure and successes, ups and downs, joy and sorrow. In chapter 8, I had called this “romanticization” and argued that it transformed the “dagong” process into something trivial or light, i.e. without serious consequences. Such a conception may be summarized neatly under the expression “sour, sweat, bitter and hot” (酸甜苦辣 *suan tian ku la*) or the expression “dagong is very exciting but also very frustrating⁴⁶⁰” (打工很精彩又很无奈 *dagong he jingcai you hen wunai*) which are very pervasive in migrant workers’ writings as well as in editorials or texts written by editors and journalists. In migrant workers’ tales, a description of the hardship of labor and living conditions is often followed by the mobilization of the “sour, sweat, bitter and hot” formula or by a way of representing the dagong experience that fits well into this “sour, sweat, bitter and hot” framework. In the hereafter table I gather a few examples that, I argue, belong to this framework (see next page please).

Table 10.9: Illustrations of the “sour, sweat, bitter and hot” framework.

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Unpublished letter n° 28	There should be <i>no regret to have chosen this road</i> (...) I said to myself that as I was 18, I had to go out to <i>try my chance</i> and see what <i>the world of the outside</i> looks like (...) No matter what happens, I will face it with courage, I can not escape it (...) <i>Dagong is very tough</i> , but I have not had this experience yet and all this is still very new for me. To be able to <i>give it a try</i> is a <i>challenge for my own capacity</i> (...) <i>Success and failure</i> are both going to <i>test</i> us. When we will have lived many happy and painful moments, we will be able to stand still and think about the life path we will have walked up to there (...) <i>Opportunities and challenges</i> coexist, we need to see whether we <i>can grasp</i> them” (...) I am now ready for going out to <i>dagong</i> ”.	(…) 外面的世界很精彩，也很无奈。打工是很辛苦的，但从来没体验过这种生活(…)能够去尝试，是队我自身能力的一次挑战(…)成功和失败都会让我们经受考验(…)机遇和挑战共存着，就看我们是否能把握(…)出来打工我已经做好准备。

⁴⁶⁰ I did not find an appropriate translation for the term *wunai*, it may entail frustration as well as the idea of being at a loss, not knowing what to do or to say.

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Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 04/94, “Xin de huhuan”, 23.</p>	<p>(...) the <i>outside world</i> is <i>wonderful</i>, but it is also <i>very frustrating</i>” (...) I have gone through <i>so much hardship and trouble</i>, I have gone through so many tragic separations, I have been desperate so many times, (...) in fact it is only after having gone through all this that I realized that no matter what you are doing, what you need is a happy heart, within the <i>dagong universe</i> there is <i>hardship</i> and there is <i>happiness</i>. This beating heart is both <i>rising</i> and <i>going down</i> on this rapid and always changing Southern <i>warm earth</i>”.</p>	<p>外面的世界很精彩又很无奈 (...) 经历了多少次南征北战，经历了多少悲欢离合，经历了多少失望 (...) 才发觉其实干什么都一样，多种要有一个颗快乐的心，打工生涯有苦也有乐。驿动的心在这快节奏，日新日异的南方热土沉落又浮起。</p>
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 02/95, « Shunjing Nijing », 24.</p>	<p>“Life is a <i>long and thorny road</i>, you just need to <i>walk resolutely</i>, and you will surely be able to get to the sacred earth that is in your heart. At this moment, when you stand at the top, looking at each of your footprints, then <i>each drop of your sweat becomes honey and it soaks your heart</i> (...) There coexists <i>success</i> and <i>failure</i> in life, <i>failure</i> is often more <i>useful</i> than success. There is no point in sighing, it will not help.</p>	<p>人生是一条路，漫长而曲折，只要坚定地走下去，便能达到你心中的圣地，那时候，那每一滴汗水就会变成蜂蜜，浸润你的心田 (...) 生活就存在着顺境和逆境，而逆境往往比顺境起到更大的作用。何必叹息，叹息换不来明月清风。</p>
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 04/96, “Dagong zhi shi ge yizhan”, 14-15.</p>	<p>“ (...) within this furnace⁴⁶¹ that the dagong is, in this <i>colourful world</i> of dagong, we can encounter all sorts of people, we can <i>learn all sorts of things</i>, we can <i>enrich our experience</i> and <i>broaden our horizon</i>. Therefore, thousands and thousands of <i>youngsters are growing</i> in this life of dagong, they are getting <i>more mature</i>. Just like our friend De Hui, in these tough years of dagong, they are <i>shaping themselves, learning techniques and capacities</i>, flattening the road for the next resting post in their life”⁴⁶².</p>	<p>我们在这个大熔炉里，在这个五彩缤纷的打工世界里可以接触到各式各样的人，学到各种各样的东西，丰富自己的阅历，增长自己的见识。于是一批又一批的年轻人在打工生活中成长起来成熟起来。正如赵德挥朋友一样，在艰苦的打工岁月里，磨练自己，学技术，学本领，为自己人生的下一驿站铺平道路。</p>

⁴⁶¹ This very term « furnace » was used in the Mao era to refer to the “Furnace of revolution”: 革命熔炉 (geming rong lu).

⁴⁶² These are the comments made by an editor about an exemplary tale written by a migrant worker. The next fragment is also a comment made by an editor to a text written by a migrant worker.

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Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, “Dagong wuyuan wuhui”, 10/96, 41.</p>	<p>“Dagong is only <i>a resting post</i>, within this hard time of youth, we shall undergo many difficulties and setbacks, go through <i>the pain of failure</i> and we shall also enjoy the <i>joy of success</i> (...) all this will greatly <i>enlarge our field of vision, augment our knowledge</i> (...) we should <i>learn to find joy within trouble</i>, adjust ourselves, <i>learn to be autonomous and strong by oneself</i>. At any time one should be <i>full of confidence in life</i>, love life and existence. Because we know perfectly well that it is only <i>a resting post</i>, the road of life after this will still be very long”.</p>	<p>打工只是人生的一个驿站，在这段艰辛的青春岁月里，我们降要经受种种的磨难和挫折，会经历失败的痛苦也会享受到成功的喜悦 (...) 大大地开拓我们的视野，增长我们的见识 (...) 我们应该学会苦中做乐，自我调节，学会在艰难困苦中自立自强。任何时候对生活充满自信，热爱生活，热爱生命。因为，我们清醒地知道只是一个驿站，以后人生之路还很长很长。</p>

Within the last two fragments, the replies by editors to two letters written to the magazine by migrant workers are worth looking at since we can see in these fragments an aspect of the “guiding” (指导, 引河 *zhidao* or *yinhe*) function of journalists and editors which influence both the form and content of migrant workers’ tales. In both the initial texts written by migrant workers and in the comments made by editors we find an emphasis altogether on the hereafter notions: the dagong experience is just a “resting post” linked to migrant workers’ best years of youth; dagong is made of pain and joy, of failure and success; it entails loneliness and sadness as well as the charm and agitation of the modern city; it will enrich migrant workers’ experience and therefore the dagong life is exciting and full of colours; it is not only sadness and hardship, but also happiness and motivation; lastly, migrant workers should remain self-confident in any circumstances. While we may think that some migrant workers do conceive of their migration experience as a process that helps them gain maturity and learn skills, there is a rather paternalizing dimension in these replies by editors, a dimension that is found in many comments or editorials and which is characteristic of an urban elite conception of migrants as rural others who still have much efforts to do in order to hopefully reach a certain level of civility. When migrant workers describe their experience within the “sour, sweat, bitter and hot” framework, one may argue that they locate themselves along a party-state teleological line that runs from

youth and ignorance to maturity and civility⁴⁶³. There is too a process of depolitization at work by framing the dagong experience within the “sour, sweat, bitter and hot” framework. An idea that goes along with such framework is that the dagong, even if it may be tough, is only one stage in migrant workers’ life, that it is only a “resting post” and as such these youngsters ought not to waste their time complaining about their lot. This meaning repeated again and again by editors could be summarized this way: while some people are complaining and are saying that their lot is unfair, there are a great number of migrant workers who do not see any point in complaining, who do not waste their time and keep working hard instead, and who will at least have grown up and gained a lot in terms of personal experience and knowledge. By stressing that dagong is only one stage in migrant workers’ life, one also masks the fact that dagong often entails humiliations and abuses which may sometimes bring about very serious consequences on the lives of migrants workers. Let’s note too in some fragments, the stress on the idea that migration is the result of an individual choice, as well the emphasis on people’s capacity to face challenges and seize opportunities. The capacity “to face challenges and seize opportunities” pair is also a very pervasive one in migrant workers’ writings and often goes together with the “failure and success” couplet.

10.2.1.2 Expectations, determination and optimism about the future.

The need to nurture expectations, to be armed with strong will and to keep an optimistic outlook on the future are another series of defining features of the hegemonic public transcript that were very pervasive within migrant workers’ writings. We shall see that it was found too in interviews, but to a much lesser extent and in a far more ambivalent way. What we find repeatedly in migrant workers’ writings as well in editorials, is that no matter how hard their lot is, people need to remain self-confident in their capacities, keep nurturing ideals and be optimistic about the future because of the opportunities that may still be seized tomorrow. In many texts, this optimism about the future comes as a conclusion to texts which sometimes constitute a very detailed and rough description of the hardship associated with factory work and city life. Being optimistic about the future is often linked to people’s capacity to get hold of their fate and change it. This is expressed through the use of expressions such as “to create one’s own blue

⁴⁶³ It is in this sense that Yan speaks of migrant workers as “subjects to be” who are placed on a teleological line the runs from backwardness to development or ignorance to civility. Yan Hairong, 2003.

sky” or “to create one’ own road”. The hereafter table gives a few snapshots of this emphasis on self-confidence and optimism in the future.

Table 10.10: Illustration of the pervasiveness of the values of self-confidence and optimism in the future.

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Unpublished letter n° 30	I have tasted <i>all sorts of hardship</i> , on the whole <i>dagong is really painful</i> . This is my first experience of <i>dagong</i> , but I <i>am convinced that tomorrow will be better</i> , that there <i>will be many more opportunities</i> and that I will have to <i>face many challenges</i> ”.	我已品尝到种种酸辛，总之打工都是挺辛苦的。这是我打工的最初体验，但我相信明天会更好的，还有很多机遇，还会接受很多挑战。
Unpublished letter n° 32	Eventually our day of labor is over. <i>Exhausted</i> , we go to the toilets, we eat a bowl of rice and after having washed, we lie down with plenty of weighty ideals and we don’t want to move any more. Time goes by like this day by day, time tells our aspirations soundless: to stand the exhaustion, to stand the loneliness, we can stand all that, only because <i>in our heart there is still a dream, because there is still a tomorrow...</i> ”	终于干完了一天的活 (...)带着沉重的理想，躺在床上就不想动了(...) 我们都能承受，只因为我们心中还有梦，还有个明天。
<i>Wailaigong</i> , 11/1996, “Women <i>dagong bu kelian</i> ”, 47 (editor’s reply).	“ <i>To create one’s own blue sky!</i> ” What a beautiful sentence. Most people know that <i>dagong is hard</i> , however, there is an extraordinary great number of migrant workers who have not retreated nor have they complained (...) They know very well that the road of life is hard and thorny, however in the face of difficulties, to lament oneself with pessimism, to be angry at the unfairness of destiny does not make much sense, and does not solve any problem. What we need is to <i>establish a belief</i> (...) We do not need people’s pity, <i>we are still young</i> : we have a strong pair of hands, we have an intelligent brain, we <i>will definitely create a new universe, draw a blue sky</i> ”.	“ 要打蓝一片天空! ” 多好的话。 打工众所周知是 艰辛的 。然而，有无数的打工人并没有退缩，也并没有哀叹 (...) 他们深深地知道，人生的道路是 艰辛而曲折的 ，然而，面对困难，一叹地悲观叹息，抱怨命运不公，并没有多大的意义，也解决不了问题。 需要的是 树立信念 (...)我们不需要别人怜悯，我们正当年少，我们有一双

		<p>粗壮的手，有一个聪明的脑袋，我们 定能开创出一片新天地，打蓝一片天 空！</p>
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Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
<i>Wailaigong</i> , 11/1996, “Women dagong bu kelian”, 47.	<p>“Because I possess the <i>belief that one day I will be successful</i>, because I have <i>aspirations for the future beautiful life</i>, I chose to keep going forward. Therefore, as to all those migrant workers who complain that dagong is pitiful, I do not agree with that (...) we have intelligence and strength, every fen we get has been earned in exchange for the sweat of our best years of youth (...) do not confuse us with beggars. I am someone who dagong, I <i>want to create my own blue sky</i>”⁴⁶⁴.</p>	<p>由于怀着总有一天会成功的信念，怀着对未来美好生活的向往，我选择了维持往前走。对于众多打工者发出的打工真可怜的哀叹，我不以为然 (...) 我们有智力又有劳力，我们挣来的每一分钱都是用青春汗水换来的 (...) 别把我们和乞讨混为一谈。我式打工的，我要打蓝我那片天空。</p>

The idea that migrant workers’ subjective outlook on the world are crucial and even more important than material achievements or than one’s physical state is expressed particularly strongly in one tale. The author of this text tells the story of a young female migrant worker who had an accident in her factory and had a finger seriously injured. She was forced to go on working for two days and was eventually fired because she could not work well any more. After having criticized the ill deeds of the factory managers, the author then explains that the wounded girl went back home and, as the wound worsened, had to have her finger cut off. The concluding section of the text is worth quoting at length. The female author writes:

“You said that when you entered the factory, you had ten fingers, when you left it you had only nine and a half fingers, and now only nine fingers are left (...) now you say you are suffering a lot and you wish you could die. In fact I am extremely glad about this. Because, the fact that you do not have ten fingers any more is a minor thing, having difficulties in one’s feelings is a big thing (...) There are flowers everywhere in the universe, why should you be so depressed because some flowers are withered and some leaves are dying, why should you be so full of remorse? It can hardly be avoided that life is full of so many unfortunate and frustrating things, but there are also so many true feelings, love and friendship in this life. When you raise your head and look at the shining sun, you will then realize how beautiful the world is! ((... 你说你很痛苦，恨不得去死。我却为此感到非常高兴。因为你十指不全是小，感情不全是小 (...) 天涯处处有芳草，何必要为枯枝败叶黯然神伤，自怨自哎呢(...)人生难免有太多的不幸太多的无奈(...)当你抬头仰望那金灿灿的阳光时，你就会发现：世界多么美好！ (...) Ni shuo ni hen tongku, hen bu de qu si.

⁴⁶⁴ In the following fragment, the journalist makes a comment that further strengthens the idea that there is no point in complaining or talking about injustice and that migrant workers had better keep struggling and going forward.

Wo que wei ci gandao feichang gaoxing. Yinwei ni shi zhi bu quan shi xiao, ganqing bu quan shi da (...)
Tianya chuchu you fangcao, hebi yao wei ku zhi bai ye anran shen shang, ziyuan zi'ai ne (...) rensheng
nanmian you tai duo de buxing, taiduo de wunai (...) dang ni taitou yangwang na jin can can de yangguang
shi, jiu hui faxian: shijie duome meihao!)⁴⁶⁵.

At the beginning of the text while the author had raised problems of dignity, of justice, and of the abuse of migrant workers' rights, in the end, the whole issue, including the migrant workers loosing her finger, may be solved through an optimistic worldview. The stress is put on the ugliness and low virtue of factory managers' deeds and on the fact that as long as you have a positive and optimistic outlook, the situation ought to get better.

In many of these texts written by migrant workers, we find that the emphasis on values such as the will to learn from one's experience, to have an optimistic outlook or to be armed with determination in order to change one's fate are often associated with the fact that the "nation of migrant workers" (打工族 dagonzu) is made of young people who ought to use their capacities as well as possible. Hence, migrant workers writings are repleat with terms such as "to use one's best years" of youth in the South. The meaning conveyed is similar to the one identified in the "World of dagong", i.e. young people ought to make the most of their "best years of youth" to learn new knowledge while they are working in the South. This youth may not be wasted away, its potential forces have to be used. In some texts, this may turn into an essentialization of the values associated to youth as in this text from 1996 which title is "Light the best years of youth":

"To light the best years of youth, this is as to light the lamps of the tunnel of life, the vague road will suddenly become open and clear, the gloomy life will become bright and exciting, the dark horizon will get so clear (...) If we do not plough in our best years of youth, we will forever remain lamentable proletarians and ignorant people (...) If we go on like this, then our personality, our wishes, and all we posses will vanish (...) Friend, light the torch of your best years of youth! Out of this torch *a brand new self will come* and this will bring us *a brand new life!*" (点燃青春，就是点燃了漫长人生隧道中的灯盏，迷蒙的道路将会豁然开朗，灰暗的人生将会辉煌多彩，黑暗的前方变得清晰可辨(...) 不在青春中耕耘，我们将会永远是可悲的无产者和无知者(...)朋友，点燃青春的火炬吧！他将会燃烧出一个全新的自我，带给我们一个崭新的人生！) .

On the whole, by stressing optimism for the future, many of the tales written by migrant workers conformed to what Tamara Jacka characterized as the narrative structure that

⁴⁶⁵ *Wailaigong*, 04/96, "Juanmei, nihao ma ?", p. 6.

“dominates post-1949 political discourse, literature, and film”, i.e. to criticize the past, but be optimistic about the present and future (Jacka, 2004, p. 284). This last fragment allows me to turn to the last feature I will examine in this section, i.e. the idea that the *transformation of the self* is key to the improvement of migrant workers’ lot.

10.2.1.3 Transformation of the self

The meaning emphasized repeatedly in migrant workers’ writings is that the successful transformation of the self, which is made possible through a change in attitude or in subjectivity, will enable to liberate individuals’ potential and therefore result in an improvement of their lot or at least generate a hope for a future improvement. I will give one particularly telling example of this narrative line. In this tale⁴⁶⁶, a young male migrant worker writes that after six bitter months of search for work, during which he almost lost hope, what gave him the strength not to give up was:

“(…) I realised that there was nobody to care for me (…). I am a human being, I have got my dignity, my thought, my hopes and promises. I do not believe that it is not possible to create one’s own sky with one’s own hands (…).” (没人可怜我，不，没人可怜我！我是个人，我有我的尊严，我的思想，我的包袱。我不相信用自己的手开辟不了一片属于自己的天空).

In the face of a tough and dehumanizing factory work environment he found the resources to overcome the difficulties he was facing:

“To be a migrant worker is really like living a non-human life (…). You get tired to a point that you do not know what the day is and which year next year will be. The factory I worked in was like that (…). But it is precisely in this environment that my world outlook has undergone a fundamental change” (打工仔更加过着非人的生活(…)灯黄眼乱常常让你忘记今天是几号，明年是哪一年。我所在的厂亦是如此(…)但是正是在这种环境下，我的世界观发生了本质的改变.

In the second half of his text, the author also tells the story of a female worker who managed to get a good job position thanks to her attitude of striving and self-learning. She suggested he too

⁴⁶⁶ Unpublished letter 15.

should learn some techniques and knowledge. “This friend”, the author writes, “said that although she was not really smart, by doing some extra efforts, she would manage to be successful. She just needed to struggle consciously and she would eventually be able to create her own space” (她虽然很笨，但是笨鸟先飞，只要自己努力奋斗，终于会开垦自己的天空 (...) 她相信 “一分耕耘，一分收获”). He eventually writes that what has changed in his world outlook is that he now knows that:

“the *dagong* life is a tempering process and the one who goes forward with courage will manage to go against the tide. The weak one will only stagnate. A person can not endlessly be angry at others, and keep saying that his lot is unfair (...) The ‘*dagong*’ [experience] is a wealth. Struggle! Nation of laborers! Life of laborers” (打工的人生就是一种磨练，勇往前的人就会逆流而上。脆弱的人会凝滞不前(...) 打工也是一种财富，奋斗吧！打工族！打工者！打工人生).

I chose to quote these fragments since they concentrate many of the notions and values that have been highlighted above such as the fact that young migrant workers nurture aspirations, that they are struggling unremittingly and are willing to learn new knowledge and that therefore they may create their “own sky”. In this as well as in many other texts, we come across a rather similar narrative plot: leaving the village for work, being in search of work or simply working in cities of the Delta implies being faced with difficulties (unfriendly environment, very hard work conditions, loneliness, etc.) that represent a challenge to one’s capacities; the change in attitude either turns into an improvement in the situation of the author or generates the hope for such an improvement. This structure may be summarized as such:

difficulties – change in attitude – (hope for) improvement in situation

I suggest hereafter to discuss how some migrant workers relate to these narrative structures and categories, taking into account both the historico-political background and the importance of editorial practices in inducing some of these structures. We have just highlighted that the mobilization of common values and aptitudes such as the worthiness of the *dagong* experience conceived of as a tempering process, the will to go forward, make progress, and learn techniques and knowledge, the importance of industriousness and steadiness, as well as the need to keep struggling on one’s own in order to grasp the opportunities offered by the environment

could all be observed in many of the migrant worker's written narrative detailed above as well as in the Shenzhen mainstream press articles. These arguments share an individualization of the reasons of success and failure. They do indeed confer the idea that if one happens to fail, it is mainly due to one's own inadequacy and inability to adapt to the environment, suggesting a quasi-linearity from one's efforts to the possibility of success. I argue tentatively that the rhetoric of "failures and successes", of "opportunities and challenges" and of "learning knowledge and techniques" do point to a similar way of narrating the *dagong* experience, a very politically correct and actually depoliticized way to narrate it. Depoliticized in the sense that it individualizes the reasons of success and failures. Similarly to what Zhao Yuezhi had shown for the tabloids' representation of laid-off workers (Zhao Yuezhi, 2002), it turns issues of social hierarchy into matters of individual capacity and personal psychology. Once the *dagong* experience is framed into the "opportunities and challenges" as well as the "learn knowledge and techniques" rhetoric, I argue that it moves into two intertwined directions. On the one hand it somehow gets *detached* from structural and political factors such as the policies and institutions that are at the background of the subordinate condition of migrant workers. On the other hand, it gets *hooked* to the party-state and urban elite sponsored discourse on the countryside and on development. In this discourse of development, the notion of the "quality of the population" allows the strengthening of "related systems of valuation already embedded within Chinese development, such as town versus country, developed versus backward, prosperous versus poor (...)" as Rachel Murphy has noted (Murphy, 2004a, p. 5). Such geographical and social hierarchization is not specific to China. But perhaps that what singles out the Chinese case is the fact that the party-state and the urban elite are deeply involved in the reproduction of this deeply embed discourse of "lack"⁴⁶⁷ and in the strengthening "hierarchies of desire" and of "cultural hierarchies of opportunity and stagnation" (Hoffman, 2003, p. 45). Peasants are supposedly low in quality and may hope to raise this quality by making efforts endlessly and by learning knowledge and techniques.

The emphasis on striving, on the individual capacity to take advantage of opportunities is somehow characteristic of the kinds of pioneer narratives commonly found among migrants around the world. "Successful" individuals may draw on specific cultural repertoires to make sense, explain or justify their success and other people's failures. Globalization surely allows for a diffusion of such repertoires around the world, and China is no exception, in the sense that,

⁴⁶⁷ Myron Cohen explains how within the cultural construction of an identity for modern China from the late nineteenth century on, on the background of a rejection of Chinese traditional culture, the countryside and peasants have been associated with backwardness and considered as obstacles to national development. According to Cohen, there has been a cultural construction of the peasantry as "culturally distinct and alien "other", passive, helpless, unlightened (...) desperately in need of education and cultural reform". Cohen, 1993, pp. 154-155.

through the media, through modes of (cultural) consumption and through migration networks, it popularizes models of existence, such as the pioneer or self-made man, which carry strong ethical and symbolic content (Bayart, 2004, pp. 262, 272-294). Borge Bakken has documented the vast amount of both Chinese and foreign literature on modernization and on the modern personality, as well as the development of the “study of talents” (*rencaixue*) that has flourished in post-Mao China. Commenting about the Chinese literature on personal improvement he noted the pervasiveness of social Darwinism and the emphasis on values such as ‘striving forward’, ‘risk-taking’, ‘innovation’, as well as a necessary and nurturing competition that enhances the will to strive (Bakken, 2000, pp. 60-62)⁴⁶⁸.

But the narrative of self-achievement and success through individual striving in Shenzhen has also to be related to the representation of Shenzhen as a model of economic development for the nation which I have documented in the second part of this dissertation. An interesting point is that the texts and interviews analyzed in this chapter do not chiefly refer to Shenzhen but to other cities or more generally to the notion of “the South”. In this sense, some of the very founding values associated with Shenzhen are circulating widely in other areas of the Pearl River Delta and have become defining notions of “the South”.

I have already pointed to the fact that the circulation of values and attitudes that belong to the dominant public transcript of *dagong* were far more pervasive within written narratives than in oral accounts such as interviews or informal discussions⁴⁶⁹. What does such a pervasiveness of these categories and structures allow to infer about the power of the party-state to impose some of its core categories upon migrant workers? Does this pervasiveness strengthen the argument of a neoliberal governmentality at work in post-Mao China? To tackle these questions, I will make two points. The first one has to do with the meaning migrant workers gave to reading and, more importantly, to writing to magazines, in relation with the editing practices of editors and journalists. The second argument has to do with the centrality of the values being used mostly in writing letters to magazines and also, but in a more nuanced way, in interviews. Firstly, in several letters the authors refer explicitly to stories of successful people or to values they have read in books, magazines or newspapers. In their writings, these authors refer to these exemplary tales as resources in their struggle. I will just give one illustration of this with the tale of a young female author who narrates her 36 first days of *dagong* in Guangdong province. This author got arrested and locked up in a repatriation centre for a week. In a situation of great

⁴⁶⁸ Wang Hui notes too the strong influence of Hayek’s ideas on the emergence of neoliberal conceptions in China. Wang Hui, 2003, pp. 118-120.

⁴⁶⁹ Such pervasiveness does not mean that within the same magazines, these categories of the dominant public transcript can not be contested, questioned or subverted. That will be the focus of the next two narrative modes described.

distress, she explains that, when she got freed, what allowed her to regain hope and confidence in the future was the reading of a newspaper article she had found in the street. She writes:

“It is precisely when I was in great difficulty and I was completely desperate that this old newspaper illuminated me. I said to my self ‘you can not go back home like this, you need to get your money back!’. So, armed with strong determination I *chose* to persevere, I am going to succeed. The old saying says ‘if after a great disaster you have not died, then there will be happiness afterwards’. Just like that successful person in the newspaper: to be free, to possess wealth and to be respected. Just as Wang Jinyun was writing in that column called “A life that I want”: to be able to dress oneself and to have a house to live in without having to go to the factory. This is exactly what success is. A way of life of your own. I will succeed, I have decided already and I have made my first step forward” (正当我步步难行，对生活彻底绝望的时候，是这张报纸启发了我(...) 我抱着拼一回的决心，选择了坚持，我要成功 (...) 我会成功的，我已经下决心，并迈进了第一步。Zhengdang wo bu bu nanxing, dui shenghuo chedi juewang de shihou, shi zhezhang baozhi qifa le wo (...) Wo bao zhe pin yi hui juexin, xuanze le jianchi, wo yao chenggong (...) Wo hui chenggong de, wo y i xia juexin, bing maijin le di yi bu)⁴⁷⁰.

I found also several instances where the authors explained that the migrant magazine they were writing to both provided them with support and with guidance in their life⁴⁷¹. One informant caught neatly this exemplary dimension. He said:

“The magazines for migrant workers offer perspectives, they are not pessimistic. When I am reading them or when other people are reading them, you realize that it is possible to achieve something and that one should try to make some progress”⁴⁷².

From the above-mentioned argument, we may infer that when they are writing their tales, the authors engage somehow with a series of model trajectories that they know of (through reading books, magazines, etc.), as well as with the qualities and attributes individuals need to possess as conditions for ascending the social hierarchy. I suggest that through writing to the magazines, the authors mobilize specific frameworks of meanings such as the need to remain optimistic about the future, the need to make constant efforts, the will to learn from experience and to learn techniques, etc. which belong to *the specific genre* of letter writing to magazines⁴⁷³.

⁴⁷⁰ Unpublished letter n° 6.

⁴⁷¹ We shall see hereafter that if some authors do point to models of conducts they know of or have read of as a kind of resource, others on the opposite express their rejection of such norms and refer to them to draw the attention on how far the norms and values stand from what they experience in their daily life.

⁴⁷² Fieldwork notes, Foshan, January 2006.

⁴⁷³ De Fina notes how much migration and crossing borders are “a highly tellable experience intertextually constructed through repeated and shared tellings that circulate among the immigrants and through institutional and public narratives produced by the media”. De Fina, 2003, p. 102.

It may also be the case that mobilizing such meanings and values constitutes means for migrant workers to make sense of their reality, to express their agency and to use ideas about expectations and promises to reconcile themselves to their ‘*dagong* conditions’⁴⁷⁴. The migrant workers with whom I have had the possibility of talking about the meaning of reading and writing to migrant workers magazines all told me that it somehow had a function of pushing them forward or giving them impetus (推动力, 提升精神 *tuidongli, tisheng jingshen*). Perhaps more interestingly, I found that for my three most regular informants, the very act of writing was linked intrinsically to the idea of making individual progress. When they talked of what writing meant to them, making progress, nurturing ideals, improving one’s lot and making efforts were mentioned. For all of them too, writing was a privileged way to think over what they were going through⁴⁷⁵. The hereafter two fragments give an illustration of this point⁴⁷⁶:

“You write your thoughts, you try to understand your own life. You create your own air bubble. You don’t do that to earn money (...) When I am writing, I am willing to learn and progress endlessly”. “Last year, I could not send any money to my family, but I got a reward for writing a text. I wrote to my parents: ‘Although this year I can not send you any money, what will make you most delighted is that I have learnt a lot, a lot more than before. I have made some progress (...) After having gone out for seven or eight years, I still do not have a fen and I don’t have a wife (...) But I definitely need to persevere, I need to fight, to fight. I need to be conscientious. Last year I wrote an article called ‘I go on doing as well as I can’. I am planning to publish it in our company paper. The title is ‘I go on doing as well as I can’. I need to go on making efforts (...) My friends admire me. They say: ‘While he has’nt got any money, he has made individual progress. It will help him in his life. Later, his capacity to subsist will be a little greater’ (去年, 没钱寄回去, 可是得了奖(...) 知识提高了很多, 有进步(...) 他们说: 虽然他现在钱没有, 但他自身提高了很多。生存能力就会强一点 *Qunian, mei qian ji hui qu, keshi de le jiang (...)* zhishi tiagao le henduo, you jinbu (...) Tamen shuo: suiran ta xianzai qian meiyou, dan ta zishen tigao le henduo. Shengcun nengli jiu hui qiang yidian).

The fact of being familiar with reading migrant workers magazines seems to have also a certain influence upon the way in which migrant workers are describing what they are going through, how they interpret their experience. One informant offered a subtle illustration of such an influence as he reacted to the idea that the South offered a fair environment for migrant workers. He said:

⁴⁷⁴ I am grateful to Guy Massart for highlighting this point to me.

⁴⁷⁵ Bertaux associates life-writing to the constitution of a “reflexive consciousness”. Bertaux, 1980, p. 216.

⁴⁷⁶ Fieldwork recordings, Foshan, summer 2001.

“I do agree with the idea that the South is rather fair and that the competition here is quite fair. The environment offers opportunities. In the dagong process, I can do what I can not do in the village, I can fulfil myself. But I need to stress this: before having read this kind of literature, I did not know that I would fulfil myself, I had not thought about that. Not at all! Now it is different because there are many people who have left for dagong and there are the magazines, the television, etc. If there had not been all this, I wouldn't have thought about it. It has to do with the medias, the newspapers, the magazines. When you read such stories, you say to yourself: ‘Me too I am capable of being successful’⁴⁷⁷.”

Before having read these magazines, this migrant worker stresses that he would not have framed his experience using expressions such as “fulfilling oneself”. He is recognizing the importance of reading migrant workers magazines and more generally of the multi-channel circulation of a pool of values and structures which help give a specific form to his experiences.

Another interesting insight that was gleaned from interviews with both journalists and migrant workers was the fact that migrant workers seemed *very much aware of what was expected from them* in terms of how they should frame their tales in order to have their texts published. Several informants confirmed that the authors knew that if they wrote a fully pessimistic tale, they would have no chance to have it published⁴⁷⁸. From this we may infer that migrant workers who are used to reading and writing to magazines know that they need to put up a certain written performance by sticking to specific narrative lines if they want to get published. One ought not to neglect either that to have an article published is usually very much valued among migrant workers in terms of pride⁴⁷⁹. When I mentioned to editors the fact that many tales did conform to the “difficulties – change of subjectivity – (hope for) improvement of condition” framework, all of them confirmed to me that those tales in which there was a stress on the change in subjectivity was the fruit of authors knowing what types of plots had most chances to be published. They said that editors, through the reworking they either carried out themselves or suggested authors to carry out, had an implicit influence on the types of tales being written. The types of tales that were most likely to be published were those that offered hope and that were optimistic about the future⁴⁸⁰. I was also told by editors that the degree of reworking (加工 *jiagong*) and of guiding (引导 *yindao*) depended on the column migrant workers were writing to. Some editors were even more straightforward as to the influence of specific types of structures upon migrant workers' writings. They mentioned “patterns” or “formulaes to describe reality” (模式 *moshi*, 纪实的公

⁴⁷⁷ Fieldwork notes, Foshan, January 2006.

⁴⁷⁸ Fieldwork notes, Foshan, January 2006.

⁴⁷⁹ One informant for instance told me how proud he was that other migrant workers had seen his name under a piece of article that had been published. Fieldwork recording, Foshan, summer 2001.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

式 *jishi de gongshi*). According to such formulae, authors were expected to increase the difficulties they were facing at the beginning of the tale so that the final achievement or success at the end be greater. As to the focus on “learning knowledge and techniques”, they explained that there used to be a column specifically dedicated to tales that would focus on migrant workers who had managed to learn useful knowledge and techniques⁴⁸¹. Hence, what could be considered as the evidence of the effects of the dominant discourse may well be an appearance of submission or in the case of migrant workers’ narration of *dagong*, a strategic framing that draws from a repertoire of specific categories, arguments, or plots which they think are likely to concur with either the editorial line or narrative structures favoured by the magazine they are writing to. Thus it may well be that *the way some tales are framed is dependent upon the genre of writing practice* and the type of readership addressed. What we may happen to conceive as an ideological effect or of an effective neoliberal governing through people via specific attributes and values may well be a form of representation that is the result of a certain power configuration or in this case of specific institutional settings, i.e. the specific features of the genre of letter writing in post-Mao China. This insight cautions against making too definitive interpretations about people’s narratives as evidence of an internalization of dominant ideologies or as the productive effects of categories of neoliberal government.

Having highlighted that migrant workers may well carry out specific performances when they write letters to magazines does not mean that some elements that have been identified as being part of the hegemonic framework and which were pervasive within migrant workers’ writings should be considered as mobilized solely as part of a strategic representation. The point I want to make here is precisely that some of these elements that are part of the hegemonic public transcript are core social values and are circulating widely within society and may help migrant workers give meanings to their experiences in specific circumstances. Some of these core values were found within the interviews I carried out or in discussions that migrant workers had together. But most often these values were balanced or even contradicted by other elements and they did not provide monocausal explanations of social stratification. Here again, I would say that it is because the interviews were in-depth and carried out in a rather flexible way that it is possible to pin-point both points of similarities and of departure between the hegemonic public transcript and migrant workers’ narratives mediated by interviews and discussions. I found one particularly speaking illustration of this in an in-depth interview with a migrant worker. As I asked him why he had left the first factory he had been working in, he replied:

⁴⁸¹ Fieldwork notes, Shenzhen, January 2006.

“One of the reasons was that I did not have enough space to develop myself. Our Japanese boss was fine however, he was going on well with us laborers (...) But I thought that I could not remain an ordinary worker in this factory. I could not fulfil myself” (我没有发展空间 (...) 不能体现我个人的价值 Wo meiyou fazhan kongjian (...) bu neng tixian wo geren de jiazhi).

As it was highlighted in chapter 4, it happened quite often in the nineties that migrant workers who felt dissatisfied with their condition in a factory would decide to quit this factory. It is interesting though to note that in this fragment, he first highlighted the impossibility to fulfil himself and raise upon the social ladder. Later, we learn that another reason why he had decided to leave that factory was that he had fallen in love with a girl and that it had turned out to be a failure. Later again, he told me that the main reason for his departure was that his boss was angry at him because he had helped an injured worker write a letter of complaint to the local newspaper and local government. This, he said, was the main reason why he had left. If I had not examined an entire section of the interview, I could well have been misled by taking the “self-fulfilment” argument as an evidence of confirmation of the hegemonic public transcript.

On the whole, migrant workers stressed a variety of elements in their explanation of social mobility such as social relations, chance, the kinds of job performed and the kind of mobility it allows, familial and hometow background, etc. When I asked them to talk about the importance of being willing to study new knowledge or techniques, all of them of course recognized that it was important to study such techniques, but that the will to do so was often far from a sufficient condition. One of my informant explained that most people just don't have the time to study by themselves since they labor for more than 12 hours every day. He himself used to work in a factory more than 12 hours a day. It was only when he changed to another factory where he only worked 8 hours a day that he could find the time to read and write. Another informant reflected upon the importance of strong will and of studying techniques this way:

“To make efforts is not sufficient, this is the basic ground for trying to become successful. It may be that one will get eaten anyway. This is complex, society is complex. There is also chance which is linked rather to your life and opportunities, but there are many other factors. Again, to study techniques can help, but it is not enough. Zhao said that in 1996 when he studied some techniques, but this did not change his fate. He just had longer teeth...”⁴⁸².

⁴⁸² Fieldwork notes, Foshan, January 2006. Jacka notes that some of the female migrants she has interviewed in Beijing, after having studied for many years while working, held that self-education through night classes had not helped them whatsoever to raise on the social ladder.

In the hereafter fragment, the rhetoric of being able to catch opportunities and the idea that the South is a fair environment are qualified by the fact that many people are doing their best but are still unable to improve their situation. The last two sentences of this fragment are a very straightforward acknowledgment of the fact that you have no choice but to be able to adapt to the environment, otherwise you will get eliminated:

“Those who have been able to seize the opportunities will tell you that the South is fair. But there are many people who keep trying and are still failing. People have to adapt to society and not the opposite⁴⁸³. If a person can not adapt, he is eliminated”.

Because of the precariousness of their condition, migrant workers are those within society who are most aware of the merciless competition which characterizes the society they live in. They are most aware that they have to do as much as they can to improve their lot or simply guarantee subsistence. I once had three of my informants read a fragment of a “World of dagong” editorial that summoned migrant workers to work hard and conscientiously and that said that only those who keep going forward deserve to be admired, while the weak ones will be eliminated. Their respective reactions need to be highlighted. One of them just said to me “Let’s not bother about that !” (不管它了 bu guan ta le !) and wanted to go on talking about their own life, he had nothing else to say about the article. The second informant said to me “Well, that’s obvious, it has to be like this. If you don’t have that, then you will not be able to adapt”. The third informant shouted angrily saying that “this is bullshit , who does not know that you have to work conscientiously? I have always opposed these sorts of recommendations. If society goes forward, I have to go in that direction too, otherwise I will go backward”⁴⁸⁴. When they describe the kind of society they live in, the “fair competition” sponsored in the Shenzhen mainstream press and in Shenzhen spiritual civilization work, which provides everyone who is willing to work hard with opportunities could turn into a jungle. To quote the words of a scrap collector whom I met at an informal meal:

⁴⁸³ Jacka explained in the case of migrant clubs which she studied in Beijing that a psychological counsellor who was taking part to meetings with migrant workers at the club stressed precisely this very idea: “Some people decide that their environment does not suit them. In fact, that is the wrong way of looking at things. You must look for a way to adapt to you environment, not the other way around” . Jacka, 2006, p. 77.

⁴⁸⁴ Another informant assimilated dagong to “waging a war”, he said: “To dagong is to wage a war! You have to work at least as much as or harder than other people”. Fieldwork notes, January 2006, Guangzhou.

“We live in a jungle (NB: I ask him to make it clearer). A society where the strongest crushes the weakest. If you are weaker than me, I eat you!” (一个弱由强食的社会。你比我弱，我就把你吃掉！ Yi ge ruo you qiang shi de shehui. Ni bi wo ruo, wo jiu ba ni chidiao !)⁴⁸⁵.

Another informant used a similar image of being eaten or eating other people:

“(…) I see our society just like a big sea, with tall waves and a calm ground. But behind this quiet bottom, a small fish could be eaten by a bigger fish and nobody would think this could happen. On the surface, the waves can make you climb very quickly, but you can as well get down very rapidly. If a fish wants to become bigger, it has to learn how to avoid being eaten and become capable of eating other fishes. Then he will be successful”.

The above-quoted fragments hint at the centrality of some values that are part of the dominant public transcript of *dagong*. Looked at through the prism of the experiences of migrant workers, they appear to shed a crude light on the dynamics of Chinese society. In this sense, I follow Bertaux for whom human experiences are worth studying because they are concrete, “because it is the experience of contradictions, of the uncertainties of struggle, of praxis, of history, to take it seriously is to place oneself in a position to apprehend not only social relations (...) but also their dynamics, or better their dialectics” (Bertaux, 1980, p. 221).

In the next section, I shall examine the second mode of articulation between the hegemonic public transcript and migrant workers’ narratives. I will demonstrate how processes of euphemisation and concealment⁴⁸⁶ manifested through the dominant discourse on migrant workers and “the South” may be contested. I argue that this contestation forms part of a struggle to fix the meaning of “*dagong*”.

10.2.2 *The second mode : « reversed echo » ?*

I call this mode “reversed echo” as it may be conceived of as a reaction to the definitely optimistic and sometimes triumphalist dimension of the hegemonic public transcript on the South and on migrant workers’ position within society. We have highlighted that within the hegemonic public transcript, conscientious and relentless efforts and sacrifices entailed being

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁶ James C. Scott identifies “euphemisation” and “concealment” as two of the four major manifestations of the public transcript, along with “affirmation” and “unanimity”. Scott, 1990, pp. 45-63.

rewarded (回报 huibao) and meant having a sense of pride and of belonging to the South and to Shenzhen. In many tales that, I argue, belong to the second narrative mode, these narrative structures and frameworks of the public transcript are questioned by pointing at how much what migrant workers experience in their daily life stands far from these dominant representations. Obviously, one may not ascertain that these narratives are reactions to the hegemonic frameworks. Still, at the minimum, we can infer that these representations are circulating sufficiently widely within society through a variety of channels to constitute a repertoire among which migrant workers may draw or engage with.

I will hereafter provide a detailed examination of a text which characterizes neatly the main features of this narrative mode. Once this is done, I will examine further one important category of this narrative mode. The text was written by a 25 year-old migrant worker hailing from Hezhou in Sichuan province. In his introduction, he starts by saying that he is looking for a better job and hopes to become befriended with other migrant workers who, he says, must “surely be in the same situation as me”. He also writes that he hopes to meet the person he has been dreaming of and that he wants to “end this lonely, sad and tasteless life as a single person”. He wishes that all workers be able “to realise their dreams and that the magazine will become more and more successful”. He accompanies his text with a “personal file” (个人档案 geren dangan) that includes his photograph, his area of origin and his age. His text is called “The single love song: the song of dagong”. Let us look hereunder at the main sections of the song:

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

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

There are so many workers, but only a few are happy. They know nothing but suffering. They have offered and paid their best years of youth, but there are only a few fruits (他们奉献了付出了美好的青春 tamen fengxian le fuchu le meihao qingchun).

For money, they are wandering about. It is already a long time since they tasted enough of the bitterness of dagong. Among the workers, one finds lost people all around, one can not even find a couple of them who manage to fulfil their ideals. Their burden is getting heavier and heavier, the price we pay is getting higher and higher. Each worker needs to be clear about this: 'dagong' means to be unafraid of suffering. (吃够了打工的苦 chigou le dagong de ku)

(Refrain)

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

(Refrain)

Sad people are so numerous, I have to go through this with courage. One ought not miss the opportunities, having paid, having lost one's best years of spring [youth] and to sigh with regret. This sad melody of 'dagong', this sincere song of suffering and sadness, who will come sing it with me? Ah...(伤心的人那么多, 我应该勇敢的过, 不要错过了机会 Shangxin de ren name duo, wo yinggai yonggan de guo, buyao cuoguo le jihui (...))”



失落的人到处有，实现理想的没有几个，负担越来越
 重，付出越来越多，每一个打工的人得看透，打工就
 别怕吃苦，找一份轻松的理想的钱多的钱高的工
 来告别贫困，一份有权的有位的有名的有利的工来
 提高身份，打工的人那么多，有钱的没有几个，因
 为付出了辛苦，奉献了美好青春失去的太多，哦……
 找一份轻松的理想的钱多的钱高的工来告
 别贫困，一份有权的有位的有名的有利的工来提高
 身份，伤心的人那么多，我应该勇敢地过，不要错过
 过，失去了付出了美好青春而后再嗟吧，这首真心
 的痛心的伤心的打工悲歌，请与我来和，哦……

It is indeed tempting to conceive this text as a *reversed echo* of the optimistic and often celebratory rhetoric about Shenzhen, the South, migrant workers and their contribution to the economic development of the region that has been highlighted above. Let us first note the contrast repeated several times in the song between *those who are rich, who succeed, who are happy and who are able to fulfil their ideals* on the one hand and on the other hand, those like himself, who fail to do so and are left with *the bitterness of dagong*. Secondly, the author of this song emphasises several times the contribution of migrant workers, which he contrasts with the fact that they did not get much fruit out of this contribution. As was shown in chapter 8, the steadiness of migrant workers and their contribution to economic development and local prosperity have been praised repeatedly throughout the nineties in the Shenzhen press as well as reportage literature. Regarding this notion of contribution, it is worth emphasizing that in the “Song of dagong”, the author uses the exact expression “to offer one’s best years of youth” (奉献青春 fengxian qingchun) to describe the contribution he and migrant workers have made. I would argue that in the “The song of dagong”, the author’s use of the expression “to offer one’s best years of youth” is an expression of disillusion or despair tainted with irony. Let us consider James C. Scott’s argument that “practices of domination and exploitation typically generate the insults and slights to human dignity that in turn foster a hidden transcript of indignation” as well as the idea that it is possible that the subordinates voluntarily strengthen the stereotypes imposed by the dominant,

and that such stereotypes may be both conceived of as a form of oppression, or in this specific case as a kind of epistemic violence, as well as a resource for the subordinates. According to Scott, the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate is a dialogue in which the language of this dialogue “will invariably borrow heavily from the terms of the dominant ideology prevailing in the public transcript”(Scott, 1990, pp. 35-36, 103). In my interactions with migrant workers, I have *never* come across the use of the expression “to offer one’s youth” or even the notion of contribution or sacrifice for the zone, for a company or for collective interest, except on one occasion when a migrant worker told me with much humour that they [migrant workers] were “making their contribution to the environment” by cycling as they could not afford to buy motorcycles. By using an element of the dominant discourse on migrant workers and the South, I suggest that the author of this text is reacting at an epistemic violence caused by a discourse that celebrates success, prosperity and local economic development. I argue that this author contrasts his yearning for greater stability and social mobility, decent working conditions and revenues with a rhetoric that euphemises the precariousness and the highly contradictory dimensions of their existence.

It has been observed elsewhere how much migrant workers’ very bodies were marked by their harsh working conditions in the Pearl River Delta (Pun Ngai, 2002, pp. 341-348). The body of unpublished letters under scrutiny is marked by an overall weighty feeling of “suffering applied to the bodies” of authors⁴⁸⁷. We find many instances of *bodies that have been exhausted and injured*. In one text, the idea of sacrificing one’s youth and being rewarded in return turns into sacrificing one part of the author’s body. In this article, the author raises a number of issues that all point to the subordinate status of migrant workers in the factory in a rather direct way. While in many articles, the value of youth that ought to be used as well as possible in the South is celebrated, he writes on the contrary:

“Excessive exhaustion threatens our health, it has even destroyed our young life (...) In Dongguan, being forced to work overtime until three and a half in the morning is just ordinary stuff. The next day at 7 o’clock in the morning you have to get back to work” (过度的劳累威胁着我们的健康，甚至捣毁了我们年轻的生命 (...) Guodu de laolei weixie zhe women de jiankang, shenzhi daohui le women nianqing de shengming (...)).

Observing that most people do not want to work so much overtime, he stresses that accidents at work are frequent and gives the example of two workers who have been “sacrificed” because of overtime work:

⁴⁸⁷ I am grateful to Guy Massart for highlighting this point to me.

“Not so long ago, a young worker from Guangdong has offered respectfully his right arm to his boss (...) Over here, the calls for justice are considered attitudes that go against the regulations” (有个广东籍青年不久前为老板奉献了一条右臂 (...) You ge Guangdongji qingniqn bujiu qian wei laoban fengxian le yi tiao you bi (...))⁴⁸⁸.

What this author is denouncing points to what the scientific literature on factory work in the Pearl River Delta has shown for more than a decade: the subordinate status of migrant workers within and outside factories. Let us observe that some of the criticisms made by the author, may, I argue, be considered as echoing and questioning core elements of the dominant public transcript. The author notes that migrant workers may never express any resentment about their condition in factories. As we have seen, both in the Shenzhen mainstream press and in migrant workers magazines, it is emphasized repeatedly that it is of no use to “express resentment and have regrets”, and that one had better do one’s best to study techniques and knowledge. A central category in the “reversed echo” narrative mode is that of the sacrifice and painful efforts that are *not* rewarded as they should or that do no pay off at all. Hence it is the link between efforts and success or rewards, which is a very straightforward one in the hegemonic public transcript, that is questioned. That striving, making efforts constantly, showing perseverance are important defining features of *dagong* and of migrant workers’ subjectivities is of course not surprising considering the very harsh work conditions and the precariousness of their stays in cities. But their relation to *dagong* is highly contradictory and is one of “love and hate” (Lee Ching-Kwan, 2002, pp. 70-71) and what is, I suggest, often contested and part of a process of euphemisation of class relations is the idea that efforts and hard work almost invariably lead to self-achievement or social mobility.

One should stress that the category of not having one’s efforts rewarded has been circulating very widely via the press, reportage and scientific literature and has become a core category of discourse used by migrant workers chiefly when denouncing unfair treatment and putting forward claims. In the hereafter table I have gathered a few other examples of this category (see next page please):

⁴⁸⁸ *Wailaigong*, 07/96, “Qing ting women de chenzhong de huxi”, pp. 8-9.

Table 10.11: Unrewarded efforts

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 04/94, “Dagongren lu zai hefang?” , 22-23.</p>	<p>“After having waited for one month when, with my hands trembling, I got this <i>extremely meagre revenue</i> that I had <i>exchanged for more than 10 hours a day of work</i>, at that moment I could not stand any more what destiny had arranged for me. Therefore, no matter what my dagong friends told me, no matter where my road would go, I packed my simple luggage (...) and I stepped on the road ahead that was still frustrating”.</p>	<p>(...) 一天用十多个小时换来的微薄的薪水再也无法忍耐命运对我的安排。于是我不顾朋友的劝阻，也不管今后的路在何方，毅然卷起简单的行李 (...) 踏上那仍然惘然的前方。</p>
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 04/94, « Women bu shi baoshengong », 22-23.</p>	<p>“Shenzhen, this modern city, with all its skyscrapers, all its wide roads (...) At all times, this illustrates its sudden rise and its prosperity. However, <i>today’s Special zone is also soaked with so much sweat and blood of the nation of migrant workers</i> (特区的今天包含着打工一族多少血汗) <i>that they have paid. What have we got for this?</i> What we got is unequal treatment and <i>being discriminated</i>, the tiny dagongzhe that is looked down on by other people. Although most of us are dagongzai and dagongmei come from far away mountainous areas, it is not possible not to say that we are the builders of the Special zone and that we are also the Chinese workers.</p>	<p>(...) 特区的今天又包含着打工一族多少血汗，几多付出...而我们得到的是什么呢？得到的只是不公平待遇和受人的歧视，让人看不起的小小打工者惨无人道 (...) 得不到合理的报酬，扣押身份证，执法犯法威胁或打工人梦人身，财产梦生活水平从根本上得不到合理合法的保障 不可能不说我们不是特区的建设者，不是中国工人。</p>
<p><i>Wailaigong</i>, 07/95, « Tianshang piaozhe yi duo bai yun », 26.</p>	<p>I can not say what I got from this, I have just kept fighting on this earth full of bitterness and where it is hard to find a shelter, going up and down (...) <i>Time has taken away the best years of youth and the illusions of those of the same age as us and it has left behind deeper and more painful frustration</i> (...) I have offered the little blood and sweat that was left in my heart for other people’s city in exchange for this meagre pay”.</p>	<p>(...) 岁月的流逝裁走了我们同年龄的青春和幻想，遗留下更深跟痛的无奈 (...) 为别人的城市奉献心中仅存不多的点滴血和汗，来换取那份廉价的报酬。</p>

Art. ref.	Fragment English	Fragment Chinese
Unpublished letter, n° 32	“We ‘laborers’ have always been called the city’s marginals. <i>Although we are living in the city, although we are making efforts silently, it is as if the city had not accepted us.</i> For instance, the fear of having your residence permit controlled frequently on the street: <i>our efforts are not respected as they should</i> ” ⁴⁸⁹ .	打工人一直被称为城市生活的边缘人。我们虽然生活在城市，默默地努力，但城市似乎并不接纳我们 我们的努力也得不到应有的尊重。
Xu ⁴⁹⁰	“I think that the revenue I get now is not at all proportionate to what I have paid. <i>I did not get what I deserve</i> ”.	(...) 我没有得到我应该得到的。

The “reversed echo” narrative mode is linked to expressions of disillusionment on the part of migrant workers who are facing a situation that often turned out much tougher than what they had expected and heard or read about. For some migrant workers, such as feeling is linked to facing the reality that improving one’s condition will be far harder than what one expected. This feeling is often expressed by the term “wunai” (无奈) which can either be translated by “frustration” or “being at a loss, not knowing what to do or think”. Asked what they meant by “wunai”, migrant workers often referred to being discriminated in other people’s cities because of their status of temporary residents⁴⁹¹. In this case the term “wunai”, as it often refers to institutional factors, allows to put forward criticisms that may bear a political dimension, while we have seen that in other instances when it is associated to the term “jingcai” (精彩) which means “exciting”, it could be conceived as implying depoliticization.

Before turning to the third narrative mode, I want to point to an interaction I observed and for which, I believe, “reversed echo” heading is appropriate. In this interaction, I could observe the confrontation between a resolutely optimistic discourse and a migrant workers’ view of his and peasants’ condition. In the course of this discussion which I observed during a “morning tea”⁴⁹², a journalist’s very optimistic discourse about the lot of a migrant worker was expressed almost like a belief and kept being opposed at this migrant worker’s conception. The journalist kept insisting so as to have his optimistic view about this migrant workers’ lot accepted,

⁴⁸⁹ The end of this text is worth highlighting since the author writes that “as a migrant worker, I do not wish to use formulas such as “Make efforts, struggle” in order to summon everyone. Because we are too tired. I just want to say this to everyone: cherish every single day of this life, cherish what you possess now, that is enough”.

⁴⁹⁰ Fieldwork recordings, Foshan, summer 2001.

⁴⁹¹ Fieldwork notes, Foshan, January 2006.

⁴⁹² The “morning tea” (早茶 zaocha) is a very plentiful breakfast that is typical of South China.

but the migrant worker was holding firm onto his position, always referring to his actual condition and that of his hometown where his parents still lived. Hereunder are some fragments of this discussion⁴⁹³:

The Journalist : “The condition of peasants has improved since agricultural taxes were suppressed last year”.

Zhang: “Even if taxes are diminished or cancelled, the production costs are so high and the cost of health is simply out of reach for peasants”.

The journalist: “Right, but in your hometown, things have changed if you compare with fifteen years ago, right?”

Zhang: “Not necessarily. Take education for instance. In 1985, out of 70 households, I was the only one who managed to reach the exam at senior high school. In 2002, 17 years later, it had not changed! When we had to study English in order to prepare for the exam, our level could not be compared to that of those who hailed from bigger towns. Our teacher could hardly speak English and we did not know how to write the alphabet. I remember when he was writing ‘Japan’ on the blackboard, he had to write 加板 (jiaban) in Chinese so that we could approximately get the pronunciation! It is still like this today! Those responsible for education are bastards!” (我们在学英语的时候，我们那个老师，英语说得很差劲，我们英文字母都不会。我记得，在黑板上写 Japan，还得写加板两个字，这样大概知道这个发音！今天还是没变！那些管教育的就是笨蛋！Women zai xue yingyu de shihou, women na ge laoshi, yingyu shuode hen chajin, women yingwen zimu dou bu hui. Wo jide, zai heiban shang xie Japan, hai dei xie ‘jaiban’ laing ge zi, zheyang dagai zhidao zhe ge fayin! Jintian haishi mei bian! Naxie guan jiaoyu de jiushi bendan!)

The journalist : “But you have changed your fate! There are many other people just like you. Many of them, seeing how successful you have been, will want to try their luck in the South”.

Zhang: “At the end of each month, I have not one single fen left! Look yesterday, more than 200 yuan for sending my son to the hospital after he had been bitten by a rat! My parents, they are the oldest in the village. If they are still alive, it is because I send them money every month”.

In the hereabove dialogue, the resolutely optimistic view is expressed through discourse. In some instances, narratives that belong to the “reversed echo” mode were produced in reaction to concrete objects in the environment that could be associated with state policy and with local prosperity. On one occasion, after we had visited a public park in Guangzhou, a migrant worker questioned me about these tall and magnificent buildings under construction that we were facing:

⁴⁹³ Although I did not record the conversation since it occurred in an informal setting and in an unexpected way, I can still hear the voice of this migrant worker’s reaction at what the journalist was saying. As soon as I got back to my room, I wrote down the dialogues I found most interesting and which struck me most.

“Look at these buildings, who’s going to live there? Who are these for? In my village, I have to pay 8000 yuan for my third child. It’s already three years that I have received the fine notification. Tell me how I can pay this ! It is state policy, but many people can not find this money, they can not take it out, there is nothing to do (...)”⁴⁹⁴

In this fragment, I suggest that this migrant worker is contrasting the lived reality of his hometown with tall buildings that tentatively express in triumphalist tones the state-sponsored discourse about economic development. This argument can be aptly related to the concept of “exhibitory complex” developed by Tony Bennett which “inverts the apparent public significance of the monumental environment to focus on the buildings instead as spectacular representative forms of state power”. This concept reverses Michel Foucault’s disciplinary apparatuses “in seeking to render the forces and principles of order visible to the populace (...)” (Bennett, 1994, p. 126, quoted in Cartier, 2001, p. 241). As Carolyn Cartier argued, through the manifestation of huge office towers, “the state underwrites the accumulation goals of local property development firms. The monumental built environment it creates (...) speaks to the public: wealth, success, world city, leading center of the Asian regional and world economies” (*Ibid.*, pp. 241-242). I suggest now to turn to the third narrative mode.

10.2.3 *The Achilles heel...*

The last narrative mode I wish to examine in this section relates to James C. Scott’s argument about the malleability of the categories of the dominant discourse and the idea that these very categories may be mobilized by subordinate groups and have their meanings changed in order to back the claims or grievances put forward by the subordinates. More precisely, I want to elaborate on James C. Scott’s idea that the “basis of the claim to privilege and power creates (...) the groundwork for a blistering critique of domination on the terms invoked by the elite” and that any “publicly given justification for inequality thus marks out a kind of symbolic Achilles heel where the elite is especially vulnerable” (Scott, 1990, pp. 102-103, 105).

In “The cry of a dagongzai,” a male migrant worker from Hunan Province describes his efforts to get justice after having been beaten up in the factory in which he was working in Dongguan. The author, in his letter of introduction addressed to the editors of the magazine, narrates his endeavours to try to get justice after having been beaten up in the factory he was

⁴⁹⁴ Guangzhou, fieldwork notes, December 2003.

working in. He writes about being turned away repeatedly by several official organs such as the police bureau, the village committee, and the labor and management office. As in many other letters, he goes further than his own experience to raise the situation and condition of migrant workers as a whole.

He explains that after suffering the beating, he almost got fired by his boss and that his workmates suggested he should either take revenge outside the factory or simply swallow his anger and pain. To this advice he replies:

“I can’t do this because I believe that our society is a society of legality, I need to use the law in order to obtain justice and protect my legitimate rights” (我不能这么做因为我相信，我们的社会是法制社会，我要用法律为我伸张正义，维护我的正当权利。Wo bu neng zheme zuo yinwei wo xiangxin, women de shehui shi fazhi shehui, wo yao yong falü wei wo shen zhang zhengyi, weihu wo de zhengdang quanli).

In the next section, the author explains that after having been turned away by several organs including the police bureau, the labor bureau and the village committee, he eventually decides to go back to the police office to be told that his case is “just a minor affair that should not be exaggerated”. Reacting to this statement he writes:

“But police officer comrades, this is exactly because you disdain to care for so many minor affairs and that you do not treat them rapidly that it engenders revenge by a minority of people and eventually they become the tricky criminal cases of your enquiries and certificate controls”.

In the following paragraph, the author explains that he is then dismissed with his salaries unpaid. He writes:

“We, the ‘migrant workers’, while we suffer unfair treatments, while we suffer the deterioration of our environment, is there not a single place where we can call for justice when our person has been violated and when our dignity has been injured? I do not believe it and I do not accept it”(在遭受了厂方的不平等待遇，忍受了生活环境的恶劣化后，难道受到人身的侵犯，人格的侮辱时能讨个说法的地方都没有吗？我不信，我也不服。Zai zaoshou le changfang de bu pingdeng daiyu, renshou le shenghuo huanjing de eliehua hou, nandao shoudao renshen de qinfan, renga de wuru shi neng tao ge shuo fa de difang dou maiyou ma? WO bu xin, wo ye bu fu).

He eventually finds an official of the county government who listens to his plea. He then makes this comment: “At that moment, I was very moved. There are still good officials in our government”. He finally abandons his search for justice, since he needs to find work as soon as possible in order to prepare for his daughter’s future and ensure that she can continue her schooling. He concludes his letter with the hereafter statements:

“Although I did not get a satisfactory end in this struggle, at least the alarm has rung for the employer. We, the ‘migrant workers’ (dagongzhe), shall not retreat, scared by your money and your power. As there is a “truth among the people”, I wish that you treat your employee with benevolence (...) One should not abandon one’s dignity in order to protect one’s rice bowl. One needs to be able to use the law as a weapon in order to protect oneself”((...) 不要为保护饭碗而丧失人格尊严，要懂得用法律武器保护自己。Bu yao wei baohu fanwan er sangshi renge zunyan. Yao dongde yong falü wuqi baohu ziji).

In the ultimate paragraph, the author eventually raises the issue of the attitude of the public authorities towards migrant workers:

“I am also saying to our administrative organs, to the public servants who educate the people: raise the consciousness of legality, carry out your sacred function with probity, great efficiency, raise your sense of responsibility. For these workers who have left their fields and their families, who have their blood and sweat flowing on the production line, and who wipe their tears silently for reform and opening, and for the wealth and power of the country, please do more real, concrete and good things” ((...)为这些背井离乡，；默默地为改革开放，国家富强在生产流水线上流血汗，抹眼泪的打工人，多办一些好事，好事 Wei zhexie bei jing li xiang, momo de wei gaige kaifang, guojia fuqiang zai shengchanxian shang liu xuehan, mo yanlei de dagongren, duo ban yixie shishi, haoshi).

Let us observe first the reference to the concept of “legality” through calls for the protection of the author’s “legitimate rights”. We should note here the centrality of the concept of legality and the rule of law as tenets of the regime’s claim to legitimacy and modernity in the post-Mao era. In addition to this, even though the labor conditions of migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta have not fundamentally improved and in many cases remain appalling, a variety of official, semi-official and un-official organs (labor bureaus, trade unions, legal advisors, NGOs, the media, etc.) have made substantive efforts to better inform migrant workers about their labor

rights and to help them claim such rights. Migrant workers' magazines surely play an important part in calling attention to such issues and they often serve as platforms for migrant workers to express their grievances. In some cases of blatant violations of migrant workers' rights, the media even have intervened to help migrant workers obtain compensations or redress for unfair treatments.

Secondly, it is worth noting here that the author's description of the attitude of the police officers concurs with what many studies on migrant workers in urban China have stressed: urban authorities have required that migrant workers pay a variety of fees in order to be allowed in cities, while providing minimal services to them. These studies show that when problems arise in urban settings, most migrants feel they have no one to turn to for support and often prefer not to go to the police or other officials to solve their problems (Li Qiang, 2003; Wang Chunguang, 1994; Xiang Biao, 2000; Solinger, 1999)⁴⁹⁵. In the last quoted fragment, one may observe the use of key phrases from ideology sponsored by the party-state. These include the emphasis on legality ("raise the consciousness of legality"), and the discourse on making sacrifices for reform and opening (migrant workers who "have their blood and sweat flow on the production line and who wipe their tears silently for reform and opening") as well as national construction and modernization ("wealth and power of the country"). Also included is a reference to a major tenet of Deng Xiaoping's thought, 实事求是 (shishiqiushi) or "look for truth in facts," which in this case encourages officials to adopt a correct and pragmatic attitude and do concrete things for the people. This slogan was first intended to contrast wished-for pragmatic attitudes by officials with Mao-era officials' obsession with ideological factors. In this case, however, looking "for truth in facts" is used to question the way police officers have overlooked the prejudicial treatment of migrant workers.

Articles similar to this above-quoted piece are frequent in migrant workers magazines or in popular newspapers such as *Nanfang Doushibao* (*Southern Metropolitan Daily*). In the hereafter fragment from a migrant workers article, references are made to the founding narratives of the regime such as its rejection of exploitation as this fragment shows:

"The Chinese working class from its beginning has been oppressed by imperialism, feudal forces, and bureaucratism (...) The terrible exploitation it has suffered, as well as their horrendous working conditions and living environment are known by all. But today, the flag of the People's Republic of China has been floating for 45 years on the 9.600.000 square kilometers of sacred soil. The practices of exploitation have

⁴⁹⁵ During my last stay in the Pearl River Delta in the winter 2005-2006, I have been told by several informants, migrant workers and people working with migrant workers in Shenzhen that this feature remained unchanged.

reappeared again on our highly civilized socialist territory (...) The confiscation of our identity cards, the violation of the law by officials, and being threatened are things that happen again and again (...) We also get the flexible labor system. It has been like this for many years, how many people may say a word of justice for us, the working boys and working sisters who are suffering so much (...) We, the migrant workers are an army of laborers that may not be ignored, if there were no working boys and sisters, who would invigorate the economic construction of the Special zone (...) How could a country of socialism with Chinese characteristics be built? (...) I, on the ground of the honour of a Chinese worker and representing all the migrant workers of the Special zone, call today's people (...) to give us more respect and sympathy so that we may build a more prosperous and more powerful Special zone".

中国工人阶级从一产生就身受帝国主义，封建主义和官僚资本主义的三重压迫(...) 今天当中华人民共和国旗帜高高在这神圣的 960 万平方公里的土地飘扬四十五周年的今天，那种人剥削人的手段，再次出现在我们高度文明的社会主义国土上(...) 又有多少人能为我们万分委屈的打工仔，打工妹说句公道话(...) 我们打工者是一支不可忽视的建设大军⁴⁹⁶ (...) 如果没有打工仔打工妹 (...) 又怎么能建设具有中国特色的社会主义国家. Zhongguo gongren jieji cong yi chansheng jiu shen shou diguozhuyi, fengjianzhuyi, guanliao zibenzhuyi de san zhong yapo (...) jitiqn dqng wo Zhonghu renmin gongheguo de qizhi gaogao zai zhe shensheng de 960 wan pingfang gongli de tudi piaoyang sishiwu zhou nian de jintian, na zhong ren boxue ren de shouduan, zaici chuxian zai women gaodu wenming de shehuizhuyi guotu shang(...) you you duoshao ren neng wei women wanfen weiqu de dagongzai, dagongmei shuo ju gongdao hua (...) Women dagongzhe shi yi zhi buke hushi de jianshe dajun (...) ruguo meiyou dagonzai dagongmei (...) you zenme neng jianshe juyou you Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi guojia)⁴⁹⁷.

As we can see, references are made to the pre-1949 period as in this April 1994 article which uses the term “working class”, a rather seldom used category to refer to migrant workers. This article first refers to the pre-1949 situation and the oppression and “terrible exploitation” of the working class by imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism”. This historical reference then allows to draw a parallel between that situation and the condition of migrant workers in post-Mao China. The symbols used to do this are pretty strong since they refer to the flag of the People’s Republic of China and to the notion of socialism with Chinese characteristics. To refer to the migrant workers, the author of this text uses several times the term “worker” (工人 gongren) which is usually used to refer to workers of State-owned-enterprises. Such a usage of the term “gongren” is far from being fortuitous and has on the contrary a strategic function

⁴⁹⁶ It is interesting to note that such militarization of language goes back at least to the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) when one used to talk of the « great army of construction » (建设大军 jianshe dajun), the « great army of laborers » (劳动大军 laodong dajun), the « great army of technicians » (技术大军 jishu dajun).

⁴⁹⁷ *Wailaigong*, 04/94, “Women bu shi baoshengong”, p. 23.

within claim-making, so as to better address rulers and require from them that they take their ideological tenets seriously. While the author of this text strikes at quite sensitive points, he also couched some of his claims in rather prudent and politically correct terms. This is most obvious in the last sentences of this text. I argue that such a framing has strategic aims and signals both challenge and confirmation, as if a balance was to be struck between going on the margins of the public transcript and at the same time confirming its very ground, reassuring rulers as to the fact that core elements of the public transcript had been left untouched. Hence, the texts that belong to this narrative mode as well as the “reversed echo” narrative mode often share a common feature which is that they tend to point to a political void, i.e. the sheer absence of local state organs’ role in protecting migrant workers’ rights or in backing them in their relationship with factory management. In the above-quoted text, the author asked who could “say a word of justice” for them. In other instances, authors who criticize the extremely harsh discipline within foreign-funded factories raise questions such as “why is it that the Taiwanese factory flag is floating on the five-star red flag?”⁴⁹⁸ Many texts indeed raise the issue of migrant workers who have no one to turn to in case of trouble or worse. By pointing to this political absence, I suggest that migrant workers are hinting at an imaginary about what the state should be and how it ought to deal with people. More precisely, I would say that this hints at some fundamental functions of the state. Such functions are related to an idea of the common or collective good⁴⁹⁹, such as the protection of labor rights or the notion of fair treatment in justice for instance.

The replies to such critiques by editors may head in two opposite directions. Either they further denounce and render the initial claim more systematic by stressing for instance the discrepancies between labor regulations and their outright abuse. Or editors’ replies may also take a very different turn. As was hinted at when I touched upon the role of editing practices in guiding or formatting migrant workers’ tales, cases where editors simply defuse migrant workers’ texts by turning what were politically loaded narratives into sheer individual psychology are fairly common too.

The texts belonging to this narrative mode may be read as an illustration of what Kevin O’Brien has termed “rightful resistance” or a kind of political contention that entails “an innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy ‘disloyal’ political and economic elites (...) to apply pressure on those who have failed to live up to some professed ideal (...)” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 32; Lee Chingkwon, 2002, pp. 84-86). The author of this letter requires that the party takes seriously the implications of its rhetoric on sacrifices, rights,

⁴⁹⁸ 08/95, *Wailaigong*, “Dagong ernü dang ziqiang”, p. 19.

⁴⁹⁹ I am grateful to Guy Massart for raising this point to me.

pragmatism, etc. Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, in their work on the complaints sent by migrant workers to the Shenzhen municipality Labor Bureau, show how the quest for a sense of justice among migrant workers is articulated around three major kinds of principles: principles of fundamental justice linked to the human person; fundamental and founding principles of the official ideology; and the 1995 labor legislation (Thireau and Hua Linshan, 2001a, pp. 1283-1312; Thireau and Hua Linshan, 2003, pp. 83-103). Lee writes likewise that, apart from framing their actions in terms of demands for justice, more and more migrant workers resort to labor regulations set up by the state. As she puts it: “These labor regulations and policies offer workers a new cognitive and discursive resource to frame their claims in state-approved idioms” (Lee Chingkwon, 2002, p. 68).

10.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how much the weight of rural constraints were pervasive in migrant workers’ narrations of their experiences of dagong. If in the Shenzhen mainstream press the countryside was constituted monolithically as a place to be rejected, the picture of the countryside expressed by migrant workers was more complex. The rural conditions had a real consistence *as lived experience* in migrant workers’ narratives. The relationship between migrant workers and their families signalled warmth and support on the one hand, but also pressures as to the high expectations that were put on the shoulders of migrant workers. I have singled out that the stress on the need for migrant workers to work as hard and as consciously as possible while they were in the South intersected with a party-state analogous discourse. A related type of discourse permeates the work-place in many factories of the Pearl River Delta (Pun, 1999; Pun 2005; Cen Huang, 1999; Lee Ching-Kwan, 1998; Tan Shen, 2000). Hence, upon concrete conditions of constraints linked to their rural conditions and within a living and work environment which is often marked by instability and precariousness, I argue tentatively that we find here an illustration of strands of discourses which concentrate on migrant workers via three intersecting and self-strengthening sources: the party-state, the work-place and rural families⁵⁰⁰.

⁵⁰⁰ I draw this insight from Pun Ngai who wrote that the female migrant workers were the object of the triple oppression of “global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy”. Pun Ngai, 2005, p. 4. Donald Nonini made a similar argument in his work on the Chinese diaspora by stating that there were three main *regimes of truth and power* which diaspora Chinese were subjected to: the regime of the Chinese family, the regime of the work-place and the regime of the nation-state. Nonini, 1997, pp. 204-205.

In the analysis of how migrant workers explained their decision to leave their village for dagong, I have pointed to processes of reproduction of migration which are occurring at the background of deep historically produced discrepancies between the countryside and cities. I have argued that such processes of reproduction of migration, which some of the migrant workers' narratives shed light on, was backed too by the discourse on the low quality of the rural population. According to this deeply embedded elite urban-centered narrative, one important way to elevate one's quality is via migration, i.e. via learning knowledge and techniques, via relentless efforts. After almost three decades of separation between the countryside and cities, geographic mobility takes on strong cultural meanings, as coming to the city for work also becomes a form of cultural appropriation of ideas and goods related to the city. In such highly social and spatial hierarchization, the city has become an "intense object of desire and urbanity is conceived as an "artefact of popular culture and of consumption" (Schein, 2001, pp. 225, 228). The ways migrant workers represent their hometown, cities as well as how they describe their rationale for migration and their experience of dagong all need to be considered in relation with larger forms of more or less institutionalized knowledge and discourse that impact upon these representations and desires.

The confrontation between the major categories of the dominant public transcript and those used by migrant workers in their narratives showed a complex and ambivalent process of wide circulation and reworking of such categories within migrant workers' narratives⁵⁰¹. I have argued that the various ways in which these categories and narrative structures were used within migrant workers' narratives have been characterized by partial confirmation and accommodation, reversal, and strategic use. I have described three main narrative modes in order to show how the dominant public transcript related to migrant workers' narratives and experiences.

In this chapter, I have highlighted a greater proximity of written narratives to the dominant public transcript than within oral narratives. In order to account for this difference, I have put forward the idea that each type of narrative belonged to a specific genre and entailed its own conditions of production and of reception which had to do with the specific institutional settings of each genre. The idea of people putting up a narrative performance within a particular genre may be aptly related to the conception of hegemony referred to in chapter 3 which entails establishing "a common material and discursive framework". Key in establishing such a framework was the setting of "prescribed forms of procedures" or "prescribed forms for expressing both acceptance and discontent" (Roseberry, 1994, pp. 360-361). Along this line of

⁵⁰¹ A figure gathering the major elements of the articulation between the dominant public transcript of dagong and migrant workers' narratives is included at the end of this conclusion.

argumentation, I have also pointed the role of editors in inducing authors to use patterns or “formulaes to express reality”, as well as to the fact that these authors seemed very much aware of the “rules of the genre” when they were writing texts which they hoped would be published. If we follow the logic of this argument, the notion of people putting up a performance can be taken seriously. These insights have allowed to qualify the argument of the production by the party-state power of a neoliberal subject.

On the whole, in this chapter we have come across two representations of dagong that were often entangled. The first one, characterized by hope, self-confidence, and optimism in the future, depicted young people whose fate depended chiefly upon their individual qualities. The second representation was that of frustration, sometimes despair, indignation, marginality and uncertainty. The first representation can be summed up under the category of “chuang”(闯), which can be translated as “trying one’s luck” or “pathbreaking” and which, as was highlighted, is one of Shenzhen’s defining values. While for the second representation, another term embodies a more complex understanding of dagong, more infused with class relations too. This term is “hun”(混), often used by migrant workers to express instability or the difficulty to nurture plans for the future and which can be translated by “getting by”⁵⁰² (O’Donnel, 2006, p. 19).

We can now turn to the conclusion of this dissertation in which some theoretical and empirical implications of my work will be discussed, as well as the issue of what may be inferred about the re-deployment of the party-state power and about the extent of its effects.

⁵⁰² The informants who were using this term connected it with that of “de guo qie guo”(得过且过) which can mean “to live day by day”.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have documented the three constitutive dimensions of the public transcript. Firstly, the dimension of *material appropriation* has been examined by pointing to the political environment of the Pear River Delta, to the disciplinary regimes of the workplace and to how they impacted upon migrant workers' experiences. Secondly, the “rituals of hierarchy, deference, demonstration of authority” through which *public mastery and subordination* are affirmed have been referred to in my analysis of how the sanwu people have been represented in the Shenzhen mainstream press. Thirdly, I have analysed in greater details the ambivalent patterns of struggles revolving around *how domination and social stratification are justified* in post-Mao China.

The dominant public transcript I have documented throughout this dissertation points to a very intense discursive construction of migrant workers which has allowed for conciliating both a national imaginary that signals homogeneity, stability and control on the one hand with narratives that celebrate flexibility and promotes self-relying and enterprising individuals on the other hand (Ong, 1997, p. 173). We have seen that in the Shenzhen mainstream press, youthful migrant workers embodied a series of values and attitudes which were drawn altogether from the Maoist repertoire, from Chinese tradition, as well as from more market-oriented post-Mao discourses. As such, the construction of the figure of the legitimate migrant worker, along with its “negative Other” the sanwu people, embodies the two pillars of post-Mao China legitimacy: the capacity of the regime to uphold social stability and its ability to sustain sufficient economic growth. The emphasis on social stability was manifested mainly through the depiction of campaigns aimed at cleansing the sanwu people out of Shenzhen. These cleansing campaigns orchestrated by the Shenzhen municipality and Party-state authorities may indeed be seen as forms of affirmation or “theatralization” of the party-state capacity to bring back social order and to allow Shenzhen to resume its race to become a modern international city⁵⁰³. This way, the Party-state is able to show that it treats differently legitimate dwellers, whom we have seen deserve “concern and loving care” (关心和爱护 *guanxin he aihu*), from the sanwu people who have to be treated with severity. It is thereby a defining feature of diacritic power of the state which is affirmed. Within the dominant public transcript, hardworking, disciplined and self-learning migrant workers were praised for their contribution to the outstanding achievements of the Shenzhen special economic zone in terms of economic development and prosperity. If the ideological construction of migrant workers has proved so intensive, it is also because, as I have

⁵⁰³ This public display relates both to state organs' action such as destroying illegal housing, arresting and expelling specific categories of people, *and* to the discursive affirmation of this power by theatralizing its effects.

suggested in the introduction of this dissertation, it is in Shenzhen that the collusion between local officials and investors has taken a most violent form, while at the same time the special zone has been heralded as a harbinger of market socialism for the whole country. The encounter between narratives of the nation and of the market has indeed enabled the expression of a state-sponsored triumphant discourse which has reinvested migrant workers' "blood and sweat" into material achievements such as the built environment, thereby providing them with a sense of identification with the modernization project. Within the dominant public transcript, the inclusion of migrant workers into the Party-state rhetoric of success has on the whole silenced the politico-institutional dimensions of highly exploitative regimes of production. In post-Mao China, global capitalism has indeed been building much of its momentum on the ground of existing political hierarchies (Huchet, 2006). This, I have argued, has been largely euphemized within the dominant public transcript by a pervasive essentialization of people's capacities and bodies.

We have seen that in the dominant public transcript of *dagong*, because they embodied exemplary attitudes of self-reliance, migrant workers had turned into positive poles in contrast with (former) state-owned enterprises employees and workers whose apathy and choosy attitude on the labor market were chastised. In this sense, the dominant public transcript of *dagong* actually points to and can even be thought of as magnifying one of the most important socio-economic and political transformation being carried out by the post-Mao China leadership: the dramatic lowering of the social and political status of state-owned enterprises workers and, along with this change, the modification of the nature of the previously privileged relationship the party-state nurtured with this social category. The Chinese state is indeed requiring more and more from all social categories to become self-reliant and find ways to provide themselves for their own well-being. Migrant workers, because of their rural status and because they may more easily be associated with rising on the social ladder, may therefore turn into positive and somehow precursory icons of self-reliance precisely because the state has historically never conceived providing food, employment or welfare to rural people as one of its duty. We have seen indeed that for many migrant workers it was self-evident that they had to rely solely on their own efforts to hopefully fare better. Therefore, by studying the public transcript of migrant workers in Shenzhen, I have shed some light on the very heart of modes of legitimation which include a process of re-shuffling of a complex economy of representations which seeks to accommodate with renewed geographical and social mobility, as well as for the great diversification of forms of labor in post-Mao China. If in today's China the nature of party-state's relationship with (former) state-owned enterprises workers still remains more privileged than its

relationship with migrant workers⁵⁰⁴, I have hinted at the fact that in some cases former state-owned enterprises workers were found to be doing some of the jobs usually performed by migrant workers. What forms will the new figures of the “laborer” take in the years to come as China is becoming more and more integrated into the world economy? What will be the nature of their relationships with the Party-state and how will they account for social mobility and social stratification?

The analysis of the public transcript of migrant workers has shown that the emphasis on exemplary behaviors, either through the Shenzhen mainstream press “blood and sacrifice” types of models or through the magazines’ more everyday and more operational kinds of exemplary figures, constituted a point of convergence between the two types of medias. They both stress a series of social norms and the need to “educate people”. But defining the core categories of the dominant public transcript of migrant workers in the Shenzhen mainstream press has allowed in addition to show that some of these categories were circulating pervasively within migrant workers’ narratives. I have documented three ways of how these elements were relating to migrant workers’ narratives. We have seen that the first narrative mode signaled an ambivalent confirmation of the narrative structures of the dominant public transcript. The second narrative mode hinted at a kind of ironic and somewhat disillusioned reaction to resolutely optimistic or triumphalist discourses. In the third mode, some of the rhetoric reminiscent of the Mao-era or other elements were mobilized by migrant workers in order to make some of their claims.

In which respect can these insights inform the issue of the modalities of Party-state power at work in post-Mao China? To inform this issue the methodological choice of confronting the three bodies of texts because of their being differently constrained ideologically has proved particularly valuable. Letter-writing may indeed be thought of as a form of Party-monitored narrative technique which aims at making so that migrant workers organize their experiences of *dagong* *within* an approved discursive framework. Tilly had asked, we have seen in chapter 3, in which respect specific forms of domination were likely to generate more or less conformity and “suppression of anger (...)” (Tilly, 1991, pp. 597-598). In the case of migrant workers’ writing practices, the point is rather to organize and frame anger, instead of suppressing it, along with hopes, ideals, and frustration, so as to have migrant workers talk and interpret their experience within the hegemonic framework. Remaining within the limits of this framework though, was far from precluding contentions on trying to stretch the limits of this framework or public transcript. One should note however that within this re-working process, it was the *very categories* of the dominant discourse that were used by migrant authors, rarely alternative ones.

⁵⁰⁴ In the case of state-owned enterprises, this relationship may vary greatly since there are various degrees of unemployment and workers keep different kinds of relationships with their (former) work units.

Hence in this “ideological debate about justice and dignity” migrant workers’ narratives are checked by power relations which writing to a migrant magazine entail (Scott, 1990, p. 89). The issue of migrant workers’ rights is discussed largely in migrant workers’ magazines for instance, but to a certain extent preferably by using specific terms in the debate. The categories that once were central in the party-sponsored “hegemonic interpretation of experience” and that were rather forcefully imposed on people are to be avoided in post-Mao China. This explains partly the fact that labor issues, and more specifically forms of labor such as dagong, are so touchy nowadays, and this also accounts for the attempts by the party-state to fix the meaning of this category and contain contention around it within specific limits.

Moreover, writing to and reading migrant workers’ magazines provide an arena for a *highly recursive circulation*, an engagement, a re-working and sometimes a reversal of a set of core values and narratives structures. By narrating their dagong experience, migrant workers seem at the minimum to engage with the dominant mode of rationalization of success and failure; it was indeed hard to find narratives that would not in a way or another refer to it. Dagong has turned into a point of focalization and of reverberation of discourses on Chinese society and processes of social stratification. There is indeed a great resonance, a strong intertextuality between the various channels through which dagong is narrated in relation with what Shenzhen and the South represent. Dagong has become an object that is constituted and re-constituted repeatedly and from which one may locate oneself in relation with a series of norms and values a migrant worker ought to nurture. Throughout this dissertation, I have highlighted the strong profusion of discourses, symbols, and images on *the South* and on the fact that it offers opportunities for individuals not only in terms of work but also in terms of consumption. This profusion, constructed in contrast with attributing a low value to the countryside within the geographical and social hierarchy of post-Mao China, has been constituted as an important point of articulation *and* contention between the party-state sponsored discourse on individual capacities and migrant workers’ ways to make sense of their hopes, desires, sufferings and frustrations. To substantiate this point, I wish to quote one final fragment from one of my regular informants who in chapter 9 had associated dagong with a stinking mouth. In this fragment, one can almost perceive the reverberating power of discourses on the South as if its constituting elements were colliding against one another, calling forth core notions of the hegemonic framework of dagong:

“If there is an opportunity in a factory, he will try his chance (...) With so many opportunities, it is easy to develop oneself, it will certainly be possible to develop oneself. If he goes backward, that’s not called development, is it? If opportunities are numerous, he can only but go forward, go forward! Then he will be able to develop himself. With development it will be possible to transform everything, to transform my

destiny. It is possible to transform, to transform (...) If I can transform, then I have got hopes, I am full of hopes for my future. Therefore my future is full of sun rays” (在一家工厂有了个好机会，他会去闯一下(...) 有了这么多机会就容易发展了(...) 他要往后退，那就不叫发展，对吧？机会多他只能往前走，往前走(...) 有了发展就可以改变一切，改变我的命运(...) 我对我的前途充满希望。我的前途就充满着阳光 Zheli, jihui hen duo. Zai jiaxiang mei zheme duo jihui (...) Zai yi jia gongchang you le ge hao jihui, ta hui qu chuang yixia (...) You le zheme duo jihui jiu rongyi fazhan le (...) Tao yao wang hou tui, na jiu bu jiao fazhan, dui ba? Jihui duo, ta zhi neng wang qian jin, wang qian jin! (...) You le fazhan jiu keyi gaibian yiqie, gaibian wo de mingyun (...) Wo dui wo de qiantu chongman xiwang. Wo de qiantu jiu chongman zhe yangguang)⁵⁰⁵.

The reason why the South allows for this articulation is that it embodies the strongly embedded but far from unchallenged idea that it implies hopes into the possibility for people to change their condition. This idea, while it rests on the strong social mobility that characterizes post-Mao China, is often contested since it silences the various institutional obstacles and power configurations which render the improvement of migrant workers' condition in many cases rather uncertain. Still, we are dealing here with very complex forms of power which rely on the notion of *individual emancipation* within a context in which economic development is actively constituted as an ideological field. Part of this power relies too on the fact that migration itself is a phenomenon that is linked intrinsically to the notion of emancipation. Hence, the difficulty when looking at such forms of “emancipatory power” is that it works on people's common sense and practical categories. This explains why it entails such lively and contested patterns of struggle. Within this dissertation, I have touched upon — in a still rather limited way though — a dual, entangled and mutually constitutive process by which people are adopting some of the Party-state categories *and* through which the state transforms its modes of action by incorporating society's categories (Migdal, 1994, p. 13). The way I have informed this process by stressing that the so-intensely constructed idea of the South entailed the notion of *hope for a change in one's condition* informs the nature of how today's legitimacy in post-Mao China is working. More precisely, it points to a form of legitimacy which is grounded chiefly on “rhetorics of transition” which remain unclear to their content but which are “laden with a wide range of hopes for the future”. Through its modernization project and its widely stated aim of improving the country's prosperity and people's standards of living, the Party-state's legitimacy is working rhetorically by maintaining and nurturing the idea that people can improve their conditions in the future. (Latham, 2002, pp. 230-231). The kind of discursive struggles I have documented around dagong

⁵⁰⁵ Fieldwork recordings, Foshan, August 2001.

and around the South can be seen as an instantiation of such a rhetorically grounded legitimization process.

Finally, the patterns of struggle and accommodation I have documented in this dissertation illustrate a specific dimension of the complex nature of state-society relationship in post-Mao China, i.e. one characterized by an unstable logic of “testing the limits” (Liu Xiaobo, 2006) in which contention and change are often balanced by co-optation and compromises. Contrarily to the idea often read that rural people’s consciousness of legality and justice need to be awakened, my work shows that migrant workers nurture a strong sense of the political constraints that impinge on their lives. Since 2003, within the framework of the “put the people at the centre” (以人为本 *yi ren wei ben*) rhetoric and the renewed official emphasis on “legality” (法制 *fazhi*), the central government has shown greater concern for the lot of peasants and of migrant workers. Will migrant workers be able to make use of these new elements of official discourse and regulations in order not only to better protect their rights but also more fundamentally to somehow modify the balance of power which makes that they remain at the lowest rung of society? Could practices such as letter writing or the greater popularization of the use of internet help migrant workers put forward their claims more forcefully by questioning the ruling elite on the very enactment of the principles upon which their rule is grounded? Or will it be so that, as long as long as the power configurations which combine both local political forces and powerful constraints linked to global capitalism remain unchanged, these claims will become “ritualized” and thereby void of any real power? To hopefully examine such questions in the future, one would need to provide explanatory frameworks that would allow to better study how the kinds of “infrapolitics” I have documented in this dissertation are linked to more confrontational forms of struggles, including more violent ones such as those which characterize too state-society relationships in today’s China.

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Annex 1: List of Shenzhen and Guangdong province mainstream press newspapers and their abbreviations

Shenzhen Fazhobao (Shenzhen Legality Daily)

SFB

Shenzhen Tequbao (Shenzhen Special Zone daily)

STQB

Shenzhen Wanbao (Evening of Shenzhen)

SWB

Nanfang ribao (Southern Daily)

NFRB

Annex 2: List of persons met during the fieldwork preparatory phase

- Mr. Chen Huailin, Department of journalism, Chinese University of Hong Kong ;
- Mr. Zhang Li, Geographer, Chinese University of Hong Kong;
- Mss. Pun Ngai, anthropologist, Hong Kong University ;
- Mr. Zhu Jiangang, sociologist, Ph.D. candidate at Beijing University;
- M. Qian Gang, former chief editor of *Nanfang Zhoumo* (Southern Week-end);
- M. Zhou Chongxian, writer and journalist at *Nanhai ribao* (Nanhai daily);

Annex 3: Main items discussed during this first series of in-depth interviews from July 10th to August 25th 2001

First introductory descriptive questions:

- self-introduction
- type of work performed, for how long;

Life in the hometown before migration

- geographic localisation, population, etc.;
- simple description of village life, types of activities;
- description of interviewee's family;
- type of activity performed by the interviewee in the village;
- schooling background of the interviewee.

Migration decision

- proportion of those who left the village, when it first started;
- social comment on those who had left the village;
- when and how the interviewee made the decision to leave the village;
- how the family and friends considered this decision, etc.

The first journey

- preparations before departure;
- how the journey was financed;
- reasons for choice of destination (and with whom);
- description of the first journey

Arriving at destination

- first impressions upon arrival
- looking for work;
- first contacts;
- lodging;
- administrative procedures

Describing dagong

- description of different dagong experiences (various cities and types of work, etc.) ;
- factory work and other kinds of work;
- difference with hometown work;
- what the interviewee likes or dislikes in dagong;
- first salary;
- expenses and remittances;
- their definition of dagong.

Relationships

- with other migrant workers (including tongxiang)
- importance of *tongxiang* relationship;
- with locals (bendiren)
- importance of developing friendship;
- difference between relationship at home and in cities;
- relationship within and outside the factory;
- with relatives;

A Series of specific questions which emerged during the process of interviewing and observation (plans for the future, importance of household registration, major values nurtured to account for social mobility, description of hometown and dagong with five words, etc.) were asked as well during the interviews.

