

Struggling around “dagong”: dialectics of contention and accommodation .

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Since the launching of market-oriented reforms in post-Mao China, the Chinese party-state has re-deployed some of its categorization, allocation, and spatialization prerogatives. The rapid societal changes at work in post-Mao China have implied a complex process of transformation of the Party-state's sponsored economy of signs and values. The various ways in which rural migrant workers have been represented are in this respect particularly worth studying, this at least for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, migrant workers have been playing *a central economic role* within the Pearl River Delta's but also within the whole country's economic growth since they provide the vast majority of manpower in the labour-intensive industries. Since the capacity to generate high levels of economic growth and to improve people's living standards are crucial in the Party's legitimisation building, migrants also play an important political role. But at the same time, the very harsh labour 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 still grounded precisely upon the rejection of capitalist exploitation.

In this paper I want to show that by delving into migrant workers' narratives of their experience of 'dagong' and more specifically within their migration rationale one can get a glimpse of the at once empowering and also highly constrained dimension of migrant agency. Within specific patterns of accumulation, that is a context of combined “dull compulsion of economic relations” and of “routine repression”, I will document the process by which “people's experiences and “practical engagements with the daily world” are linked to “historically produced institutional and structural settings” (Smith, 1996). As migration is intimately linked to unstable identification processes (at the individual and collective levels) and to the state project of legitimation, migrant narratives provide a particularly interesting vintage point to examine these processes of hegemonic contention and struggle. In the last section of the paper I will argue for the need to take into account contradictions seriously when studying migration experiences through ethnographic work.

The data used for this paper are part of an extensive analysis by the author of the Shenzhen mainstream written press, participant observation, in-depth interviews with about 10-15 rural migrants, short informal interviews in the streets with about 70-100 people from 2001 to 2008, and a body of unpublished letters to the editor of several migrants' magazines.