

Migrant Laborer Subcultures in Recent Chinese Literature: A Communicative Perspective

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Introduction

Literary works have the potential of plausibly dramatizing a complex social milieu that has become stereotyped and oversimplified in many people's minds due to inadequate terminology or general lack of knowledge. For instance, migrant laborers from China's countryside have typically been pigeonholed by the blurry term *mangliu*, which literally means "one who roves blindly about [in search of employment]."¹ Widely used in both government publications and by urbanites on the street, the term *mangliu* has derisive connotations of impulsive and unreflective drifting. However, virtually all villagers who migrate to cities know very well what they are doing: leaving a countryside oversupplied with labor and low-income work and undersupplied with land and capital, and moving to an urban area where capital and relatively high-income manual work are much more plentiful.² Moreover, they tend not to migrate as atomized individuals, but as groups in networks held together by local or familial ties.³ Far from "blindly roving" wherever the impulse might take them, migrants tend to plan and implement their migration as a well-defined group, formulating their plans in a manner scholars have considered highly strategic (Rozelle & Jiang 1995).

Like long-term city residents in most parts of the world, Chinese urbanites tend to notice the ongoing problems of overcrowding and crime that rural migrants can exacerbate, while overlooking the valuable manual labor and general economic stimulus that such migrants provide. It is hardly surprising that the urbanite-dominated governments of most developing countries tend to treat the problem of urban squalor among village migrants with benign neglect. Unlike the governments of most other countries, however, the Chinese government has gone to great lengths to place onerous restrictions upon villagers who wish to migrate to

cities in search of work. For decades, the Chinese state has defined long-term residence in cities as illegal or illicit for villagers by making urban residency permits [*hukou*] extremely difficult or impossible for them to obtain. Since the state has thoroughly institutionalized the rural-urban divide in China, we may go so far as to speak of two key subcultures within China, rural and urban.

Varieties of Subcultural Divides

Scholars researching intercultural communication within a given country or region often find themselves studying subcultural divisions within that country. The United States' long history of antebellum slavery and racial segregation has tended to make race a key defining factor of subcultural identity, even though most biologists and anthropologists have known for decades that the concept of race lacks a scientific basis, and is a blunt and essentially misleading tool for measuring human differentiation. According to the distinguished sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz (1995: 192), "The drawing together of races, the factor of intermarriage, and the growing secularization of cultures all point to a decline in the racial factor as a unitary variable of analysis." Yet anyone who has applied for a job in the United States knows that a question about the applicant's race inevitably finds its way onto the application form, as if the boundaries between the races were well-defined and self-evident.

For residents of Northern Ireland, in contrast, a person's religious identity as a Catholic or a Protestant tends to define a key subcultural boundary, just as in those regions of India where Hindus, Moslems, and Sikhs live in close proximity to one another. Partially overlapping these religious subcultural divisions in India is the blood-line hierarchy of the Hindu caste system, in which children automatically inherit the parents' social ranking, whether it be Brahmin, untouchable, or somewhere in between these extremes. Language differences can also function as subcultural barriers in regions like Quebec and Taiwan, where separatist political movements play down the bilingual leanings of much of the citizenry in an attempt to marginalize the outsiders' language, whether it be English in Quebec or Mandarin in Taiwan.

Though a number of Chinese dialects like Taiwanese and Cantonese are as different from Mandarin as Spanish is from Italian, thus functioning as distinct languages, linguistic differences clearly do not serve as the key subcultural divide in China (DeFrancis 1984:56). And while Islamic separatism has flared up from time to time for at least two centuries in China, these religious tensions with Islam have nearly always been localized in the border regions to the west and southwest, where there are high concentrations of Moslems within the population. Moreover, from an ethnic standpoint, uppermost in many Americans' way of approaching subcultural divisions, the Han Chinese constitute an overwhelming 95% of China's total population, and minority nationalities within China are concentrated mainly in

border regions to the west and southwest of what is known as "China proper." China in its entirety is less ethnically homogeneous than Japan, but China proper is closer to Japan's ethnic uniformity than it is to the ethnic heterogeneity of Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, or the United States.

China's Key Subcultural Divide Between Long-Time Local and Migrant

Although the above factors can be significant in certain parts of China and at times, they pale beside the key subcultural divide of *bona fide* local resident versus migrant or "guest resident" in a given locale.⁴ Generally, the process of a migrant's assimilation in a locale and acceptance as a *bona fide* local is much more lengthy in China than in immigrant nations like Australia and the United States. The slowness or even virtual absence of assimilation is especially marked among Chinese migrants into heavily populated regions like Guangdong, Guangxi, and Taiwan, whose Hakka or "guest people" residents are mostly the descendants of northern ancestors who moved south into these warm regions centuries ago. In the sparsely populated regions in China's arid northwest, by contrast, migrants tend to experience less tension in their relations with the long-time local population, and may be accepted as *bona fide* locals over a period of mere years; a famous example is Zhang Xianliang, a writer from the lower Yangzi riverport of Nanjing who has integrated himself smoothly into the frontier region near Mongolia in arid Ningxia for the past four decades (Williams 1991:143-44).

The social and political ramifications of the subcultural divide between local resident and migrant can loom very large. Sometimes referred to as "the gypsies of China," the Hakkas have maintained a subcultural identity quite separate from their neighbors in southeastern China (Pan 1990:16). Pent-up resentment over the Hakkas' informal status as second-class citizens was a driving force behind the 19th-century civil war known as the Taiping Rebellion, which lasted three times longer than the American Civil War, nearly toppled the Qing dynasty, and left at least 20 million dead in its wake; Hakkas formed the bulk of the top Taiping leaders from beginning to end (Spence 1996). In this century, Hakkas have played a crucial role in the Communist revolution, for the original Communist base area in Jiangxi province was largely Hakka in population make-up; the primarily Hakka soldiers of the Communist Long March journeyed from one Hakka village to the next on their way through Sichuan province. Several top Chinese Communist leaders were Hakkas, including Deng Xiaoping and the marshals Zhu De, Ye Jianying, and Chen Yi (Constable 1996). Often dissatisfied with the status quo, Chinese migrants such as these Hakkas have at times been readier to take risks to improve their situation, occasionally going so far as violent insurrection.

Gradual migration to China's less populated border regions to the west and southwest has been taking place almost continually for several decades, but it is only during the past several years of the Deng economic reforms that the pre-1949

Chinese pattern of large-scale rural migration into cities has resumed. The chief reasons for this are a somewhat relaxed enforcement of government prohibitions of migration to urban areas, along with increasing rural unemployment in the wake of major demographic and economic changes; over 100 million rural Chinese are unemployed or grossly underemployed: this adds up to about a quarter of the entire rural labor force. China's ten largest cities have at least a million migrants in each of them; Shanghai and Beijing alone are home to over six million migrant laborers.

As has long been the case with migrants in China and in most other countries, these migrants tend to work at the dirtiest and most exhausting manual labor jobs—the sort of jobs that longterm local residents are often loathe to take. Migrants not lucky enough to find a hovel or crowded room to sleep in often sprawl out in railway stations and other public facilities, adding to the congestion and clutter in China's already seriously overcrowded cities. Long-term locals often view the migrants with a wary eye, and tend to blame migrants for having committed a larger share of criminal acts than the newcomers have actually perpetrated.

A Contemporary Play Exemplifying China's Subcultural Divide

This breakdown in communication and mutual mistrust between the subcultures of local residents and migrants comes across vividly in a full-length modern play (*huaju*, or "spoken drama") from 1989 by Zhang Mingyuan entitled *A Rainy Summer* [Duoyu de xiatian].⁵ The protagonist, named Fourth, is a young Shandong farmer too poor to marry his would-be fiancée, a fellow villager named Erqin. Erqin's parents need to use Erqin's bride-price to pay off some debts, so they betroth her to the demented son of a wealthy couple in the village, who have understandably had a hard time finding a daughter-in-law from one of the wealthier families in the area. Instead of resigning himself to a lifetime of poverty and frustrated bachelorhood in his economic dead-end of a village, Fourth joins together with many of his fellow unemployed and underemployed villagers and journeys to the far northeastern city of Qiqihar, which is even closer to the Siberian border than Harbin is. There he becomes a migrant laborer in the construction industry that is thriving in bustling Qiqihar. He experiences many of problems typical of such laborers, such as wages so low that even the most frugal saver could only manage to accumulate some small change in savings at the end of a week. Sometimes bosses and foremen would cheat the migrant laborers out of even these meager wages, citing some excuse about unexpected job-related debts or expenses. It is as a result of being defrauded in this way that Fourth decides to take a major risk that could lead him either to some working capital or to the execution grounds: he pulls a knife on his crooked foreman in a dark alley, and demands the unpaid wages of the whole work team on pain of death. The risk pays off, for the bundle of unpaid wages becomes Fourth's working capital, with which he joins the ranks of successful

construction foremen, supplying steady jobs for his fellow villagers and other migrant laborers from the countryside.

Fourth eventually becomes so adroit at outbidding competitors for construction jobs that they retaliate by framing him as the scapegoat in the latest police crackdown on bribery and other white-collar crime – which virtually all foremen must engage in as a routine "back-door" practice. Fourth's lack of a verifiable urban household registration (as opposed to the dubious registration that he has bribed an official to concoct) makes him especially vulnerable to prosecution. By the end of the play, Fourth knows he will have to go to jail, if he does not actually get executed by a government fond of making an example of such offenders during highly publicized crackdowns. The most Fourth can accomplish on his last day of freedom is to use his business contacts to set his workers up with a new construction project at the other end of China in Guangdong.

The stigma Fourth has borne as a migrant laborer from the countryside continues to dog him after he becomes a successful foreman. In order to receive an all-important urban household registration certificate, which grants the holder numerous privileges that villagers could only dream of, Fourth must pay a bribe of 5000 yuan. This sum amounts to several hundred dollars, but actually is very large by rural Chinese standards. At a banquet held to celebrate the group's business success, Fourth proudly announces the attainment of urban household registration at the very same time he announces the birth of his first son; the two events are presented as being of equivalent importance. This is quite extraordinary in the context of the traditional Chinese imperative to carry on the family line with a son, an idea that even today is especially deeply rooted in the countryside, where old-age pensions are practically unknown. Later, when someone at the banquet asks Fourth what he hopes for the son's future, he replies that he wants his son to fare as well as any other child born in the city, and to never have to experience the grinding poverty he knew first as a villager and subsequently as an ordinary migrant laborer.

As a former migrant laborer who against all the odds has become quite wealthy, Fourth throws himself into his work with a kind of zeal that makes his life quite imbalanced. When his old rural fiancée escapes from her arranged marriage to the village lunatic and travels across the country to hook up with Fourth, he shocks her by urging that she return to their old native village, even though he has not yet gotten married at that time. Fourth has already decided to enter into a marriage of convenience with a municipal Party official's grievously disabled daughter, knowing that such a marital alliance will dramatically smooth the way to more construction permits and contracts. Though Fourth could have easily married the fiancée, Erqin, whom he still loves, and simply taken his savings and started up a small business elsewhere with her, his yearning to climb even higher in the local municipal construction trade has become an obsession for him; he feels that he cannot set his vaulting ambitions aside merely for the sake of love. At one point, he attempts to explain to Erqin the origins of his obsession to rise to the top in his trade:

"Erqin, you don't know how hard I've had it just to try staying human – or how hard a struggle it's been to have gotten as far as I've come. In a city as big as this, there's nowhere we could get a footing. Other people would curse us as migrant rovers, darkies, or third-class citizens. We'd work so long and hard we nearly keeled over, but we couldn't get so much as a word of thanks for our labors. When we'd go into a store or stroll through an open market, other people would give us a wide berth. If we wanted to establish our position in the city, we had to work; if there was no work to do, we'd just have to starve to death! We had no backer to help us; if we got too poor to pay the rent, the only thing we could count on would be a swift kick out of the place! I'd had my fill of poverty. When I got hold of some money, I wanted to go back to redeem you from service to your husband's family. But if I'd redeemed you, we'd still be paupers now. If I wasn't able to give you a really good life, I'd rather just suffer on my own. So I used that stash of money to find work for all the fellows from back home. That's what I spent a lot of money buying. Ever since that time, all the fellows have trusted me, and I've smoothed out a path for them to follow. The more I pursued this line of work, the more wrapped up I got in it – and the more addicted I got to it. Without knowing what was happening, I let other people impose on me. Once I'd done that, I couldn't disentangle myself." (390)

When Fourth's construction project bidding skills threaten to drive some of his urban-based competitors out of business, they seek him out to suggest a compromise solution to the impasse. One of the urban-based foremen named Wu proposes a merger between his construction company and Fourth's, but Fourth proudly turns his offer down quite abruptly. Had Fourth gone along with the proposed merger, he probably would have avoided being tattled upon to the police and put on trial in later months. Fourth somehow seems oblivious to the menacing tone of the urban foreman's proposal, and stubbornly rejects the proposal for a merger; he is willing to risk incurring the wily Foreman Wu's wrath. Fourth's own iron determination to stay completely in charge of his business resonates with the decisiveness and courage Fourth earlier showed in migrating here in the first place, and in lifting himself out of poverty through a daring Robin Hood robbery. But the migrant's boldness and decisiveness in dealing with a rival here puts Fourth in peril; the rival foreman is ready to act on his knowledge of Fourth's rural origins, and betray Fourth to the police; Fourth mistakenly believes that his competitor is simply bluffing, and thus can be safely ignored. The rival foreman had genuinely wanted to reach a compromise with Fourth that would enable both to profit from their combined strengths, but when meeting intransigence from Fourth, decides that he has no option but to betray Fourth to the police. All in all, it is a classic case of a communication breakdown between the urban resident subculture and the rural

migrant subculture.

Conclusion

To sum up, China presents a case of the major subcultural boundary existing between long-time locals and guests from the outside; this boundary becomes even more strongly defined when the outsider is a migrant laborer from a rural region, and the insider is an urbanite. Chinese concepts of identity have a great deal to do with regionalism and seniority of the family's residence in a given locale, rather than the simple sort of ethnic concept that many Westerners, and Americans in particular, have typically imagined to be universally of uppermost importance. In investigating the subcultural boundaries of other non-immigrant traditional societies, scholars would be well advised to take careful stock of the variables of regionalism and domestic migration along with the more familiar issues of religion, class, and ethnicity.

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Notes

1. Many Chinese novels featuring migrant laborers from the countryside include the term *mangliu* in their titles. Bao Chang's *Mangliu* (1986) is a novel set in China's far northwest, while its counterpart set in the far northeast is Wang Zhaojun's *Mangliu shijia* (1989).
2. Meng Xin (1996) makes this cogent argument with the aid of case studies of various native-place networks among migrants.
3. Xiang Biao (1996) focuses upon the migrant laborer group as a special community.
4. Some China specialists such as William Rowe consider this division "subethnic" rather than "subcultural;" Rowe argues that "geographically determined subethnic divisions...constituted the most important distinguishing feature between individual Chinese in the late imperial period" (1984:247). Furthermore, Bryna Goodman has demonstrated that this Chinese proclivity for "native place identity" continued to thrive in the twentieth century (1990:4). Most significantly, these key identifying features are definitely not "ethnic" in the American sense of the term. As Emily Honig notes, "if the developments of ethnic-like relationships throughout

China depended on the existence of non-Han minorities, little or no ethnicity would be found" outside of various border regions (1992:5).

5. Zhang Mingyuan's Chinese version is in *Juzuoqia* [Playwright] (1989). The complete English translation by Philip F. C. Williams is in Chen Xiaomei (Ed.), *Reading the "Right Text": An Anthology of Post-Mao Chinese Drama* (forthcoming), 352-425. Page numbers in the body of the text refer to the version in English translation. This play provides a largely urban audience who may know little or nothing about migrants with a far more nuanced understanding of the problems and opportunities of rural migrant construction workers in the northeastern frontier region of Heilongjiang.

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