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## 9 Struggling around the politics of recognition

The formation of communities of interpretations and of emotions among a collective of migrant workers in twenty-first century China

*Eric Florence*

My life is like a book that's dreadful to read—fate has made its cover very messy. I am from Xiangyang in Hubei, and started to do private teaching at the local village school when I was 12. If I wouldn't have left, I would have continued to teach and would have become a proper teacher. But I couldn't bear to stay in the countryside and view the sky from the bottom of the well, so I came to Beijing. I wanted to see the world. I was 20 years old at the time.

(Essay by Fan Yusu)

23 In late April 2017, a short essay by Fan, a 44-year-old female rural migrant  
24 worker, went viral on Chinese social media, being shared thousands of times on  
25 WeChat and engendering intense debates on the author's identity, on the liter-  
26 ary quality of her essay, and on the realities that she depicts in this brief  
27 piece.<sup>1</sup> This case is just one example of the increasing participation of rural  
28 migrant workers in the cultural politics of self-representation and being repres-  
29 ented, a politics that, with the digital turn, has taken more visual forms (Sun,  
30 2012, 2013a, 2013b). While, for more than a decade, rural migrant workers had  
31 virtually no venues to express themselves publicly and were on the whole per-  
32 ceived as a threat to urban order, being turned into "the other" through what  
33 Zhang Li has termed three overlapping processes of "unifying and homogeniz-  
34 ing"; "dehistoricizing and dehumanizing," and "abnormalizing" (Zhang, 2001:  
35 28–46). At that time, rural migrant workers also often stood for urbanites'  
36 anxiety about the morally and socially disturbing effects of markets on urban  
37 social order (Florence, 2006; Solinger, 1999). From the mid-1990s on however,  
38 a gradual shift in representation of rural workers occurred: from homogenized  
39 and voiceless masses toward an emphasis on smaller groups of people and on  
40 individuals. This shift took place in South China's Pearl River Delta earlier  
41 than in other regions of China as the migrant workers in the Delta's major  
42 Eastern cities such as Shenzhen or Dongguan started to outnumber the perma-  
43 nent urban dwellers; and as the inflow of chiefly foreign capital went unabated.  
44 Hence, the availability of cheap and flexible, predominantly female, rural  
45 migrant workers became ever more important for local authorities. The repre-  
46 sentational shift was also the result of the emergence of a body of Chinese

social sciences literature, which complemented and questioned the predominant “law and order” paradigm by focusing more on individuals and on their rights (Xiang and Tan, 2005). Moreover, from the mid-1990s on, rural workers’ experience of toiling outside their hometown became accessible to the public through an increasing number of platforms such as radio, newspapers and magazines, films, etc.) and from the beginning of the twenty-first century via the Internet and social media.

While the cultural politics of being represented and representing oneself of rural migrant labor has been the object of scientific research (see Florence 2006, 2013, 2017; Jacka 2006; Qiu 2009; Sun 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), how grassroots labor-related organizations mediate workers’ experience and how this translates to the politics of voice and recognition has received little academic attention.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I endeavor to explore how a grassroots collective of mostly young rural workers engage in the constitution of mediation arrangements to produce “various spatial scales of visibility of their actions, of their claims and of their identity” (Bleil, 2005). Therefore, the question I am interested in is not so much what spaces are invested by collectives of migrant youth, but rather to focus on a range of organizational practices and mediation processes through which collectives of workers shape spaces of interactions, of engagements, of shared emotions and collective performances, both physical and virtual.<sup>3</sup> As to “youth” among rural migrant workers, let us note first that this latter widely encompassing category is made of a majority of young people. Second, one should note the centrality of the category of “youth” (*qingchun* 青春) within the cultural politics of rural workers. In mainstream, elite, and official narratives, rural workers’ youth is often described as a reservoir of social energy that has to be shaped and invested into the economic development and prosperity of cities (Florence, 2017). Expressions related to youth, as will be underlined hereafter, are also recurrent in rural workers’ own depictions of their experiences of toiling in cities and factories, but they are so predominantly to express uncertain struggles around aspirations for social mobility, or feelings of disillusion and resentment. Young rural migrant workers are actually often the objects of pedagogic narratives originating from their families and from urban and party-state elites (Pun, 2016). As to the cultural life of rural migrant workers, it has often been described as poor if not non-existent, especially so in the 1980s and 1990s, and those who engage in culture-related activities or work for various types of social organizations are on the whole a minority (Sun, 2014). It is furthermore difficult to assess how many people may be impacted by the action of grassroots organizations such as the one we study in this chapter.

Following Martin, I conceive of cultural practices as embodied practices linked to social hierarchies and as fundamentally marked by ambivalence, polysemy, and, most prominently as to this chapter, as carrying the potential to foster pleasure and connect people, as well as to embody emotions (Martin, 2000). Hence, the question arises: how do grassroots collectives of rural workers foster the constitution of communities of “interpretation and emotion” (Chartier, 1989)? To tackle this question, I rely on the concept of “mediation” as defined

1 by Voiroi for whom mediation processes are at the heart of symbolic and  
2 material struggles for representation and for definitions of social orders (Voiroi,  
3 2005: 20, 56–57). More precisely, I am interested in mediation or arrangements  
4 of mediation in that they enable to “bridge meaning with organizations and  
5 people” (ibid.). The object of research in this chapter is more organizational than  
6 semantic. Instead of focusing on peoples’ consciousness or subjectivities, I draw  
7 from De Nora’s concept of “aesthetic agency” to look at how “the production of  
8 knowledge, talk, organizational regimes, and embodied practice is seen to  
9 emerge from within a matrix of social relations and things” and is closely related  
10 to embodiment and materiality (Witkin and De Nora, 1997).

11 The sources for this chapter comprise the author’s own fieldwork notes and  
12 observation of several workers’ collectives from 2011 to the present in Beijing  
13 and Shenzhen. In addition to scholarly sources on migrant workers in China,  
14 other sources include unpublished material, DVDs, and CDs gathered during  
15 fieldwork stays in Beijing. Exchanges and observations sourced from WeChat  
16 groups are used as additional material to the more traditional sources used in this  
17 chapter.

18 In the following sections, I first set the background of labor NGOs in post-  
19 Mao China and delve upon the genealogy of the grassroots collective “Migrant  
20 Workers’ Home.” I then show how the collective’s identity has been built con-  
21 comitantly with the claims it has been making and the social problems it has  
22 tried to make visible. In the third section, I document how the combination of a  
23 workers’ collective of locally organized initiatives on the one hand and larger-  
24 scale events on the other hand constitute arrangements of different scales of  
25 mediation which contribute to making the collective’s claims, identity, and  
26 actions visible.

### 27 28 **“Workers’ home”** 29

30 Even though at present more than 100 labor-related NGOs exist in China, it was  
31 only in the 1990s that the first few organizations were founded in Shenzhen and  
32 Beijing. These organizations focused chiefly on raising public awareness  
33 regarding the exploitative work conditions experienced by rural migrant  
34 workers. One had to wait until the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-  
35 first century to see the number of labor-related NGOs flourish. This period coin-  
36 cided with the advent of the second generation of rural migrant workers whose  
37 class-consciousness, experience of resentment, and knowledge of their rights  
38 were more pronounced (Pun and Lu, 2010; Ng and Pun, unpublished paper).  
39 Both in the 1990s and the next decade, NGOs had been the object of cyclical  
40 phases of State repression often followed by phases of decreasing State control.  
41 In 2012 and a year later, with the coming to power of Xi Jinping, State repres-  
42 sion increased greatly and the spaces for action for labor NGOs substantially  
43 narrowed, with the government recognizing only those NGOs that did not  
44 engage directly in labor organizing or labor rights advocacy but provided social  
45 services and social work to workers (Franceschini and Nesossi, 2018; Ng and  
46 Pun, unpublished paper).

It is actually from 2005 onwards that an increasing but still limited number of grassroots labor-focused organizations started to foster workers' participation in various forms of cultural practices such as writing, singing, filming, etc., often combining these activities with social services such as skills training or legal advice (Florence, forthcoming). One such organization, "Workers' Home" (*Gongyou zhi jia* 工友之家), was founded in 2002 by a collective of musicians called "The young migrant workers culture and arts performing band" (*Dagong qingnian wenyi yanchudui* 打工文艺演出队), in the suburbs of Beijing. The collective changed its name to the "New Workers Art Troup" (*Xin Gongren Yishutuan* 新工人艺术团) in 2004. It was first based in Xiaojiuhe, then in Dongba, then finally the organization was established in the village of Picun in Chaoyang District, on the fifth outer ring of Beijing, less than 10 km from the Beijing International Airport and more than 50 km from the capital (Lü, 2013). The majority of the more than 20,000 inhabitants of Picun are rural migrant workers laboring in Beijing as well as in the village's many workshops and in the service and construction industry. Housing in Picun is on the whole pretty precarious and the infrastructure is quite lacking. There are for instance neither proper heating nor sewage systems in the village. Picun has up to now remained outside real estate development plans probably because of its being so close to the airport. In addition, several of the local institutions such as the migrants' primary school and the organization's theater have faced threats of forced closure or demolition over the last ten years, allegedly due to the lack of security and hygiene according to the local authorities.<sup>4</sup> One should note however, that on the whole the organization attempts to collaborate with local authorities, particularly at the Village committee or District level.

The "Young migrant workers culture and arts performing band" was originally a music band that started to perform music aimed for an audience of migrant workers in 2002; particularly workers on construction sites and in factories, as well as communities of rural migrant workers in the suburbs of Beijing. Today, around 100 people work for Workers' Home, a majority of whom are rural migrant workers, in addition to university student volunteers. The people participating in the regular activities organized by Workers' Home are mostly young people in their twenties or thirties, though notably there are also some older workers, in particular construction workers, joining in some the activities run by the collective. Each evening, between 50 to 100 people gather in the courtyard or library of Worker's Home or the Workers' Museum. This is a shared space, and there are also quite a number of children who play in the courtyard.

In 2004, the band released its first album called "Under the sky we are all one family of workers" (*Tianxia dagong shi yi jia* 天下打工是一家), which brought about 75,000 RMB in royalties. According to one of the founders of the collective:

The CD sold very well indeed, I have been told 100.000 copies were sold, we got 75.000 RMB. It was the first time we had seen so much money. We held a one-week gathering to discuss what we were going to do with this money; we discussed whether we could use this money to do something

1 meaningful. At the time we would often go to local communities to  
 2 perform, we became aware of the fate of the children of rural workers and  
 3 their extreme difficulty to access local schools.

(Wang and Sun, 2013: 7)

4  
 5  
 6 Hence, the primary school for children of rural migrant workers was established in  
 7 2005.<sup>5</sup> At about the same time, the Picun Cultural Activities Centre aimed chiefly  
 8 at the local community was also established. In May 2008, the *Migrant Workers*  
 9 *Culture and Arts Museum* (hereafter “the Museum”) *Dagong Wenhua Yishu*  
 10 *Bowuguan* (打工文化艺术博物馆) was founded with the collaboration of the  
 11 Chaoyang District Cultural Bureau and the Picun village committee, with funding  
 12 for the museum chiefly provided by the Hong Kong branch of OXFAM. From  
 13 2009 to 2011, Workers’ Home organized the annual *New workers’ culture festival*  
 14 (hereafter “the Festival”; *Xin Gongren Wenhua Yishujie* 新工人文化艺术节) in  
 15 Beijing, through which several hundreds of mostly young rural workers and other  
 16 organizations and artistic formations from cities such as Shenzhen, Hangzhou,  
 17 Suzhou, or Xi’an gathered, including some coming from Hong Kong, Taiwan,  
 18 Japan, and Holland. Then, from 2012 to 2017, the *Migrant Workers Spring*  
 19 *Festival Gala* (hereafter “the Gala”; *Dagong Chunwan* 打工春晚) was set up (Lü,  
 20 2013). This range of projects was aimed not only at the local community level but  
 21 also, perhaps more fundamentally, at recording and mediating workers’ voices,  
 22 experiences, and history through cultural practices. In addition to major events,<sup>6</sup>  
 23 the collective runs a number of recurrent locally organized events under the  
 24 heading of “community organizing” such as music classes, reading classes,  
 25 dancing classes, and film shows. It also provides services to the local community  
 26 such as the establishment of a local branch of the trade union which is able to  
 27 occasionally assist workers in situations of labor relations conflicts, second-hand  
 28 clothes shops, a school for rural migrants’ children, a library, etc.<sup>7</sup>

### 30 **Workers’ home: identity formation**

31  
 32 From the creation of Workers’ Home in 2002, and the subsequent founding of  
 33 the migrant children primary school in 2005; the Museum in 2008; to the  
 34 Festival a year later, these projects and events have been conceived by the  
 35 founding members<sup>8</sup> of the collective as benchmarks in terms of the gradual con-  
 36 struction of an identity for the collective. One of the leading members of the col-  
 37 lective put it this way:

38  
 39 The 2009 workers culture festival was the first national level festival for  
 40 migrant workers and its goals were very clear: we had raised “establish our  
 41 own platform to perform our own play, establish workers’ culture, establish  
 42 laborers’ culture.

(Lü, 2013: 335)

43  
 44  
 45 This process of development at both the organizational level and at the level of  
 46 identity formation of the collective is also related to a process of self-reflexivity

of the collective. The media and urban elite on the other hand focus more on the nature of Workers' Home and the extent to which it represented migrant workers. On this issue of representation, while some founders of the collective have claimed in media outlets that they did not consider themselves as speaking for or on behalf of migrant workers, and that they did not mean to represent them (Wei, 2015), a member of the collective argued however:

At the beginning we did not think much ... We were going out to perform and that was it. But then, some people started to pay attention to us, to interpret us, particularly so some specialists, thus we also started to reflect on ourselves. Then we slowly realized that it was not as simple as what we originally had thought, we realized that we did not only represent ourselves, that we represented the whole *dagong* community (...)

(Qiao, 2012: 8)

For the third edition of the Festival in 2011, the organizers put forward "labor is glorious" (*laodong guangrong*) as the motto of this edition of the event; which according to a brochure produced for the occasion meant first, that the term "glorious" contained implicit dignity for workers and that "Glorious means reward for labor; if sick, has to be treated; has to be looked after when getting old; has to enjoy a stable dwelling," (*lao you suo huo; bing you suo yi; lao you suo yang; zhu you suo ju*, 劳有所获; 病有所医; 老又所养; 住有所居) (Brochure for the 2012 Gala). A year later, the first edition of the Gala was set up in Picun, it was then followed by five successive editions until 2017. The organizers of these events conceived of these projects as being part of a larger whole. According to them, the organization of the six editions of the Gala had been possible because the organization had been involved in a whole array of other activities such as the school for rural migrants' children, the training center, the museum, concerts, theater performances, the various classes organized weekly, the reading groups, etc. (Interview, Beijing, February 2015 and July 2016; Lü, 2013). Moreover, from its funding in 2002, the collective had been running a variety of regular and more or less formal forums, camps, study sessions which most often gathered core members of the collective, as well as its "supporters," among these a number of intellectuals, including specialists on rural issues.<sup>9</sup> Through these gatherings, a number of documents were produced in which the founding members of the collective discuss and explain the principles alongside ordinary workers, which guide their action. These spaces of interaction and debate are of essential importance, and complement the recreational gatherings mentioned in this section. Furthermore, they contribute to defining the principles of the organization, its mission and goals; and finally, these gatherings foster a sense of belonging for the migrant youth.

In conjunction with the formation of the collective's identity and organizational capacity, one should also note that through the variety of cultural events they organize and through how they explain the importance of these events, one can observe among the founding members of the collective a trust in the transformative capacity of culture and in the empowering potential of collective

1 embodied cultural practices. The cultural events also serve as spaces that  
2 mediate shared emotions, and enable articulations with the politics of dignity  
3 and social justice. The founding members explained, for instance, that, during  
4 the first concerts that band performed in factories and on construction sites in the  
5 Beijing suburbs, they could observe how much the workers attending these per-  
6 formances were moved, some actually shedding tears. They described these per-  
7 formances and the effects they had on workers as powerfully moving. Another  
8 member narrated that during these initial performances, workers “could feel  
9 equality and respect, they could start to dare to express themselves (...),” that  
10 they “felt the warmth and power from the collective, and how much it strength-  
11 ened their confidence” (Lü, 2013: 336).

12 Such an emphasis put on culture and on its mediation is necessarily linked to  
13 the collective’s endeavors to transform the ways they are represented and to  
14 express and make workers’ voices heard through cultural practices. A worker  
15 who participated to the 2015 Gala put it this way:

16  
17 We have at least to express our own voice, if we do not do it, nobody will  
18 do it for us, this way the experiences of this group will vanish as time goes  
19 by.

20 (Zhao, 2015)

21  
22 As to culture, the same member of the collective argued that the reason why the  
23 museum had been called “Migrant Workers’ Culture and Arts Museum” and not  
24 “Migrant Workers Museum” was that

25  
26 literature and arts can record workers’ history in a more moving way, more  
27 real, and more lively way. It is not a dead history, but a lively one; for  
28 instance, examining workers’ tales and feelings through workers’ poems. If  
29 it were only cold writings, we could not produce these kind of emotions.

30 (Qiao, 2012: 10)

31  
32 Closely related to the confidence in the transformative capacity of culture  
33 through its capacity to mediate emotions is the idea also shared among the col-  
34 lective that it is through performing and practicing that the emotional power of  
35 these performances can be increased.

36 As explained previously, the Workers’ Home collective has been striving to  
37 improve the representation and the recognition of migrant workers within  
38 Chinese society. The idea that rural migrant workers suffer from a deficit of  
39 recognition and face discrimination in terms of rights and access to social ser-  
40 vices within cities, in addition to being a central element in the identity forma-  
41 tion of migrant workers (Pun, 2016), has indeed been a core one, developed and  
42 circulated not only within Chinese social science research, but also in the media  
43 and within cultural production by rural migrant workers (Florence, 2017, 2013;  
44 Sun, 2014). This narrative somehow echoes James C. Scott’s argument about the  
45 collective experience of indignities by subordinate groups that often generates  
46 collective narratives of indignation, of redress, and of justice among these

groups (Scott, 1990). Within this narrative, rural workers set their own everyday experience of indignities (exploitation, discrimination, etc.) against their yearning for minimum stability and a fairer social order. It can also go through the expression of disillusionment or frustration in particular among second generation young workers who in the face of adverse predicaments find themselves taken in various forms of entrapment (Pun, 2016; Pun and Lu, 2010). Such narratives of “embodied indignity” are shared and reworked widely in the variety of cultural production originating from the Workers’ Home collective, be it through the songs of the New Workers Art Troup, or through the other publications such as children’s magazines, the surveys produced by the collective, as well as via the organization of wider scale events such as the Gala. One should note the high recurrence of a series of terms such as “best years of youth” (*qingchun*), “sacrifice one’s best years of youth” (*fengxian qingchun* 风险青春), “realize one’s ideals” (*shixian lixiang* 实现理想), “to have one’s own dreams” (*yongyou ziji de mengxiang* 拥有自己的梦想), “to pursue one’s future” (*zhuiqiu weilai* 追求未来), etc., all related to ‘youth’ and young workers’ aspirations within these cultural productions, be it songs, poems, play scripts, essays, etc. Before the first edition of the Gala was organized in 2012, a number of recurring themes and ideas strongly related the yearning for dignity of workers and for social justice ran through this mix of small-scale events addressed at the local community, and via the organization of larger-scale events such as the Gala to which I turn in the final section of this chapter.

In this section, we have seen the development of the Workers’ Home collective’s organizational capacity over the years as well as the principles shaped its identity and its actions. The capacity of culture to bring about shared emotions and empower people have also been highlighted as being of paramount importance within the collective’s identity and actions and within the formation of spaces of interactions and collective performances. We have referred to how the actions and identity of the collective in public space had been progressively transformed along with some of its claims. In the next section, I focus on the organization of a specific event, the 2015 edition of the Gala, to show how the integration of local sites of interactions with a larger-scale event—the Gala—enables to make visible the collective’s actions and how it fosters the formation of “communities of interpretation and emotion” (Chartier, 1989).

### Scales of mediation

As we mentioned previously, one of the major events organized by Workers’ Home is the Gala. The idea of setting a Spring Festival Gala originated from the realization among the founders of Workers’ Home that at the level of the local community, rural migrant workers who did not return to their hometown for the spring festival resigned themselves to have an ordinary meal and watch the official Spring Festival Gala on CCTV. It is clear from most of the accounts by workers themselves that the migrant Workers’ Gala was from the very start thought of as the “workers’ own gala,” one that is defined as displaying “migrant workers’ true voice” (*dagongzhe zhenshi de xinsheng* 打工者自己的心声) in



1 contrast to the official Spring Festival Gala (Zhao, 2015). An introductory text to  
 2 the first edition of the Festival in September 2009 had already set some basic  
 3 principles for this, promoting “the value of labor and social justice.” It read:

4  
 5 We have been used to saying “the government set the stage, the people  
 6 perform the play”

7 Today we want to say “We put up our own stage and we perform our own  
 8 play”

9 (...) Before, we did not have our own stage

10 Therefore, we could not express our voice

11 We could not express our culture

12 (...) We will rely on our own intelligence and hands

13 In order to build our own cultural stage (...) <sup>10</sup>

14  
 15 This first edition of the Gala took place in January 2012 in Picun’s local theater.  
 16 It did not benefit from any specific funding, except around 1,000 RMB for deco-  
 17 ration (Interview, Beijing January 2015). For the 2015 edition of the Gala, the  
 18 total budget was around 150,000 RMB, which, besides some funding from  
 19 Oxfam, the collective had to gather through crowd funding. Altogether, they  
 20 managed to collect around 110,000 RMB. From the initial edition of the Gala  
 21 until 2017, the person who has been chairing the evening was Cui Yongyuan, a  
 22 CCTV celebrity. The video from the first edition of the Gala was uploaded on  
 23 the Internet and, apparently to the surprise of the organizers, was watched by  
 24 about 400,000 people and initiated a number of reactions in the media (Liu,  
 25 2015; Lü, 2015; Sun, 2014). From its first conceptualization, the Gala has been  
 26 thought as a platform that would gather workers from the local community and  
 27 people from grassroots organizations from Beijing but also other cities such as  
 28 Suzhou, and Shenzhen in one place (Liu, 2015).<sup>11</sup> This networking dimension of  
 29 the event has grown in scale over the years and, for the 2015 edition, eight  
 30 grassroots organizations from Beijing, Tianjin, Xi’an, Shenzhen, Dongguan, and  
 31 Suzhou held stands at the Cultural Hall of Chaoyang District in Beijing.

32 While the first edition of the Gala took place locally in Picun, the locale for  
 33 the following editions of the Gala were set in much larger settings: the Chinese  
 34 Communist Party Youth League Hall for the 2013 edition; a theater of the Cul-  
 35 tural Hall of Chaoyang District for the 2014, 2015, and 2016 editions; while for  
 36 the 2017 edition, it eventually was organized in Picun again. From 2014, the  
 37 Internet and social media have been used as major tools for the publicity about  
 38 the Gala, which was actually video-recorded days before the evening of the  
 39 Chinese New Year to be circulated widely on the very evening of the new year  
 40 through the support of the Shaanxi Agricultural and Forestry Internet Television.  
 41 The 2014 edition of the Gala has reportedly been viewed by more than 80  
 42 million people (Interview, Beijing, February 2015).

43 The keywords for this 2015 edition were “Express yourself, communicate  
 44 and cohesion” (*Biaoda, Goutong, Ningju* 表达, 沟通, 凝聚). We cannot delve  
 45 into a description of the more than 4-hour-long gala and its 21 items ranging  
 46 from singing, poem declamation, dancing (from traditional to hip hop), rap,

short humoristic plays, etc. Suffice it to say here that, having watched the whole gala twice on stage and several times online, it provided an interesting balance between highly politically correct performances<sup>12</sup> and performances which materialize “embodied indignity” and put forward claims related to justice and the rejection of discrimination or oppression; and in some instances toed the line through the utilization of popular CCP-sponsored idioms, which included creative euphemisms for class relations and conflict, which include creative use of euphemisms for class relations and conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

In the remainder of this section, I detail what participating and preparing for the performance at the Gala meant for a group of migrant workers I followed a couple of days before the recording of the Gala. This participant observation was done in order to document how local sites of interactions both physical and virtual (digital) articulate with the larger-scale event to enable the constitution of “communities of interpretation and emotions.” I show that for those who took part in these events, these collective spaces fostered their identification with a larger collective, both on the local level as well as through wider digital platforms; sharing core experiences of indignity and of non-recognition which shaped their identities as rural migrant workers. The participation in these various types of social spaces of interaction also nurtures a sense of pride, of critique, and of empowerment. In these processes, we suggest, the crafting and embodiment of shared emotions are central.

During the rehearsal sessions for the 2015 Gala, which took place two days before the video recording, I became acquainted with a group of five carpenters in their twenties originating from Picun, who had been selected by the organizers of the Gala to perform a song originally written by the New Workers’ Art Troup in 2003. A video of the song performed and produced in Picun by the New Workers Art Troup on the occasion of May 1, 2011 had been circulated widely on the Internet.<sup>14</sup> One of the carpenters first explained how getting involved with Workers’ Home’s activities had provided him with a new meaning to his life, which prior to this involvement was culturally void and highly monotonous. The carpenters described the meaning and the intensity of getting together locally in the community for rehearsals several months ahead of the event in preparation for their performance at the Gala and how much it strengthened their self-esteem and confidence in themselves, as well as their sense of forming a community. In this case, small-scale physical face-to-face interactions among the small group of carpenters; encounters with other participants at the Gala and volunteers working at Workers’ Home; and online interactions during the months preceding the event eventually found a climax in the large-scale performance of the Gala. These various forms of interactions, as well as the later sharing of these contents on social media, provide a complement to offline practices and encounters and, I argue, help strengthen the internal sense of community of the groups concerned, and their participation to what Chartier has called “communities of interpretation and emotion” (Chartier, 1989).

The group of carpenters were deeply emotionally involved in this experience before, during, and after the performance took place. During the performance itself, one could observe the pride and confidence which performing the song

1 provided the performers. Similarly, a young worker from Dongguan who  
 2 participated to the 2015 Gala explained:

3  
 4 Participating to this gala was really like a dream, it was a dream, really! Our  
 5 group was not even formed yet and we got selected for our own song on our  
 6 daily life in the factory. It was like a dream. We were so proud!

7 (Interview, Shenzhen, October 2017)  
 8

9 Young workers whom I could interview and who knew of the Gala explained  
 10 how much watching this event, most often through the Internet and social media,  
 11 had moved them and how much they had wished they could take part in it. The  
 12 following narrative by a female migrant worker from Shenzhen who was  
 13 selected as one of the two female chairs for the Gala of 2015 shows how emo-  
 14 tionally powerful watching this event may be and how strong its power of  
 15 seduction is:

16  
 17 It is now the sixth edition of the Gala. But I remember having watched a  
 18 video of the first edition [...] At the end of the play, everybody stood hand  
 19 in hand, with the crowd singing the International. I too cried watching this  
 20 [...] For me who could not dance nor sing, it was a challenge, and I cher-  
 21 ished this opportunity. I hoped I could convey female workers' voice, and I  
 22 put my whole self into applying.

23 (Ding, 2017)  
 24

25 Another female worker who had participated in the Gala explained that for her  
 26 and for her sister workers, the preparation for the event and the performance  
 27 itself provided them with excitement and had a physical impact on them:

28  
 29 We were both thrilled at the idea of participating and scared also (...) But  
 30 we were so delighted, so happy! My fellow sisters overcame these hurdles  
 31 when they took part to the gala. And also, this was the first time that we  
 32 loved our bodies, that we experienced a kind of liberation of our bodies (...)  
 33 In fact, we were full of expectations as it was the first time that so many  
 34 female workers would shout (*nahan* 呐喊) their voice and feelings.

35 (Ding, 2017)  
 36  
 37

### 38 **Conclusion** 39

40 In this chapter, I have looked at how a workers' collective shaped its identity  
 41 and at how the organizational practices of this collective helped shape various  
 42 scales and more or less formal spaces of interaction, of interpretation, and of the  
 43 shared embodied of emotions for young migrant workers. The social ties and  
 44 emotional bonds created within these spaces through socialization enable the  
 45 creation of feelings of pride, of values of justice and solidarity; and strengthens  
 46 feelings of collective belonging and identification with a community through

shared emotions. This in some way nurtures the confidence in the idea that nothing can “annihilate within themselves the strength to be themselves (...) that nothing can prevent them from creating and being proud about it” (Jules-Rosette and Martin, 1997: 52). In this chapter, I have documented young migrant workers’ spaces of interactions and engagements marked by what Qiu and Wang term a “collective participatory ethics” (Qiu and Wang, 2012: 144). Indeed, while one may concur with Fung and De Kloet’s “contention that youth culture in China is characterized by the constant oscillation between control and being controlled, between technologies of the self and subjection” (De Kloet and Fung, 2017: 180), the formation of these cultural spaces tends to lead to alternative social relations and may somehow lead to forms of empowerment among migrant youth. However, because the spaces of youth culture are multi-layered (Frangville and Gaffric, this volume), they ought to be studied alongside how other kinds of youth spaces linked to everyday consumption and leisure and which may, on the contrary, foster individualization and depoliticization. As we alluded to above, most migrant youth seem to be unconcerned or unaware of the spaces such as the one studied in this chapter.

Moreover, through specific arrangements, in mediating everyday forms of “embodied indignities” experienced by rural migrant workers and by putting forward claims for social justice, the collective along with the workers have made visible claims aimed at the enjoyment of basic rights, to be protected and to benefit from institutional support, and claims for a more inclusive and fairer politics of recognition and citizenship (Butler, 2013).

If, in an ever more politically-constrained environment, the collective has worked chiefly on the level of culture, I have shown that cultural practices were conceived by their initiators as aimed chiefly at the transformation of the everyday material subaltern condition of rural migrant workers. On the issue of what impact the work of the collective has been able to achieve, the founders and leaders of the collective themselves remained indecisive. On the one hand, they felt somewhat satisfied that thanks to their wide-scale projects other collectives had sprouted in several Chinese cities—in Xi’an, Suzhou, Tianjin, Shenzhen, and Dongguan for instance—and that this had been, from the start, one of their goals (Qiao, 2012: 10). On the other hand, they cast doubts on the effects of their work on peoples real lives. One of them expressed this dilemma neatly:

In the end, how meaningful and what value does this have? I find it very hard to judge right now. Ok, there are more people paying attention to migrant workers now, but is this a result? We hoped that through displaying some questions that we care about, such as Children left alone in the countryside (...), our workers’ rights, or labor relations, etc., on all these issues what impact did we really have? I really don’t know.

(Qiao, 2015: 8)

This chapter also touched upon one important issue which deserves further investigation: that of the difficulty for grassroots collectives such as Workers’

1 Home to strike a strategic but perpetually fragile balance on the very frontiers  
2 between more or less institutionalized, formal/informal, and authorized sites of  
3 public expression and of association, as well as the varying degrees of visibility  
4 that may be attached to these spaces.<sup>15</sup> What kinds of actions and what types of  
5 political socialization can take place within these spaces and how visible can  
6 they become? This raises the issue of the degree of “publicness” of these spaces,  
7 of their highly constrained nature. The very borders of these sites of mediation  
8 where public expression and representation are fought for are the objects of  
9 incessant struggles (Eliasoph, 2010). The Gala, as we have seen, benefited from  
10 increasing visibility through dissemination of publicity on the Internet and social  
11 media, and aimed from its very first iteration in 2012 to “defend migrant  
12 workers’ rights through arts” (*yi yishu weiquan* 以艺术维权). To one of the  
13 organizers of the 2015 edition of the Gala, this initial objective meant “using  
14 songs to shout workers’ voices and oppression, reflect on reality, and that one  
15 has to first express one’s voice in order to better protect rights and be heard by  
16 leaders as well as by ordinary people” (Wei, 2015: 3). The following year, the  
17 Gala did not pass censorship and could not be circulated through the Internet  
18 and social media. It however aroused a heated debate as an actress named Yuan  
19 Li, who had participated in the Gala, had asked migrant workers “not to com-  
20 plain so much [...] and be somewhat thankful to bosses.” Reactions of protest by  
21 netizens and participants to the Gala went viral. A participant from Shenzhen  
22 put it this way on a WeChat group discussion:

24 Why are workers embarrassed? Because behind the prosperity of cities one  
25 finds workers’ blood and sweat [...] Nowadays many people say “One  
26 should respect workers’ dignity.” But if this remains at the level of words,  
27 this is useless. A real equality means equality in the system of distribution:  
28 same treatment in cities, in retirement, in health access, in housing, in chil-  
29 dren education [...] We are scared to be represented by too many people.  
30 This year, the Gala has elicited workers to stand up and express their  
31 dismay, this is the beginning of a real dialogue.”

32 (Fragment of a WeChat discussion group, 2016)

34 In January 2017, the Gala had to return to its original smaller space in Picun, as  
35 the collective had had to struggle for several months for the survival of some of  
36 its premises. It seems the political and potentially contentious nature of large-  
37 scale events such as the Workers’ Gala, because of their visibility, and because  
38 of their links to social justice and class tensions in society and that constitute a  
39 challenge to the party-state to uphold its commitments to social justice, may  
40 simply not fit into the increasingly highly politically-loaded environment under  
41 Xi Jinping. Hence, for the 2018 edition of the Gala, no gathering was set up  
42 and it turned into a series of exclusively digitally circulated short video  
43 sequences. Hence, this chapter has touched upon this issue of the continuous  
44 struggle over the borders of what kinds of spaces of interactions and associ-  
45 ations should be formed under changing political circumstances and how  
46 visible they ought to be.

## Notes

- 1 www.whatsonweibo.com/fan-yusu-beijing-migrant-workers-writing-takes-wechat-storm/.  
[Accessed September 12, 2018].
- 2 Jacka and Sun have delved upon such organizations, but they cultural practices in  
these organizations were not the specific focus of their research. See Jacka, 2006;  
Sun, 2014.
- 3 While I will mention the use of the Internet and social media in this chapter when  
they articulate with other spaces of offline interactions, the focus is not on digital  
practices per se.
- 4 It happened in the July and August 2013 as the primary school run by the “Workers’  
Home” collective was under threat of being shut down as well as in the autumn and  
winter 2016–2017 and autumn and winter 2017–2018, when some buildings such as  
the theater were on the verge of being shut down. On each of these occasions, the  
collective managed to prevent such measures to be implemented through the combi-  
nation of a subtle use of the Internet and social medias that ranged from the simple  
rather low profile advocacy of their cause, to the mobilization of networks of support  
among (public) intellectuals, party-state officials, media professionals, etc. Following  
these politics of “rightful resistance” (O’Brien, 2013) through social media observa-  
tion and interviews with some of the protagonists, I could observe how, as the situ-  
ation grew in tension and was moving toward a likely fatal end for the collective, the  
politics of voice and of visibility gradually became less low profile and tended to turn  
into more direct forms of interpolation of the party-state authorities at the village and  
district levels (Fieldwork notes and interviews, 2013–2018). In December 2017 for  
instance, a short 5-minute video about the work done by the “Workers’ Home” col-  
lective was circulated and viewed by more than 23 millions viewers. At the moment  
of writing this chapter, the video had been viewed more than 41 million times.  
<https://v.qq.com/x/cover/sssaaqrqv2u5n0w/i0022qqb88t.html?> [Accessed November  
15, 2018].
- 5 Today the school caters for about 500–700 pupils.
- 6 These events are connected to each other. For instance, writings such as poems,  
songs, diaries and other cultural products such as photographs which were collected  
for the Festival between 2009 and 2011 or for the Gala from 2012 on, were exhibited  
in the Migrant Workers Museum. Similarly, some of the poems, life stories, drawing  
by children from locally organized classes in Picun village, were also exhibited  
within the museum.
- 7 The collective has also been very active within the digital sphere, running several  
platforms related to migrant workers and labor and producing a wide variety of print  
medias (CDs; DVDs, leaflets, books, surveys, etc.), see Qiu and Wang 2012.
- 8 For reasons of anonymity I do not name the group of founding members here.
- 9 Intellectuals focusing on agricultural development often associated to the “New Left”  
seem to have had some influence on the formation of the collective at the level of its  
core principles. One should not exaggerate the extent of such influence however as  
the different members of collective are not unanimous as to the relevance of these  
scholars’ ideas on the collective (Interview, Beijing, October 2016).
- 10 *Workers’ culture forum materials*, unpublished document 2009, Beijing.
- 11 I have personally observed how Workers’ Home is perceived by small collectives  
in the Pearl River Delta as a model organization to emulate, even if they also  
recognized that the local contexts in Beijing and in cities such as Shenzhen or  
Dongguan were quite different (Interviews, September and October 2017,  
Shenzhen).
- 12 One should note that the content of some items such as song or poems’ lyrics may  
appear highly politically neutral but actually become somehow empowering once  
performed and embodied, on this agentic dimension of performances, see Martin,  
2000 and Street, 2011.

- 1 13 Given the politically constraining locale in which the event took place, with several  
 2 high-level cadres from the Chaoyang District Cultural Bureau and of the Central  
 3 Party School, the very performances of some items in the program appeared to the  
 4 writer of this chapter as rather bold and examples of a politics of stretching the  
 5 blurred boundaries of what may be tolerated by rulers.  
 6 14 This song written in 2003 has been described by its author as the first song to be written  
 7 once the collective had turned from “representing themselves to representing other” and  
 8 was a form of “cry of pain and struggle” (*nahan*) expressed as a rejection of the repres-  
 9 sion rural migrant workers have been subjected to, in particular in relation to practices  
 10 of arrest and incarceration (Lü, 2013: 255). One of the platforms the song can be  
 11 viewed on is “Tudou,” [http://video.tudou.com/v/XMjA2MDc1NzE2OA==.html?\\_\\_](http://video.tudou.com/v/XMjA2MDc1NzE2OA==.html?__fr=oldtd)  
 12 [fr=oldtd](http://video.tudou.com/v/XMjA2MDc1NzE2OA==.html?__fr=oldtd). [Accessed August 13, 2017].  
 13 15 This dynamics around scales of visibility ought to be further researched as it strikes  
 14 at the heart of a mode of governing of authoritarian regimes, one in which ambiguity  
 15 is central and where (Stern and O’Brien, 2011).

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