

Migrant workers' narratives of 'dagong': identification, contention and hegemony as discursive framework.

Eric Florence, Ph.D. in political and social sciences (The University of Liege, Belgium)

Eric.Florence@ulg.ac.be

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. In this paper, I confront the dominant form of cultural construction of migrant workers through the Shenzhen official press with migrant workers' own narratives about their experience of work (*dagong*) in the city as they are mediated through two different sites : in-depth interviews with the author and a body of published and unpublished letters to the editor of several migrants' magazines. I examine one particular way of articulation between the hegemonic construction of migrant workers and migrant workers' own narratives about work and social mobility¹.

After having briefly introduced the economic and macro-institutional environment of the Pearl River delta and the disciplinary mechanisms it enables, I document the main categories and narrative structures which are part of the dominant cultural construction of migrant workers within the Shenzhen mainstream written press. In this section of the paper I point to a very intense discursive construction of migrant workers, of Shenzhen and of the "South" which, I argue, allows 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). Within the Shenzhen mainstream written press, youthful migrant workers embody a series of values and attitudes which are drawn altogether from the Maoist repertoire, from Chinese tradition, as well as from 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.

In the next section, I examine in detail how the main categories and structures of the dominant cultural construction circulate within migrant workers' own narratives and

¹ In Florence 2007 I document 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. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the first of these narrative modes, i.e. "affirmation" or "confirmation".

experiences. I do this by confronting the major elements of the dominant cultural construction with migrant workers' published and unpublished texts as well as with in-depth interviews and informal discussions with migrant workers. I stress the much greater pervasiveness of the major features of the dominant cultural construction within written narratives than in oral accounts such as interviews or informal discussions². *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 neo-liberal governmentality at work in post-Mao China?* I will endeavor to demonstrate that this 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. On the ground of discussions with both migrant workers and editors, I will show that what may happen to be conceived as an ideological effect or as 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.

² Such pervasiveness does not mean that within the same magazines, these categories of the dominant public transcript can not be contested, questioned or subverted.