

**The London School of Economics and
Political Science**

*Growing Up and Becoming Independent:
An Ethnographic Study of New Generation
Migrant workers in China*

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology
of the London School of Economics for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, London, December 2011

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I-Chieh Fang

Abstract

Based on anthropological fieldwork in factories in China's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), this dissertation examines the process of 'growing up' and 'becoming independent' for young migrant workers from the countryside, especially in relation to their decisions about employment and marriage.

In 'post-socialist' China, as many writers have observed, the old systems and ideas have not entirely faded away but new market logics have been imposed on them. Partly as a result of this, the process of achieving adulthood – i.e. the process through which young people should, in theory, learn how to position themselves as full members of society – is now filled with uncertainties. Old expectations about interactions with others have become invalid. This is especially so for young migrant workers from the countryside who, as I argue, possess a double social being, i.e. they are caught somewhere between childhood and adulthood, and who face the challenges of multilocality, i.e. they shift back and forth between rural and urban environments. For them, migration is a mandatory rite of passage, but one that often leaves them suspended in a position of liminality and uncertainty.

The research found that young workers learn, in the course of migration, that manipulating personal networks is the most efficient way for them to get the resources they need – so that they can deal with the problems of uncertainty they face. They rely on the rather traditional mode of 'interconnected personhood', instead of developing what might be called 'individualistic personhood'. Having said this, they are meanwhile enjoying the freedom, opportunities and symbolic values that individualistic personhood can bring them. They stand in between the two systems and typically avoid fully committing to one or the other. This is how they deal with risks and responsibilities within the constraints imposed by their background, gender, and class position.

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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

<i>chengzhang</i>	growing up, maturity
<i>chutou</i>	being successful, exceptional, outstanding, hence also standing out – ‘sticking one’s head out’ <i>bu choutu</i> : avoiding <i>chutou</i>
<i>dagong</i>	being employed, to work for a salary, waged labour (usually implying migrating in order to do this)
<i>dagongmei</i>	female (migrant) wage workers
<i>dagongzai</i>	male (migrant) wage workers
<i>duixiang</i>	object wooed, pursued or looked for, a serious (i.e. marriageable) love interest <i>zhaoduixiang</i> : looking for a partner
<i>duli</i>	becoming independent
<i>huan renqing</i>	pay back the debt of human feeling
<i>hui zuoren</i>	how to be a proper person
<i>hukou</i> system	household registration system
<i>jiachuqu</i>	marry out
<i>jiang shimian</i>	to see the world
<i>laoxiang</i>	people from the same home town or province
<i>liushou ertong</i>	‘children left behind’, i.e. when parents migrate away for work
RMB	Renminbi (‘people’s money’), currency
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
<i>shouqi</i>	literally: receive/take anger; meaning to suffer petty annoyances or to be subjected to daily persecutions
<i>tiba</i>	to pluck out <i>guanzhao tiba</i> : to promote as a special consideration
<i>xinshengdai</i> <i>nongmingong</i>	new generation migrant workers
<i>zongwu</i>	general administrator

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The fieldwork on which this thesis is based was made possible by the general managers of the factories I refer to as THS, KS1, KS2 and KS3. I am extremely grateful for this, and for the useful ‘introductions’ provided by my friend, Darrow. Most important of all, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my informants, i.e. the workers in the factories. Thank you for receiving me in your lives. I only hope that this thesis can do justice to your stories.

Thanks are also due to my supervisors: Charles Stafford and Rita Astuti. I appreciate their guidance over these years. They have encouraged me to think more creatively about my material, and their steady support of various kinds has been very much appreciated. Special thanks are owed to Beverley Brown; she helped ease my frustrations with writing in English, and gave me inspiring feedback and suggestions. My thanks go also to Hans Steinmuller, Elisabeth Engebretsen and James Johnston, who kindly read chapters of this thesis and offered excellent suggestions and critiques. I thank my classmates and teachers who participated in the thesis writing seminar at the LSE Department of Anthropology and in the China Study Summer School for their questions, comments and companionship. The support from my non-anthropologist friends is also deeply appreciated.

This thesis is dedicated to my family who always supported me without any conditions. Without their love and support, I could not have made it. My study at the London School of Economics has been facilitated by a Studying Abroad Scholarship from the Taiwanese Government, a Dissertation Fellowship from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and a Research Studentship from the LSE.

Introduction

This dissertation is based on research conducted among young people from the Chinese countryside who migrate away from home to work in urban factories. These young people are sometimes referred to as ‘new generation migrant workers’, and are generally thought to have some different characteristics and behaviour patterns from previous generations of migrant workers (Wang 2001; see also Chapter 1 below).

As a point of entry into young migrants’ views of the world, I want to begin with a fieldwork observation. Not surprisingly, the young factory workers I met enjoyed listening to and singing popular songs. They often saved them on their mobile telephones and played them back in the factory courtyard when they were off duty. Silk¹ – a young woman who became my key informant, and who I will discuss at length in the chapters that follow – was also eligible, as a middle ranking manager, to sing KTV (karaoke) in the staff common room at her factory. I learned that she had two favourite songs.

The first was ‘Tiny’ (*Xiaoxiao*), which is about a little girl who lifts her head and watches the stars scattered across the sky. The girl makes a wish – counting one, two, three – and then wonders if it will come true. The breeze kisses her face, secretly. There is someone on her mind. Every time Silk sang this song she did so with great sincerity, using all her strength to reach the highest note. She told me the singer is her idol, not only because she is beautiful but also because she is very special and talented. In fact, Silk wanted to become someone like her, she said, although ‘maybe not a singer, but a writer’. She liked the magazine *Duzhe* (Reader), which publishes stories and novelettes about every day life, about events in history, about humorous things. Buying *Duzhe*, which costs about 3 RMB, was one of the few expenditures she allowed herself. When I returned with her to her home in Hubei during the winter, and we were trapped there because of a snowstorm, I bought many second-hand copies of *Duzhe* to kill the time. Silk showed me some articles she had written and told me she

¹ This is not her real name. The names of all individuals from my fieldwork mentioned in this dissertation have been changed.

wanted to submit her pieces to *Duzhe* one day. During her time working in factories, she said, she had accumulated many feelings and wanted to express them in some way. Sometimes as we talked before falling asleep, she would ask me: ‘How can I become a writer?’ Or she might ask: ‘How can I get into the advertising business?’ (i.e. as a writer).

The other song she liked to sing was very different: relatively ‘macho’ in tone and performed by a male singer. It is called ‘As Boundless as the Sea and the Sky’ (*Haikuotiankong*):

I walk in the desert, doubting my own ability. No matter what dreams I dream, they never come true. Just as I open my wings, the wind stops. Could it count as a kind of harvest if I got used to suffering? Luckily I never give up. I never look back. I eventually prove there is really an oasis in the end ...

Thank you, people who were indifferent to me. Thank you, those who looked down on me. Because of you, I never lowered my head. Your contempt led me to the colourful life I have today!

Silk was not the only person who loved this song: it was popular among many of the migrant workers I met. When I sat in Silk’s friend’s car, driving to Hubei province for the New Year celebrations, the three young people in the car sang it together with true emotion, lifting their voices in unison. The lyrics apparently reminded Silk of the many ups and downs in her own migrant journey. She started as a basic assembly line worker ten years ago when she was just 14, and her greatest achievement was becoming chief manager in the Quality Control section of the factory. Later, however, she was downgraded to a general clerical position in the management section – a clear demotion in status.

I start with these songs because they illustrate the two types of question that can be said to preoccupy young migrant workers in China today. On the one hand, they ask themselves, ‘What are my dreams?’ But then they also ask themselves, ‘How can I possibly achieve these dreams when the real world is so tough?’ As they start out in life they need a strategy for reconciling their dreams and desires with a reality that is often difficult and disappointing.

Through examining the cases of young people like Silk, I hope to shed light on the process of rural-to-urban migration in today's China. More specifically, I want to examine migration from the viewpoint of young people from the countryside, especially in relation to their decisions about work and about marriage.

As I have already noted, it is widely held that the 'new generation' differs from others in crucial ways. This perceived generation gap in post-Mao China is generally described as the product of on-going processes of individualisation taking place within a neoliberal economic environment. A commonly held view is that Chinese youth, increasingly 'individualistic' in orientation, now manifest selfish, materialistic and narcissistic behaviour to a degree not seen in previous generations (Rosen 2009). From the new generation's point of view, however, it might be added that the older generation are also sometimes the subject of criticism. It is sometimes said that they are too cowardly to pursue what they really want, preferring to sacrifice their whole life for the needs of others (Rofel 2007).

A good deal of the research on young people in China today is still framed within an economic model which posits that the individualisation of Chinese youth is the direct consequence of responses to market development. However, I believe we should take into account how young people themselves – with their unique moral perspectives, which are a product of their immersion in particular social/cultural environments – actually perceive and respond to the market around them.

I choose *progression through the life course* as my primary focus in this dissertation, since young people perceive the market's power very strongly precisely when they must move through it as they mature, i.e. in the flow of time. I deal primarily with the stage of adolescence and post-adolescence, since a number of key life decisions must be made in these stages. Here the struggles, negotiations and compromises of young people with the inconsistencies of the structure around them is sharply revealed. I will examine their attitudes toward authority, competition, customary practices and love marriage respectively in the following chapters.

A key point for me is that migration, for the young people I met, is not a purely economic activity. It is now an essential rite of passage for them, a fundamental part of

the process through which they gain full membership in their communities and the wider society. In this sense, migration functions as a mechanism for modifying social statuses and constructing new subjectivities. For the young people who go through it, uncertainty, fluidity, and ambiguity – including in relation to ‘who they are’ – have become the norm. By studying migration as it unfolds during the life course, we can therefore shed light not only in this particular case but also on more general questions of human agency and resistance.

SUBJECTIVITIES IN LIMBO

Moving to cities in search of work and marriage partners has become a standard practice among rural Chinese youth – something they ‘normally’ do after they finish school and before they marry. When young people leave rural villages for factories (typically those found in the highly developed coastal regions), and start living away from their families, they gain both a wage and some autonomy. Of course, they may come to the Special Economic Zone (SEZ)² in order to relieve economic pressures on their families. But, in some ways, earning money seems less important to them than the process of finding a new identity. As I shall explore in later chapters, their overarching concerns are expressed in terms of ‘growing up’ (*chengzhang*) and ‘becoming independent’ (*duli*). ‘Seeing the world’ (*jian shimian*) is an important part of the growing up process.³ Indeed, this is consistent with what previous research has suggested. Jacka, for example, notes that rural migrants are interested in ‘exploring the world, trying new experiences, testing new identities and developing themselves’ (Jacka 2006: 134). In Jacka’s understanding, the ‘desire to pursue self-development in the city’ and escape marriage in the countryside is quite possibly the main reason rural girls leave for the city and become workers. The search for ‘autonomy, hopes and aspirations’ (Jacka 2006: 138) is the key factors in their decisions to leave home.

² According to Zhu, the SEZs were set up ‘in order to conform to the world trend and to participate in the world economy’ after ‘China ha[d] launched an economic reform since 1978 aiming to change its system to a market-aware and a more productive regime’. Shenzhen Special Economic Zone is ‘one of the programmes having remarkable significance’ (1994: 1611).

³ See Glossary for this and other key terms.

However, the content of their dreams is very open, and, indeed, this very openness to a realm of unknown possibilities is part of the dream.

In short, rural migrants come seeking unknown chances for better life opportunities that they believe are not available in their rural home towns. They will have heard many inspiring stories – from their neighbours, friends and the mass media – about how people changed their lives overnight through migration. Most of them want to ‘give it a shot’.

In the course of my fieldwork I came to see that thinking about their future and asking ‘What’s next?’ was, in a way, the most important everyday ‘labour’ that young migrant workers engaged in. While young migrants are looking for specific opportunities and seeing what they can get from the SEZ factories where they work, at the same time, they are always busy asking themselves bigger questions such as: what kind of life do I want to have? what kind of job do I want to do? and which person (or kind of person) do I want to marry? In this way, when they are working in the factory most of their attention and effort is actually focused on preparing for their adult life by figuring out how their current situation relates to their imagined future.

In most cultures, to grow up means ‘to pass through and beyond the social dependence associated with youth’ (Cole and Durham 2008: 7). Although psychologists have tended to assume that human development is age-prescribed, following a ‘natural’ process of progression, anthropologists have emphasised cultural variability in concepts of childhood, youth and adulthood and the transitions between them (Cole and Durham 2008: 5). If adulthood does not come ‘naturally’ to a person, through what social processes do Chinese youth come to be recognised as adults? In today’s China, I want to suggest, migration for wage labour has become the key process through which young rural peasants are recognised – both by others and by themselves – as having ‘grown up’. To *dagong* (work for a wage) can be seen as their rite of passage (I will elaborate this argument in Chapter 1). In the course of *dagong*, they try to resolve their career questions and their marriage questions and become adults.

Returning to the two songs I started with, when seen alongside each other, the question ‘What do I want?’ (which is related to the freedom to express one’s feelings,

individuality, autonomy and self-identity) is entangled with the question ‘Can I?’ (i.e. can I realise who I am and form a new layer of identity in a group) and, moreover, the closely related question ‘How can I?’ (i.e. how can I achieve my goals). Putting these questions together, their desires to be modern, free and cosmopolitan seem to be distorted or reshaped in order to fit into the tough reality. What starts as a dream of individualism and being independent is reinterpreted through their world view, acquiring an altered meaning in their new context, having been adjusted to ‘reality’.

The SEZ environment where migrants live and work brings various people together: bosses from Taiwan, consultants from Japan, customers from UK, France, Shanghai, and Beijing, and, of course, co-workers from different provinces. Although the daily work of a migrant like Silk seems, in fact, rather far away from the ‘modern world’ they imagine – not least because workers are isolated in suburban factories – living and working in the SEZ still has the potential to be life changing. Silk wanted to wear fashionable clothes and live in a house like the one owned by the factory director and his wife, she told me. When she talks about this house, she imagines that she will, in the near future, be the ‘tender wife’ of a husband who will be able to provide her with such things.

But what about her dream of becoming a writer? Silk told me quite specifically that she had no wish to become a *nu qiangren* (a ‘powerful woman’, typically one who is successful in her career). If she works after marriage, she said, it will only be because she doesn’t want to be too isolated from society or to be too boring for her husband. She won’t insist on being a writer, in fact. If her future husband disapproves of her dreams, they can just talk about this and decide what the best will be for both of them. It seems to me that her dream will not survive a confrontation with reality. The question ‘Can I do such and such (in reality)?’ will ultimately be more important than ‘What do I want?’ The person she wants to be seems to be a bit uncertain and contradictory: sometimes she emphasised self-fulfilment and the development of her individuality but sometimes she emphasised the need to hide her true self in order to fit in and maintain harmonious relationships with others.

Gender is clearly a fundamental consideration here. Struggling and fighting with cruel reality is, in many respects, as ‘macho’ as the song young migrant workers sang. While ‘struggling’ might well capture the lives of labour migrants it contradicts, in some ways, the passive femininity an ideal wife should have. Migrant female workers like Silk arguably struggle more than men in balancing their desires and tough reality. Although both young males and females work in factories at this point in their lives, their life strategies and decision-making relate to expectations of the future that are heavily shaped and constrained by gender norms. With their socially defined roles, young women/girls and young men/boys express, plan, and achieve what they want in life differently. By definition, this involves a dialectical process between individual intention and social constraints, including the structure of social inequality in contemporary China. The strategies they adopt for resolving the ‘dilemma’ they confront (namely, the gap between their dreams and reality) is, by definition, going to shape their experience of socialisation.

In certain respects, Silk’s narrative about herself confused me. Sometimes she described her life as if she were a traditional Chinese woman: enduring hardship and willing to sacrifice herself for her family and children. She ‘can only allow herself to spend 3 RMB per month to indulge herself in her petty dreams’. At other times, however, she is more like a ‘new generation’ youth: having her own dreams and daring to fulfil her desires. For example I saw her spend quite a lot of money buying a mobile phone and cosmetic products without apparent concern.

I saw many other examples of this seeming split. On the one hand, rural workers of the younger generation are adept at using words and expressions linked to modernisation. Expressions such as ‘independent’, ‘autonomy’, ‘freedom’, ‘personal desire’, ‘my own decision’ and ‘choice’ are prevalent in their daily conversations. On the other hand, in reality, the journey of migration they experience, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters, is largely focused on relationships of ‘dependency’ and on ‘*guanxi* networks’ (i.e. networks of personal contacts/connections). Among other things, they learn how connections matter when it comes to gaining promotions, finding new jobs or getting married. When young migrants emphasise *guanxi* and reciprocal obligations, paradoxically they see this as their preferred way of implementing their agency and, in

fact, their preferred way of being independent and autonomous. When they try to pursue what they want, they seem to be caught in an in-between position between two ideologies, both in terms of the ends they choose and the means they adopt to achieve those ends.

The two modes/ideologies they hesitate in front of, when trying to fulfil their dreams and desires, may be called the 'free exchange mode' and the 'gift exchange mode'. The former is based on the principles of the market economy and sees relationships as chosen and formed by the individual. The latter is based on the traditional moral economy and is built around pre-existing social relationships. Resources are distributed in very different ways in these two modes. In the free exchange mode, there is, at least in theory, an impersonal mechanism (such as law) for distributing resources 'fairly' in the market. In the gift exchange mode, resources are distributed through personal networks, and 'fairness' and justice are judged in relation to pre-existing social relationships. There is no intrinsic assumption of impartiality (see Huang 1997: 26).

For young migrant workers, these two systems offer different advantages and disadvantages when it comes to pursuing what they want. In the free exchange mode, individuals are offered the 'freedom to choose' but they also must take responsibility for the consequences of their autonomous decision-making. In the gift exchange mode, individuals depend on the support of the social networks they belong to, thus sharing the risks and responsibilities with other members and gaining patronage, which shelters them from the consequences of risk-taking and responsibility-taking. However, in this mode, they are also simultaneously bound by social roles that locate them in a net of predefined reciprocal obligations. This heavily constrains individuals' freedom and powers of autonomous decision-making, and thus may sometimes appear to render a person's individuality (or 'true self') trivial and invisible. The two ideological models are also based on different premises about cooperation and competition: in short, they imply different understandings of self in relation to society.

These two exchange modes therefore impel social actors to develop different skills and to form different dispositions/subjectivities. As a kind of shorthand, I will refer to these as 'individualistic personhood' and 'inter-connected personhood', respectively. Faced

with these two models – and it should be emphasised that both are present in the world of the factory – it seems that young migrant workers are uncertain about which one to follow, and which skills they should aim to develop.

Under China's emerging market economy, young people are sometimes said to be developing 'neoliberal subjectivities' (Rofel 2007: 2). They talk openly about their 'hearts' (*xinli, xintai*) and their 'feelings' (*ganjue*) (Rofel 2007: 4). Individuals are not only presumed to possess emotions and desires but it is considered legitimate for them to express them and follow where they lead, in the pursuit of individual freedoms (Yan 2003: 239). Moreover, this is not just a phenomenon of the cities: rural people apparently believe they deserve such freedoms too (Yan 2003: 248). The family has become, increasingly, understood as a private conjugal unit relatively free from the judgments of the outside world (Yan 2003: 243). Young people now express their own opinions in public and do not need to feel afraid of being labelled as deviants when their opinions differ from those of others (Yan 2003: 244). They are prone to be anti-authority, in some respects (Yan 1999: 81). These characteristics echo what theory predicts: that individualisation will come naturally with the flourishing of the market and economic growth.

Yet, if there are these powerful social and economic forces pushing contemporary Chinese youth to be individualistic, why is it that young migrant workers do not fully match this picture? Silk and the other young people I did research with did not fit in these schemes; instead their subjectivities/personhoods were seemingly left dangling in-between 'individualistic personhood' and 'inter-connected personhood'.

Previous research offers two ways of accounting for this situation. On the one hand, there is the view that the relatively underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds of young workers is a crucial impediment keeping them from becoming fully-fledged individualised market subjects. This is a function both of the socioeconomic underdevelopment of rural areas *and* of the consequent 'underdevelopment' of the people living there – in terms of their 'quality' (*suzhi* – see below). If the proper level of economic/social/cultural development could be reached, young migrant workers' mode of subjectivity would become properly modern and individualised. Here the

emphasis is on the structural disadvantages, marginality and exclusion of rural people – to put it simply, their status as victims of the system. From what I will call a ‘*class/quality perspective*’, then, the in-between subjectivities of young rural people reflect the inherent contradictions of their social position and the ways that this has been constructed and reconstructed (by the state in particular). By contrast, a ‘*migration/multilocality perspective*’ – to be explained in more detail below – suggests that keeping both these modes of subjectivity available, and moreover holding onto more than one ‘location’ within which one’s agency is exercised, is actually a strategic choice made by young migrants.

CLASS/QUALITY PERSPECTIVE

As I have just said, a good deal of the research on Chinese migrant workers focuses on the presumed ‘underdevelopment’ among certain groups or classes of people – especially when seen from the point of view of state discourses – and stresses the crucial role played by migrant workers’ desire for upward social mobility within the existing system. More specifically, when migrant workers flood into the SEZs to pursue their dreams, their ‘individual desires’, to a great degree, may be said to have been collectively produced by the state and its policies. Moreover, the rise in China of a ‘modern’, i.e. effectively middle class, lifestyle is, to a significant extent, a product of government discourse and practice in relation to the theme of ‘quality’ (*suzhi*) – a discourse and practice that, in turn, serves the nation-state’s agenda of shifting China from a planned economy to a market economy.

To explain: the state discourse surrounding *suzhi* – ‘quality’ – judges the degree of development of individuals/groups as part of an overall drive for China’s development. In the terms of this discourse, and its official understanding of ‘civilisation’ (*wenming*), rural people are presumed to be substandard within a new system of social stratification (one that replaced the categories of the Maoist era) (Anagnost 1997; Anagnost 2004: 75). Meanwhile, the notion of ‘valuable persons’ was reformulated (Brandtstädter 2009: 150), not least in relation to youth. In the Maoist era the party-state appealed to urban youth to ‘serve the poor and lower-middle peasants wholeheartedly’ (Andrews and Shen 2002: 142) and dedicate themselves to the effort to

‘build an ideal society in which men and women – rich and poor, educated and uneducated – could through their collective efforts, share equally in wealth and happiness’ (Andrews and Shen 2002: 140). Today, in the course of promoting *suzhi*, the party-state ‘calls on people to take responsibility for their own welfare in a competitive world’ (Murphy 2004b: 5).

In such a context, the image of ideal youth in China has been dramatically changed. For the Cultural Revolution generation, the image of ideal urban youth (*zhishi qingnian*) should be ‘the teacher of the part-farming, part-study primary school’ (Andrews and Shen 2002: 141–42), for example:

a young woman who serves the poor and lower-middle peasants wholeheartedly, ... her appearance show[ing] she lives the life of the farmers she serves and is dedicated and happy in her work, ... her lack of adornment show[ing] that vanity is absent from her mind. Her plain, androgynous dress indicates a sacrifice of her individuality, including her sexuality, and her rural setting suggests her temporary sacrifice of ties of family and friends. (Andrews and Shen 2002: 142–43)

For the ’90s generation and today, the ideal image of a Chinese female youth now: ‘has an attractive, regular face, a pleasant smile and sparkling eyes’, ‘takes an interest in art museums and the new galleries in Shanghai and Beijing’ (Andrews and Shen 2002: 142–43), is ‘plugged in to the internet, popular music, and film’, and ‘knows where to shop and how to shop’ (Andrews and Shen 2002: 149–50). In such circumstance, if migrant workers want to reconstruct ‘valuable selves’ (Brandtstädter 2009: 143) under this ‘quality’ discourse, they set out from an intrinsically disadvantaged starting point (Anagnost 2004).

Thus the *suzhi* discourse simultaneously brands rural migrants as ‘low quality’, presents them as in need of ‘remedial attention’ – and, following neoliberalism, places the responsibility for raising their *suzhi* squarely on their own shoulders.

As Yan Hairong emphasises, the countryside is constructed as a ‘wasteland of backwardness and tradition’ in the ideologies that support the state’s economic strategy (Yan H. 2003: 586). Yan goes on to argue that ‘post-Mao development has robbed the

countryside of its ability to serve as a locus for rural youth to construct a meaningful identity' (Yan H. 2003: 579). Rural youth find 'there is no way out in the countryside' – as I will explain, staying in the rural village is not really a viable alternative today – but the only alternative is to locate themselves as 'low-quality strangers' in the city (Yan 2003: 583–84). In China, although economic prosperity exists to a significant extent because of the efforts of peasant workers (Yan 2003: 467), 'urban Chinese generally view rural Chinese as ethnically distinct', in significant part because of the exclusions built around the *hukou* system of registration (Yan 2003: 456).⁴ This ensures that the rural-born are excluded from the civil privileges that the urban-born enjoy. They are not eligible to enjoy freedom of movement rights, citizenship rights or labour rights in the places where they work (Solinger 1999: 459). Put more strongly 'peasants are denied the rights that international norms of justice and globally accepted standards of citizenship decree should belong to all human beings and to nationals' (Solinger 1999: 455). The structural disadvantage installed through the *hukou* system presents a serious obstacle to social mobility for rural migrants, making the aim (individual or national) of raising the quality, or *suzhi*, of migrant workers even harder to achieve.

Chinese government discourse is not the only influence: it is hard to deny that modern lifestyles are working as an 'imaginative stimulus' generally all over the world (Crapanzano 2003). However, China's *suzhi* discourse legitimates the national economic plan through a particular version of this imaginative stimulus. In the *suzhi* discourse, to pursue a modern lifestyle and foster 'a valuable self' is not only a natural desire, it is a social responsibility that individuals have an obligation to fulfil (Anagnost 2004). China's capitalist transformation, in part through the mechanism of *suzhi* discourses, thus presents the appearance of being a 'bottom-up' movement on the basis of individual 'rational choices' (Anagnost 2004: 192). However, *suzhi* discourse and its mechanisms arguably lead young migrant workers into an awkward situation: when they make the 'rational choice' to hope one day they will achieve a modern lifestyle and become middle class (as in the first of Silk's two favourite songs), they

⁴ The *hukou* system is explained in more detail below.

are actually doing something very irrational (behaving in an ‘over-idealistic and childlike’ way, see Yan 2009; Chen 2010). Why irrational? Because what they do is not based on a correct appraisal of the likelihood of their dreams coming true, and this will lead them to a notably tough situation (as described in the second song).

Rofel argues that rural workers in post-socialist China are subjected to a process of ‘othering’, in which they are characterised as ‘potentially hindering China from reaching modernity’ because ‘in their very existence’, they ‘bring the past into the present’ (Rofel 1999: 106). Jacka, similarly, argues that ‘the figure of the rural migrant is a signifier of “otherness” against and around which dominant national ideas about identity are constructed and reproduced’ (Jacka 2006: 31). The party-state preaches the quality of ideal citizenship, fostering this through the discourse of *suzhi* (population quality) and supporting ‘individuals in their efforts to raise their *suzhi*’ and reach *xiaokang* (a comfortable standard of living)’ (Murphy 2004b: 4). This means that ‘low quality peasants’ thus ‘need special remedial attention’ (Murphy 2004b: 3). In the discourse of *suzhi*, peasants and their lifestyle are measured on the scale of modernity and – by contrast to their depiction under Mao as heroes of socialist progress (Rofel (1999: 106) – end up being stigmatised as ‘backward’, with rural migrant workers cast as ‘abject’ (i.e. as occupying a place of radical exclusion associated with physical disgust) and thus as a threat to ‘the project of national modernity’ (Jacka 2006: 31).

The class/quality perspective, then, tells us that migration to the city for waged labour is both a free choice – a way of relieving economic pressures on rural households – and also something that has been *constructed* to be a free choice, via the discourse of *suzhi*.

On the other hand, if we see migration from the perspective of ‘growing up’ (*chengzhang*) and ‘becoming independent’ (*duli*), it could be seen as one of the ways in which young rural people try to resolve the situation of uncertainty and ambiguity in which they find themselves as they try to construct a valuable self. They effectively embrace *suzhi* discourse – in the sense of wanting to better their social position and achieve individualisation – as part of embracing the values of urban marketised China.

MIGRATION/MULTILOCALE PERSPECTIVE

What I call ‘migration/multilocality perspectives’ emphasise how subjectivities are formed through geographical/social mobility and how multilocality keeps social actors constantly ‘on the move’ – and more particularly in and out of different social contexts with different value systems. The migration/multilocality perspective, in other words, shifts our attention away from class positions, class struggle and social marginalisation to the topics of risk management, family strategy and individual negotiation. One key focus is whether migration changes migrants’ subjectivity? According to some research, sometimes it seems that this is so: migrants are portrayed as ‘cosmopolitan’ and as individuals ‘capable of crossing cultural boundaries and building multiple or hybrid identities’ (Castles 2002: 1158). In other research, it seems not. Migrants actually form and maintain strong connections with the place they come from. Their migration projects largely rely on the social networks of their places of origin. Migrants even form their own community in the host country, maintaining their own lifestyle rather than being assimilated by host cultures. Maintaining the linkages with their native places and families, influences migrants themselves but also the people left behind (Trager 2005: 3). This process re-solidifies membership in various networks, households and families. In this sense, migration is an on-going process, rather than a single event (Trager 2005: 19).

In fact, the seeming contrast between these arguments is less extreme than it first appears. Most migrants have ‘contradictory and fluctuating identities’ (Castles 2002: 1158) that challenge the dichotomy of host place–origin place as insufficient to explain migrants’ in-between identity. Migrant subjectivities are formed and reconfirmed through the process they go through as they ‘negotiate their ways between complicated choices of return, assimilation and community formation. These are not exclusive options, and individuals and groups find creative ways of simultaneously adapting to and changing their social environments’ (Castles 2002: 1158). According to Trager, we therefore ‘need to examine people and their activities in terms of their attachment to and participation in social and economic activities in a number of places’ (Trager 2005: 28, see also Koenig 2005). Hence the concept of ‘multilocality’ becomes an important analytical tool in migration studies (Trager 2005). Migrants are located

‘simultaneously inside and outside cultures and societies’, something which to a large extent influences their identities (Osella and Osella 2000: 117).

Certainly, the life of Chinese migrant workers is typically multi-local, not least because of China’s *hukou* system. Following a law of 1958, ‘every Chinese was registered as being resident in a particular place’ (Knight 2005: 17), and official approval is required for any change of registration. Moreover, the *hukou* system is not only about the place of residence but also about resource distribution (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Only those who are ‘a resident in a locality’ can hold the right to ‘share the resources of that community’ (Knight and Song 2005: 17; Chan and Buckingham 2008: 588). *Hukou* basically defines ‘one’s relationship with the state’ (Chan and Buckingham 2008: 588). The *hukou* system provides non-agricultural registrants with ‘housing, employment, grain rations, education and access to medical care as well as other social welfare benefits’ while expecting agricultural registrants to be ‘self-sufficient’ (Chan and Buckingham 2008: 588). In turn *hukou* registration affects geographical mobility, requiring rural residents to gain permission for travel: in Knight’s word, *hukou* works like an ‘internal passport system’ (Knight 2005: 17). The *hukou* system thus limits the rights of permanent residence of migrant workers in the city where they work, and provides no social security for them when they stay in the place without legal local registration (Lu 2004: 20–28; Knight and Song 2005: 17). Consequently, if they want to have a child or get their child schooling in the place they work, they are charged higher fees (Chan and Buckingham 2008: 600). Meanwhile, the migrant workers are typically offered relatively low wages simply because they are only temporarily in the city without having residence rights. Lower wages and higher charges mean they can barely meet their basic cost of living in the city (Pun, Lu et al. 2009). The lifestyle of migrant workers thus resembles the migrations of birds as they move back and forth between their rural home towns and the cities (Lu 2004: 20–28). Even though the *hukou* reform of recent years has been implemented in many provinces, according to Chan and Buckingham (2008), it does not change migrant workers’ situation fundamentally. It only shifts the power of migration approval from central government to local government, which opens the door for them to welcome non-local migrants who are highly-educated and rich by setting ‘entry conditions’ to suit local needs. The

nongzhuanfei ('converting *hukou* from agricultural to nonagricultural' (Chan and Buckingham 2008: 588)) abolishes the line between agricultural and non-agricultural populations but the line between local and non-local still means that resources are distributed unequally. It is a long way from abolishing the urban–rural divide. Chan and Buckingham thus argue that the *hukou* system and its resource distribution mechanism might 'make real change quite difficult' when the news media, outside observers, and also Chinese state controlled media tend to 'focus on China's change' and trumpet China that is on 'a continuous, linear progression towards a 'market' economy, with an open, free society like our own' (Chan and Buckingham 2008: 606).

Some scholars point out that the existence of the *hukou* registration system allows cities to accumulate capital rapidly at a low cost because the *hukou* system transfers the cost of reproducing the migrants' labour power (via marriages, childbirth etc.) back onto the rural villages where they are registered (Pun, Lu et al. 2009). In this sense, their existence in the city does not create too many burdens for the cities they live in. When migrant workers lose their labour capacity, e.g. become sick, injured, old, or pregnant, they are forced to go back to their home towns (Murphy 2002: 13). The cities they work in can sidestep the responsibility of providing insurance protection for them (Yan 2003: 586). From this perspective, the *hukou* system allows city governments to utilise the surplus labour force from the rural areas efficiently and flexibly (Knight and Song 2005) without bearing any welfare costs.

However, no matter whether policy-imposed multilocality makes migrant workers victims or strategic actors, the fact is today there are thousands and tens of thousands migrant workers in China with this separation between their life and work. Previous studies refer to this as 'circular migration' (Davin 1996: 24; Fan and Wang 2008). New generation migrant workers are seemingly unsatisfied with such a state of affairs and are seeking to have it changed (Wang 2001: 67–68; Gao 2010: 9).

So far, the migration/multilocality approach seems clearly relevant to the question I proposed before about Silk and her colleagues' 'in-between subjectivities'. Unlike the class perspective noted above, here various writers see migrant workers as not simply passively exploited through the *hukou* system. Rather, migrants strategically utilise

multilocality to develop better livelihoods and seek their best interests. In fact, many migrant workers want to keep the *hukou* system – because of the selective advantages it offers them – and reject permanent migration (Cai and Wang 2007).

One could go even one step further and ask whether it is migration and multilocality that has had *effects* in terms of young Chinese migrants' sense of identity or whether, on the contrary, it is the search for new identities that, for the new generation, drives their migration and multilocality. In any case, previous comparative research has focused on the ways that migrants might mix multiple subjectivities (of home town, of host country, of the place they temporarily stay, etc.). However, where migrants 'hybridise' these identities and form a new subjectivity, it is noted that they did not give all the component identities equal weight (Osella and Osella 2000). These identities are hierarchical from a young migrant's perspective. For example, when young migrants are keen to identify themselves with the modern lifestyle and middle-class subjectivity, the identity of the place they come from is often discarded deliberately because of its implication of backwardness.

The case of young male migrants from Morocco who migrated to Spain and other European countries for sex work, and thus in theory for money and freedom, provides an interesting comparison. They believe they have come to 'a world where upward social mobility can be attained easily' (Mai 2007: 109). They are not necessarily gay but selling sex is one of many strategies for survival (alongside stealing and drug smuggling) (Mai 2007: 102). They do not want to go home with empty hands: therefore they travel from one country to another instead of returning home. They even rank the countries among themselves according to the degree of modernity of each, from Spain and Greece, to France, Germany and then eventually to the UK and Netherlands (Mai 2007: 109). Mai argues that, through migration, these male sex workers are going through an informal rite of passage to gain a kind of alternative adulthood, instead of following 'family-based models of personhood' (Mai 2007: 113).

When migrant sex workers struggle with 'the experience of exclusion and social marginality' (Mai 2007: 109), their migration project is based on the hope of 'an utopian cultural construction of western modernity' (Mai 2007: 109). The western

modernity in their imagination means sex, leisure and freedom, in which they can possibly escape from ‘their socially more established and hardship-bound roles as loyal sons and daughters, sacrificing their lives for the survival of the family’ (Mai 2007: 103) and obtain an ‘individualised and hedonistic lifestyle’ (Mai 2007: 102). For that reason, they try repeatedly to reconcile ‘the aspirations to individualised late modern lifestyles and established canons of subject formation and relations to the self’, which Mai believes is intrinsically impossible (2007: 114).

Looking at China’s young labour migrants, especially unmarried females, we see an equally complicated picture of the relationship between migration and subjectivity formation. Labour migrants also migrate for the desires of freedom, getting rich and also struggling from the margins to form their modern identity. However, migrant workers *simultaneously* still want to fulfil their social expectations and family obligations. Migration for wage labour is their best strategy to resolve the dilemma between ‘personal desires’ and ‘social responsibilities’, between kinship-based morality (moral economy) and desires of autonomy and commodified display (Mills 1997: 37).

Although labour migrants, like Silk and her fellow workers I met in the SEZs, also yearn for an ‘informal rite of passage’ and ‘alternative adulthood’, they do not reject ‘family-based models of personhood’. They actually want to satisfy the social expectations of their native place while managing to survive in the host place. Young labour migrants seem to be pragmatic: they hope they can gain a new, modern personhood but if they fail, they can still be a decent peasant. In this regard, the personhood labour migrants try to achieve should be able to satisfy the dual social contexts. Thus the dilemma they face and which needs resolving is not a choice between two models but rather how they can maintain both: how will they learn the skills to juggle between ‘social responsibilities’ (such as forming a family and establishing a career) and ‘personal desires’ (such as sex, leisure, freedom and autonomy), trying to find a delicate balance. Previous research has drawn attention to seeming paradoxes in which, for example, female migrant workers are shown to be both ‘the filial daughter’ *and* ‘the rebellious daughter’ (Jacka 2006: 166–67).

In order to understand how female migrant workers reconcile their social obligations and personal desires, we need to consult more detailed studies of how individual migration relates to family decision-making. Anthropologists point out that the decision to migrate out is not typically a matter of pure individual rational choice directly responding to economic circumstances. It needs to be understood through 'intermediate-level institutions that link individuals and macro level forces', notably 'the family, the household and social networks.' (Trager 2005: 16). For example, unmarried female workers in China, just like other family members, 'leave home to work primarily as a result of decisions made by their parents, taken in order to maximise economic benefits to the household' (Jacka 2006: 116). Out-migrants shoulder the responsibilities of mobilizing resources (including money through remittances or information, networks) from other places back to the home town in order to benefit their household economy (Murphy 2002). Remittances, in the form of goods, money or social remittances are also a way to showing love and continuing emotional support to the people left behind (Mckenzie and Menjivar 2010).

In terms of household strategies, the question among family members is, 'Who should stay and who should leave?' Here, family configuration and moral economy matters. In the collective decision for family betterment, individual preferences, including their desires, are typically a low priority. The prescribed roles of individuals largely decide their destiny and constrain their bargaining power vis-à-vis family decisions (Kabeer 2000: chapter 2). For example, in China, unmarried female members generally have no choice but to accept family decisions because 'being at the bottom of hierarchies of both age and gender... [they are] subject to powerful patriarchal discourses' (Jacka 2006: 166). Even if young girls are also the beneficiaries of better livelihood through difficult trade-offs (Locke and Zhang 2010), their migration, as seen from this perspective, is undertaken mainly out of their feeling of moral obligation toward their kin (Woon 1993) rather than individual preference. Similarly, where there is a decision to return, migrants' decision again cannot be separated out from a set of social expectations on the basis of social roles. For example, as the successors of the household, it is their responsibility to sacrifice individual intention and return home when this is required of them (Traphagan 2000: 378). In short, when they going

through the process of migration as a household strategy, out-migrants are picked according to their stage in the life cycle, gender, marital status, level of education and skills. In this regard, leaving home can be seen as ‘... the result of collective investment, a veritable collective enterprise’ (Laacher 2007: 24). Migrants were in this case likened to being on a long business trip, which does not necessarily result in the change of identity, personhood and values system.

An individual migrant’s journey might start from the attempt to obey the logic of family strategy. However, despite the pressure from family and community, young migrants – and perhaps especially young female migrants – do not see their migration journey as merely following the family’s household decision. At the very least, they strategically smuggle along their personal desires, like becoming modern, free, autonomous, and desires of new life. Mills’ (1997) ethnography about Thai female migrant workers, Jacka’s (2006) ethnography about female migrants in Beijing, and Pun’s (2005) ethnography about migrants workers in Shenzhen all provide clear examples of this. This pattern makes their journey to pursue desires seem more like a gentle compromise rather than a form of radical resistance against the system in which they live. In order to make such a ‘delicate balance’ between individual desires and family strategy possible, it is crucial to maintain flexibility. To create more room for negotiation, migrants might deliberately maintain the ‘inconsistent values coexisting’ or ‘remain in the interstices of the different moral worlds’ (Mai 2007: 113). In this sense, morality will become fragmented, individualised and negotiable.

These discussions and theories of migration take us back to a question posed earlier: does change, in the context of migration, go in a single direction? What if holding onto differences, maintaining multilocality and lingering in-between can somehow offer migrants the best way to ‘manage risk’ and gain the most agency possible in an uncertain situation? If so, it is not surprising that young migrants sometimes deliberately choose not to head in any particular direction of development and rather chose to position themselves in between various moral premises, ideologies and even personhoods. In this regard, the assumption about the linear progress to modernity (which is also associated with versions of the class/quality perspective) is problematic. In addition, Murphy (2002: 21) points out that there are two levels of values: in

discourses and in everyday practices. To mobilise values at the level of discourses is much easier than to change values at the level of practice. The degree to which the values in everyday practice can be changed by the values brought by migrants remains an open question. It will hugely depend on how local people perceive these new discourses in the course of the negotiating processes.

In short, the migration/multilocality approach suggests that young migrant workers' seemingly ambivalent and confused attitude toward individualisation might in fact be a matter of choice. Because migrants must handle various social contexts simultaneously, having an 'in-between personhood' therefore suits them. If we want to know which personhood they deploy at any one point, we need to know more about the process of negotiation they engage in while trying to achieve the delicate balance between individual desires and social responsibilities.

The migration/multilocality perspective suggests that, if migrants are positioned between traditional and new ideologies, that is a strategic choice. The class/quality perspective, by contrast, suggests that this is because their 'underdeveloped' position (at the bottom of the social/cultural hierarchy) is impeding them in their progress towards becoming more and more individualistic in line with neoliberal capitalist logics. If the obstacles (such as the *hukou* system) are removed, and a certain degree of development has been reached, the migrant workers will be as individualistic as urbanites. In this dissertation I want to take both perspectives into account, re-examining the questions they rise through a consideration of detailed ethnography about how young workers make decisions while gaining adulthood.

Here, I need to draw attention to the fact that *gender issues are crucial for both models*. In the migration/multilocality model, gender roles prescribe female social actors with gender-specific responsibilities. In the class/quality model, gender factors often intertwine with class factors to form the double dominations imposed on female workers (Pun 1999). It should thus be emphasised that the constraints on and opportunities available to young male migrant workers and young female workers are different. Consequently, the strategies migrants adopt are highly likely to be gender-specific. I will therefore discuss a number of relevant gender literatures in the

individual chapters, and return repeatedly to ethnographic case studies where gender is a central theme.

AMBIGUOUS VALUES IN MARKETISED SOCIALIST CHINA

When we use the two approaches I have outlined above to understand migrant workers' 'in-between subjectivities', we should of course not leave out the crucial fact of China's version of socialism. Only by taking it into account, we can contextualise the tension between individualism and collectivism in the Chinese context.

The regime in contemporary China is officially called a 'socialist market society with Chinese characteristics' (Brandtstädter 2009: 142). That is, China has implemented economic reforms based on market principles but retains its 'socialist' political form, i.e. this is a world of party-led marketisation, involving its own pattern of national development rather than following the western route. Leonard, for example, states that the Chinese party-state is not willing to see so-called 'western ideology' – even if it emerges naturally from the market economy – to dominate China, even more so after China gained in confidence following its economic miracle (Leonard 2008: 14–16). This shows that 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' can function better than western neoliberalism. In pursuing economic growth, the Chinese party-state embraces neoliberal values selectively. As a socialist regime, its aim is to provide the world with another set of values and ideologies that can compete against the 'universalization of Western liberal democracy' (Leonard 2008: 117).

Since the Chinese party-state has its own agenda vis-à-vis development, Chinese youth are growing up under 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. One consequence is that there are considerable tensions and contradictions between the official ideology that children learn in school and the practices and ideology they experience in everyday life (Kwong 1994). Individualism is encouraged (Yan 2010) but only the kind that will fulfil China's need for competitive, self-responsible individuals who can help fuel China's economic growth (Rofel 2007; Yan 2010). Chinese youth are expected 'to be individualistic in some aspects (entrepreneurial and competitive) but not others (self-expression and empowerment)' (Weber 2002: 347), although self-expression is picked

out as associated with neoliberal values in some ways. They therefore grow up in a highly ambiguous situation. This issue can be traced back to the historical root of individualism in China. Modern notions of individualism have been coming to China since the Qing dynasty in the 17th century. However, this was not the western model. As promoted by intellectuals, who asked citizens to be independent, autonomous and responsible for themselves, this was so that they could fundamentally serve the ‘big self’ (i.e. the nation or society as a whole) (see Liu 1993; Yan 2010). As an ideology, individualism thus was conceived not as an end in itself but as the means to collective goals (nationalism) and the remedy to cure a weak nation. Such ‘individualism with Chinese characteristics’ is thus intrinsically intertwined with collectivism (and long before the socialist era). Correspondingly, it is less about free choice, the development of individuality and individual autonomy than it is about taking on individual responsibility for achieving collective goals.

In this sense, as part of growing up, Chinese youth have to ‘feel their way towards a functional coexistence of individualistic and collectivist value systems’ (Weber 2002: 347). The rapid pace of marketisation in China makes the process of growing up for contemporary Chinese youth somewhat experimental. Because being a ‘desiring subject’ is a relatively new status for Chinese adults, the processes of ‘learning how to express various longings, needs and aspirations’ and ‘struggling over how to display and embody the correct class subjectivity toward diffuse lessons on how to become cosmopolitan desiring subjects’ are still unfolding (Rofel 2007: 11). There are no firm norms, rules and role models for Chinese youth to follow. This opens a space within which Chinese (urban or neo-urban) youths can negotiate between grassroots values and neoliberal values (Kwong 1994; Yan 2010) and ‘push the parameter of acceptable behavior’ (Weber 2001; Weber 2002). Kwong thus argues that Chinese youth are experiencing an ideological crisis under the Party’s continued rule (Kwong 1994). This leaves young people in the position of having to figure out almost for themselves ‘the definition of self and relation to society’ which is the crucial content of youth stage (see Gold 1991: 597). They must achieve adulthood but their own parents are not able to provide them with viable role models and guide them through the rapidly changing realities that confront them (see Fong 2007).

This leads to a significant consequence in relation to new generation rural migrants. The contest of values between marketised China and socialist (and pre-socialist) China often happens in between urban and rural settings. In Fujian, according to Brandstädter, rural villagers actively contest the ‘official narrative of improving their quality’: instead they insist they want to be *pusu* (simple and plain) (Brandstädter 2009: 153). Distinguishing *bendiren* (local persons) and *waidiren* (outsiders) they reinforce local solidarity and readopt gift exchange as a way of re-building social relationships (Brandstädter 2009: 143, 153–54). They reject consumerism (Brandstädter 2009: 153) in the name of a ‘politics of sincerity’ re-deploying ‘class politics’ to uncover fake goods (Brandstädter 2009: 143) (Brandstädter 2009). According to Brandstädter’s study, from rural people’s perspective, the values of the market, which to large extent are equal to ‘money talk’ values, are seen as intrinsically selfish and opposed to the collective good (Brandstädter 2009: 150). Far from agreeing that they are ‘backward’, peasants criticise richer household as ‘money-minded, greedy and without *renqingwei* (moral standards and human feelings)’ (Brandstädter 2009: 150). They use Maoist language and traditional *renqing* (moral standard of human feeling) to criticise corruption and consumerism and have ‘developed an attitude of general doubt against any official narrative or statement’ and were ‘always searching for the “real thing” behind the surface appearance’ (Brandstädter 2009: 149). To give another example, rural villagers in Shandong apparently reject the role of individualised peasant-citizen, preferring to remain altruistic peasants (Keane 2001). This leads to a question which this thesis attempts to answer: how do young migrant workers decide what kind of self to become as they try to fit into contemporary marketised socialist China?

MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE DESIRE TO BE A PROPER PERSON

One very basic fact I learned during my fieldwork is that, even if these young migrants wanted to stay in the countryside, a high proportion of them cannot actually make a living there. Most young workers I interviewed did not know how to farm. Only 30% of them told me they had previously done farm work. Even so, when I asked them to tell me something about farming methods, some of them could not elaborate because

their experience of farming was simply assisting their parents on the basis of just following their parents' instructions without any reflective or abstract knowledge of the work. Those were the ones who claimed to have some knowledge of farming. The other 70% of those I interviewed said they knew nothing about farming, even though their households were registered as farmers and they themselves were born with the class status of farmers. In her ethnographic account, Pun also describes her surprise at learning that the migrant workers she met did not even know the size of their household's landholding or even roughly what the annual farm income was (Pun 2005: 55). This seems a widespread phenomenon among rural youth today.

Even if they wanted to learn to farm, some of them would encounter another problem: they have no land to farm (Gao 2010: 10). Only 60% of the households of workers in my sample were still engaged in farm work. Their own parents had also left home to be migrant workers or to engage in petty business in nearby country towns. They rent out their household's land to relatives (close or distant) or to professional farming teams. Such teams have grown up as part of a new business model that has emerged, in which companies rent the farmland of migrant workers. By joining up the small, fragmented lands from each household and combining them into a larger whole, such companies can farm the land professionally and make a higher profit than the sum of the households who previously farmed the land. The relationship between peasants and land in China, as Fei (1992) describes, had already significantly changed before the current generation of migrant workers.

Although lack of farming knowledge and access to land to farm are practical reasons that may lead to the migration decision, the more influential reason, in my view, is the moral discourse among villagers about 'what an ideal youth should do'. Although born in rural villages, it seems that no one seriously expects them to become farmers or stay in their place of birth. For villagers, the synonym for 'staying in one's home town' is 'not engaged in decent work' (*buzuo zhengjing shi*). When I went with Silk to her home town in Hubei, I found many middle-aged villagers in the town who could hardly explain what they did for a living. They did all kinds of different jobs to earn money, taking advantage of whatever was available. For example, they would do farm work; help neighbours who were building houses; go fishing in the river in order to sell

the fish; or do some small-scale business. It is hard to give this kind of ‘career’ a name; while they can earn some money through this kind of casual work, neither their relatives nor they themselves feel proud of their occupations, it seems.

Correspondingly, it appears that the ‘ideal typical’ understanding of ‘youth as a stage in the life course’ has changed from its meanings for previous generations (Gold 1991). Today, a young person who chooses to stay home to farm will inevitably be subject to the negative moral judgements of those around them (Fu and Tang 2009). There was a consensus amongst the villagers that young, healthy and decent people are supposed to work outside their home town doing a ‘decent job’ (*zhengjing gongzuo*) rather than stay at home doing this kind of casual work. These temporary and ad hoc jobs in the village are viewed as having ‘no future’ and ‘no promotion prospects’, as ‘not promising’ and ‘not an opportunity for something bigger’. In short, to stay in a rural village means that the opportunities provided for social mobility by *dagong* will be lost (Fu and Huang 2009). In comparison to middle-aged villagers, young people are expected to show greater concern for the future and, in effect, to try harder. If they do not leave home for work, their rural network will deem them ‘conservative’, lacking a ‘sense of progress’ and ‘incapable’ (Fu and Tang 2009: 47). It will be said of such a young person that this is someone who *meichuxi* (has no future): without a serious purpose in life – as shown by migrating for *dagong* – they are useless and will never amount to anything.

Interestingly, this builds on a dichotomy that emerged during previous generations’ migration: the idea that one goes out of the village in order to work and one stays at home in order to engage in leisure activities such as gambling, attending banquets, visiting friends and so on. Exhausted migrant workers often opted to go home in order to rest and ‘play’ (*wan*) for a while. Therefore, today a young person staying home after graduating would be judged as *lan* (lazy). They should go out to ‘work’, not stay at home to ‘play’ (*zai jia wan*).

Older villagers have other reasons to push young people to leave (Fu and Tang 2009). Thanks to financial remittances from migrant workers, new houses have been built and modern furniture has been bought (Murphy 2002). Although it has been argued that the

comparison between households that benefit from *dagong* income and those that do not is often not obvious (Murphy 2002; Zhou, Han et al. 2008), one important potential impact is on marriage decisions. A young girl and her family will judge if a household is worth marrying into on the basis of its material conditions (Yan 2003; Yan 2006a: 113). If a young man or woman does not follow their neighbours in migrating out for *dagong*, their household is likely to experience ‘downward mobility’ in their village (Zhou, Han et al. 2008).

What Murphy has termed ‘social remittances’ (Murphy 2002: 11) also play a part in this pressure to migrate. Villagers look forward to the information, skills and new ideas brought back by young migrants. As I will describe in Chapter 1, for example, Silk’s parents expect her to integrate into the modern world and bring new knowledge of modernity back to them. This desire to have updated information about the developments in the city is part of what young workers hope to gain for themselves from ‘seeing the world’ (*jian shi mian*) – but it also reflects the fear of the rural villagers that they might be left out of modernised China and their endeavour to connect themselves with it. Therefore, to have some members migrate out will, in theory, benefit collective welfare. No matter how slim the chances of success, villagers take the potential for success into account and expect their young people to at least try, not only for themselves alone but as an obligation or responsibility to ‘the bigger self’. It is also important to note that, especially in respect to expectations of ‘social’ remittances, it is not only young people’s success as workers but as consuming subjects that is expected by their fellow villagers, parents, and relatives (Yu and Pan 2008).

Thus in both practical ways and through the huge pressure of moral discourse, new generation migrant workers are virtually forced to participate in the competitive milieu of marketised China as part of their process of ‘growing up’. While their parents at the outset still had some choice as to whether to farm or migrate for work, there is almost no alternative for today’s rural youth. In order to be an adult, they must make the step of going to the city for work. In this sense, it is, I would say, legitimate to speak of a ‘crisis’ of their life course facing young rural people today. Reflecting this, once they leave, they feel they cannot go home with nothing to show for it (Murphy 2002; Fu and Tang 2009). Therefore, they rarely give up trying, on the basis that ‘if they must die,

they would rather die in the city' (*si yeyao sizai chengshili*) – i.e. die trying to succeed. To be migrant workers, for my informants, is related to their future identity, no matter it is for the hope of being successful urbanites or for the hope of being decent rural adults.

FIELDSITE AND FIELDWORK

I spent twelve months conducting fieldwork in China (October 2007–October 2008), primarily in an electronics factory in Shenzhen's SEZ. I refer to this factory as THS.⁵ I also collected material in three other factories (KS1, KS2, KS3) in Kunshan, near Shanghai. My most important informants were the young migrant workers of THS. My roommate in the factory dormitory, Silk, was particularly important as she was especially willing to tell me her story and bring me into her social circle. She also took me to her home town in Hubei province during the Chinese New Year for three weeks. I therefore met her family, some of her relatives, and some of her classmates. I visited her uncles', aunts' and grandparent's house during my stay and visited the nearby town several times with Silk and her *laoxiang* (friends from the same native place). These opportunities to understand her story and her situation in detail gave me insights into the position of (especially female) migrant workers, that were confirmed by my interactions, formal and informal, with other factory workers.

While staying at THS, I was allowed to walk around the factory freely and talk to workers spontaneously. I attended training courses with workers and sat with them during the recruitment fair. I had my own desk, first in their administrative section and then later in the Quality Control office. I normally sat beside the assembly line to see workers working. I shared a room in the female dormitory with three other workers. I ate in the canteen with the workers, three meals a day, seven days a week. They invited me to shop with them in the nearby supermarkets after work and to go out for activities over the weekend, such as climbing hills in scenic locations.

⁵ The names of all factories mentioned in this dissertation have been anonymised.

I formally interviewed 37 workers at the three Kunshan factories and 41 workers at the THS factory. My policy was to ask group leaders in advance to make sure my interview would not cause any disruption to the factory's work. The workers I interviewed in THS came from nine different provinces, and ranged in age from 16 to 42; 17 of them were male and 24 female. Nine of them were married. 97% of them have siblings – an important point – while only one was a single child.

The data I collected during the course of fieldwork focused on a number of very different themes. First, I collected data about the 'reality' these workers face: what is happening in the society around them (e.g. the financial crisis, new labour laws etc.), the immediate environment of migrant workers, their background, the experiences they have gone through and the social roles they fill. Second, I collected data about the desires, dreams, hopes in young migrant workers' minds which they want to fulfil in their migrant journey. Third, I collected data about the decisions they made about their life choices and the motives behind them, in their own interpretation. In this way, I was able to collect data about how migrant young workers perceive the 'realities' they face, how it influence their decision making, and how they responded.

However, before explaining my data collection in more detail, first I want to give readers a brief introduction to the factories.

The factories: my research sites

As explained above, my research was conducted primarily in the THS electronics factory in the Shenzhen SEZ, supplemented by further research in three other factories (KS1, KS2, KS3) in the Kunshan SEZ, near Shanghai. The SEZs of Shenzhen and Kunshan are actually adjacent to the big cities of Shenzhen and Shanghai, respectively, not within the city proper. If workers wanted to go to the big city from either of these two SEZs, it took around one hour by car to get there. If you travelled around the zones you saw one factory after another. Most people here were engaged in jobs relating to factories. Migrant workers made up a large proportion of the occupants of these areas. They wore the uniforms of their different factories even during their time off as they walked along the streets. In addition to the many factories clustered in the area, there

were some markets, shopping malls and restaurants. Some big luxury hotels were located in the centre of the towns, catering for business meetings.

Kunshan factories

I visited three factories in Kunshan but here I will focus on the KS1 factory, because it provides the clearest contrast with the THS factory I will describe below. KS1 was an electroplate factory where I stayed for about one month. It used to be a state-owned enterprise but had now been privatised and was owned by a mainlander. The current general manager was around 40 years old, and was the son-in-law of the former party secretary (*laoshuji*) of Kunshan city. He had worked in this factory since he graduated from junior high school. As a Kunshan local, he had been immediately eligible to get a job through party-state arrangements. On my visit, he welcomed me and allowed me to interview the workers in the factory by their own arrangement. Later, he allowed me to sit in the Quality Control section, and also on one of the shop floors, to observe workers' daily working life and the interactions among them. I was also able to talk directly to the workers. However, because I needed to ask for permission before I did everything, I found it hard to conduct real fieldwork. So I was also looking for other opportunities. During my stay at KS1, I also visited factory KS2 and factory KS3, conducting interviews and observing workers on the shop floor for three days in each factory. When the chance of moving to THS arose, drawing on a personal connection and introduction, I immediately moved to Shenzhen.

However, my initial research experiences in Kunshan, although brief, was not in vain, especially in KS1. THS and KS1 offered significant contrasts: between a state-run factory and Taiwanese-run factory, between middle-aged workers and young workers, between local workers and migrant workers, between electroplate factory and electronic factory, between a large factory (more than 1,000 workers) and a small factory (around 100 workers), and between a factory in the Yangzi river delta and one in the Pearl river delta (attracting workers from different provinces, the location of factory hugely influences the worker configuration). Accordingly, even though the bulk of my research was conducted in THS, I shall now provide a brief introduction to both KS1 and THS.

Factory KS1 was a big factory compound. It had a large car park when you entered the gate. The main building facing the gate was for managers and clerical workers. As well as the main building, there were two long workshops buildings and one small building housing the canteen. There were around 1,253 workers here, of which 803 were male and 450 female. The majority of the workers (565) came from Jiangsu province. Workers from Sichuan (181) and Anhui (178) were the second most numerous. In total, the workers came from 20 different provinces.

The popular distinction between ‘northerners versus southerners’ (Lee 1998: 118–19) was also prevalent here, as elsewhere in China. But what functioned most powerfully in the managerial structure was actually the ‘local’ versus ‘outsiders’ distinction. Compared to outsiders, the locals got long-term contracts. Their local *hukou* status, rather than their work performance, helped them secure their jobs. Their wage was higher than outsiders. The leaders of factory were primarily from Kunshan and spoke Kunshan dialect to each other in the workplace. When they gave an order to subordinates, they spoke Mandarin with a strong accent. Most workers from other provinces could not understand Kunshan dialect. Thus, the dialect in KS1 was a very direct way to construct ‘localistic otherness’ as Lee describes (Lee 1998: 117).

Because so many of its workers were local, this factory did not provide dormitory accommodation. Workers travelled to work by bicycle, going home every day. Migrant workers rented houses in the adjacent villages. The rent was a huge amount for migrant workers. Therefore, they would normally choose to squeeze in as many acquaintances as possible (spouse, families, relatives or people from the same native place). But the rent still cost almost one-third of their income (around 300 RMB). The rent problem made migrant workers highly conscious of their migrant status and produced a sense of envy toward ‘locals,’ whom migrants saw as the real beneficiaries in the SEZ: it was the locals who got a stable job, a normal life, extra income by renting out their houses, no traffic costs and development of their home town (as a consequence of the factory being there). Migrant workers also had to pay for their meals in the factory. Several times migrant workers told me they wanted to return home and never come back again. At home, they said, they were not forced to work

hard everyday in order to earn enough money just to cover basic expenditure, like food and housing.

The workers at KS1 were generally middle aged. Few young workers were sitting among them. I was told by workers that this was because people believe the chemical air in the electroplate factory was bad for health. Therefore, younger skilled workers who could find better jobs did not stay long. The division of labour in KS1 was mainly by gender. Male workers worked on the assembly line and female workers worked for quality control. The general educational background of all of them was junior high school certificate. If they had a senior high school degree, they were thought to be qualified to become a group leader or a clerical worker. There was a long seniority of workers here: most of them worked here for around 10 years or so. The topic of changing jobs was discussed only among the temporary workers who were paid on a piecework basis in the Quality Control section.

The THS factory, Shenzhen

The THS factory in Shenzhen presented a very different landscape. It was an electronics factory owned by a Taiwanese businessman. The owner was around 40 years old. He grew up in Taiwan and got his Masters degree in engineering in Japan. He still maintained close connections with Japanese experts who were invited to THS to conduct training from time to time. The owner's family was in Taipei. His business partners were in Taiwan too. Therefore, he did not always stay in China, going back and forth between China and Taiwan several times a year. To achieve efficient management, he asked all clerical workers and managers to install Skype on their computers and stay online during working hours. In that way, he could give orders by Skype if necessary.

The THS factory had a courtyard surrounded by three buildings and a main gate. One building housed the office and shop floor, one housed the kitchen and canteen and the other one was the dormitory. There were around 122 workers in total, 52 male and 70 female. The largest number of workers came from Henan (25 people, male 13, female 12). The second largest group was workers from Hubei (19, male 6, female 13). Altogether there were workers from 17 different provinces. Three of them were from

Taiwan, two of whom occupied high-ranking managerial positions. The other one was an engineer. The official language in the factory was Mandarin. As mentioned in Lee's ethnography (Lee 1998: 117–18), asking 'Where are you from?' and 'Who introduced you to this factory?' (implying 'Who is your patron?') were more popular here than asking migrant workers' names.

However, unlike KS1, THS was not dominated by 'local' worker, with permanent contracts and speaking an exclusive dialect. In this factory, the power relations among migrant groups of different provinces were more dynamic. Although the factory was located in Shenzhen, Guangdong, the workers from Guangdong did not form a special level of internal stratification. On the contrary, the strongly accented Mandarin of Guangdong workers made it sometimes hard for them to communicate with the owner of factory, who could not speak Cantonese. For the owner, the workers from all the provinces were all more 'local' than him. Therefore, workers from every province seemed to get the chance to be chosen to be a high flyer. The dominant imaginative division among workers was probably 'mainlanders' versus 'Taiwanese'. Taiwanese are seen to be the special group because they had the relevant 'localistic relatedness' (in contrast to localistic 'otherness') to the owner, and in fact, they did get special treatment in Taiwanese-run factories generally. In KS2 and KS3, Taiwanese cadres lived and ate separately and formed their own social circle. Their daily life was quite separated from that of the mainlanders although they all worked in the same factory. In THS, because there were only three Taiwanese, they were treated like mainlander cadres. When I was in the field, as a Taiwanese, I also had good relationships with Taiwanese cadres. I got the chance to understand their life in the SEZ during the time I stayed in a Taiwanese manager's house when I was in Kunshan and also during the time I spent in THS through interactions with them in my daily life.

Whereas local managers in KS1 generally made a distinction between local and migrant workers, seemingly feeling superior and avoiding mingling with the migrants, the Taiwanese owner in THS seemingly tried to do the opposite. He deliberately spent as much time as possible mingling with migrant workers who were cadres or potentially cadres: playing mah-jong, eating in the restaurant, drinking beer while eating BBQ and playing billiards. He was keen to earn their loyalty by making workers

feel he was one of them. He mentioned several times to me that he believed the trend was to 'localise' the managerial labour force. Comparing the wage difference between a Taiwanese manager and a mainlander manager, he supposed that sooner or later all Taiwanese managers in his factory would be replaced by mainlanders.

The workers here were generally younger, the mode age being 20 years old. 78.04% of them were unmarried. Their average educational background was junior high school certificate. Some of them with university degrees were in high-ranking managerial positions. Compared to the middle-aged workers in KS1 factory, they seemed to be happier and full of hope. When they calculated the costs and benefits of their migrant journey, income and expenses were seldom the priority, as with the workers in KS1. They imagined a good future at the end of their journey and seemed to truly believe it would come one day. The hope and bright imagination of the future to a large extent reduced their complaints about life in the factory, at least temporarily. But at the same time, they changed jobs quickly. Once they felt they had been treated unfairly or wrongly, they just quit the job and returned home, hoping their next job will be better. The hope of the future, the short cycle of work and the continuous 'job hopping', meant that being a worker did not seem to be their main identification; it seemed to be more the practical ladder they must climb in order to achieve their dreams (normally, to be a boss). It was unlikely, in my opinion, that THS would be their last job. I will discuss more as to how the characteristic of youth matters for migrant workers in the later chapters.

This factory provided male and female dormitories and meals for workers. Originally, the dormitory arrangement in the factory separated basic workers and high-ranking managers by locating them on different floors. After moving to the current location, the arrangement separated mainlanders and Taiwanese cadres in two different buildings, while still separating high-ranking mainland manager and basic workers by locating them on different floors. The floors of cadres were well-equipped and have better quality furniture. The Taiwanese owner told me he deliberately made the ranking 'materially visible' because he believed it was the best incentive to motivate his workers to work harder.

The daily routine for low-ranking assembly workers was along the following lines: they ate breakfast in the cafeteria from 7:00 to 8:00 am, and then started work at 8:00 am. The working day was usually divided into two sessions: the first from 8:00 am to 12:00 am and the second from 1:30 pm to 5:30 pm. In the busy season, they worked an extra session, which lasted from 6:30 pm to 9:30 pm. The shift management at THS was organised in the following way. Every worker had a card (*changpai*), which the worker used to clock in and clock out. Each card included the worker's photo, name and the section in which they worked, and details of the areas in which they had managerial responsibilities. If they wanted to go out, they needed to hand their card to the guard sitting at the main gate. When they came back into factory, the rd was returned to them. Everyone wore a uniform during working hours, no matter which rank they belong to. The uniform consisted of a blue shirt in the summer and blue jacket in the winter. While they must wear the specified top, workers could wear their own trousers and shoes. If the worker worked on the shop floor rather than in the clerical or managerial offices, they had to wear a hat. The colours of these hats differentiated statuses in the factory hierarchy and also different managerial sections. The hat of the leader was dark blue. The hat of the lowest-ranking workers was light blue. The pink hat was for the Quality Control sections.

There were slogans everywhere in the factory, especially emphasising the 'quality' of the products, such as 'Never produce substandard products, never let substandard products go out, never accept substandard products' (*bu zhizao buliangpin, bu liuchu buliangpin, bu jieshou buliangpin*). A notice board posted the rewards and punishments given to staff, indicating the reasons. For example, 'Announcement! XX is awarded a demerit because he ran in the aisle.'

There were partitions separating the managers' offices from the shop floor. There were big windows in this partition wall, with curtains on the side of the managers' offices. This meant the managers could always draw the curtain aside and engage in surveillance of their workers. In contrast, the workers did not have the right to decide to peek into the managers' rooms. Even though the form is different, the concept is similar to Foucault's 'panopticon' (Foucault 1979): that is, workers never knew when

the manager was observing them and, as a result, they usually self-governed and behave as if they were always under surveillance.

During working hours, the lowest ranking workers were assigned to three groups for different tasks. The manager of the manufacturing section assigned the tasks as well as the volume of work they had to achieve that day; this assignment was given to each group's leader every morning. Then, the group leaders were responsible for deploying the labour in their group, and for managing the procedures, the efficiency control, the working space allocations etc.

In theory, the working procedures should have been controlled by SOPs – 'standard operating procedures' – listed on a board hanging in front of each work station. However, normally SOPs and their presentation were only for examination and verification to meet the requirements of guests. In everyday practice, reference was rarely made to the SOPs. The group leaders taught their workers how to do the work correctly by demonstrating it themselves several times in front of the workers. Then, workers then repeated the same action under the eye of the group leader. If their movements were judged sufficiently accurate, they then had to repeat it – thousands and thousands of times. In order to avoid wasting time and to achieve maximum efficiency, workers were asked to keep the same position of their fingers and the same posture of their bodies.

Once a month, wages were paid. The accountant would bring the cash to the shop floor and ask the workers to line up according to their employee numbers. The most money they could receive was about 1,900 RMB per month (currently about £180). They might earn less than 1,000 RMB if business was bad.

Although he provided the workers' residence and its interior arrangement (which hugely influenced workers' off time lives), the Taiwanese owner of THS told me he never spied on the sex life of workers. Rofel (1999: 244–56) writes about a textile factory in Hangzhou and shows how the implementation of the family planning policy encouraged managers to invade workers' privacy by spying on their sex lives. When I asked this question, the Taiwanese owner laughed and told me he felt this practice was ridiculous.

However, the point Rofel (1999) makes that the line between work and life can be incredibly fluid is also relevant to THS. Life in the factory did not have a clear divide between working hours and time off. Managers could easily find workers to work extra shifts if necessary because workers all lived in the same compound. But, surprisingly, the migrant workers welcomed this and complained that they were bored if they did not have to work in the evenings. If they didn't spend their evenings on the shop floor, they didn't know what else to do. Therefore, I wondered if they had their 'life' in the factory.

However, I gradually came to understand and saw how the workers smuggled their life into their work routines. The workers were growing up here: falling in love, getting married and having children, all in the context of the factory. Their kinship ties were influential in their decisions on public affairs within the factory, e.g. about who should be hired.. They intertwined friendships, private intentions and personal developments tightly with their job. Public and private were two sides of the same coin. Managers and the rules of the factory did intervene into their private lives and at the same time workers also used resources in the factory to complete their private life – notably, gaining adulthood (which, for them, comprised primarily establishing a career (*liye*) and getting married (*chengjia*). The factory offered them opportunities they could not find in rural villages.

Data collection

In order to understand which personhood (i.e., individualist personhood or interconnected personhood) young migrant workers judged to be most useful for fulfilling what they wanted, I sought to collect data about 1) how young migrant workers negotiated their marriage and career goals; 2) how young workers made sense of these goals and their own sense of where their migration and the factory system have helped or failed them; 3) what influenced the choices they made.

I was interested in the possibilities and constraints that shape individual choice in this context. I therefore paid attention, for example, to managerial strategies in the workplace and the ways in which migrant workers reacted to them. I paid attention to the conversation when young migrant workers talked about their future dreams and

decisions for next plans. Since they never understood what ‘anthropologist’ meant and often confused me with a psychologist, they would often come to me to talk about their *xinshi* (worry, frustration, angry, negative feeling). For me, although I was quite embarrassed in failing to answer questions like ‘If I cannot sleep, what should I do?’, it was the best opportunity for me to understand their feeling, thoughts and reasoning. Luckily, they were also willing to share their happy moments with me. If they found something interesting and exciting, they chatted with me too. During the Beijing Olympic Games, we watched the matches in the dormitory or the common room and shared the information about our favourite sports.

About the data on family backgrounds, educational backgrounds and working experiences I could not observe directly, apart from three weeks in Hubei province with Silk. Therefore, the data concerning these matters I mainly collected 1) through occasional conversations, 2) through the semi-structured interviews or 3) through official documents. Occasional conversations frequently occurred: for example, when I sat in the canteen I would talk to the workers sitting next to me, or when they sat on the swing after dinner waiting for the night shift to start they liked to talk to me and answer my questions.

I carried out a relatively large number of semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, in Kunshan and in Shenzhen, I collected 74 kinship charts of migrant workers covering three generations of their families. In this way, I collected basic personal data about age, education and family background, family form and size, the distribution of their relatives, the trajectory of their moves, where their job opportunities came from and also the farming situation in their home town. I interviewed workers about their life histories. I asked them to describe their life from childhood to now. Through the stories they shared with me, I thus learned if they were *liushou ertong* (a ‘child left behind’) (see Chapter 1). They told me about their decisions at each change point in their lives, such as giving up school, and about their ‘job hopping’ trajectories. Through their narratives, I learnt how they perceived changes in their family conditions. I asked my interviewees some fixed questions by taking advantage of chance encounters at the factory: 1) what are your dreams? and 2) what do you want to be in the future? We also talked about their adaptation to the new

environment of the SEZ, about their feelings during the process of migration etc. These data helped me to get a basic understanding of my informants and allowed me to understand their decisions better.

Another source I have drawn on is official documents: the data they put on the Human Resources forms which every worker had to fill in when they arrived at the factory: 'name', 'sex', 'education', 'the year and day of birth', 'home town address', 'married or not', 'parents' names and jobs', 'previous working experiences and the reasons of quitting', 'the date of arrival [at THS]'.

During my fieldwork, the Chinese government introduced a new labour law.⁶ I interviewed the managers and workers about their opinions about it. As time passed and there were changes in the policy related to migrant workers, like the *hukou* system, and in the global economic situation, notably the financial crisis, I also followed reactions in the factory.

THESIS OUTLINE

Chapter 1 focuses on migration as a 'rite of passage' for contemporary rural youth, which makes them sharply different from previous generations of migrant workers. I argue that, if they show any characteristics of being 'spoiled children', as the media and some scholars have suggested, this is not because they are really spoiled. Rather, it is because they are anxious about the life crisis they are confronting. They are effectively stuck in a liminal position and trying to find a way out. Today, adulthood does not come 'naturally' to rural migrants. They need to manage how to *cheng jia li ye* (establish a career and form a family) and it is their own responsibility, almost without state and family support. The following chapters will elaborate how they go through the process of '*chengjia liye*' respectively: Chapters 2 and 3 are about establishing a career, and Chapters 4 and 5 are about forming a family. Through

⁶ The new 'Labour Contract Law' was introduced in early 2008 by Chinese government. It 'formalises workers' rights on a series of tension-generating issues, including the requirement that employers sign written contracts with every employee, limit overtime hours, and offer a greater role for the trade unions' (Wang et al. 2009: 487).

exploring these decisions, I seek to uncover both how young migrant workers perceive market values and the personhood/subjectivity it promotes and also the way in which they adjust/change/shift their subjectivities accordingly. Through analysing this ethnographic material, we can find a better way to explain their ‘in-between’ subjectivities.

Chapter 2 focuses on the question of whether workers become ‘enterprising selves’ after they come to the modern factory. I describe how, under the modern surface, factories control workers through authority on basis of hierarchy. Workers learn that ‘authority and hierarchy matters ‘in determining their chances of better opportunities and also welfare support. At the same time, the factory also asks workers to respect regulations in order to control workers’ labour force efficiently. The workers thus start to realise the inconsistencies between these surface rules and the actual hierarchy-based practice and conclude that it is a mark of adulthood – equated with a grasp of ‘reality’ – to know how to fulfil both sets of demands.

Chapter 3 discusses why job hopping is so prevalent among new generation migrant workers. At first glance, job hopping seems to imply that young workers have become ‘competitive’ and sophisticated operators within the logic of the market, manifesting characteristics and ways of calculating unknown to socialist workers. Does job hopping therefore mean they have become the social actors required to fit into marketised China? My research does, indeed, show that their job hopping behaviour is directed at achieving better wages and opportunities – but the process itself bears little resemblance to fair competition or work performance. On the contrary, job hopping, like promotion within a company, is more oriented to skills of cooperation and forming and maintaining social relations. The hope is to find patrons who will ‘pluck them out’ and thus free them from direct competition with their fellows. This is a delicate process, involving paradoxical reasoning toward competition and being successful, as embodied in the nuanced meanings of the term ‘*chutou*’ (to lift one’s head). Behind their job hopping, the competition pattern they engage in is more like that of the traditional big family: the competition between brothers for their father’s favour (in the factory context these ‘fathers’ can be female supervisors).

In between Chapters 3 and 4 is a short section termed ‘Interlude: Intimacy, Mistrust and Friendship’. As a way of building a bridge between the two main sections of the dissertation, I want to briefly discuss some issues related to living among strangers in the factory and, in turn, some issues surrounding friendship. The importance of *laoxiang* networks show that young migrant workers still rely on ‘the past’ to face the future. To make friends with *laoxiang* satisfies their hope for something new while also satisfying their risk aversion and psychological need for trust.

From Chapter 4, attention shifts to young migrant workers’ family relationships and ultimately how they manage to marry and form a family, the second aspect of *chengjia liye*. But, first, we examine relationships with workers’ natal family. Chapter 4 discusses sibling relationships within the household and how this influences male and female migrants’ (different) attitudes toward their home town, showing that customary practice and expectation still have a large bearing on young migrants’ decision-making. Yet the market economy has had an effect in breaking the pre-existing balance in reciprocal relations on basis of moral economy: the net effect is to make the elder sister a victim, causing much tension in the rural household. The villagers’ way of resolving this tension is to push the daughter to marry out (which removes the trigger of tension) and marry up (which makes parents feel less guilty). Unpacking siblinghood thus not only shows the different experiences of male and female young migrants but also demonstrates that, even though the market economic setting has brought dramatic changes to their world, making the moral economy in some senses negotiable, some practices, notably that daughters have to marry out and that the son will inherit the property, still continue without challenge.

Chapter 5 is about how young migrant workers, especially female workers, engage in the practice of romantic love. What does romantic love mean for them in their context? Do the ethos and aesthetics of romantic love set migrant female workers free or make them anxious and fearful? How is femininity imagined in a domain of the personal still largely premised on female powerlessness? What does ‘being independent’ mean as between young migrant workers’ self-development or finding a good husband?

Chapter 1

Migration as an Incomplete Rite of Passage

The first time I walked into KS2, an electronics factory in Kunshan, I saw hundreds of young people at work side by side. Most of them were in their late teens or early 20s. I sat next to one of the assembly lines for half a day to see how they worked. These young people seemed full of vitality. It was a very energetic place.

During break times, I observed the young workers having fun – ‘playing’ (*wan*). They joked around with each other. They took out their mobile phones to play games. They hit their colleagues for no particular reason except for fun and they chased each other along the corridors during the ten-minute break. They would call out someone’s name, then, when the person asked, ‘What is it?’, they would just shrug their shoulders and reply, ‘Nothing!’, with a smile. The one whose name was called would open their eyes wide and look annoyed. The first one would laugh, their face expressing satisfaction. At the THS factory in Shenzhen, I encountered a similar environment. Boys went out of their way to tease girls. If a boy and a girl were walking side by side, with the boy, say, on the left, he would reach out to touch her right shoulder and – expecting someone on her right side – she would turn back to look. But there would be no one there, which left her confused. Then she would turn to her left and see the boy smirking. Feigning anger, the next move would be for her to hit him. That way they could have bodily contact. The most interesting pastime for them, in my experience, was finding a romantic partner or acting as matchmaker for their colleagues. The factory is never short of gossip about who is in love with whom.

After the break, the young workers get back to their jobs. Once back at work, they look more mature and well behaved. Each assembly line has one leader. The leaders are also young, in their early 20s, and the shoulder patch they wear is the only thing that differentiates them. When I approached one of the assembly lines, a young leader came to welcome me and show me around. He was a bit shy and gave me the impression that he was not quite sure what he should say or do with me. He kept asking me earnestly to give him some comments (*zhijiao*) on the performance of his assembly line. When I

realised he was treating me like an official (*zhangguan*), I told him I was actually a PhD student and that I had come to the factory to learn things from them. He nodded silently and then put the question in a different way. ‘You see, I am always trying to improve the efficiency of this work station. I have tried this way and that’, he said, pointing at the relevant machine to show me what he meant. ‘But nothing really works,’ he continued. ‘I always need to put one more worker at this station and spend hours getting things in order. In your opinion, what should I do?’ After he asked this question, I spent 30 minutes discussing it with him. We had a nice chat and at the time I felt that this line leader was like a very good student: keen to learn from others and resolve every problem he encountered.

Later, after talking to the director of the KS2 factory (a Taiwanese businessman with a PhD from an American university), I realised why the young leader had responded to my questions in the way that he did. The director encouraged everyone to put forward their ideas and in this way provided them with opportunities for upward mobility in the factory. The director’s assistant, a Taiwanese manager in her 40s, told me, sighing with emotion, ‘When you provide a learning opportunity to the kids from rural China, they appreciate it deeply and treasure it to death [*zhenxi de yaoming*].’

But the workers’ childish side still spills out from time to time. They will suddenly yell loudly, ‘*Fansile!*’ (literally, ‘vexed to death!’) when their *laoda* (big boss) is not in the office – and then burst out laughing. They squabble and argue just for the sake of it and say, ‘*Wo jiushi yao zheyang* [that’s just how I am]’. Sometimes, as this suggests, they are like little kids – but they are also capable of being serious, thoughtful and earnest.

This chapter seeks to explain how these young people think about and talk about their reasons for coming to the factory, what they are looking for and what kind of person they are trying to become. In particular, I shall try to show how the ‘half child, half adult’ status of these young people is a topic worthy of scholarly attention, one that may give us new insights into work migration in China today. More specifically, I want to take migration for work as a kind of ‘rite of passage’ that young people go through, a process during which they seek to grow up and establish themselves in life in culturally acceptable ways.

BACKGROUND OF THE WORKERS

Let me start by providing some general information about my informants. As might be expected, the young migrants I met come from different provinces across a wide geographic range of China. There are 1,545 workers in total at the KS2 factory in Kunshan. The largest proportion is from relatively nearby, Jiangsu province (24.6%, 380 workers). Second and third place are taken by Shandong (17.73%, 274) and Anhui (13.85%, 214) provinces, while Henan (10.49%, 162) is fourth. At the THS factory in Shenzhen, the largest number of workers was from Henan province (21%, 25), the second largest from Hubei (16%, 19), and the third largest from Guangdong (13.4%, 16). There were also workers from Guangxi (11.8%, 14), Jiangxi (9.2%, 11) and Hunan (7.6%, 9). However, these proportions have changed over time. For example, older workers at THS told me that migrants from Hubei formerly outnumbered migrants from Henan; today the situation has reversed. This has come about, they said, as a result of conflict between the Hubei group and Henan group.⁷ Indeed, I noticed soon after I started my research that ‘local knowledge’ about the backgrounds of different groups of people – and especially about their places of origin⁸ – was a regular topic of

⁷ The background to this dispute in fact relates to some of the individual workers discussed here. Ling, Silk’s cousin (Silk was introduced in the Introduction), recruited many workers from her home town when she was manager of the THS production section. Her husband was director of factory. They acted as benefactors for those Hubei workers who had informal ties (*guanxi*) with her. During that time, the number of Hubei workers soared – which irritated workers from other provinces. When the THS factory was re-organised, Hunan workers said they would resign collectively if the new management did not replace Ling and her husband. Ling’s husband was downgraded but Ling kept her position. The result was that Ling and her husband then ‘hopped’ to a competitor company that employed mostly Hubei workers. Thereafter, at THS, Hunan workers came to outnumber those from Hubei. The new director of the factory, Light, happened to come from Hunan.

⁸ According to my informants, Chinese people are mainly grouped in two main categories, *nanfang ren* (southern people) and *beifang ren* (northern people), and many judgements, stereotypes, impressions and also emotions attach to these categories (see Lee 1998: 117–19). For example, it is sometimes said that *nanfang ren* are richer, more sophisticated in their etiquette, more ‘dainty’ (*jiangjiu*) – but also more calculating, stingy and pragmatic. By contrast, *beifang ren* are felt to be poorer, more straightforward and more sincere – but also ‘ruder’ and more ‘simple-minded’. Within these two main categories, there are subgroups that are mostly classified by province. For example, Hubei people, categorised as *nanfang ren*, are famous for being articulate, calculating and streetwise. According to the popular expression ‘*tianshang youzhi jiutou niao, dishang youge hubei lao*’: Hubei people are just like nine-headed birds on earth, i.e. they can talk and act in nine different ways); being articulate, they get everything they want. By contrast, Henan people, who are categorised as *beifang ren*, are

conversation among the migrant worker (and also among local people outside the factories). It seems to me that, in an environment consisting of many unknowns, this was a way of trying to gauge their colleagues, who might be from very different cultural backgrounds, speak different languages, eat different food and make different moral judgements from themselves. Workers need to find ways, however crude, to interact in everyday life.

However, even though migrant workers come from different provinces, their family background tend to be rather similar. They mostly grew up in rural villages. Their parents are mostly farmers – or at least officially classified as such. The young migrants themselves are registered in the *hukou* (household registration) system as *nongmin*, i.e. as farmers/peasants (Knight and Song 2005).⁹ The government has allocated the majority of them land to farm. However, at least half of them do not know how to farm and have almost no agricultural skills, knowledge or experience (Yu and Pan 2008; Chen 2010). Some of them do not have land allocated under their names, e.g. because their birth violated China's birth control policy or because their families were affected in other ways by government land policy (see Gao 2010: 10).

Starting with or before their parents' generation, rural people began to crowd into nearby towns or cities farther away on a large scale to *dagong* (work for a salary).¹⁰ Consequently, about half the migrants I met grew up as *liushou ertong* ('children left behind') (Ye and Pan 2011) and were taken care of by their grandparents or uncles/aunts, seeing their parents only during the Chinese New Year period.

The young people I met are part of what is generally known in the literature as 'new generation migrant workers' (*xinshengdai nongmingong*). This expression is used by some scholars specifically to describe migrant workers born after 1980 (Li 2009; Chen

poor and short-tempered (*zhi*), according to the stereotype. Shanghai people are snobbish and famously hard to get along with. It hardly needs to be said that the circulation of such cultural stereotypes reinforces bias but the question here is why such ideas are so often heard in the factories of the SEZ.

⁹ For more detail of how the *hukou* system functions, see Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Background information about rural migrants going to the city for work can be found in John Knight's 'Labour policy and progress: overview' (Knight and Song 2005: 13–45).

2010; Gao 2010) in order to distinguish them from the first generation of migrant workers, those born before 1970, and the second generation, who were born between 1970 and 1979 (Wu and Xie 2006).¹¹ According to a survey conducted in 2009 by the National Bureau of Statistics, more than 120 million migrant workers in China today were born after 1980, which means that this group constitutes about 60% of the total migrant workforce (Bian, Zhang et al. 2010; Chen 2010: 79–80; Gao 2010: 9). One quarter of young people (aged 16–30) in today’s China are ‘new generation migrant workers’ (Chen 2010: 80).

Unlike first-generation migrants (who for the most part had already married before migrating, had children in their home towns, and shifted back and forth between their urban and rural bases) and second-generation migrants (who also tended to marry before leaving home but typically stayed longer in the city and lived separated from their spouse/children), most of the new generation have still not married (Wu and Xie 2006; Yu and Pan 2008; Fu and Huang 2009: 28; Chen 2010). In a society where marriage remains a defining feature of full adulthood, this is a crucial fact, as I will discuss.

The circumstances of these young migrants have attracted much scholarly and political attention in recent years, especially after the State Council of the PRC issued a call for ‘resolving the issues of new generation migrant workers’ in its Central Number One Document (*zhongyang yihao wenjian*) in January 2010 (Chen 2010; Gao 2010). Corresponding to the official stance, much of the current discussion treats new migrants as a problem – an obstacle to the satisfactory urbanisation and modernisation of China. International attention was recently focused on migrant workers when 14 suicides occurred at Foxconn.¹² Apple’s biggest ‘original equipment manufacturer’ (OEM) factory in China. They were all migrant workers aged 18–25 (Chen 2010). Even the doubling of salaries seemed to leave the problem of worker

¹¹ The definitions of ‘new generation’ migrant workers are not entirely consistent. Some scholars define the ‘new generation’ as those who migrated out after the 1990s by distinction to those who left in the 1980s (see Wang 2001; Yu and Pan 2008: 156; also He and Fu 2006 and Huang 2010).

¹² <http://www.cbmedia.cn/html/64/n-382864.html>.

disaffection unresolved: the suicides still carried on.¹³ This led people to ask, ‘Who are these young workers, how do they think and what exactly do they want?’ China (and perhaps the world) began to realise that these new generation migrant workers might not be the stereotypical submissive, hardship-bearing ‘producing subjects’; new research on this generation of migrant workers began to flourish. However, as will be explored in the next section, much of the existing research is hampered in answering these questions by assumptions about the homogeneity of the migrant work force rather than paying attention to the diversity behind the collective term ‘migrant workers’ (*nongmingong*) (Fu and Huang 2009: 24).

CHARACTERISING NEW GENERATION MIGRANT WORKERS

According to some Chinese scholars, China’s young migrants are driven in their actions, to a greater or lesser extent, by the demands of consumer culture. That is, the workers in this generation, it is said, want to show their individuality through consumption behaviour (He and Fu 2006; Yu and Pan 2008), preferring to pursue a ‘fashionable life’ as opposed to maintaining a ‘stable life’ in the manner of their parents (He and Fu 2006; Li 2009; Huang 2010). Thus they seemingly migrate not only for money but also in order to adopt an entirely new way of living (Yu and Pan 2008). These young migrants are also described as largely indifferent to their rural home towns and towards farm land of the kind held by (most of) their families (Chen 2010: 80). Indeed, despite their rural origins, the young people described in these literatures do not seem to have any of the characteristics of traditional Chinese peasants as described by Fei, including an enduring attachment to the soil and an ability to work very hard (1992). They are, it seems, in search of a new kind of Chinese personhood – an ‘individualistic’ one.

Interestingly, when the Foxconn suicide scandal first erupted, public opinion blamed ‘sweat shop’ conditions in the factories, where it was assumed the wages were too low and the working hours too long. Once it was realised, however, that Foxconn was actually offering higher wages and better working conditions than most factories in

¹³ http://www.mediaxinan.com/snxw/content/2010-11/05/content_454022.htm

Shenzhen,¹⁴ the bulk of public opinion shifted to blaming the young people themselves, suggesting that they manifested character defects of one kind or another.¹⁵ Both in the media and in scholarly work young migrant workers were said to possess a low tolerance for stress, not wanting to take on dangerous, dirty, energy-consuming and humble jobs (Gao 2010). According to Gao (2010), they do not have the sense to be pragmatic about life, trying to live like urbanites even though this is impossible for them. Some scholarly analyses suggest that their consumerist desire for ‘the good things’ results from most of them being spoiled ‘singletons’ in their families (Chen 2010; Gao 2010: 10), i.e. that their attitude is a product of China’s one-child family policy.

In fact, very similar terms are sometimes used to describe today’s Chinese youth in general. A widely shared image is that young people in today’s China are individualistic and materialistic (Yan 2009), that they want to indulge in the good life and are concerned primarily with making more money (Kwong 1994; Yan 2006b; Rosen 2009), that they ‘consider themselves the center of attention’, that they ‘don’t like to cooperate with others’ and that they ‘don’t want to take on any responsibilities’ (Rosen 2009: 363). In short, they are depicted as the Chinese ‘me generation’ (Rosen 2009; Sima and Pugsley 2010). At the same time, they are said to be quick to ‘demonstrate an anti-authority tendency’ (Yan 2009: 115), challenging pre-existing power relationships when possible. The characterisations of these traits in the media, and in some scholarly analyses, are generally quite negative – and they are contrasted with the positive traits associated with traditional Chinese culture in general and with Confucian morality in particular (Rosen 2009).

Other scholars, however, present young migrant workers as primarily victims of the rigid social policies related to China’s urban–rural dichotomy, especially the *hukou* household registration system, which places them in a contradictory position. On the

¹⁴ See <http://www.donews.com/it/201005/99023.shtm>.

¹⁵ However, this is not universal. Some news stories blame inappropriate management, while social contradictions are emphasised elsewhere, e.g. on website blogs and expressions of opinion. Some public officials and professors blame the unreliable legal system and local government for failing to take responsibility.

one hand, their mentality is close to that of young urbanites, which makes them incapable of adapting to a rural way of life any more. On the other hand, the *hukou* system makes it very difficult for them to gain full urban citizenship so that they can stay legally in the city (He and Fu 2006; Wu and Xie 2006: 22; Li 2009; Huang 2010).

There is thus a division in the existing literature – collectively, the news media, popular opinion *and* scholars – in which today’s young rural migrants are depicted either as spoiled children – products of the one-child policy and on-going individualisation – who are incapable of handling factory life – or, by contrast, as appropriately ‘modernising’ young people who are thwarted from fulfilling their goals, victims of rigid government social policies and exploitative private enterprises.

However, these perspectives have some points in common, notably the shared assumption that new generation migrant workers leave home for the city for different reasons from those of previous generations. In this respect, they both see the current generation as more individualistic, seeking personal goals and, correspondingly, but with a difference of emphasis, these perspectives also concur in seeing them as unwilling – or unable – to endure the work/life hardships that their parents endured in the past. What distinguishes the two perspectives is that, while some authors adopt an (implicitly or explicitly) negative moralistic stance towards the new generation migrants’ individualistic orientation and its origin in their ‘spoiled singleton’ childhoods, others view this emergent individualism as a perfectly natural consequence of modernisation and sympathise with the young migrant workers, calling for reform of the *hukou* system so that rural youth can fully settle down in the city.

Unfortunately, both the polarisation and the commonalities of these competing perspectives have the effect that relatively little attention is given, in these accounts, to the desires of migrants to take on and fulfil *responsibilities* of one kind or another. Nonetheless, within the existing literature, evidence for this can be found in young migrant workers wanting to own their own businesses and thus take on responsibilities (Wu and Xie 2006: 25; Gao 2010: 10), to participate in public affairs and integrate into new social environments (Wu and Xie 2006: 24), to seize opportunities to learn (He and Fu 2006: 10; Wu and Xie 2006: 24–25), to fight in order to bring their families to the city (Gao 2010: 11) and to gain an understanding of the law in order to protect their

rights (He and Fu 2006; Wu and Xie 2006: 26; Li 2009: 30). These do not seem to be the actions of selfish, irresponsible or materialistic young people.

More generally, I will argue that the way young rural people experience China's new market economy is not only in relation to new trends in lifestyle and consumption. Engaging with the market also changes their life course in fundamental ways, and the content of each life stage, including childhood, youth and adulthood. In particular, rural youth confront very heavy responsibilities which (in spite of their willingness to take some of them on) may create a kind of life crisis for them. I will argue that what differentiates new generation migrant workers from previous ones, who, as I have explained, mostly married before they migrated for work, is that migration itself now plays a key role in the process of growing up.

As I have already noted in the Introduction, anthropologists generally reject the idea that adulthood comes 'naturally' to a person, arguing instead that it is a culturally specific construct and process. In most cultures, adolescents go through rites of passage of some kind before being considered fully adult. In Van Gennep's famous account, the structure of rites of passage normally consists of three phases: separation, liminality and re-integration (van Gennep 1960). By going through this process, the subject's social status is fundamentally changed and they become a full member of society.

Traditionally, young people in China relied on adults, in particular their parents, to gain adulthood, one key instance being through marriages, which were arranged by their parents and families. The process of 'becoming independent' within the Confucian tradition was a matter of self-cultivation within the context of embedded human relationships (Tu 1998: 28). Under Maoism, by contrast, the state sought to extract individuals from 'feudal' social relationships so they could relate directly to the state without interference (Fong 2007: 94). The path to adulthood was set by the state, which gave young people land and '... guarantee[d] them rights to full participation in public affairs when they turn[ed] a certain age' (Yan 2009). In the post-Mao era, the party-state has largely retreated from the personal sphere, and 'independence' (*duli*) has become a matter of personal responsibility (Yan 2003).

So where exactly does this leave young Chinese people today in terms of the passage to adulthood? The situation faced by new generation migrant workers in China, vis-à-vis becoming adults, is fundamentally different from that of previous generations. It is not just that young migrants face a new world of fashions and lifestyles, or that they are basically spoiled children. The key point is that older generation migrant workers were married, and had land to farm, before they went out for *dagong*. *Dagong* for them was about earning money to support their families (i.e. the decision rested on economic necessity). For new generation migrant workers, leaving home for *dagong* is primarily about growing up (i.e. the decision is related to progression through the life course).

As I will discuss more fully below, factory life has become part of their rite of passage through which they are supposed to ‘experience the transformation into being a mature member of society’ – and more specifically, it is part of the liminal stage (Traphagan 2000: 382). That is, young migrants are standing *between* two stages of their being, i.e. between childhood and adulthood, and also between two societies, i.e. between the origin society of their home towns and the destination society of their working life (see also Monsutti 2007). In the following section, I will focus in more detail on what young migrant workers are going through during this period, asking in particular why rural youth might experience a serious life crisis in the course of their migration experience.

WHAT ARE NEW GENERATION MIGRANT WORKERS SEEKING?

When I asked the young migrant workers at the KS2 and THS factories why they had left home, they did not say ‘because we want consumer goods’ nor did they say ‘because we are victims of the Chinese government’s rural policies’. During my interviews with these workers, nearly everyone told me that the reason they left home was because they hoped to do two things: to ‘grow up’ (*chengzhang*) and to ‘become independent’ (*duli*). This answer seems to fit strongly with the image I portrayed at the beginning of this chapter: they are pretty much like kids in many respects – but they are on their way to becoming adults. Typically they leave home when they are 17 or 18 years old, although some leave earlier and some later. They have just graduated from school and are *supposed* to find a job and get married. In this period, I am suggesting,

they are between being children and adults.¹⁶ So what exactly do ‘growing up’ and ‘becoming independent’ mean, in this context?

The meaning of ‘growing up’

In talking to the young workers, I found that ‘growing up’ (*chengzhang*), for them means to learn something new and to change in ways that will enable them to see, fit into and then take part in ‘modern China’, which is taken to be very different from their rural home towns. The hope to take part in the society of the modern city is often described by young migrants as the desire to *kanshijie* or *jianshimian* (literally ‘to see the world’, meaning ‘to become worldly/sophisticated’).

Given the various ‘push’ factors leading young people to leave their villages (see Introduction), and their education and skill levels, the jobs they can easily get are in factories that require low-skilled workers. As a result of the economic boom, there are such factories all over China. Quite a few are very close to their home towns, where they can work in a Township–Village Enterprise (TVE); indeed their parents may already work in these factories. In other words, if they wanted, they could just find a job in a factory near to their home town rather than travelling thousands of miles to Shenzhen or Kunshan. I asked young workers why they had chosen to go to the big cities along China’s east coast. They told me that it was because they wanted to *jian yixia shimian* (see a bit of the world). These youths from rural areas have neither the

¹⁶ According to Hsu (1971: 272), traditionally, Chinese children did not have a demarcated period of childhood since there was no sphere of purely adult life (except that of sex). Children were encouraged to behave like ‘mini adults’ and enter adult life as early as s/he could. Therefore, there was no clear distinction between children’s life and adults’ life. According to Gold, only boys in well off families in traditional China enjoyed the status of youth as a distinct life stage in their life course. Most children received ‘little schooling’ and education and made ‘an early transition from childhood dependency to work’ (1991: 597). However, this system was challenged by ‘new values and norms introduced from abroad’ (Gold 1991: 598). In the Communist era, most family power shifted to the Party (Gold 1991: 598). The CPP attempted to reconstruct the life course of people for the purpose of revolutionary transformation (Gold 1991: 597). The stage of youth was thus redefined and closely managed by the Party (Gold 1991: 594), which saw ‘youth’s challenge as to behave like Leifeng, a “selfless and unquestioning soldier”’ (Gold 1991: 601). Thus, to clarify: what I mean here is that in China today ‘youth [is] a time for the individual’s autonomous quest for self-identity and meaning’ as in the west (see Gold 1991: 601); *however*, what is involved in this quest – the ‘content’ of youth – is not the same but is defined by their Chinese context.

money nor the time to do a ‘grand tour’ in the classic European style. Factory work far from home becomes the best option for them to see modern China, which they have heard a lot about. Their first month’s wage from the factory is neither sent back home nor is it used to buy things they want. It is usually used to pay for the debt they have incurred just in travelling to the city.

Delicate, a factory worker at THS factory, explained to me how important *dagong* – waged labour, almost always undertaken away from home – is for young people from the countryside today:

No matter what you do in the future, if you have had the experience of *dagong*, then people will consider you to be a person who has *jianguo shimian* [seen the world]. If you always stay at home, people will think that you know nothing and you are just like an idiot.

The desire to *jian shimian* could in turn be interpreted as resting on a more general desire: to change one’s identity. A rural youth will be recognised as no longer *being* only a rural youth if s/he has had the experience of working in the big city. The identities associated with the place of destination lead rural youth not to want to stay near their home towns. Moreover, migrant workers have a very hierarchical judgement of various cities in China. Because the city where a migrant worker goes implies different levels of the ‘modernity’ that they can see and experience, this is closely related to their identity.

For example, Silk, whom I have already introduced in the Introduction, is from Hubei. She left her home for Shanghai when she was 14, and then later moved to Shenzhen. But Shanghai is considered more modern than Shenzhen. Having worked for five years in Shanghai, Silk feels she is superior to her colleagues in Shenzhen. She left Shanghai for the Shenzhen factory on 5 March 2004 (she still remembers the exact date) very reluctantly and considered the move a ‘down-grade’. She left only because she had no other choice: her cousin Ling,¹⁷ who took care of Silk for several years in Shanghai, where Silk stayed in her house, had now been relocated to Shenzhen and asked Silk to

¹⁷ Ling is Silk’s mother’s sister’s eldest daughter. (See also footnote 1 above.)

come and help, and so Silk felt she could not say no.¹⁸ Yet, intriguingly, Silk also said that she actually hated Shanghai people because they ‘abused their power and bullied people from other places [*zhangshiqiren, paiwai*]’. She was looked down upon while she was in Shanghai – just as she now looks down upon Shenzhen and her colleagues there. Her feelings of superiority were also because the factory where she had worked in Shanghai was owned by a Japanese businessman (rather than a Taiwanese or mainlander). Because she attached her identity to the city she where she had migrated for *dagong*, she reckoned herself to be a person who had ‘seen the world’, just like a Shanghai local or even a Shenzhen local.

But *chengzhang* – ‘growing up’ – is not only about seeing the modern world; it is also about the endeavour to fit into it. In this sense, *chengzhang* is strongly related to learning, specifically getting some knowledge that will be ‘useful’ (*youyong*) in the neoliberal economic environment they actually have to cope with. In my interviews, young people mentioned a highly varied list of things that they thought might be worthwhile. For example, it is useful to gain knowledge of electronics and of computers. It is good to have the skill of recognising ‘quality’ in goods (whether you are making them or consuming them). It is good to be able to cook, drive, do hairdressing, and manage other people. It is good to have social skills appropriate to an urban environment (and in particular communication skills, coordination skills and tactics for surviving in the factory, for achieving promotion, for avoiding scams and conflict, for seeking and seizing opportunities, etc.).¹⁹ Interestingly, they do *not* normally consider useful to learn English because English is useless for their current stage of upward mobility.

¹⁸ Silk did not use the term *huan renqing* (paying back the debt of human feeling) to describe her motivation for this decision. To me this suggests that she was not merely obeying the code of social morality but that their relationship was invested with emotions that were part of her decision-making. Since emotion and morality has intertwined together subtly in Chinese context. Human feeling (*renqing*) is not only the feeling out of biological reaction, it inevitably involved in moral code (see Yan 2005). Sometimes it is hard to distinguish. Here, through Silk’s tone of expression, I felt Silk want to emphasise her appreciate toward Ling and their good relationship.

¹⁹ These data are mainly collected from the interviews I did in the factories.

Many of the skills they are most interested in relate, in some way, to their working lives. For them to succeed in their working lives is clearly one of the most important aspects of ‘growing up’ – as is getting married and forming a family. Many of my informants gave me a simple and firm answer to what would make them adults: ‘getting married and forming a family (*chengjia*) and establishing oneself in a career (*liye*).’ (As I discuss marriage extensively in later chapters, it will figure here only briefly.)

What these young people are actually yearning for, I want to suggest, is a change of status – from child to adult and from rural villager to sophisticated urbanite. However, change of this kind is not only an individual desire. Friends and relatives in the migrants’ home village also expect to see such effects in someone who has had the chance to ‘see the world’. If a young worker fails to display ‘changes’ after they have stayed in the city for several years, they will be judged as failures. In this sense, the desire for young people to change and grow up is collective. There is an expectation on the part of the individual and also the collective that a change in identity (e.g. an improvement in their ‘quality’, *suzhi*) is a desirable outcome of migration. An individual’s hope for change thus reflects the wider social attitude.

What kind of change would count as the *chengzhang* (growing up) that a migrant worker is expected to achieve and to demonstrate to others? Some clues are provided by a case I observed involving one young woman, Phoenix. I met her in a big hotel for businessmen near THS. She told me she had formerly worked at FXX, an electronics factory with 800,000 workers, for three and half years. Just as the cities are ranked by migrant workers, so too are the factories. Because FXX is big and famous, working there is the kind of job that nearly every young worker dreams of getting in the early period of migration. To work there would definitely be to ‘see the world’. When migrant workers talked about someone getting a job offer from FXX, their tone of voice sounds as though someone had got an offer from Harvard University. People would assume she/he must be outstanding because the recruitment process of FXX is

stricter than other smaller factories.²⁰ But, Phoenix told me she had decided to quit her job at FXK a few months earlier. The reason was that, when she went home during Chinese New Year, her relatives and friends all laughed at her and said:

You left for the city several years ago. Tell us why your dresses still look like those of a country bumpkin. Your disposition is still so stupid and uncouth. Didn't you learn anything from *dagong*? You've come back from the big city. You shouldn't still look the same. Look at your classmates; they worked in a hotel in Shanghai. See how beautiful they are!

Therefore, she quit the factory job and 'job hopped' to the hotel, where she gives massages to businessmen. Compared to the routine job in the factory, she thought the hotel job offered a better chance for her to become an articulate, fashionable young woman, like the ideal youth of her relatives' expectations.²¹

When I discussed this topic with a group of factory workers, they agreed that the 'change' they are seeking and expecting via migration for work should include the following. First, young workers should become more articulate (*hui shuohua*) than before. Second, they should know a good deal about 'fashion' (*hui daban*) and other 'modern things'. Third, they should be smarter, more poised and confident (*jingming nenggan*). Where do these expectations come from? In part they come from the city life rural people see depicted in television dramas, which are the basis for many urban expectations/imaginings/fantasies. When they set off from the countryside, they were looking forward to this kind of life.

However, they soon discover that life in factories is not as 'colourful' as rural people collectively assume. The working schedule is always the same day after day. The only people you meet and talk to are your fellow workers. Most often the people who

²⁰ Although some workers would gradually realise that it is harder to get a promotion working at FXK, at which point they would weigh cultural capital against opportunity and make their own decision. But no matter how long they want to continue working in FXK, they do all agree that working in FXK was a great experience which let them 'see the world' (*jian shimian*).

²¹ This also represent the image of a perfect match as a marriage partner. This topic I will discuss in Chapters 5.

become friends in the factory are those who share similar backgrounds. In addition, the working hours are extremely long, leaving limited leisure time, which they usually spend in big supermarkets or food stalls at night markets nearby (which are still part of the SEZ). In fact, the real city, Shenzhen city, is about an hour by bus away from the factory. Coming out of the factory after working for hours, the only scenes migrant workers can see are endless factories one after another, and also many young people from very similar rural backgrounds wearing the uniforms from their various factories on the streets.

Although factory life is disappointing in some ways, the yearning for change is not abandoned. This results in an interesting attitude among the young migrants: they are willing to learn and welcome new things, no matter what. They are highly open to new values and discourses and appear to easily accept, at least superficially, the new morality that the factory inculcates. Fly, a 19-year-old man from Hubei, told me that, from his perspective, life in rural villages was actually freer. There he could sleep as long as he wanted and decide how to use his own time. In the factory, he has to work on the shop floor 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. The strict daily schedule of the factory means that he has almost no personal time. Despite all that, he thought this change was good and he felt happy about it. He said that life in rural villages was too lazy and comfortable. Now he has turned into a useful young man. Not long afterwards, I heard similar words spoken by the factory director at the monthly assembly of workers (see Chapter 2). The young workers seemed to absorb what he said like a sponge.

Why was Fly seemingly prepared to embrace this system whole-heartedly, even though it arguably exploits him, rather than resisting? His acceptance probably comes from his hope for a bright future, i.e. the anticipated change of status and identity. Migrant workers come for better life opportunities – a sense of unknown chances – which are generally presumed to be unavailable in their rural home towns. They hear many inspiring stories from their neighbours, friends and mass media about how people changed their lives overnight. Most of them want to ‘give it a shot’. It could be said that they come here as a gamble.

Becoming independent

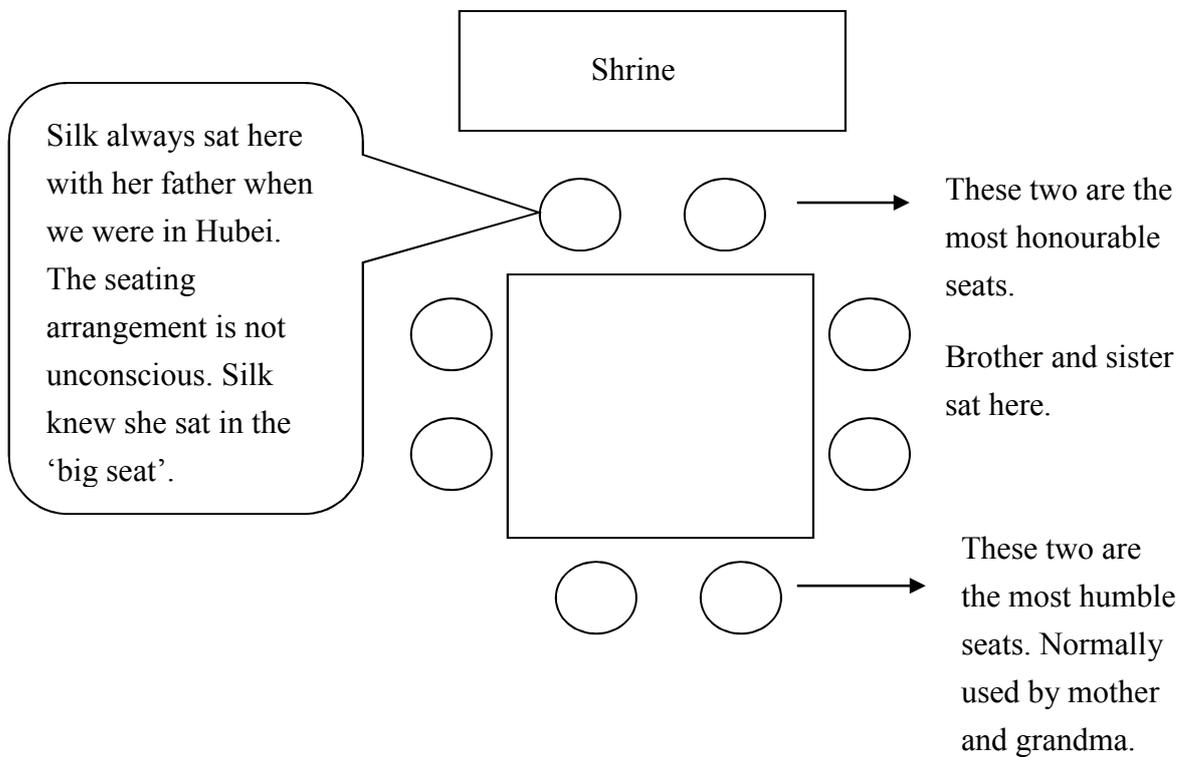
The term *duli*, ‘independent’, is often heard in the factory. In the talk of young migrant workers the phrase *rang ziji duli* (so that I will be independent) comes up again and again. At one level, this probably reflects the way that the whole society is embracing a modernisation process in which talk of ‘individualism’ and ‘being independent’ is politically correct – even though the Chinese version of individualism does not entirely copy the western model (see Chapter 2). At a more personal level, my fieldwork suggests that the desire to be independent is partly grounded in migrants’ hope to say goodbye to their rural family backgrounds.

Again, Silk’s case offers a fascinating example. She does not like going back to her home town during the Chinese New Year holiday. When she took me to Hubei for the Chinese New Year holiday in 2008, she apologised to me many times before we set off. As she saw it, for me to go home with her in winter was to *chiku* (literally, ‘eat bitterness’, in this context meaning to endure a poor quality of life), and she worried that, ‘You won’t be able to endure it’ (*shou bu liao*). When we arrived, she kept on telling me, ‘I am just like you. I’m not used to it’ [*bu xiguan*, not used to village life].’ Later, I realised that this was Silk’s way of telling me that she was not a country girl any more. She is modern and civilised.

On that visit I witnessed her family relationships over a period of several weeks. To my surprise, she appeared to have a very high status in her natal family. For example, she would rest on her bed waiting for her mother to serve her lunch, which many people in China would find quite remarkable. Silk took this treatment for granted, never even saying ‘thank you’ to her mother. There was seemingly an implicit agreement between them in which Silk had the ‘right’ to ask for her mother’s services and her mother was ready to provide them.

Silk’s status in her natal family was also reflected in the seating arrangements at the dining table. The family table is a square. It is normally put in the centre of the house, right in front of the ancestral shrine. Around the table, each seat has a different hierarchical meaning as shown in Figure 1 below: the seating arrangements shows Silk’s high status.

Figure 1. Seating arrangements at Silk's natal home



It is quite striking that Silk neither respects nor feels gratitude to her parents in any very obvious way. During my visit she often told me that she felt that neither of her parents understood her and that she was not 'familiar' (*bushou*) with them, especially her father. In fact, I had the impression that her parents were a bit afraid of her.

Meanwhile, Silk had serious expectations for her younger sister and brother (especially her brother): for several years Silk's wages have been spent on their tuition fees. Yet, on my visit I saw Silk on several occasions crying because of her brother's offensive attitude. She would lecture him but he refused to accept her criticisms and fought back, showing no respect to her. Silk felt very hurt. After these quarrels with her brother, she did not even want to eat lunch or dinner.²²

Silk spent most of her free time while at home hanging around with *laoxiang* (friends from her home town or home province). One of her friends, Strength, a 21-year-old man, came to her home to visit for a few days before the Chinese New Year. In the end

²² See Chapter 4 for further discussion of this sibling issue.

he stayed at Silk's home for around five days, sharing Silk's father's bed, because, he said, the snow was too heavy to go back to his own town. This reason was acceptable because there was no transportation from Silk's village. (Normally, one could hire a taxi but the heavy snow prevented all cars from reaching the village: the only way out would have been to walk 40–60 minutes to the highway and stand by the road to stop buses or taxis as they went past.) A few days later, a rumour spread amongst the villagers that Strength was Silk's fiancé and that they would get married during the Chinese New Year vacation. Silk's mother did not like having Strength staying for so long because she thought it was bad for Silk's reputation. However, she expressed no resentment toward Strength during his extended visit. One day after Strength left, however, Silk's mother complained that Strength was tactless and did not know how to *kan ren lian se* (literally 'see other people's face', i.e. to notice the other person's expression and adjust so as to try to please them). At that moment we were eating lunch. Silk's response to these words was to rage at her mother: she slammed down her bowl with a bang and shouted, 'How dare you criticise my friend like this? One of my friends is still sitting here [pointing at me] – how could you say in front of her that it was inappropriate for my friend to stay at my home for such a long time?' Her mother glanced at me but said nothing and then carried on eating. Silk was still staring at her mother with rage.

Why does Silk occupy the most respected seat at the family table? Why does she have so much power in relation to her parents? One factor is presumably that she has made significant financial contributions to her family's household economics from her earnings. In the ten years that Silk has been a migrant worker she has sent regular remittances to her parents. Also, Silk knows 'modern things' that her parents do not know. When modern equipment, a gas burner and hot water heater, were installed in the family home, Silk's parents and grandmother had no idea how to use them and would ask Silk what to do. Silk would often reply in an impatient tone and her parents would smile at her in order to pacify her. Having this type of knowledge may empower her to some extent. Compared to their parents, the children in this family do seem better at handling the 'modern world'. If Silk herself didn't know the answer, she would call her friends to sort it out.

Thus a further factor may be that Silk, as a young migrant worker, has a relatively wide network of friends in the city. When we arrived in the countryside, a new house for Silk's family had just been completed. She told me that she had organised borrowing the money for the new house building through her *guanxi* (network, connections) among the factory leaders and her friends in Shenzhen. She saw this as therefore her responsibility to pay back the debt. (Although her parents did share some responsibility for the debt, it was mostly on Silk's shoulders.) She told me that she had chosen to take on this burden entirely of her own free will. Her parents had not forced her or put any pressure on her. She had taken it on because she 'had more [rich] friends than them'. Here, we can see newly established social relationships, i.e. those created by Silk in the course of migration and work, interacting with her given kinship relationships and changing her bargaining power within her family. Thus, overall, the bargaining power of the daughter in the household has increased because of her newly established knowledge and relationships. This, at least to some extent, gives Silk a new identity within the household.

On the first day of the Chinese New Year, Silk and I woke up very early. Silk shouted at her brothers and sisters to get them out of bed. She led us all out of the house to visit every household in the village to make the traditional New Year calls, offering New Year greetings, *gongxi facai* (congratulations and become rich). As we visited, Silk would sit for a while with some families in their homes, asking the host how everything was going, inquiring after the health of their elder members, teasing the children and praising children as cute in front of their mother. She seemed to know well the courtesy expected of her and how to talk gracefully on such occasions. Silk, like the other young migrant workers, is basically the public representative of her natal family.

Walking along the street and greeting people on the way, we saw many other young people in groups led by their eldest siblings. They were all doing the same thing: visiting relatives and neighbours, making New Year calls. Silk explained to me that, when they were small children, the family visits were led by their parents but, now the children have grown up, their parents stay at home and rest. Only the children now go out to *bainian* (pay New Year calls). Once they have reached a certain age, the eldest

child, whether male or female, substitutes for the parents and acts as the representative of the household.

They too were migrant workers just returned home for the Chinese New Year. When they met on the snowy, winding path, one of the first questions they asked each other was, ‘When will you go back to the city?’ Their connection to the city was emphasised; returning to the city is taken for granted. No one assumes these young people will stay in their home towns after the Chinese New Year. The story of Silk appears to illustrate what Yan (2003) has already described as ‘the rise of youth power’ in the rural Chinese family, i.e. the increasing ability of young people to control what happens in their own lives, even against the wishes of their parents and other elders in the community.

However, if we examine the scenario happening within her family and the relationships between family members, this perspective is insufficient to explain the whole picture, I want to suggest. One important question left unresolved is why Silk was so impatient and rude towards her parents. Her economic contribution had been fully recognised by them (she sat in the most respected seat, her parents serve her at all times), so what drove her, a young migrant worker returning home, to be so arrogant and rude to her parents? Some observers of the ‘new generation migrant workers’ would just say that she is simply spoiled. However, the way that Silk behaves cannot be blamed on her being a ‘singleton’: she has siblings and, so far as I know, was not spoiled by her parents during childhood. Like most of the new generation migrant workers, she and her siblings (to a lesser extent) grew up as *liushou ertong* – children left behind.

I want to suggest that Silk’s behaviour is driven, at least in part, by her desire to make a radical declaration of separation, independence and detachment. The need to make such a declaration is perhaps more powerful than ‘the rise of youth power’ as an explanation of Silk’s behaviour in terms of her relationship with her family.

Declaring independence

As has been noted with respect to women’s role in Chinese families, the reality is that, in Chinese culture, power and authority are sometimes distinguished in order to maintain the appearance of being ‘ideologically correct’. That is, when the real power holder within a family is a woman, she may nonetheless pretend to be submissive to

her husband (Wolf 1972: 111; Martin 1988). Women normally let men to be the 'representative' of the household no matter whether they actually have the final say or not (Martin 1988: 177). Women submit while, in reality, holding power.

Therefore, two possible scenarios arise from a consideration of Silk's case:

1) It reflects the fading of the ideology of filial piety. To treat one's parents rudely and impolitely and to enjoy being served by one's parents is now acceptable in rural villages: this would be a huge change.

2) Alternatively, the ideology has not changed that much or at least has not been totally abandoned: Silk's behaviour would be judged abnormal and unacceptable. Silk (like a 'submissive' wife) should know that, no matter how much power she holds in her household, she should 'give face' to her parents and at least show them respect on the surface. Why didn't she do this?

It seems to me very unlikely that the first explanation can hold. As Martin Whyte's research has shown (Whyte 2003; 2004), in contemporary China there is no 'crisis' in the system of filial piety as such, and he suggests that the question should, rather, be how this tradition has been maintained. According to my interviews, although a 'rise in youth power' has undoubtedly occurred, to provide for parents and meet the basic requirements (responsibilities) of filial piety is still seen as an essential task for most young migrant workers. Especially the sons in the family are expected to shoulder this responsibility. The second scenario is thus more plausible, in my view.

In other words, Silk is using this very strong method (what would normally be seen as unacceptable behaviour) in order to 'declare' that she is different now. She is different from her past and also will become an adult who is very different to her parents. In other words, she is independent, detached and separated from her previous connections. She uses the rude, crude and most obvious way to show her independence, which implies not only that she no longer depends on her parents but also that she has a superior status to them (for example, her mother serves her lunch and washes clothes for her as if she were her housemaid).

It should be recognised that Silk is experiencing a complex and difficult situation in respect to her parents. Her decisions to offer financial support to her family, including her siblings, appear to have been made largely autonomously. Indeed, research has shown that in this context it is difficult for parents to exercise a high degree of control over their children's lives, as Kung (1983) observed in the context of 1970s Taiwan. Initially, the parents might be able to control *dagongmei* (female migrant workers) by exerting influence through elder siblings or cousins and thereby pressure them into sending money home and telling them which occupations they should enter and which particular factories they should work in. However, just as Jacka (2006) points out in relation to Beijing, the factories are often too far away from their home towns and the communication between the generations too difficult for this kind of control to be effective.

My experience is that young migrant workers generally do not pay much heed to their parents' suggestions because they feel that the experiences their parents went through when growing up are not applicable or relevant to their own lives. As first- or second-generation migrant workers, parents were generally married before migrating out, as noted above. They went out mainly in order to earn money and support their families, who still lived in rural areas. But for new generation migrant workers, the problems they need to deal with during their migrant journey are mainly about sorting out their future, a situation that their parents have never encountered and thus have no experience to share. In addition, given that the world is changing so quickly, most parents of new generation migrant workers, even though they are migrant workers too, know almost nothing about their situation in places like Kunshan or Shenzhen. This means that the new generation workers have to 'figure out the future' for themselves from the vantage point of places like Shenzhen or Kunshan.

Indeed, parents frequently have to learn things from their children, a phenomenon known as 'cultural feedback' (Zhou 1999). The parents of young migrants, typically rural peasants, lack the confidence to insist that their children obey their instructions, not least because they rely to a great extent on their children's knowledge of the modern world. Although parents still shoulder the responsibility of guiding their children as they grow up and become independent, and although the children are still

supposed to show respect and filial piety to their parents, the situation of these parents implicitly pushes the young peasants to seek other role models to follow. Considering their parents' experiences to be mostly irrelevant to their lives, young migrant workers have to grow up, to some extent, without effective guidance from their parents.

In sum, then, 'growing up' and 'becoming independent' can be seen as a two complementary goals that migrant workers are keen to achieve. *Duli*, independence, represents their hope of separation (from their old, past village context, including their parents) and – to use the terminology of Victor Turner (1969) in characterising rites of passage – the creation of 'anti-structure', i.e. the breaking down of pre-existing social relationships. By embracing this hope, they come to the factory in the SEZ.

Chengzhang (growing up) represents the process of entering a new world (the neoliberal world in this case) and gaining a new social status. It is a process that makes young migrant workers integrate into the social structure again but a different social structure from that of the villages they hope to have left behind. Their *duli* (independence) follows from their denial of the past and the breaking down of their former relationship with their parents, while their hope of *chengzhang* (growing up) follows from their embrace of an (imagined) 'modern world'.

Thus it should be emphasised that these young people from the countryside have a quite different relationship with their parents from the one described in Vanessa Fong's research (2007), which was carried out in the large city of Dalian. The young people I met did not seem to take their parents' words that seriously or try to internalise their parents' views into their own way of seeing things. If migrant workers, like urban singletons, feel confused about the society around them, this is not likely – as Fong suggests of her urban informants – to arise from the complexities of cultural transmission (Fong 2007). On the contrary, young migrant workers from the countryside are keen, as I have said, to detach themselves from their relationship with their parents. Consequently, they make themselves responsible for becoming adults.

LIMINALITY: SEPARATION WITHOUT INTEGRATION

To return to the notion of rites of passage: the period when migrant workers stay in the factory can be understood as a period of liminality associated with the change from one

status to another: they have separated from the world of the countryside but not yet re-integrated into the world. Although the factory might be the easiest way available to them to gain access to ‘modern China’, it does not really provide the appropriate conditions for them to (re-)integrate into ‘society’. In the factory, they struggle to form a stable identity against the background of the alienated/impersonal and differentiated environment (Carrier 1992) produced by industrialised capitalist society, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters (especially Chapters 2 and 3). Young migrant workers in the factory can thus be seen in terms of liminality, a stage of ‘betwixt and between’ characterised by ‘ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy’, in Turner’s terms, ‘a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are relaxed – a situation which can lead to new perspectives’ (Turner 1967).

From this point of view, a job in a factory in the SEZ is not the ultimate destination that the young migrant workers are seeking, unless it is accompanied by a transformation of social status. In fact, as we have seen, for this generation of young workers the change of social status from child to adult is equated with a change from being a ‘traditional’ rural person to a member of ‘modern’ China. A job is therefore just the starting point, the opportunity to create something new and make the desired transformation possible: getting married and establishing a working life that is different from that of their parents. Migration separates the young people from their fixed position and kinship ties in their villages and gives them a certain freedom to negotiate their identity. They have temporarily left their position in the fixed social structure. At the point where they enter the factory, they are just leaving their identity as rural people and are ‘negotiating’ their state of being. Their sense of freedom may be seen not so much as a reflection of the new world itself – which in the case of the factory is in fact highly constrained – but, rather, as associated with the state of liminality, which Turner characterises as a ‘realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence’ (1967: 106).

The reality is that the modern city does not welcome these young rural migrants, as has been extensively noted by other authors. For example, Jacka (2006) describes in her ethnography how urbanites discriminate against migrant workers and view them as dirty and uncivil. Pun describes an occasion when a group of female migrant workers

go to a cafe to buy a drink and are treated scornfully by the waiters and also by the local guests, who look down on them, saying they have ‘dirty hands’ (Pun 1999; Pun 2005). It could be argued that it is their ambiguous and incomplete transformation, the fact that they are ‘in between’ social statuses, that causes them to become a scapegoat for social problems (see Douglas 1991). To integrate into modern China is harder than to separate from a rural village. They have, in effect, announced their separation from their parents and the past. Yet, in the factory, the transformation that young migrant workers desire does not seem to come naturally. To put it simply, I shall argue, they get stuck in the liminal phase.

The search for a process of ‘growing up’ and ‘being independent’ leaves young migrant workers in a predicament: they have renounced their rural identity but they do not yet have a new one. Achieving a new identity as a ‘player’ in modern China turns out to be much harder in reality than in their expectations – not only in the social milieu of the city but in the factory itself (see Chapters 2 and 3). Indeed, all young people in today’s China face a far more complex social world than the type of social situation that Turner focused on, stable stratified societies. What has been said of urban youth in China (Weber 2002; Fong 2007), also applies – perhaps even more strongly – to these young rural migrants: they are confronted with many different value systems, which sometimes contradict each other. Just like urban Chinese children (Fong 2007), these new generation young migrant workers can be said to be ‘confused’ with respect to cultural models possibly without being aware of it, but in very different ways (see Introduction). So how do young migrant workers handle this situation?²³

Kwong’s research (1994) suggests that Chinese youth sometimes reject certain of these values and adopt the relatively attractive ones from amongst those on offer. As will be explored in subsequent chapters, the migrants I met also selected particular values – especially in order to legitimise their behaviour when the context allows them to do so. For example, they might quote their cousins’ or colleagues’ words in response to lectures from their parents – but sometimes they would quote their parents’ words or

²³ This normal liminality means both experimenting with different modes of being and failures of re-entry due to unclear social situation.

traditional values if they felt it would benefit them in other contexts. For some, who realise that not only is there no future for them in the rural village but also, it seems, no future in the city, profound depression and despair sometimes follow.

CONCLUSION: RESPONSIBILITY FOR GROWING UP

Ong (2007) argues that the neoliberal economic system not only promotes competitive individualism but also that the logic behind this is individuals assuming responsibility for the self. New generation migrant workers, at least in my experience, are not only trying to fit into one side of this equation – by becoming ‘competitive individuals’ – but are also trying to fit into the other side by learning to be ‘self-responsible subjects’, trying to determine their own futures and take responsibility for themselves (Yan 2010).

If, as I have suggested, gaining adulthood – ‘growing up’ – is a challenge for rural Chinese youth today, one question that arises is how – if at all – parent–child relationships influence this process of ‘gaining adulthood’? As indicated above, my research, suggests that parents have little influence on this process. Similarly, Yan (2009) states that Chinese youth today do not rely on adults, in particular their parents, to gain adulthood. His argument is that this is because it is instead the state’s role to (a) assign land to young people; (b) to guarantee them rights to full participation in public affairs when they turn a certain age.. In this respect, the party-state can be said to more or less support young people’s anti-authority (i.e. anti-parental) attitudes. Yet, does the state actually support these young rural people? As I have already noted, some of the migrants have no land in the countryside as a fallback (Gao 2010). Others have land, but cannot farm. In this respect, the party-state offers little help for them when it comes to ‘growing up’.

Anagnost (2008) notes that Chinese parents are often anxious about their children’s future because they have no idea how to prepare them for the global market. Considering the specific issues of new generation migrant workers, compared to anxious urban parents, rural parents have even less idea about what is happening in the neoliberal economic system and in fact, rather than guiding their children, are in fact

often reliant on their children to guide them (Zhou 1999). Rural youth must largely shoulder the anxiety of integrating into the market world by themselves.

Interpreting migration as only ‘pursuing of desires of consumption’ seems to neglect the struggles of young people as they try to figure out their futures and deal with their responsibilities to others. They are dealing with a new neoliberal economic system and with a complicated merging of old and new values and ideologies. It therefore seems to me misleading to label their behaviour simply as ‘spoiled children’, as some scholars have done.

The argument I am suggesting is that migrating for work is the crucial process through which new generation migrant workers gain their adulthood – and that this was not the case for previous generation migrant workers. Previous generations had effectively finished their rite of passage and become adults before the experience of outside work. To put it simply, the structure of the older generation’s rite of passage would be: separation phase (in home town), liminal phase (short, in or near home town) and reintegration (home town). The structure of the new generation’s rite of passage would be: separation (from home town), liminal phase (in urban factory) and (attempted) reintegration (in urban setting). This different structure of the rite of passage is the fundamental difference between new generations and the old ones. Through paying attention to migration as a rite of passage, we thus can see clearly that the difference between these generations is deeper and more profound than some have suggested – it is not just that they are ‘spoiled’ children.

Today, adulthood does not come ‘naturally’ for young people, e.g. via marriages arranged by their families or via state policies offering them land. For rural youth, this leads to them face an awkward, challenging situation. Rural home towns are almost empty after mass emigration and social relationships there are often fragmented. It is impossible for them to gain adulthood there and, in fact, no one in the village expects them to do so (see Introduction). They have little choice but to go out to the city to earn their adulthood and become a recognised member of society.

The factory may look like the destination of their migration but actually it is only a start, the beginning of their search for adulthood and self-responsibility. Young migrant

workers are keen to *chengzhang* (grow up) and hope to integrate into neoliberal, modern China. Equally, they are keen to announce/declare their *duli* (independence), hoping to say goodbye to their parents, their village backgrounds and the 'backward' peasant world of the countryside. Their boldness in announcing their separation to their parents to some extent reflects the fact that their parents are incapable of providing useful guidance and support as they move towards (self-responsible) adulthood. However, their endeavour to grow up and become independent arguably leads them to have little sense of their class situation in the factory, and it also leaves them in a liminal situation. Because of their wish to integrate into modern China and become an adult, they are willing to absorb and embrace change, new things, values and ideas that the factory feeds them. Driven by the wish to be independent and separate/detach from their home town and natal family, I have argued that they get trapped in a liminal situation. It is actually hard for them to integrate into urban life because of the alienated/impersonal environment of the factory, which they face every day, and the hostile social milieu. Yet they have limited access to the state-supported rights of the *hukou* system and so cannot simply 'return' to a rural way of life.

Chapter 2

Working in the Factory: Regulations and Authority

In Chapter 1, I suggested that the new generation migrant workers come to the SEZ with two aims: 1) to grow up (*chengzhang*) and 2) to become independent (*duli*). In order to achieve these aims they have to 1) get their working lives sorted out (*liye*) and 2) establish a family (*chengjia*). This chapter looks at the working environment that young workers are confronted with and how they adapt to it in order to achieve their goals. In particular it focuses on the conflicting value systems that are found within the factory. On the one hand, there is the ‘modern’ ideal of being a professional worker committed to ‘impersonal’ ideas of efficiency, quality and abiding by regulations. On the other hand, there are everyday managerial practices that communicate and enforce the idea that those in authority are able to go beyond any regulations. How do young migrant workers cope with this confusing mix of ideologies that coexist in the factory?

A MODERN FACTORY

Soon after I entered the THS factory in Shenzhen, I took part in some induction courses for new workers. Then I went to the shop floor with these new workers. As a newcomer, I gradually came to understand this factory and its culture. The THS factory certainly seemed to adopt modern (I can’t say Western here because the owner himself and his leadership were hugely influenced by Japanese culture) management methods and tried to match the standard of a rational and effective organisation. The leaders regularly say, ‘*Gongshi gongban*’ (roughly: ‘We are doing official business according to official principles’, i.e. ‘We do not let personal considerations interfere with our execution of public duty’). They stress that this is a professional and modern enterprise that meets international standards and thus can be clearly distinguished from family-run workshops, with their non-professional practices. The organisational structure of the THS factory, as set out in the regulations, is also very well-defined and looks quite formal on paper. The position of each person and the tasks they are in charge of is clearly spelled out. The owner told me this meets the requirements of the ISO (the International Organisation for Standardisation) very well. One day, an English

businessman representing an English company came to THS. He was considering buying some products. We sat in the meeting room and I watched as he was given a presentation. After the Q&A, the English businessman asked for the formal documents, especially on quality control procedures at THS; he checked these carefully. While he was sitting there scrutinising the documents, the general manager told me that he was confident in the customer's satisfaction with the documents because he was always well prepared for that.

Workers arriving from the countryside, for their part, are given specific guidance on entering into the ethos of the factory. The THS management asks them specifically to do the following: 1) they should give up their peasant dispositions and 2) they should internalise the factory's ideology of 'efficiency' and 'quality'. When the factory director gave a speech at the monthly assembly (*yuehui*), the workers were told what it meant to 'give up their peasant dispositions'. For example, don't be lazy. Don't be rude. No quarrels. No fights. Be punctual. Be clean. Never throw food waste on the ground when eating in the canteen. Never spit anywhere in the factory. Never clock in and out for other workers. Pay attention to detail in order to avoid making bad products. In the same speech, they were also asked to be 'diligent', which meant they should work whenever the factory wanted them to. Lastly, they were reminded that 'time is money' and that they should be as efficient as possible. I found some workers were conscious of this even when not working. When I ate with workers in the canteen, I was always the last one to finish my meal. The workers ate very fast. They could finish their meals within five minutes or less. At the beginning I thought they were simply very hungry because of the hard work. But one day, talking to Lotus, I realised that the workers had been taught to do this. Lotus said she used to eat slowly like me. But now she ate much faster because her supervisors laughed at her, saying, 'Look! How slowly you eat. That's fine at the dining table. But do you do everything at this kind of speed? If so, that's terrible. How much time do you need to finish a task?!' Lotus felt so ashamed that she changed her ways and now she is always aware of her eating speed – measuring herself against the others. 'Never be among the last few in the canteen. Your leaders will think you're not a good worker,' she told me.

It seems the environment here is ‘modern’ and requires a self-disciplined, self-motivated and self-managed work force, as one would expect to find in any contemporary corporation: in ‘contemporary corporate situations’ of this kind, ‘employees are expected to reason and self-manage according to such calculations large and small [e.g. calculations of discipline] in the interest of a common corporate enterprise’ (Ong 2007: 223) Moreover, the ‘intelligence’ required of workers in this setting ‘is the capacity to think, plan and act in a “rational” way, according to specific goals such as increasing and maintaining company profit margins’ (Ong 2007: 222).

Therefore, at the beginning, my expectation was that the young migrant workers would gradually give up their peasant disposition and develop what Yunxiang Yan (following Nikolas Rose) calls the ‘enterprising self’:

The institutionalised changes in the [Chinese] labour market, education, and career development ... have led to the rise of what Nicolas [sic] Rose calls the ‘enterprising self’, meaning the calculating, proactive, and self-disciplined self that is commonly found among the younger generations of Chinese labourers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party-state had to guide collage [sic] graduates through educational programmes and new regulations to search for a job in the labour market as they were all used to waiting for the assignment of a job from the state (Hoffman 2001). Since the mid-1990s, however, the image of an enterprising self is commonly shared by Chinese youth who not only actively participate in various forms of self-development but also perceive the social world to be inhabited by autonomous and responsible individual actors. (Yan 2010: 504)

At the same time as observing this ‘enterprising self’ among migrant workers, I also expected to find them expressing anti-authority sentiments, in part because of Yan’s findings, noted in Chapter 1, that young people in the countryside ‘demonstrate an anti-authority tendency’, e.g. with respect to village leadership (Yan 2009: 115). Recalling how powerful my informant Silk was in her rural family, as discussed in Chapter 1, one might expect her to display a similar spirit of anti-authoritarianism in the factory. However, this was not the case at all. Her attitude and behaviour changed dramatically in the context of the factory and work-based relationships. Her powerful, confident attitude seemed to fade away. To me, it seemed that she now behaved a bit like her

mother, who often replied in silence – with a smile – and conducted herself in a rather submissive manner no matter what kind of verbal ‘abuse’ was directed at her. Once, when I went with Silk and the deputy manager to the supermarket (an incident I discuss below), I saw that when the deputy manager picked up a piece of fruit, Silk solicitously got a plastic bag for her to put it in. This seemed quite a different girl from the one whose anger flared up in front of her parents. ‘Is this the same Silk?’ I wondered. What had happened in the factory to make Silk like this? Was this due to the ‘modern’ factory ethos she has acquired during her time in the SEZ?

‘THE MODERN’ AS A COVER

In order to decipher Silk’s contrasting behaviour, we need to pay attention to the differences between the people she interacts with in the factory and in her home town. The recipients of Silk’s smile and her submissive and considerate behaviour are mostly her leaders; most of her co-workers behave towards them in the same way. Why do they smile all the time? Are they really happy in the factory? The young workers used the term *shouqi* (taking anger) when explaining this to me. What do they mean by this? Who ‘gives’ the anger for whom to ‘take’?

In the quality control room of the KS1 factory in Kunshan (as noted in the Introduction, this factory is operated by a mainlander), the leaders often yelled at and humiliated the workers, displaying great rage. I myself found the atmosphere in that room was chilling and uncomfortable. The leader constantly walked around, surveying workers’ behaviour. Her two assistants sat at the front and checked the results of the workers’ labour: if the workers themselves failed to identify defective products, the leaders not only asked them to do it again but also shouted at them in front of everybody, using violent and insulting language. For example, one leader would yell, ‘What’s your problem? [*ni you maobing a!*] Do it again [*chongzuo!*]’ She and her assistants would poke their fingers at the victim while shouting at them. Sometimes they even hit workers’ hands in order to punish them. The methods of control here, via highly personalised anger, seem not fit with the idea of the modern factory.

The KS1 factory was not an isolated case. It was the same in the THS factory, where supervisors also typically expressed dissatisfaction through displays of anger, shouting

at the workers for the slightest reason. When leaders were really angry, they might even throw ashtrays around, hit the table or slam the door. The leaders, it seemed, never tried to suppress their rage in public. On the contrary, they seemed to magnify it deliberately.

In contrast to the supervisors, I often saw subordinates smile. In particular, they often smiled (at least in public) at those moments when I knew that they were in fact frustrated, sad, embarrassed, angry or disappointed. Even when young workers felt badly wronged, they often seemed to suppress their feelings. They sometimes smiled bitterly while expressing their appreciation to the leader. This seemed to me like a ‘performance’ of emotions rather than a spontaneous emotional reaction. Soon after, I found that workers were actually aware of such performances. They told me they thought that displays of anger by supervisors were often deliberate and they believed that the best response was just to smile. The agreed roles in the factory, one could say, were ‘angry supervisor’ and ‘smiling subordinate’.

What is the purpose of such performances? On the one hand, it seems that the leaders in the factory were using their expressions of anger as a way to control those beneath them. Let us call this ‘managerial anger’. These expressions of anger have the aim of making workers humiliated and/or fearful, thus pushing them to work harder. For example, Beihu, a 43-year-old worker from Hubei province, told me:

Every time I’m scolded, I feel useless. Who doesn’t want to do things correctly? Who wants to fail the task? Who wants to have to redo the task? They [the leaders] always say something so unpleasant [*name nanting*] to make us feel useless [*meiyongde*].

Then, expressing self-pity, she said, ‘I am old. My eyes are not as sharp as a youngster’s. Even though they [the leaders] do not point this out, it is still unbearable [*nanshou*]. I feel I am useless.’ In Beihu’s case, the leaders’ anger is a response to her unsatisfactory work performance: the leader *uses* anger to complain about poor performance. But I also want to suggest that leaders use their anger more generally to make workers feel nervous, uneasy, and restless and thereby create a tense atmosphere in the workplace. The leaders seem to believe that creating this kind of mental environment can push workers to work harder – and indeed this is explicitly what they

told me in both the KS1 and THS factories.²⁴ Since anger is believed to be an efficient tool to manage subordinates, it is common to see workers scolded.

Away from work, during their private time, young workers would laugh with each other, comparing which of them had been most scolded by the leaders. One day after dinner, some workers gathered in the dormitory. Delicate (a 23-year-old female worker from Guangdong province) laughed at Giant (a 32-year-old male worker also from Guangdong): ‘Giant, the deputy manager has scolded [using the Cantonese term *diao*]²⁵ you a lot recently. How many times did she have a go at you today?’

The subordinates’ reaction to managerial anger seemed to be to take supervisors’ anger as normal, without even asking for a reason. Some of them have an explanation. One night I saw Chong, an 18-year-old female worker from Jiangxi province, sitting alone on the swing with tears streaming down her face. I went to chat with her. She told me she had just been promoted: this had been her second day in her new job and she had done a clumsy job. Her new supervisors had shouted at her all day, saying that she was unbelievably stupid and threatening to throw her back onto the shop floor as a basic worker. Although she felt bad and frustrated, she said:

I know I made mistakes and this is why the leaders scolded me. I’m not angry. I’m not upset either. I did the wrong thing, so I deserved to be scolded by her [*yinggaide*]. When leaders point out my flaws, it is good for me [*wewoihao*].

So, from her perspective, workers should feel happy and grateful for the deserved criticism rather than feeling sad and resentful.

While some workers did believe that a supervisor’s anger was actually ‘good for them’, many seemed to believe that such displays of anger towards subordinates was just what supervisors do. For example, Giant replied to Delicate’s question about how many times the deputy manager had scolded him that day by saying, ‘It’s up to her. She

²⁴ For example, one of the managers said, ‘Sometimes it is necessary to “give a bit of facial expression for them [the subordinates] to see [*gei tamen yidian lanse kan kan*].’

²⁵ This Cantonese dialect term is widely used by workers from all different provinces in the factory.

can have a go at me any time she wishes [*ta xing zemediao zemediao*].’ He did not even think that the leader’s anger had been triggered by his work performance. Rather, for him, the leader showing anger to him was just because the leader was a leader. As leaders, they can do anything they want to subordinates. Similarly, Tang, a 40-year-old female worker from Sichuan province who sat next to Beihu, always complained while she worked, ‘It’s so annoying I could die [*fansile*]. Fuck you [*tamade*]. This job sucks, so I will quit soon [*cigongle*].’ Tang’s reaction to abuse from the leaders was similarly strong:

We are the ones subjected to daily persecutions [*shouqi*]. They abuse us as if we are children. I don’t earn much money each day. You know, each day I just earn 17 RMB [about 1.64 GBP].²⁶ If it is a good day, I can earn a maximum of 35 RMB [about 3.37 GBP]. It’s vexing. I want to quit. Fuck it [*tamade*]! Every day is the same. They never stop abusing me [*mage buting*].

Tang’s attitude, like Giant’s, suggests that some workers were able to detach their own judgement of their performance from the rage and insults directed at them by their leaders. These workers do not accept that the leaders’ rage indicated that they were actually bad or useless workers. For them, it seems that the leaders would express anger and dissatisfaction regardless of how well they did their jobs. According to Tang, to ‘throw anger’ at subordinates is in fact the leaders’ way of reminding their subordinates of the hierarchical differences between them.

Because the leaders spoke Mandarin with a strong local accent, Tang said, ‘We can’t understand what they say sometimes. We smile when we are being scolded. Even though some workers *can* understand the leader’s’ Mandarin when they are being scolded, they still smile.’ Tang was one of the few who dared to answer back when being chided. One day, she was seriously abused by her leader’s assistant and was asked to redo something for the third time. Her eyes turned red. When the leaders shouted at her, saying, ‘OK, you are unable to pick out the defective goods, right? Then, just go home’, Tang replied in very low voice, ‘*Hui shenme hui*’ [here meaning:

²⁶ By way of context, the monthly rent for a house in the area around the factory is about 200 RMB.

what you said is total nonsense]’. The leader hesitated a moment, seemingly so shocked by Tang’s response that she did not know how to reply. Tang then wryly forced a smile. The leader left without saying anything. Tang cursed as the leader left. Tang’s smile in front of the leaders was very striking. In fact, she was very angry and felt wronged and therefore could not help but fight back; however, in order to reduce the degree of offence caused, she tried to make her words sound as if she was making a joke.

Since subordinates constantly ‘take anger’ (*shouqi*), justified or not, from their supervisors and suppress their own true feelings, Tang envied what she imagined was my position in the factory, saying, ‘You don’t need to take anger [*buyong shouqi*] from anyone.’ No matter how many times I explained to Tang who I was and what I was doing in the factory, she still believed that I was a high-ranking leader in the administrative office with the title of *yanjiusheng* (research student). She believed that it was my daily job to sit next to her, chat to workers and then go back to the office and get paid. Tang often told me that she hoped her son would study harder and then become someone like me; then ‘He can earn a higher salary and *buyongshouqi* [won’t need to take others’ anger].’

Shouqi was felt by the workers to be part of their daily job and a heavy burden. This was true of different levels of workers. Cloud and Silk, both middle-ranking clerical workers, often told me, ‘*Huo shi buzhong, danshi xinlei* [The work – meaning their own clerical work – isn’t heavy but it is mentally/emotionally tiring].’ Both seemed to feel that they were abused in various ways by their managers. Hence the scene one sees very commonly in the factory: angry, dissatisfied and picky leaders chiding workers who are unhappy yet smiling reluctantly.

This may also offer some insight into why Silk, if she was intending to show that she had become superior to her rural parents, ‘threw’ her anger at them. Contrary to Yan (2009), Silk’s behaviour at home should not be interpreted as ‘anti-authority’, in my view. Rather, in Silk’s mind, her parents are not figures of authority at all. Her parents cannot offer her resources and have no influence in the world. On the contrary, it is they who receive money and resources from Silk. Her behaviour towards her parents thus corresponds to how she has learnt to behave in the factory toward the people with

the power to decide about the resources, material rewards and opportunities she can (or cannot) get. This, may more accurately represent her attitude toward authority, hierarchy and power.

Observing workers ‘take anger’ (*shouqi*) from their superiors gradually helped me see the complicity behind the modern cover of this factory. The entrenched hierarchy seemingly dominates life here, every moment, everywhere, both within the factory and outside it. I did not see any young migrant worker express a genuine anti-authority tendency. On the contrary, it seems to me, they probably believe in authority and reinforce hierarchy. Silk yelling at her parents is, in some respects, copies the way supervisors treat their subordinates in the factory, and her excessive anger is her way of ‘performing’ the hierarchical difference between herself and others.

Aside from taking anger (*shouqi*), other aspects of factory life also show that this is not as modern and strictly professional as it claims to be. Subordinates run personal errands for their supervisors after work. The leaders can ask workers to go and buy them a chicken, noodles or cigarettes, even when workers are off-shift and are meant to have some free time for their own purposes. Normally, the workers do not object – but this does not mean that this kind of labour assistance is done out of friendship between workers and their leaders. If this were the case, the workers would not be subject to such serious criticism when they make mistakes in these personal tasks. For example, they may be scolded if they bring back the wrong-sized chicken or buy noodles without the chilli sauce the leader expected. Sometimes the leaders do not even state their orders clearly but expect workers to guess and get things right. For example, the leader might not have said she wanted spicy noodles but she would still get angry when brought plain noodles, scolding the worker: ‘You should know I like my noodles spicy!’

As time went by, I saw more and more cases in which the will of managers rather than impersonal standards determined what happened – without regard to the regulations or written documents. This was by no means restricted to the execution of personal tasks. At THS, I participated in the recruitment process with the deputy manager several times. I found that the deputy manager did not look at the applicants’ CVs very seriously; indeed, it even seemed to me that the deputy manager preferred to hire

‘incompetent’ workers. She told me she believed competent workers were proud and hard to manage. She justified this by explaining, ‘What I need is hands, not brains and mouths.’ While neglecting potential employees’ capability, she paid special attention to personal characteristics and the ‘look’ (*mianxiang*, her word) of a worker. If she liked the ‘look’ of a recruit, along with their personality and disposition, she would give them a chance and offer them a position, even if they knew nothing related to the job. A deputy manager explained her theory to me: ‘This one is well educated and has impressive experience. She will ask for a very high salary and leave our factory very soon. If she doesn’t leave, she will have many opinions on everything. It will cause me troubles.’ But how can incompetent workers work in the factory? I discussed this with other middle-ranking managers. They told me the deputy manager was probably thinking that inexperienced workers could be paid lower wages and then they could be given time to ‘learn’ (thus offering learning opportunities as a strategy for retaining workers) rather than paying a high wage to recruit a capable worker. Does this match the corporate rationality identified by Ong of pursuing ‘specific goals such as increasing and maintaining company profit margins’ (Ong 2007: 222)? From the perspective of the best interests of the whole company, this basis of recruitment decision-making is arguably irrational. However, it is rational for the manager personally because to hire a submissive and incompetent worker whom she likes reduces the chance that the worker will threaten her own authority or even one day replace her in her managerial position. If something bad happens, the clumsy recruit can be blamed. Managers shared these ‘theories of management’ with me on more than one occasion and, I thought, enjoyed watching my facial expression as I listened. They laughed at me for being so ‘nerdy’ and knowing nothing about ‘the real world’ (*xianshi*) and the ‘dark side of life’ (*rensheng hei’an*).

Under such circumstances, the opportunities for workers to get a new job are evidently not based on the model or image of ‘modern’ competition in which the winner is judged by transparent impersonal standards. On the contrary, the procedure is based on highly personal criteria, reasons that are unknown to the workers and that they therefore cannot dispute.

The question that arises for me here is how young migrant workers manage to cope with the confusing mix of ideologies that coexist in the factory. On the one hand, the factory lectures them constantly to be a professional worker who should care about efficiency and quality and do their job without personal bias. Meanwhile, on the other hand, it tells them – both through ‘performed’ managerial anger and through more subtle, unspoken and implicit practices such as demands for personal service outside the workplace – that the power of authority bears little relation to any official regulations and frequently goes far beyond what such ‘paper’ rules would permit. In other words, young rural migrants encounter a clash of values *within* the factory culture of ‘modern’ China.

BEING COLLECTIVIST OR BEING INDIVIDUALIST

From an analytical point of view, there are some issues that need to be clarified when it comes to understanding this clash of values. According to previous research, Chinese youth in the 1990s were encountering an ‘ideological crisis’ (Kwong 1994) because they lived under a form of ‘capital socialism’ (Pieke 1995: 496) in which the values they absorbed from formal education were largely inconsistent with the values promoted by the market state (which corresponds to Kwong 1994). As they were growing up, the Chinese government was implementing economic reforms while at the same time maintaining tight political control (Weber 2002: 348; Yan 2010: 508). In the hope that China would have responsible, competitive and cosmopolitan citizens, the party-state encouraged ‘the rise of the individual’ (Rofel 2007; Yan 2003; Yan 2010) and actively promoted this through the mass media and other means (Rosen 2009). However, this individualism (seen as a route to modernisation) had a very particular history (Liu 1993; Yan 2010: 494): government and Chinese elites created the discourse of ‘a Chinese version of individualism’, in which the individual is a ‘small self’ who is part of a ‘big self’, which can be the state, society or the party-state as necessary. The small self should shoulder the responsibility for being healthy, reliable and competitive in order to make the big self it belongs to both strong and powerful (Liu 1993; Yan 2010). As noted above, Yan (2010) argues that in the context of neoliberalism specifically this means the promotion of ‘self-responsible’ citizens – but, in the Chinese version, in order to strengthen the state as a whole. In this version, the

individual is part of the collective and therefore individual ‘responsibilisation’ is construed in terms of collective goals. To some extent, this is therefore simply shifting the object of the individual’s loyalty away from the traditional focus on the family and towards the state or society (Yan 2010). In this regard, it should also be noted that the party-state encourages people to be individualistic in some aspects but not in others (Weber 2002).

At the same time, it also needs to be emphasised that the individualisation process that Chinese youth are experiencing today has been rather hastily imposed on Chinese society (Yan 2010) and that its effects are uneven. Growing up under the party-state’s ambiguous attitude toward ‘autonomy’ and ‘free choice’, sometimes these young people may appear to be completely ‘westernised’ (and thus individualised) professionals but, at the same time, they can be surprisingly ‘Chinese’ in orientation (Hoffman 2006: 552; Hoffman 2010).

Whatever the images or promoted ideologies, it cannot be assumed that Chinese youth have just passively accepted western (or global) values and that they are becoming individuals in the western sense. Many anthropologists, such as Sahlins, have shown that non-western peoples do not simply copy western culture and ideals when they encounter them (Sahlins 1999: x); on the contrary, they actively incorporate these into ‘indigenous sociologies and cosmologies’ (1999: vi), effectively indigenising the ideas and practices of the western world system (1999: x). To cite one highly relevant example: modernisation in Taiwan has not completely erased the traditional emphasis on hierarchy and social roles in organisations (Jiang and Cheng 2008), while meanwhile, as discussed in Chapter 1, the practice of filial piety there remains robust, in spite of what could be seen as wholesale westernisation (Whyte 2004).

It is broadly accepted that, when this generation of Chinese youth were growing up, they inevitably faced the challenge of handling both ‘individualistic’ values (such as ambition for one’s own career) and ‘collectivist’ values (such as responsibility and the willingness to sacrifice for others) (Weber 2002: 348). To put it simply: today’s Chinese youth have to *negotiate* because they typically do not have a clear model to follow. Hence they negotiate to achieve personal and professional goals by mobilising individual and collective values (Weber 2001; Weber 2002). They negotiate ‘to push

the parameters of ‘acceptable’ behaviour’ (Weber 2002: 347). They also negotiate with the ideal youth culture the Chinese government has ‘packaged’ for youth consumption (Kwong 1994; Weber 2002: 352). They form their own subcultures (Kwong 1994). Their feelings and emotional reactions, such as guilt or retribution, play an important role when they are negotiating for personal goals, swinging between different value sets (Weber 2002: 347, 365). Thus, as well as the ‘enterprising self’ and the ‘desiring self’ noted by previous authors (Yan 2010), the ‘negotiating self’ may more precisely reflect the actual circumstances outlook of Chinese youth today.

However, much of the scholarly work on these topics has focused on well educated urbanites. This is probably because young urbanites are ‘better consumers’ and they are certainly ‘more visible to the media’ (Yan 2006b: 260). By contrast, rural youth, although constituting the majority of Chinese youth, ‘rarely enter the sight of scholars and journalists’ (Yan 2006b: 261). We cannot simply assume that rural migrant youth will sooner or later ‘urbanise’ to become something like their urban counterparts. Chinese youth are not a homogeneous group and because of social context, they might be more diverse than their counterparts in the west (Kwong 1994: 248).

What I have emphasised is the clash of values that young rural migrants encounter *within* the factory culture of ‘modern’ China. Is the journey of *dagong* (working for a salary) the start of new generation migrant workers’ experience of individualisation? Or is it in effect the opposite: the start of internalising hierarchy, learning how to display in-role behaviour? Here I shall show how these young inexperienced migrant workers become ‘negotiating selves’.

NEGOTIATIONS OF YOUNG MIGRANT WORKERS

The factory offers workers a contradictory and tricky environment where both modern values (like respecting regulations) and old values (like respecting the exercise of arbitrary power) coexist. Although the factory managers try to impose the hierarchical structure on the workers, the workers’ response does not have to be passive acceptance. Thus it makes sense to ask, how do young migrant workers make their decisions and react to the situation they find themselves in? The range of possible reactions might

include resistance, accommodation, negotiation or submission. Which do most of them choose?

In my experience, most migrant workers seem to decide to attach themselves to figures of authority. However, I would argue that this decision is not a simple submission to authority or out of giving up on any possibility of resistance as such. On the contrary, in my experience, it is the result of negotiations/calculations with the realities as young workers see them. Beyond offering basic respect and submission to their leaders, some migrant workers also actively try to please their supervisors. Cloud is a good example. Although she is in charge of the Human Resources section, in practice she acts more like the assistant to the chief manager. She follows the chief manager's orders submissively, never asking why. In addition, Cloud can read the chief manager's unspoken intentions from her facial expressions and do the right thing to please her even without being asked. When the factory moved to a new location, a moving ritual was held. We went out together to buy incense and *zhiqian* (paper made to resemble money and burned as an offering to the dead). The seller asked us to pay RMB240. The chief manager thought the price was too much but, as she could not speak Cantonese, she said nothing but looked unhappy. Cloud, as a native of Guangdong province, could speak Cantonese fluently and quickly stepped in and negotiated the price with the seller, saying, 'Take 188 RMB. It's a lucky number for both of us [*jixiangshuzi*].' Although the seller did not agree with the price Cloud suggested,²⁷ the chief manager was satisfied with what Cloud had done and praised Cloud's 'smartness'.²⁸ It was as if Cloud was voluntarily taking care of her leader's feelings.

I saw many other instances of the arbitrary power exercised by supervisors/leaders. The following example concerns control over the temperature in the workplace. Shenzhen is located in southern China and the weather can be extremely hot in the summer. The temperature in the office was always a problem and it was hard to reach a consensus about how to handle this. Because the workers come from all over China,

²⁷ The reason he gave was: 'I can't negotiate on the price of stuff used for rituals. It's not respectful to God.'

²⁸ 'Smartness' here meaning that Cloud was smart enough to know what her leader wanted.

they perceive the temperature in very different ways. When some people felt hot, others might feel comfortable. Also, the air conditioner in the office was defective and the cold air did not spread around evenly. Therefore, those who sat in front of the air conditioner were extremely cold while those sitting further away from it felt too hot. Although control of the workplace temperature is not in the sphere of his authority, Gold, the manager, kept the remote control always on his desk and the temperature of the air conditioner was always set up according to his preferences.

The examples offered here provide a representative picture of the way in which a diverse range of matters were handled according to the will or whim of the leaders. What has happened to the regulations?, one might ask. Or, more specifically, from the perspective of my research, how do the workers answer this question? Young workers told me, ‘Only naïve people believe regulations and rules and stick to them.’ For them, an adult is one who is capable of understanding the gap between reality and regulations. Such inconsistencies are to be expected. They have no faith that other people will obey regulations. They said that regulations are ‘just so things will look good [*xie haokan de*] – who believes in all that [*shei xiangxin*]?’ Their experience is that the practice in the factory does not follow the regulations and they regard the rules and regulations as merely a matter of keeping up appearances. Only stupid or naïve – childish – people calculate and operate their rationality on the basis of regulations. (Thus, they seem to equate being grown up with having a cynical, or ‘realistic’ view that understands how things ‘really work’ behind the appearance of proprieties. See also Interlude) They laugh at an outsider like me, without knowledge of the mainland ‘Chinese national conditions’ (*zhongguo guoqing*) and ‘social reality’ (*shehui xianshi*) that structures their experience.

If these workers want to achieve labour rights, they will never try to do so directly; they are also anxious not to even want to trigger suspicions. Their assumption is that subtle and tactful emotional performances – offering their loyalty, gaining trust and then persuading supervisors – will function better for achieving their goals. Their conclusion is that learning to behave in this way will lead them onto the right track for establishing themselves in life – *liye* – and growing up to be an adult. They come to know that ‘respecting hierarchy’ and ‘displaying proper role behaviour’ are crucial for

their future success. They learn that smiling submissively will bring them freedom: to step aside (in deference) and that this is the first step to go forward. They believe in the power of hierarchy and authority rather than in the power of official documents, rules and regulations.

They also negotiate within the context of their uncertain situation by switching, as conditions require, between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ values. For example, the workers would sigh as they told me how frustrated they felt working constantly without a ‘sense of achievement’ (*chengjiugan*): no matter how good they were, it seemed that the boss would still favour someone good at *pai ma pi* (flattering and fawning). Cloud and Silk told me, ‘Our boss is swayed by his emotion too much. He puts personal relationships above all and is blind to who is really good at work. Under his management the really good worker will feel frustrated.’ However, when Cloud and Silk complained in this way, they seemed to forget that they themselves had been beneficiaries of good personal relationship (*guanxi*) with crucial managers. Silk had already received high pay while doing nothing for several months because she was considered to be sincere and loyal.²⁹ The manager did not want to let her go even though she was already effectively redundant. Cloud was famous for her skilful emotional performances in front of the deputy manager. If, as seems to be the case, migrant workers are developing a ‘theory’ that ‘you can’t go wrong if you obey your leader’, they can hardly be said to be en route to becoming ‘self-responsible’ or ‘enterprising selves’. If anything, they are learning that the best strategy is to reduce risk by avoiding responsibility and handing it over to a superior who will care for them.

The main question arising here is thus why the migrant workers I met are deciding to pin their future on subservience to hierarchy and authority? This seems to make them different from other youth cohorts. While it seems that urban youth in China are

²⁹ Silk had resigned a few months earlier because she was getting married – but suddenly it all fell apart. So she came back to the THS factory to resume her job. The factory had already appointed other people to replace her but, since the boss considered Silk a senior and loyal worker, he still offered her the same position and wage even though she had been made redundant.

actually trying to develop themselves into enterprising selves (as in Hanser's (2002) research (conducted in 1998), meanwhile, rural youth in China are seemingly critical of unpopular political policies and corruption (as in Yan's (2009) findings). What makes the young migrant workers I met so different from these contemporary counterparts? In the following sections, I will begin to explore some possible reasons, starting with their training into the ideology of the factory, i.e. the attempt to make them 'promising' workers.

To be a promising worker

There were many compulsory training courses (*jiaoyu xunlian*) taken by factory workers. The classes were offered for all workers but they are divided according to their rank. Talks were also regularly given by the leaders to the workers – normally three times every working day. Apart from professional training courses, the rest of these are meant to preach the 'correct mentality' (*zhengquexintai*) to fit into the way of being a successful person. All training courses were followed by exams. The workers had to pass; if not, they were asked to re-sit the exams. If they failed several times, the factory deducted money from their wages.

I quote here some sentences from the dramatically named management document 'Apocalypse' (*Qishilu*), the manual for employee's' EQ (Emotion Quotient) training. One chapter, entitled 'The Revolution of Enterprise', includes the statement 'The real revolution occurs when one revolutionises oneself'. It urges workers to transform themselves into a wholly new person right now. It describes how currently the prevailing mentality among migrant workers is:

What do we have now?

We have a job but we also have resentment.

We want to do something, but the criteria don't allow us.

We work hard but we earn little.

We are working for a boss so we don't have a sense of responsibility.

We work for others so we don't work actively.

The enterprise is not mine, so I have no loyalty.

Then, the manual admonishes workers, explaining that this mentality is wrong and will cause harm to the workers themselves one day. It starts to promote a 'correct mentality'. It preaches the importance of loyalty by saying:

Think about it,
in this world,
entrepreneurs and great men all need comrades.
They never work alone.
Who is their comrade?
The most important criterion for their comrade is loyalty.

Here loyalty is linked to hierarchy and collectivity: everyone should show loyalty to that great man and the great goal he initiates among us. It interprets that 'feeling inequality' only occurs when the workers have the wrong mentality. It goes on:

You know it should be equitable, don't you?
However, how do you count if it is fair or not?
What kind of equity are you pursuing grounded on what you are doing now?
'How to count'? $\text{Gain} = \text{ability} + \text{contribution}$.
If you use this formula to count, then the result is always 'inequity'.
 $\text{Inequity} = \text{belittle others} + \text{overvalue yourself} = \text{look for trouble} + \text{backward!!}$

Then, it promotes a 'new equity spirit', emphasising that 'spirit' is powerful to overcome the feeling of inequity. It says:

In this world,
what kind of power can return empty-handed dead people to life?
Spirit only!
In this world,
what kind of power can let people feel happiness without relying on material fortune?
Spirit only!

The spirit calls for an immense gratitude. The manual continues:

Who gave us a job? The boss!
Who helps us to grow up? Our supervisors!
Who gives us invulnerable will? Our enemy!
We should feel gratitude to our leaders.
We should treasure our current lives.

These lessons attempt to inculcate a new mentality in the workers: one should be loyal to hierarchy because it is for one's own good. I found that some workers had copied these sentences in their own notebooks and seemed to take them to heart. Silk told me, for example, that the training actually corresponded with what she learned through her own experiences over the past ten years, even if it looked a bit counter-intuitive at first glance. Since Silk was eager to enter into the neoliberal world, these sentences, and the ideologies behind them, seemed to stir her heart.

To be a proper person (hui zuoren)

Young migrant workers also educate themselves, of course, outside of this formal training, something which they themselves link to the process of 'growing up' (*chengzhang*). For them, learning proper job performance, skills and the new mentality required for work overlaps with the process of learning to be an adult. When I interviewed them and asked what they had learned during their years working in the factory, more than half of them answered along the lines of, 'The most important thing I've learned during the experiences of *dagong* is how to *zuoren* [how to be a proper person]'.

Within the Chinese tradition, and within Confucianism in particular, the discourse surrounding 'proper personhood' is highly developed. In simple terms, however, for these young migrant workers, learning how to *zuoren* seemingly means that they now have a better understanding of their 'social roles' – which they distinguish from their inner selves – and the sets of behaviour attached to these social roles. For example, Duckweed was a tough, 24-year-old unmarried woman from Hubei province. She always called her section *women jia* (our family) and her colleagues in her section *zijiren* (insiders, our own people). She adjusted her attitude and behaviour quickly when she encountered different categories of people: subordinates and supervisors, people in the same sections and in other sections. She spoke loudly on the telephone at

clerical workers in the production section. She abused her subordinates. Meanwhile, when Duckweed speaks to the supervisor, her tone turns low, submissive and respectful. Duckweed's performance might remind us of Silk, who also 'adjusts' her behaviour when engaging with different people.

Workers who do not know or have not yet learnt how to behave in accord with their position may be judged '*quexinyan*' (mindless). Managers from Taiwan sometimes laughed at such workers as '*shaogenjin*' ('missing a nerve') and sometimes angrily shouted at them that they were clearly 'blind' (*baimu*). They were felt to be either too innocent to make sense of things (if they are young) or simply useless (if they are older). Workers learnt that dull workers who only follow orders are not desirable. They are deemed to be stupid and overly *laoshi* (simple-minded).

What truly marks a 'smart', ideal worker is that they should be voluntarily paying attention to their leaders' emotions in order to understand the leaders' desires and intentions (*kanren lianse*, literally 'watching other people's facial expressions', meaning to see what others feel/want). Then, they should react quickly. One day, Gold, a manager, stood up suddenly, and walked toward the exit holding his mug. When he passed by Duckweed's desk, he put his mug heavily on her desk. He said nothing. He did not even stop. He kept on walking and left the room. Soon after, Duckweed stood up, took Gold's mug and went out of the room. When she came back, Gold's mug was full of hot tea. She was detecting the intention behind Gold's behaviour and fulfilling his intention in order to please him – although serving tea for Gold is definitely not part of her formal job responsibilities in the official documents.

If workers cannot understand leaders' unspoken wishes, or know who might react to things that happened, they will be punished, sometimes without the matter ever being mentioned. For example, Giant (a 32-year-old married male from Guangdong) worked in the factory as a driver. He had an affair with a married female worker who worked on the assembly line. The workers gossiped about it from time to time. It was a 'public secret'. But it seems they had an agreement that they would never speak about it in front of their leaders. One day, the deputy manager accidentally heard about it from Cloud, who was the one the deputy manager trusted and from whom she regularly inquired about factory gossip. The affair sent the deputy manager into a rage. However,

instead of asking Giant to bring it to an end, she chose to stay silent. She never once scolded Giant directly. One reason for this is because she believed the affair belonged to the private sphere: as a modern professional manager who practises the doctrine that ‘business is business’, to ‘nose about’ in workers’ private life was inappropriate. But not long after, she seized on the chance of dormitory allocation to punish Giant, asking him to move to a poor quality room shared with a chef and an electrician. The official, public reason the deputy manager gave was that they should sleep in the same room for managerial purposes. The result was that Giant no longer received ‘cadre’ treatment as he had done before.³⁰ Giant had no idea what had happened. He started to reflect on what the reason could be, thinking carefully about what had caused the manager to change her *lianse* (literally, facial expression but here meaning emotions). He knew that he must have *dezui* (offended) the manager in some way. He asked around the factory to get a hint of the ‘real’ reason. When he realised that it was his affair that had brought about the problem, Giant promised to stop the affair and asked a middle-ranking leader to pass word of this to the deputy manager. In the end, Giant got his original room back again. The whole episode was a process of indirect communication and negotiation. None of this was ever verbalised between Giant and the deputy manager. It could also be said that what the people on both sides were negotiating was actually a moral question: ‘Should a man have an affair with a married woman?’ However, since the deputy manager never directly challenged Giant on the issue, he was also deprived of any chance to defend his behaviour before he was punished. What young migrant workers learn in such cases is probably the traditional doctrine: ‘never offend the one who holds power’, rather than ‘I can be self-responsible’.

What does it mean to be a so-called ‘enterprising self’ in this context? According to Rose, the enterprising self is the product of advanced liberalism (Rose 1996 as cited in Hoffman 2001: 66), which drives people to be competitive (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) and to try to live up to the ideals of enterprise culture (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008: 389). Yan, for one, claims that the ‘enterprising self’ is ‘commonly found among

³⁰ In the SEZ, drivers have a relatively high status in the factory, earning more than most clerical workers (1900 RMB/183 GBP per month).

the younger generations of Chinese labourers' following China's process of individualisation (Yan 2010: 504).

But it is not always clear that this has happened among the workers in the THS factory. Jasmine, a well-educated worker who used to work in a Japanese enterprise, once proposed to a deputy manager that the assignment of tasks was very confused and inconsistent with the regulations. She suggested that the tasks should be redistributed and that this should be formalised in the regulations in order to make everyone's responsibilities clear. Her request seemed reasonable to me and, indeed, her initiative seemed to be exactly what would be expected of an 'enterprising subject'. However, her behaviour made the deputy manager very angry, as she took it as a challenge to her authority. Later, the chief manager told me in private about Jasmine's 'mistakes':

She is too selfish. She is too calculating [*taiaijijiao*]. She only thinks about herself. This kind of person lacks a sense of responsibility [*mei zerengan*]. Who does Jasmine think she is [*ta yiwei tashishei*]? She thinks she is well-educated and knows everything. She is too proud and really blind [*baimu*].

Note that lacking 'a sense of responsibility' and 'blindness' are mentioned in this context, as seen from the chief manager's perspective. Jasmine's request was taken as a challenge to the deputy manager's authority. Jasmine's initiative was not applauded but interpreted as a sign of her competing with the supervisors' authority, rather than a sign of being self-responsible or enterprising. More precisely, what Jasmine did could be seen as an attempt to overthrow the hierarchical system in the factory. Therefore, she is labelled as 'blind'. Her 'blindness' to the current hierarchical structure is what earns her censure. The charge that she is 'selfish' comes from her implicit denial that she is part of the collective. In short, Jasmine lacks 'role-based loyalty'. The consequences for Jasmine were serious. The chief manager said, 'She is not suitable for our factory. If I get the chance, I will ask her to leave.' Because of the managerial response to Jasmine, young migrant workers would see that anyone who challenges the hierarchy will get a serious punishment and probably never gain success in 'the modern world'.

Since those social actors who insist on following rules and clarifying job duties and responsibilities are stigmatised as selfish, blind and irresponsible – in effect, childish –

the model of responsible adults thus would thus seem to be the opposite side: those who put ‘collective first, individual later’, those with the capacity to maintain structure, harmony and stability.

From this perspective, in order to be an adult, the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other must be recognised and the emphasis should be on attending to others, fitting in and having a harmonious interdependence with them. Adulthood does not denote fully developing one’s individuality or showing off one’s distinctive characteristics, in disregard of the wider situation. If people act this way, they are criticised as being naïve or childish. Learning about *zuoren* is thus the socialisation process for young migrant workers, the process of gradually learning how to control one’s ‘inner self’, how to precisely manage one’s proper ‘social role’ in a group, how to fit into a group by behaving ‘role appropriately’, while giving others clues and cues to adjust their self–other relationships.

The hierarchy thus exists as the point of reference for judging if everyone’s behaviour is proper or not. If one’s behaviour is inconsistent with one’s position in the hierarchy, then it will be judged inappropriate. For subordinates, to offer their loyalty respect and submission is a duty and obligation. Jiang and Cheng call this ‘role-based loyalty’ (Jiang and Cheng 2008: 214).³¹ In the THS factory, managers and workers perceive it as ‘knowing how to be a person’ (*hui zuoren*), which means being able to properly locate oneself in the *group* and act accordingly in the proper manner. For them, it is also the key characteristic that distinguishes children from adults.

However, I think that there is a further reason, which might be more decisive than ideological reasons in commanding young migrant workers’ support for hierarchy and authority and this is connected with the distribution of resources, as I will now discuss.

Family, danwei and the distribution of resources

Zuoren not only prescribes the ideal behaviour that a subordinate should display; it also regulates the leaders. Leaders are also expected to behave ‘properly’, in quite specific

³¹ Role-based loyalty means that ‘employees may feel obligated by their role to remain loyal to their supervisor’ (Jiang and Cheng 2008: 214).

ways. For example, Gold does not know how to shout at subordinates. As a leader, he is seen as weak and in need of help because displaying anger is believed to be necessary to the practice of management, in order to reconfirm the hierarchy.³² Gold fails to show the appropriate leader disposition. The general manager's personal style also incurred criticism from his employees. He often wears a polo shirt rather than a suit, which was (privately) censured by the young workers who think that he does not look the way a general manager should and thus makes them lose face by association with him. Young workers explain to me that a leader must possess the particular 'stance' (*you nage yangzi*, literally: gesture). S/he should not be too polite or s/he will fail to make subordinates submit to her/his power and threat. S/he should keep some distance from ordinary workers rather than mingling with them. It is self-evident, they believe, that leaders should be different from ordinary workers.

While the subordinates are keen to please their leaders emotionally and attach themselves to someone in power, they are not totally forced to behave in this way. The ultimate reason for their compliance, in my understanding, relates to their expectations that their leader will take care of them and, more specifically, will include them in any distribution of resources.

This expected relationship between workers and their leaders is somewhat like that of parents taking care of their children or elder brothers/sisters taking care of younger siblings. While the workers 'take anger' from their leaders, they also transfer their anxiety and responsibilities to their leaders, who are expected to take on this burden. When workers need money to build a house or pay back debts, they will ask for help from leaders who are close to them. If they encounter any problems, the leaders are expected to step in. If the workers go out with their leaders, such as to a banquet, the workers never pay: they have the 'right' to be 'treated'. Ding says, 'If I go out with Shan [his immediate leader] he definitely will pay for everything for me. *Tachongda*,

³² Duckweed thus 'helps' Gold to produce the expected performative anger to other workers. Art, the leader of another section, says she envies Gold for having a good subordinate like Duckweed; she described having Duckweed in your section as like 'having a strong arm to protect you from rain and wind [*you yige qiangzhuang de bibang, bangni zhefengdangyu de*]'.

wochongxiao [he plays the big one, I play the small one]. I won't argue over who pays because I am not his equal.'

One day, Future-Coming (a middle ranking manager) came to the Quality Control section to resolve a problem for Virtue-Bright. After it was dealt with, Future-Coming asked Virtue-Bright, 'How will you show your appreciation?' Virtue-Bright replied, 'OK, I'll buy you a drink.' Future-Coming disagreed: 'Only me? How about my brothers [*xiongdi*, brother in this context denotes his subordinates]? I need to take care of my brothers.' Again, this does not show the fostering of self-responsible, self-managed social actors. The workers expect the owner and close leaders to take responsibility not only for the operation of factory (to grasp/create resources) – which would, of course be consistent with the idea of the self-responsible subject of neoliberalism – but also to take on responsibilities of taking care of them (to redistribute resources to them).

It seems the case that the relationship between individual and group in the factory ideally should resemble that typical of Chinese families. Migrant workers bring these patterns of relations from rural China to the factories of the SEZ. Chinese households have functioned as economic groups and/or corporations for a very long time (Yan 2003). Families are expected to act as collectives. Reinforced by centuries of practice, Chinese households represent a particular mode for the distribution of resources and responsibilities (Fei 1992; Hsu 1971). Everyone in the household also is bound by implicit contractual obligations and rights. Their agency is constrained to a large extent by this implicit contract. Even though individuals can negotiate their particular situation in their best interests, their bargaining power is pre-defined by household structure and the pre-existing kinship mode (Kabeer 2000). Hill Gates (1996) refers to such units as a 'patricorporation'. She also proposed a dualist model for understanding Chinese economic life, consisting of the PCMP (the petty capitalist mode of production) and the TMP (the tributary mode of production). This helps her to explain the seemingly contradictory characteristics that have puzzled sinologists: on the one hand, Chinese society seems to emphasise morality, personal loyalty, generosity and harmony; on the other hand, the Chinese can be extremely frugal, calculating and ruthless in market competition. Similarly, within the Chinese family, filial piety and

self-sacrifice is emphasised but at the same time there is exploitation of family labour (like selling daughters into prostitution). In the light of Gates' research, the co-existing models (i.e. the TMP and PCMP) can be said to have been present in Chinese society continuously throughout the contemporary period (and before). Even through the Communist period, the only difference to the dualist model was that the object of tribute (formerly the imperial centre) was replaced by the Communist Party. Similar patterns may be seen in the factory, although, of course, on a much smaller scale. The leader in each rank is like the male head of a family who controls the surplus value created by the whole family: most of it is given as tribute to his superior, while the rest is distributed within the section.

And when things go bad, everyone knows where the ultimate responsibility lies. Near the end of my fieldwork, the situation of the THS factory was quite bad. Everyone saw the news about the 'credit crunch'. Exports from China were decreasing rapidly. Meanwhile the new labour contract law (*laodong hetongfa*) which came into effect in January 2009 raised the Chinese minimum wage from 750 RMB to 900 RMB per month. The workers did not pay much attention to the financial crisis or the new labour law but they were certainly aware that there were not enough orders for the factory. They often had nothing to do during their work hours, let alone any overtime. It meant they could only get the minimum wage, whereas normally they could get about 1400 RMB per month when the factory was doing well. (Even raised to 900 RMB the minimum wage was hardly comparable.) They complained to me, 'We have nothing to do. We're bored to death and can't earn enough money. The next Chinese New Year will be tough.' As there was so little work to do, the workers were asked to thoroughly clean the factory.

At the same time, many rumours were being spread. People gossiped that the owner would soon rearrange the position of leaders in each section because the factory would start to produce new products. Many core leaders resigned and left the factory at that time. Rumours started to spread that the factory would probably close soon. Workers left in large numbers; those who stayed were haunted by a sense of insecurity and discussed the best time for them to leave too. Meanwhile, some girls described with terror how they had seen a ghost in the toilet of the dormitory in the middle of the

night. Later, some other girls heard ghostly knocks on their doors when they were asleep. Nobody knew what the ghosts looked like because they were too afraid to answer the door. The young workers cried all together during the night. Fragrance, as the leader of product section, moved to the haunted room and slept with the girls for three nights in order to comfort the scared girls, even though she was also afraid. ‘Did you see a ghost? Are you afraid?’ became the topic workers discussed in the canteen. Some young female workers resigned, giving the ghost as their reason. All the resignations, the poor operation of the factory and the haunted dormitory fostered panic, anxiety and fear as the collective emotions of the factory workforce. It seemed that no one could say for sure what would happen the next day. I myself was preparing for the end of my fieldwork that would inevitably be brought about if the factory closed. The situation was very uncertain.

One day, the deputy manager received a text message asking him, ‘Skinny X, has your factory collapsed [*X shouzi, gongchang daolemei*]?’ The high-ranking leaders inferred that the text message had been sent by internal staff because the sender had known the deputy manager’s build (i.e. that he was skinny). That afternoon, the factory owner asked everyone in the factory to stop what they were doing and gather in the courtyard. He made an announcement:

There have been many rumours recently saying that our factory will close soon. I, Shan, give you my promise today. I won’t delay your wage. As long as you are getting what you deserve, it’s not your business to nose about in the operation of my company. You don’t need to worry about it for me [*cao zhegexin*].

After this talk, Shan regained the workers’ respect: people said his talk showed that ‘he can shoulder the responsibility he has to shoulder as a leader’.

In this situation, to be fired due to the difficulties of the factory was not seen as acceptable treatment by most of migrant young workers. Obviously they are not being dismissed due to any unacceptable work performance on their part. Nor do they see economic difficulties of the factory operation as an acceptable reason. They saw their dismissal in such circumstances as ‘the owner refusing to take the responsibility for taking care of employees s/he is expected to shoulder’.

Here is an example. When orders for products began to plunge and the factory was filled with a fearful atmosphere, what seriously concerned workers and what they kept on discussing was not whether the owner was minimising the risks to the factory but whether he was able to *zuoren* (be a proper person) – meaning in this particular context what his behaviour towards, and relationships with, those senior staff who had become redundant to the factory’s needs indicated about his personal character. One day the workers and I went out for dinner together. Over dinner, Red made the following observation:

If the owner is benevolent and treasures their former relationships [*nina jiuqing*], he does not ask his ‘soldiers’ to leave. These people used to do everything to fulfil the tasks the leaders assigned them, even putting their personal life at risk [*pinguoming*]. Even though you don’t recognise their merit [*gonglao*], you should at least appreciate their hard work [*kulao*]. How can you ask them to leave just because they can’t contribute anything [*meiyong*] right now?

Red’s opinion immediately gained the agreement of many workers at the table. I asked workers what Shan should do if, because of their personal ties to him, he couldn’t dismiss workers that had become of little use to the factory. The response was silence. The workers more or less agreed that incapable workers do cause problems. Many senior workers occupied the same positions as before but know little or nothing about the new products that have been introduced into the production lines. The process of trial and error through which they learn what to do wastes huge amounts of money and time. One of the workers finally gave me an answer, saying, ‘It’s Shan’s responsibility to “create” a new position for these senior workers if his management skills are good enough.’ Light concluded, ‘*Bingxiong, xiongyige; jiangxiong, xiongyiwo* [If a soldier sucks, only one sucks; if a general sucks, the whole brigade sucks].’

After listening to the workers’ logic, I was reminded of what has been said more generally with reference to *danwei* (work unit) relationships in China. Knight and Song describe ‘the paternalistic relationships’ within a *danwei*, which ultimately makes workers, if they are fired, feel betrayed – as if ‘they had been kicked out of the family home’ (Knight and Song 2005: 29). It is because a Chinese *danwei* is much more than an employer, in the typical Western sense. As Knight and Song explain:

The work-unit (*danwei*) refers to the urban, publicly owned organisational unit in which workers are employed. It can be a factory, a school, a hospital, an administrative or party organ, and so on. *Danwei* have played a pervasive role in China's urban society, binding their employees to them in a culture of dependence. With their many functions, they are not just a workplace but a social institution. They satisfy the basic needs of their employees and their dependants, represent their interests, define their social status, accord them various rights, and control and influence their behaviour. The *danwei* is a very different concept from that of the employer in the Western sense (Knight and Song 2005: 27).

Knight and Song also argue that a shift to a new market-based regime will therefore 'involve a difficult transition for workers, from being *danwei* people with a culture of dependency to being citizens with a culture of individualism' (2005: 20). The employees in THS seem to accord, in some respects, with Knight and Song's prediction. They are still acting more like '*danwei* people with a culture of dependency' rather than 'being citizens with a culture of individualism'. They still expect that their employer can guarantee that every employee has a job for life and also derives a certain degree of social support and social security from the job. They believe that, if they are sufficiently loyal to authority, then they deserve protection. The previous practice of *danwei* 'imposes a mindset on managers, workers, and policy-makers which is far removed from that of labour economists' (Knight and Song 2005: 20). As Bray (2005: 193) argues, although the *danwei* no longer exists in the same form as in the past in urban China, the mindset and spirit of the collective and the communal still remain key sources for subject formation.

Competition for missing social security

Migrant workers in the SEZ are not entitled to the social security provided to permanent residents. They must therefore rely on informal means in order to get help and support when they need it. As a modern private enterprise, the THS factory does not function like a work unit from the Maoist era - i.e. the workers must normally deal with their own medical, pension, childcare and schooling needs for themselves. However there are very telling exceptions.

When East-Sea's wife was pregnant, the baby was diagnosed as having a hare lip. Shan came to East-Sea's office around midnight and promised him that the factory would prepare all the documents (for an abortion) and pay the fee for the medical treatment. He tells East-Sea that, when the couple go to the hospital, they can use the car belonging to the factory, so they do not need to take the bus. In addition, East-Sea could go to the hospital any time without filling in the request form for absence from work. The official reason Shan gives for all the privileges he offers to East-Sea is: 'When unexpected things happen to our workers, the factory surely has to take responsibility for taking care of them. Whatever the factory is capable of doing, we will do [*women nengzuode jiu jinli zuo*]' . However, everyone knew that this kind of 'care' would only be given to East-Sea. Shan considers East-Sea to be '*kenpinming*' (one who dares to risk his life for his job) and a '*kekaode*' (reliable one). Therefore Shan treats East-Sea like a member of his family, not a subordinate. East-Sea gave his loyalty in exchange for countless rewards. Needle made a similar exchange and this means that, while everyone else has to go to work on a Saturday, she does not and is instead able to go home to see her son. Similarly, Delicate is able to 'leapfrog' over the immediate leadership to become the top leader of a new section.

The welfare and social security which, in a *danwei*, would be offered equally to every employee is here given on a selective and exclusive basis. In the 'modern' factory, it is provided as a consequence of competition for loyalty. It is a privilege-like reward, exclusively offered to some fortunate migrant workers who have shown what they are willing to do for the factory. It is important to note that the limited wage young migrant workers earn is normally not enough to support a normal family life in the SEZ. Their typical coping strategy is to live separately from their family (with their children staying in their rural home town and their spouse in another factory in the SEZ) and travel back and forth between the city and the home town. In this way they transfer the 'reproduction' part of their life (bearing children and also their life after retirement) back to the lower-cost rural home town.

As discussed in the previous chapter, new generation migrant workers are keen to achieve the status of being independent (*duli*). However, the lack of social security forces them to seek support from their parents in the rural home town, especially after

they have children. The alternative is to find a way to resolve this dilemma within the factory setting through a rewards system distributed on a personal basis (which evidently violates the modern norm of impersonal distribution and reward mechanisms, as written in the regulations). To engage with this ‘alternative’ system may appear, on the surface, as a ‘mindless’ or ‘habitual’ reversion to ‘traditional’ values and practices. On the contrary: it is based, I want to suggest, on the rational calculation that they should offer their loyalty in exchange for basic social security needs.

Therefore, in the factory nobody really asked why such privileges were given or insisted that things should be done according to the regulations. On the contrary, workers usually just sighed and asked why they were not the ones selected for privileged treatment. They wanted to be rewarded for their *biaoxian* (displays or performances). In the same spirit, they seemed content for the rules used for the evaluation of *biaoxian* to remain vague, flexible and subjective. Only with such personal, flexible and negotiable resource distribution mechanisms can they hope to get the rewards or opportunities that, they believe, the impersonal regime of rule-based distribution mechanisms cannot deliver.

Building informal ties is well recognised as a strategy commonly used by the structurally powerless to subvert/bend/weaken the formal structure that does not favour them. In traditional China, women in the patriarchal society provide many examples of this tendency (Judd 1989; Santos 2006; Watson 1994; Wolf 1972; Wolf 1985). By working through or ‘around’ their husbands or sons, Chinese women can influence decision making or the distribution of resources (Ahern 1975). Powerless women ‘utilise “nonpolitical” or informal means for influencing men’s “political decisions” (Tiffany 1978: 68). The same agency is shown here. Migrant workers are creating ‘actor’s possibilities’ when regulations (formal rules and laws) are unavailable to them whereas there is a possibility of negotiating through ‘realities’ (hierarchical managements).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined, among other things, how experience of life in the factory influences the new generation migrant workers’ attitude towards authority. Existing

research has argued that, following China's economic 'opening up', young workers have shown the characteristics of autonomy, self-development and self-discipline (Yan 2010: 504) and also that Chinese rural youth shows a tendency to be anti-authority (Yan 2009: 115). When young migrant workers come to THS, a modern enterprise in the SEZ, the first requirements are that they 'get rid of their peasant disposition' and 'follow regulations'. Thus, it seems that we could expect migrant workers to behave in ways that echo the previous research: soon developing an 'enterprising self' and also showing an anti-authority tendency.

However, under the guise of being a modern enterprise, the factory is actually teaching them, through repetitive everyday life practices, that 'hierarchy is important' and 'showing loyalty to authority is a duty'. Under the highly hierarchical system, almost everything done by subordinates, including subtle things such as the expression of emotion, is controllable. Ironically, the characteristics of the so-called 'enterprising self' – the ability to work following rules and regulations, the ability to manage oneself and be responsible for oneself – are labelled selfish and childish by the managers and leaders. Young migrant workers think it is very naïve to believe in regulations.

Intriguingly, even though new generation migrant workers think that it is naïve to believe in regulations, they do not seem motivated to resist the system they are living in. The anti-authority tendency somehow vanishes in this context. On the contrary, they tend to cooperate with the hierarchical system and reinforce managerial authority. What are the reasons for this? As we have seen, a number of factors are at play: they may be influenced by the training they receive in the factory; they may be trying to achieve a kind of ideal adulthood (one in which the ability to 'be a proper person' and handle relations with others is crucial); and the lack of social security may drive them to seek a benefactor who can provide the help they need. Knowing how to behave properly within specific social roles – notably that of being a subordinate – is important, as they see it, for a migrant who wants to become a 'promising worker' and a 'mature adult'.

On the basis of such beliefs, they re-confirm the importance of hierarchy in the hope of gaining social recognition. Migrant workers are not eligible for any social security in the SEZ because of the constraints imposed by the *hukou* system. They therefore are

forced to opt for informal means to access resources and support for everyday living in the SEZ. Taking such factors together, it is an entirely reasonable outcome of rational calculation to choose to support the ‘authority of (superior) people’ rather than the ‘authority of regulations’.

Young migrant workers, along with other contemporary Chinese youth, are in a society where contradictory ideologies co-exist: new and old, collective- and autonomy-oriented, equality – and efficiency-oriented. All of these no doubt have an impact on the formation of their subjectivity, which is indeed the consensus of contemporary writers. However, it is arguably the *context* in which these young people live that determines the weight they give to one or another of these ideologies. For young migrant workers, the factory in the SEZ and the *hukou* system make them ‘choose’ the relatively traditional values – hierarchy, authority, communal and collective values. This means that the modern standards and practices of the factory are themselves just a performative veneer: only outsiders, failures or naïve children would confuse them with the ‘how things really are’.

Chapter 3

Job Hopping, Promotion and Competition

Although the individual journeys of young migrant workers involve different destinations and different circumstances and goals, their journeys tend to follow a more or less similar route: 1) leaving home for the SEZ after graduating from secondary school; 2) ‘job hopping’, i.e. moving between employment, in the SEZ; 3) *zhaoduixiang* (looking for a partner) and getting married; 4) either returning home,³³ going to their spouse’s home town, remaining in the city in which they *dagong* or, finally, moving somewhere else. This pattern relates to their ultimate goal of *chengjia liye* – ‘establishing oneself in a career and forming a family’ – in other words, settling down as an ‘adult’.

This chapter initially focuses on the second moment in this journey: ‘job hopping’, i.e. moving quickly from one job to another. Given what I said at the end of the previous chapter about the importance of cultivating personal relationships with superiors (who may be able to provide security for their employees), it might be expected that young people would want long-term employment – so that they would have enhanced opportunities for developing close ties to given superiors. The job hopping phenomenon, however, is extremely common among young migrant workers and has been identified as a distinctive feature distinguishing new generation migrant workers from their seniors (Fu and Tang 2009: 41, 43, 46). Quitting their jobs, going home for several months during the Chinese New Year festival and then switching to another factory once they return is a frequent cycle for migrants – although switching jobs may happen at other times.

Current scholarship on job hopping tends to be divided between portraying new generation migrant workers as either beneficiaries or victims of market competition. Other writers have emphasised ‘cultural’/identity/lifestyle aspects bringing young rural people to the city while the life course (or life cycle) approach of some scholars also

³³ To take up an agricultural or – more likely – non-agricultural job (Yue et al. 2010).

offers a contribution to these debates. This chapter attempts to re-contextualise job hopping within the interpretative framework of migration as a rite of passage, as set out in Chapter 1. I will treat job hopping as an active decision taken by young people as they try to ‘establish a career’ (part of gaining adulthood). As emphasised in Chapter 1, gaining a job in a factory is not seen as the ultimate goal or destination but just a start in life, a necessary but a transitional moment. However, what distinguishes my argument most strongly is that I do not see job hopping in isolation from attempts to move on and establish a career through promotion: on the contrary, both are strongly linked to the way that migrants respond to the conflicting job ideologies presented in Chapter 2, the official ideology of rules and regulations and the personalised hierarchy that workers must fit into in practice. Job hopping is a way in which migrants seek to find the best possible position within a hierarchical world. Far from being a disjointed phenomenon, a condition of ‘floating’ or short-term economic calculation or a result of a weak market position (Fu and Tang 2009: 46–47), there is a strong continuity between job hopping and learning how to succeed in the new ‘neoliberal’ world. Hence job hopping is strongly connected with attitudes to, and success at, promotion.

I will explore these decisions from the perspective of workers’ attitudes towards competition, opportunity and risk. Job hopping and promotion are both affected by cultural aspects of the Chinese attitude to competition, especially the culture of *bu chutou* (not ‘sticking one’s head out’, avoiding being exceptional). In particular, building on Chapter 2, I will show that migrants seek to establish reciprocal cooperative relationships with powerful allies: in their search for social mobility they learn to offer their support to selected powerful others, attaching themselves to individual figures of authority, in return for ‘care’ and – ideally – to gain ‘special promotion’ (*tiba*). I use this term to denote the opportunities that come suddenly and unexpectedly – by contrast to the idea of job advancement based on an impersonal order of regular rules and abstract standards. This hope of *tiba* explains, I suggest, why job hopping is so frequent among young migrant workers. At the same time – as part of the same logic, although with opposite effects – because of the obligations of care that come with promotion, some female workers may also be reluctant to accept promotion.

INTRODUCING THE CASE OF SUNNY

One day, just after dinner, as I was going up on the staircase in the dormitory building, Sunny came running down, almost charging straight into me. She came to a stop and, with an embarrassed but sweet smile, called out my name. She asked me politely, ‘Going up [*shangqu a*]?’ We both knew the answer to this question but still I answered her: ‘Yes.’ This kind of verbal exchange in which both parties state the obvious is a common circumstance of greeting people in China. Even though such questions are meaningless, it enables people to start a conversation. However, I was surprised when Sunny then asked, ‘Would you like to go outside with me?’ She was the first worker to take the initiative with me in this way; most of them were very shy and usually I had to use various methods to make them feel sufficiently relaxed to talk to me. In Sunny’s case, it was particularly surprising because I was sure I had never spoken with her before. A few minutes later, after we had gone down to the small courtyard of the factory and I was watching some young girls sitting on a swing, Sunny called me from behind and asked whether I would like a bite of the snack she had bought from the nearby grocery store. As we shared her bean stick (which was spicy and very hard to chew), she started to talk to me. I soon learned that she was very articulate. She spoke Mandarin fluently without a regional accent. She spoke at a normal volume and looked at me as she talked. By contrast, most girls in the factory, even my room-mate Delicate, normally avoided eye contact and looked down when they spoke with me or to their leader. Nor did Sunny just answer questions I put to her: she seemed very happy to share her life experiences with me. I soon learnt she was only 17 years old but, surprisingly, she had already had abundant experience working in different businesses, ‘hopping’ from one job to another. As will be described in more detail below, she had two spells of working at THS. Her previous time there, when she stayed for six months, had been the longest so far. Then she quit again and went home for a further three months before returning to THS. To me it was very impressive that Sunny, a 17-year-old girl, had already ‘hopped’ through six different workplaces and been engaged in at least five different kinds of employment. Each period of work was quite short. She kept on moving to the next one.

This conversation with Sunny led me to reflect on (among other things) how quickly the workforce seemed to change at THS, with many workers spending only a short time at the company. I checked the human resource data and chose some workers to interview but, just a few days later, I found that some of them had already put in their resignations and had actually left. The demographic data I had collected was already history by the time I coded them. For example, in the period after the Chinese New Year holiday around 40 new workers started but two of them stayed in the factory for only one day. Two or three months counts as a long time to stay at the TKS factory. The Taiwanese manager at KS2 in Kunshan also told me he was frustrated by the instability of the work force. He implemented many policies aimed at encouraging the workers to stay, for instance, raising their wages, providing a better working environment (including both food and accommodation) and offering free night school classes. However, despite these efforts, he still could not prevent the rapid turnover of the workforce. (Later in this chapter I will return to Sunny's case in the light of further arguments about the nature of *chutou*.)

EXPLANATIONS FOR JOB HOPPING

One approach to job hopping is that it reflects the young generation of rural migrants' successful adaptation to the new market economy. Previously, in socialist China, in line with the planned economy, there was little mobility between jobs. Workers were typically paid exactly the same regardless of their work performance (Liu 2007: 43) and could expect lifetime employment (Knight and Song 2005: 19). In the classic *danwei* (work unit), every employee received 'pensions, housing, and healthcare' (Knight and Song 2005: 19) and workers basically 'did not compete with each other' (Liu 2007: 43). When older workers, who were acculturated to this system, first encountered market economy conditions, they reportedly 'did not even understand the concept of economic competition' and, as a result, 'could not compete for private-sector jobs' (Knight and Song 2005: 19). When today's generation job hop, this shows that they have adapted well to the logic of the market economy and can calculate their own market value on the basis of this logic. Their job hopping behaviour shows that they know how to deploy their bargaining chips and labour power in the context of the new economy (Knight and Song 2005: 25; Lee 2007: 5). In this sense, new generation

migrant workers appear to be competitive individuals operating appropriately in the neoliberal environment: their reasoning is based on awareness of ‘economic efficiency’ and also shows ‘ethical self-responsibility’ (Ong 2007: 11) in the sense that they do not expect jobs and promotion to come from via assignment by the party-state.

However, other scholars offer a different account: for them job hopping is a result of the weak bargaining position of new generation migrant workers, whose possibilities within the market economy are seriously constrained under the *hukou* system, which prevents them from shifting their permanent residence to the city (see the Introduction). Without the right of permanent residence, migrant workers can only be temporary contract workers in the factory and also are not eligible for social security (Chan 2010; Zhang 2010). Workers who work in their own home towns (or regions) are eligible to sign long-term work contracts and (therefore, it is argued) seldom ‘hop’ between jobs (Wang 2005: 40). Correspondingly, the frequent job hopping of young migrant workers who do *not* work in their home towns is said to demonstrate the struggles they have because of their limited opportunities under the *hukou* system. The majority of new generation migrant workers not only move between rural villages and cities but also between different factories in the coastal area (Fu and Tang 2009: 43). In this context, migrant workers are forced to constantly change jobs (Xu 2010), moving from one temporary contract to the next. Far from being the beneficiaries of a free job market, the constraints of the *hukou* system mean that they are victims, *forced* to wander about the city changing jobs because of the lack of social protection (Fu and Tang 2009).

Although these are conflicting approaches, at the same time they both consider job hopping to be a direct response to/result of market competition. A different explanation is that job hopping reflects the endeavour to be an urbanite, which is equated with being ‘modern’ (Fu and Tang 2009: 46–47). Because the modern lifestyle is attractive, rural youth are keen to take part in it. The ‘young generation are determined to live a new lifestyle’ (Yan 2011: 203–04). The experience of these young rural migrants is contrasted with the migration of their parents’ generation (see Chapter 1), where the typical pattern was ‘circulatory mobility’ – i.e. a back and forth movement between

rural home and place of work (Fan 2009; Murphy 2002; Woon 1993).³⁴ While both generations face the question of how to handle short-term temporary contracts and job insecurity, the new generation has not adopted ‘circulatory mobility’ because of their desire to become urbanites. Therefore, they migrate to the city and seize every chance to stay. That is the picture as seen from this perspective. However, their hope of becoming an urbanite is destined to remain unfulfilled since the *hukou* system does not offer rural people a permanent right to stay in the city. Thus, although beginning from a different premise, this viewpoint also highlights the ‘trapped’ nature of migrant workers, due to the *hukou* system. Without the right of permanent residence, migrant workers can only be temporary contract workers and hence only temporary urbanites.

However, is it actually true that new generation migrants want to migrate to the city *permanently*? Is this the basis on which they make their economic calculations? Do their aspirations to experience the urban lifestyle equate to a wish for permanent residence in the city? To presume that reforming the *hukou* system and giving the right of permanent residency in the city would resolve the ‘problem’ of rural youth’s job hopping may be quite misguided. Some current research has found that, while around 25% of migrant workers want to become permanent urban citizens, around 31% want to maintain their rural *hukou* but give up their land; around 29% want to maintain their rural *hukou* and also keep their land; and around 15% want to acquire an urban *hukou* and also keep their land. For the majority of rural villagers (around 60%), it seems, the best situation would be one in which they could – while living in the city – maintain their rural registration in the *hukou* system without having the obligation to farm, with or without the lands. In this situation, they could work freely in the city and keep open the option of returning to their rural home (Cai and Wang 2007). To assume that ‘becoming an urbanite’ is the reason behind job hopping may be to conflate the desire for social mobility with the desire for permanent residence in the city. In today’s China, social stratification is, to some extent, still determined by the position of individuals in the *hukou* system (Watson 1984). Consequently, obtaining urban citizenship may be

³⁴ See Chapter 4 on the question of previous generations’ migration as ‘circular/circulatory mobility’ and how this relates to their sense of place.

seen as a marker of social mobility for rural villagers. However, if the system were to allow every villager to become an urban citizen without conditions, gaining urban citizenship would lose its role as an index of social mobility among rural people. On the contrary, it would in effect force all villagers to participate in the system of neoliberal economic competition while restricting their alternatives.

Seemingly closer to the rite of passage argument advanced here, still other researchers have discussed job hopping in relation to the life course (or life cycle), emphasising that new generation migrant workers are typically not adults when they secure their first jobs in town. It is said they are *yijiao tachu xiaomen, yijiao tajin chengmen* – ‘one foot at the gate of the school, one foot at the gate of the city’ (Xu 2010: 5). In Xu’s study, the migrants’ average age at the time of their first waged position was 18 years. This is in fact nine years younger than the average age of the first generation migrant workers (Xu 2010: 5–6).³⁵ Xu then goes on to argue that their relative youth makes it more likely that new generation migrant workers will get ‘fed up’ with their jobs: because they are half-children, they may not be mature enough to endure the hardships of working life and act reliably. Similar arguments are made by Bian, Zhang and Jiao (2010: 96). Looking for an easier life, a better wage, or even just for fun, they job hop (2010: 5–6). This analysis, however, is quite close to the popular reaction discussed in Chapter 1 that regards new generation migrants as ‘spoiled children’, products of the one-child policy and China’s increasing ‘individualisation’. It is said they tend to ‘not work seriously’, to ‘not have a diligent attitude’, to ‘try to make the most money by doing the least thing’; moreover ‘they do not think it is a disgraceful to lose one’s job when it is one’s own decision to quit’ (Zhou and Sun 2010: 83). While, in a sense recognising the in-between condition of new generation migrant workers, these reactions arguably do not truly reflect the seriousness of the life crisis that many of the young people are going through (see below). The emphasis on these young people’s ‘in-between’ age bears only a superficial resemblance to the approach adopted in this

³⁵ Another survey (Wang 2001) found that in the 1980s migrant workers’ average age was 30, while in the 1990s it was 22.

thesis – that migration for work has become a key part of the rite of passage for contemporary rural youth.

Similarly, I need to distinguish my approach from the perspective that sees new generation migrant workers purely as passive victims of the existing structure, while paying less attention to their agency in these circumstances (but cf. Fan 2009 for an exception). By contrast, my approach focuses on how migrant workers deal with the intrinsically unfair situation posed for them by the *hukou* system, and the strategies they adopt vis-à-vis social mobility (which, for them, is closely related to the process whereby they gain full adulthood). In my experience, they do not believe they are destined to be victims in the coastal cities. If it was generally believed in the countryside that rural youth were destined to be victims in the city, young migrant workers would behave like the elderly peasants in Yan's ethnography who 'have accepted the existing social inequalities between urbanites and themselves and regard the attempt to imitate urban lifestyles as unrealistic and counter-productive' (Yan 2009: 117); moreover, older villagers would not encourage the younger generation to go out and seek jobs in the city (see Chapter 4). The idea that new generation migrants are victims in the sense that their goal of 'becoming an urbanite' is frustrated by the *hukou* system in particular and social inequalities more generally cannot stand up if they simply do not have the goal of becoming permanent residents in the city. By the same token, job hopping should not necessarily be seen as doomed attempt to achieve this permanent urban status. Approaching job hopping, rather, as a positive life strategy that they believe in, we should ask the opposite question: why do migrant young workers decide to job hop so frequently?³⁶

Leaving home to engage in waged labour serves multiple social functions for rural youth. Consequently fulfilling their desires is entangled with fulfilling the obligations they seek to honour in relation both to migratory and home social contexts. Equally, their desires should not be reduced to simplified assumptions either about the (short-

³⁶ According to my fieldwork, most of the workers who hop to other jobs do not do so as a result of decisions made by the factory (such as being laid off or made redundant). It is usually their own decision to leave.

term) lure of urban consumerism or a (long-term) wish to become urbanites. As argued here, the desire is to *experience* urban life and is situated in relation to their in-between situation. ‘Becoming an urbanite’ should perhaps be approached less as an ultimate goal or intention for permanent settlement and more as a means to achieving adult status. Many of them still have very significant links with the people in their home towns (although on the surface they appear indifferent toward their home town and pay more attention to the city, as I will discuss in Chapter 4). Their attempts to stay in the city by job hopping may ultimately be in order to become a decent *rural* adult rather than becoming ‘an urbanite’ (see Murphy 2002).

THE WORK CONTEXT

To understand this it is necessary to set aside or at least suspend certain presuppositions that job hopping is a ‘second best’ option, associated with a purely ‘floating’ existence and incompatible with forming a career, i.e. gaining promotion and achieving upward mobility. Certainly, at a more basic level, job hopping facilitates entry into the job market. The circumstances in which workers are highly mobile, regularly change jobs and flow in and out of the factory (and from one factory to another) actually create the opportunities that the workers leaving their jobs are looking for. Given that it is normal for workers in a factory to leave a short time after starting, vacancies often have to be filled immediately – which creates many opportunities even for ill-educated young migrant workers. That is one thing young migrants learn very quickly, and those were exactly the sorts of opportunities they sought. Companies sometimes offer employment to prospective workers with zero experience. By the same token, it is also the case that opportunities for upward mobility become available if one has good timing. According to the findings of my fieldwork, the vertical mobility of workers is relatively fast in the SEZ (both in Kunshan and Shenzhen). The possibility of climbing rapidly through the workforce inspires young workers as they form their economic strategies.

In the SEZ, there is not much respect for formal qualifications. It is an atmosphere that belittles educational, intellectual and bookish qualities. As a PhD student, I was more than once laughed at by the general managers both in the Taiwanese-owned factory

(the THS factory in Shenzhen) and in the mainlander-owned factory (the KS1 factory in Kunshan), as they believed that everything people needed to learn had to be acquired by doing, not studying. One of the general managers had only received a junior high school level of education. Although the other general manager had a Masters degree in engineering from Japan, he despised schooling even more than his colleague. At the same time, the system for verifying the background of young workers, including their education and skills, was fairly loose. So many fake certificates and false CVs are in circulation in the SEZ that no one placed much weight on such documents.

As described in Chapter 2, I sat in on recruitment interviews at the THS factory several times. While the interviewers were very casual about the applicants' CVs, they had the opposite attitude when it came to IDs. If they became suspicious, they would ask newcomers to recite their ID numbers and home town addresses. If the interviewees could not do this, it was assumed they were using a fake ID – they had probably borrowed their cousin's or neighbour's card in order to apply for a job (for example because they were too young according to the employment regulations). More generally, as described in Chapter 2, in recruitment interviews, managers judged the interviewees largely by their facial expression, general look, eyesight (*yanshen*), posture, and the subtle gestures made by the candidates as well as the way they replied to questions.

In the same way, opportunities for workers to gain promotion are not based on transparent terms of competition with their fellow workers in which the winner is judged by impersonal rules and regulations or compared with their fellow workers on the basis of performance. On the contrary, the procedure is highly personal. As with the initial recruitment process, promotion often comes about on the basis of reasons that are unknown to the workers and that they therefore cannot dispute. Similarly, when factory selects leaders from amongst the workers and judges the capabilities of employees, it does so from a perspective that has little relationship to official qualifications – education certificates, which could be fake – or prior work experience – which could be made up – or even an individual's capability, which could be difficult to assess.

However, the young workers do still make some effort to understand managerial decision-making concerning promotions. There are so many inexperienced workers in the factory, they ask, why does the opportunity for internal mobility become available to one worker and not another? In order to answer the question ‘why not me?’ (or indeed ‘why me?’), the workers develop their own theories to make sense of the situation. The personal theories of individual workers were shared and, consequently, a particular discourse about these key issues of internal mobility was widespread amongst the workforce. The following is the account that one worker provided explaining’ successful promotion. But of course for the few who succeed, many fail; and those are the ones who will job hop in search of better opportunities.

EAST-SEA AND THE FOLK THEORY OF PROMOTION

East-Sea was a high flier at THS and people knew that the manager, Mr. Hu, liked him very much. East-Sea told me his story in a relatively ‘philosophical’ way: he not only described but also analysed his experiences and from this extracted some explanations of what leads to promotion.

At the time when I met him, East-Sea was 23 years old. His job at THS was his second job. He told me, ‘Until I am 30 years old, I will keep looking for bosses who are ambitious and capable. I am willing to follow this type of leader. After I am 30 years old, I will start to look for a boss who will treat me well.’ He proceeded to explain his ‘theory of work’ to me, which I describe below, and which throws much light on the significance of job hopping. Before that, however, I will describe his family background, social relationships and work history.

East-Sea is from Hubei province, from a rural background; he is the oldest child in his family. His father died two years before I met him. Even though his father had a college degree, because of the instability of that era, he could only find work as a craftsman, working as a carpenter and a stonemason. Previously, he had also worked as a veterinarian. In the last few years before he died, East-Sea’s father had started to farm and sell tea leaves. The financial situation of his family had gradually improved, with 20 acres of land being farmed by his family, including some land rented from others. Before his death, his father was earning approximately 4,000–5,000 RMB

annually.³⁷ East-Sea deeply regretted that his father had died too early to enjoy his life, just as the economic situation of the family was improving.

When East-Sea was a little boy, his father used to threaten that he would not permit East-Sea to continue with his schooling if it caused him to suffer from short sightedness. At the time, prior to China's economic boom, his father's reasoning was that one could not be a good farmer if one had to wear glasses. As a result, East-Sea never 'allowed' himself to appear short-sighted and certainly would not wear glasses. When he did actually develop short-sightedness, he was so afraid of being forced to give up his schooling that he concealed it, pretending that he could see properly. Amazingly, it actually seemed to work. He told me with a smile that, if he concentrated on trying to see something, then, even if it appeared blurred at first, he could finally see it.

East-Sea's mother belongs to the Tu minority group. Under the one-child policy, members of China's minority groups are often allowed to have two (sometimes more) children. Therefore, East-Sea has a younger sister who is 20 years old and works in an electronics factory in Guangdong province very close to THS. I asked why he had not recruited his sister to THS. East-Sea's response was, 'People from the same lineage better not come to the same company as this would become an obstacle to each individual's development.' This view is very different from that held by most workers, who frequently rely on kin relationships for employment opportunities (see Chapter 4).

East-Sea's wife was 30 years old at the time of my fieldwork, i.e. seven years older than him. This was unusual, as husbands are generally older than wives. East-Sea's wife was from Guangxi province. They had met at East-Sea's previous company, where his wife also worked. Before they got married, they had already started living together in a rented house. When THS moved to Longgang, East-Sea's wife quit her job and became a worker in THS. This decision represented something of a sacrifice for her. She had been a group leader at the previous factory but at THS she only had

³⁷ In the factory, the workers' wage is about 900 RMB per month. For comparison: a meal at McDonald's is around 25 RMB in Shenzhen. At the restaurants outside the factory, 10 dumplings and a bowl of noodles each cost about 2 RMB.

the rank of a basic worker. However, it is still considered relatively normal in China for a wife to sacrifice her own career development for that of her husband, and particularly in this case as East-Sea was believed to have a promising future at THS. His wife explained her decision to me: ‘His chances [as a younger man] of being successful in the factory and in society are much higher than mine [as an older woman], so my job is less important. What I have to do is push him to be successful.’ The chances she referred to were not only related to her husband’s and her own abilities. She had also taken into account all the social biases (relating to gender and age) in reaching her decision.

For East-Sea the purpose of work was, first, survival and, second, development. His ultimate goal was to be a boss. As he said, ‘*Bukeneng da yibeizi gong* [you can’t work [for somebody else] for your entire life].’ He had got his first job when he was 18 years old. At that time, he had just graduated from a forestry vocational school (a two-year college programme), specialising in the internet industry. He then worked as a basic worker in a plastics hardware factory, SH1, in Shenzhen. He had been recruited through one of the agencies that regularly visited schools to carry out recruitment for companies. He worked for three months as basic level worker. Then he transferred to the Quality Control section to check the source materials. After two or three months, he became an experimental technician (*shiyanyuan*). After a further three months, he became deputy chief of a laboratory and stayed in this position for almost four years, after which he gained the title of Quality Engineer (QE).³⁸ At that point, he was 19 years old.

East-Sea told me that the reasons he ‘job hopped’ to THS for a QE position was because he was fed up with his previous job at SH1 because his salary was not increasing. He could not see any means of improving his salary and, in addition, he felt he was sufficiently capable to ‘*chulaochuang*’ (quit the job and take risks in order to gain one’s fortune). The last term in this expression, *chuang* – which roughly means ‘rush’ or ‘charge’ – is a very interesting one. In the context of migration, it more or less describes the motives of young people for leaving home: But it is very hard to translate

³⁸ ‘QE’ denotes engineers of professional standard in quality engineering and quality control.

chuang accurately into English. It denotes a pioneering spirit. It can also mean being a bit rude and careless in a way that allows people to break out from old rules or old ways of behaving and break into something new. Quoting Fan (another worker, aged 23, from Hubei), ‘The factory is a comfortable place to work. The life is leisurely. If you work in a factory too long, you don’t want to go out to *chuang* unless you have 100% confidence of success.’ In the picture that most workers present, it is clear that going to work in a factory is the safest step for migrant workers to take and it often is their first step. But what they really want from working in the factory is the opportunity to use the various resources available to them there to accumulate personal knowledge, money, personal networks and experience – things that enable them to take the next step.

East-Sea recounted to me the theory of promotions prevalent among the workers, as based on what other workers in the factory say, the lectures given by senior employees and the ongoing experiences of individuals. Other sources were quotes distributed on the internet and in publications. For example, it is written in the factory’s training material that, ‘Today’s society is a collectivist society. Only the collective (*jiti*) can achieve a career. To safeguard the collective equals safeguarding yourself.’ As argued in Chapter 2, these rules closely resemble traditional Chinese values of *zuoren* (being a person), which emphasise the importance of knowing the individual’s location in social networks and behaving accordingly rather than showing unique individuality and speciality. ‘Being in the majority’ and ‘avoiding being different’ is a crucial motive behind the behaviour of rural youth. Even in the modern factories of marketised China, individuals are still asked/persuaded/taught that they should be part of something bigger than themselves and that they can only survive well by delicately coordinating themselves with this *jiti* (collective) (see Yan 2010). Through being part of a *jiti*, individuals can engage in interpersonal cooperation on the basis of trust with other individuals. The competition mode East-Sea described to me among individuals in the

factory resembles in some respects the one between brothers in a traditional big family.³⁹

This approach gives little encouragement to originality or adventure but it does not preach obedience as such. Flexibility is more important than obedience for a ‘good’ employee. To be good employees, workers have to engage in a complex mind reading process. They must ‘observe’ (*guan*), ‘reason’ (*pan*) and ‘guess’ (*yu*), in an effort to align their own behaviour with what their boss desires (as described in Chapter 2). Because such reasoning becomes an integral part of interactions between employees and their superiors, these processes of reasoning and decision making may be deemed part of the public discourse and a form of ‘culture’. The reasoning is shared and a degree of consensus is reached. Decisions are reached on the basis of collective reasoning; they cannot be considered individual outcomes. On the contrary, the reasoning of individuals is secondary to the public and shared form of reasoning. This ‘theory’ is what I learnt from the discussion with East-Sea.

East-Sea also has a particular theory about rules and law (*guise falu*). For him, rules and laws are only made for people in powerful positions to legitimate their rights. A factory of course has rules and regulations relating to every aspect of work and recruitment. However, the rules here seem to apply in very particular ways. They do not serve to give equal opportunities in life to all the candidates. On the contrary, they give those in relatively powerful positions an excuse to punish their opponents. In other words, rather than seeing rules in the factory as a means to maintain a fair and equal working environment, it would be better to understand them as a mechanism that makes privilege possible. The rules exist only in order to make access to such privileges exclusive. The more powerful authority always can violate the rules when necessary according to their personal aims.

East-Sea’s explanation and his ‘theory’ accord to some degree with my own observations. In the factory, both workers and supervisors make decisions for themselves and often these are not in accordance with the rules. After ‘realising’

³⁹ ‘Brothers, instead of trying to get ahead by independent paths, tend to begin by competing for their father’s favour’ (Hsu 1971: 267).

(*lingwu*) this principle, East-Sea concluded that ‘meeting’ one’s patron/benefactor (*guiren*) is the most important thing for one’s career development’.

East-Sea explained his fast rise up the career ladder as a consequence of meeting a special leader at SH1 who liked him and had the power to award him *tiba* (special promotions). As East-Sea sees the situations, a person with a family background such as his cannot make it without a *guiren* (benefactor). His family is poor: although his parents were willing to give him all they had to help make him successful, their resources were limited. East-Sea calls his leader ‘master’ (*shifu*) and East-Sea sees himself as like his apprentice. All his knowledge and achievement stem from his leader. East-Sea adds that there was also an element of personal affection – *you ganqing le*. When he left his previous company, his leader was willing to help East-Sea to find his next job, but East-Sea politely refused because he did not want to be under this leader’s wing anymore. He adds, ‘Where would I be if one day he doesn’t care about me any more?’ East-Sea wants to ‘be independent’ from his *shifu*’s caring because he believes this relationship will come to an end after he leaves the factory, i.e. after the reciprocal relationship between them no longer exists.

In East-Sea’s experience, the leaders’ unpredictable favour and affection are also, in part, a consequence of their personal calculations. In SH1, the Taiwanese leaders are engaged in fighting against each other but they have to rely on their mainlander subordinates to fight for their power. The workers all know that in Taiwanese factories, a mainlander is never to be assigned a top position. They are naturally excluded from the big power games. Therefore, the best cooperative team is formed by a Taiwanese leader and few mainlander subordinates. They fight together for this Taiwanese leader’s promotion. Taiwanese leaders know well that these young mainlanders, who come from rural areas and have poor families, are willing to die for any opportunities for social mobility. In addition, the hearts of such rural people can be bought in many ways, or so the leaders feel, such as by giving them the opportunity to gain new skills, to go on overseas trips, to attend good dinners or to gain a new title. For such small costs, the Taiwanese leaders can gain loyal allies amongst their mainland staff. In addition, Taiwanese leaders can feel at ease in sharing key knowledge and skills with

their mainlander subordinates, knowing that these subordinates will never be eligible to be their future competitors for powerful positions in the factory.

East-Sea sees all of this clearly but he does not like it. He describes such relationships as actually '*hen yayi*' (very oppressive). The people involved are forced to plot against each other. He plays this game well but he repeatedly said to me that he did this 'only in order to survive' (*shengcun*). He went on, 'I hope one day I can go back home to be a boss and rid myself of all this. That is my dream.' I asked him how he coped with the unpleasant 'reality' he faces now. He said that he tries to stand in the middle and maintain a neutral attitude. He often reminds himself that what he needs to do is to learn as many things as possible in the factory, to seize any chances he can get and forget the unrelated things. As we talked, he took a deep breath, sighed and said his background makes him 'eat a lot of bitterness' (*chihenduoku*). He observes himself and finds that he used to be naïve (*tianzhen*) but now he is *xianshi*, which means being a realist or facing reality without fantasy.

In East-Sea's narrative, there was almost no mention of his fellow workers. His talk focused on his relationship with his supervisors, what kind of supervisors he wanted to 'follow' at different career stages, and so on. His opportunities for promotion seemed to have little to do with competing with fellow workers but, as he perceived the situation, were generally about gaining special help from his supervisors and how to behave in order to win this 'special help': in the workers' own terminology, this is referred to as *tiba* (plucking out).

TIBA (TO PLUCK OUT; TO PROMOTE AS A SPECIAL CONSIDERATION)

Tiba literally means to 'pluck out' but the expression *guanzhao tiba* is used colloquially to describe promotion as a result of special consideration, i.e. favouritism. In the folk theory of promotion, *tiba* also relates to a set of emotions and obligations associated with caring and being cared for. Caring is a cultural value: caring and being linked into the social web are characteristics that Chinese parents want their child to achieve (see Fong 2007). Yet these 'traditional' values are potentially in conflict with the values of being outstanding or excellent (*chutou*) and independent, which help

them to achieve success in the neoliberal context (Fong 2007). Vanessa Fong's research shows that Chinese are taught from childhood to take responsibility for caring for (some particular) 'others'; already by the time they are teenagers they may be judged as not reaching the required standard of behaviour. Caring for others is a responsibility required of people according to the values of Chinese culture. If one occupies a position where such responsibility is expected, there are still some fine lines as to when to take it on and when there is little (or no) choice. Successful people are expected to take on responsibilities of caring for those associated with them.

For example, Ling was the leader of the product section in the THS factory. Her husband, Respect-Career, was the factory director (*changzhang*). Ling was the elder daughter of a woman who was also the eldest sister amongst her siblings. As a result, Ling had many relatives whom she was expected to care for in one way or another. Silk, as Ling's mother's younger sister's daughter, was one of them.⁴⁰ Silk also brought her classmates and neighbours to seek help from Ling. Ling and her husband acted as the guardians of the workers who had informal ties (*guanxi*) with him, especially Ling's relatives from Hubei province. More and more acquaintances brought gifts to Ling's natal family and asked Ling and her husband to *guanzhao tiba* (promote them as a special consideration). Ling felt that she could not refuse these acquaintances because, if she did, they would either condemn her as being capable of helping but too proud to do so or, alternatively, think that she was incapable of helping them (in other words, that she was pretending to be more successful than she actually was). The first judgement would lead to resentment, the second contempt, with the result that these acquaintances would no longer give Ling 'face' (respect and reputation) through their performance of self-abasement and begging for her help. It would put their relationship – and her status – in danger.

The situation regarding relatives is different. With relatives, *tiba* would be virtually a compulsory duty. If we think of *tiba* in terms of 'the redistribution of success *following cooperation*', matters become clearer. Successful persons will be condemned if they do

⁴⁰ See Chapter 1, where Silk's migrations 'following Ling's footsteps' – under her care – were described.

not share their success with close acquaintances. In the context under discussion, sharing always means to use the resources at an individual's disposal as a result of one's work position in order to help one's relatives/close acquaintances. One has a responsibility to help one's relatives 'to get there as well'.

One day, when I was eating dinner with Shen and Silk, Shen explained the significance of *tiba* to me and the strong reciprocal duty that results – at least in the traditional view – from the fact that one person's success is often achieved as a result of the sacrifice of other family members. The successful man (traditionally – but see Chapter 4) is the 'representative' of a household. Through a process of collective decision making he was chosen to be the 'social actor' who would achieve the collective goal. On his route to becoming successful, his preferences and needs are considered carefully while the needs of others are suppressed. While he is still progressing on his journey, the household offers him the resources he needs in order to achieve the collective goal. Therefore, when he finally succeeds, he is not the only one who should enjoy the fruits of his success. The benefits of his success therefore should be redistributed to other family members. It is the product of cooperation, rather than the result of individual effort.

The strategies surrounding this type of success route may be said to be traditional in China, i.e. they are part of the traditional folk theory of success. The emphasis is on cooperation, sharing, caring – and exclusion. Fairness and equal rights do not exist as such in this hierarchical society. The individual is never the unit making the decision or taking responsibility for the consequences of decisions. Family members are assigned different 'roles' and the 'self' must adjust to fit in with these roles. The family distributes the resources according to the role each person takes and how much this role contributes to the collective goal and serves the household as a whole.

The crucial point here is that *tiba* – in effect, gaining access to opportunities through favours – is the thing that the migrant workers I met appear to want most. They do not, in my experience, focus on the injustices of the *hukou* system and demands that it should be abandoned or reformed, or more generally on the ways that inequality between urban and rural people might somehow be reduced. They are focused instead on establishing themselves in a career through 'cooperation with authority'.

Meanwhile, ‘competition with fellows’ as a way to establish their careers is not what they appear to be seeking. It isn’t that these young people have no experience of competition; on the contrary, the Chinese schooling system they have gone through is highly competitive, as is well known. But in the factory, I will suggest, competitiveness is constrained by the dilemma surrounding ‘sticking one’s head out’, as I discuss in the next section. *Tiba* avoids this problem because it seems to involve an element of chance – or being suddenly and unexpectedly granted favours.

THE DILEMMA OF *CHUTOU*

Chutou (literally ‘head sticking out’) may be said to have contradictory connotations. On the one hand, it is a positive thing: it means ‘to be successful in one’s career’, ‘to be honoured’ or ‘to be distinguished within a group’. In theory, everyone wants to achieve this social status. Parents hope their children can be *churentoudi* (standing out among their fellows) which means becoming outstanding and excellent (see Fong 2007). However, *chutou* has a negative sense in that it implies a risky, unstable situation. If you *chutou*, you will possibly become the target of challenges and the object of envy.

A number of Chinese proverbs build on this expression: *chutou de chuanzi xian zaoyang* (The longer rafter is the first to meet disaster),⁴¹ *chutou de chuanzi xian fulan* (Rafters that jut out rot first)⁴² and *bangda chutouniao* (The stick will hit the bird that lifts its head in the crowd).⁴³ This notion is seemingly widespread across China; I heard the first proverb from an elderly man in rural Yunnan Province and I heard the last one in Shenzhen.

In Shenzhen, migrant workers warn each other, *buyao luanchutou* – ‘don’t stick your head out just for any reason’ (*luan* means to do something in a chaotic or random way). For example, when the manager forgot what she had said and then scolded her

⁴¹ 出頭的椽子先遭殃

⁴² 出頭的椽子先腐爛

⁴³ 棒打出頭鳥

subordinates, who had in fact followed her orders, no one stepped up to pointed out the truth of the situation. They all kept quiet. This is not simply the performance of obedience. It is a decision taken following a complex process of consideration. No one wants to be the one who is different from others and stands alone. Another example is the way workers who received extra rewards preferred to keep it secret. It is possible that they feel they have a duty to 'share' their rewards with close acquaintances according to the *tiba* practice I discussed in the last section. If they don't want to share things then they had better keep it secret.⁴⁴ They would be asked to shoulder more responsibilities by their acquaintances, to offer them care and support when it is needed. It is simply imposed on them without any question. For young migrant workers, the best outcome is to manage to avoid the negative aspects of *chutou* while still being able to enjoy the positive.

Generally speaking, for migrant workers, to be distinguished among a group is not good, regardless of whether the distinction is for positive or negative reasons. Sometimes being, or more precisely, pretending to be average and being one of the ordinary people in a group seems to be the best position and the one for which they are aiming.

I would suggest that the contradictory mindset related to *chutou* seriously shapes young workers' culture and behaviour. Being outstanding means being different and being in a minority. It is good but also frightening in some respects. This contradiction calls for more cultural means to reconcile the two sides of '*chutou*'. Here I will draw some ethnographic examples to show the feeling of '*chutou*' in everyday life in the factory.

For young female workers, attracting attention is a frightening prospect for some of them. They avoid every possibility of being seen as *chutou* or outstanding, even to the extent of avoiding expressing their own ideas. They typically keep their thoughts and feelings quiet, never disclosing them except to their close friends and relatives.

⁴⁴ Indeed, one reason why privileges can be so widely offered by managers in the factory is because the psychological considerations of the workers prevent the awarding of privileges being openly discussed.

This fear of *chutou* amongst the workers led to difficulties for me in conducting interviews early in my research. What I actually wanted to hear was their own personal feelings and thoughts but the young workers tried very hard to provide answers which they thought were sufficiently ‘correct’ and ‘objective’ to represent Chinese youth as a whole. They often replied to my questions with statements such as ‘my own experiences can’t represent everyone’s’. After hearing this, I thought they would then proceed to give me details of their own experiences and I felt excited at the prospect and looked forward to hearing their unique opinions. But then they stopped. I gradually realised that they made this kind of initial statement to inform or warn me that their individual experiences are of no value. I should not waste time on them, a mere worker, and I should instead go to interview someone successful and remarkable. This does not mean they are inarticulate or shy. On the contrary, they are very talkative and articulate in front of their relatives and friends but, when talking to me in the interviews, to their boss, or to other distant strangers, they feel they have to talk in an ‘objective’ manner to present the opinion of the *jiti* (collective), which means in the formal style of someone on a TV programme – very different from the way they speak in everyday life. This left them anxious that they would say something ‘wrong’ but, after making a great effort to explain to them that everyone’s individual experience was valuable for my research and therefore nothing could be considered wrong, some of them did finally start to talk naturally. However, some of the young workers never managed to talk to me in this way. Paradoxically, it is those who are successful and remarkable (which means that they are actually special and not typical) who the workers feel can be *daibiao* (representatives) and exhibit the *dianxing* (typical character) of the collective.

In this context, their fear of *chutou* seems to reflect a number of things: 1) their belief that someone in authority can and probably should speak for everyone; 2) their belief that individual opinions are of limited value; 3) their fear of showing publicly that individual opinion does not match up with the official one. The fear of *chutou* again raises the question to what extent individualisation has been happening among new generation migrant workers. Have they really become a particular kind of actors, as a result of ‘a new way of technologies of subjectification’ as Ong (2007: 11) suggests?

However, they do have ways of voicing their individual opinions. But migrant workers, especially young female workers, would present these as if they were collective/authorised ones – that is to say, they would attribute their own idea to someone else. Delicate is good at this strategy. Every time Delicate wants to give orders or make some comment to Silk or Fragrant, she gives it in another person's name. For example, when she calls Silk asking her come back to the factory over the weekend, she says, 'Silk, the boss asks you come back immediately' in front of the boss. Or, in my presence she will lecture Silk in my name saying, 'Silk, XXX [the name they call me in the factory] asks you not to wear tight trousers'. Because Delicate says these things when the person whose name she borrows is actually present, they can of course hear it and deny it immediately if they want. Silk probably knows that this was Delicate's idea and Delicate is probably aware of Silk's awareness. So we can infer, first, that Delicate does not intend to lie but, rather, she is using this form of expression as a euphemism to express her idea. Second, she is using this form of expression to imply that the comments she makes or orders she gives are not only her own ideas. Delicate attributes the authorship of an idea to another person in order to force that other person, who is likely to be higher ranking than herself, to stand by her, even if only in a performative or symbolic way. She acts as if she expresses the idea for that other person. Through this kind of performance, she avoids presenting herself as outstanding in expressing or having these ideas, as she attributes them to others. She is thus suggesting that many people have the same kind of idea and she is only acting as the representative of the group in expressing it out loud. Therefore, when the girls talk, they tend to use 'XXX says' at the beginning of the sentence. In order to express what they want, but are too embarrassed to say on their own behalf, they take the role of being the spokesperson for another person or a group in the background, which serves to give support to and legitimate what is said. A girl pretends to be either cooperating with an invisible group of people or executing the order which a high ranking leader gave her. She can feel a sense of security in that. She is not alone.

However, it *is* acceptable for workers to stand up for themselves so long as this does not involve challenging authority. Fighting for the better quality desks in the dormitory at the new factory site was an example of such acceptable behaviour. They openly expressed their views and argued vociferously with each other in front of the person in

authority, asking him/her to be the final decision maker. This fits with the nature of *chutou*, which only comes into play when disputes involve someone higher in the hierarchy. Arguing with your peers is not considered *chutou*. It is like brothers competing for their father's favour (Hsu 1971: 246–47, 267). This kind of competition is even implicitly encouraged.

The workers' fear of *chutou* leads them to develop 'the art of *bu chutou*' – i.e. *not* sticking one's head out. One event made a particular impression on me, especially as it was only much later that I realised that I had accidentally been involved in the event myself. After the factory moved to a new location, the light in the new dormitory was very dim and anyone staying in the room during the evening or night when there was no natural light would find their eyes became very uncomfortable. The workers discussed this problem in the office with each other but no one raised the issue with the deputy manager, the highest ranking manager in the factory in charge of internal affairs. I often heard them complaining to each other and I was surprised that they did not just raise the issue with the manager. What were they waiting for? If they didn't report the issue, how could anybody know that the light needed to be changed? When I asked these questions, Silk replied, 'Not every employee is qualified to talk [*bushi meige yuangong dou you zige shuohua de*]'. Then, who was qualified to talk and raise the issue? I was told that it was the responsibility of the *zongwu* (general administrator)⁴⁵ to stand up for the welfare of the workers as a whole. With Delicate and Cloud nodding in agreement, Silk elaborated:

The *zongwu* lives here with us too. She knows the situation very well. There are mice running around at night and eating our food. The lights are too dim. She knows this. She has first-hand experience [*ta douyou qinshen jingli*]. Therefore, we should not have to say it. She already knows. She is the *zongwu*. She has

⁴⁵ A *zongwu* is one of the clerical workers under the supervision of the deputy manager. The *zongwu*'s work includes the arrangement of the dormitory and the canteen, buying goods (like foods, snacks, desks, beds, chairs, and bulbs etc), repairs and making the shift timetable. In THS a *zongwu* cannot have the final say on these matters. The decisions (on e.g. what kind of beds to buy, how much to budget for daily meals etc) are made by the deputy manager. But workers believe that a *zongwu* can and should make influence the deputy manager's decisions from the workers' perspective; indeed the workers believe that it is the responsibility of someone in this position).

responsibility for these issues. She is the one who should report this issue to the deputy manager. Not me.

The workers' anger at the failure to resolve the problems in the new dormitory was aimed at the *zongwu*, not the authorities as the decision makers. At least in front of me, workers did not blame the deputy manager for failing to improve their quality of life in the new dorm. They explained, 'She [the *deputy manager*] doesn't live with us. She hasn't gone through it. She doesn't know about it.' Rather, they kept blaming the *zongwu*, accusing her of being too weak and inexperienced at negotiation with the deputy manager. However, to be a *zongwu* is a difficult position because the *zongwu* has to shoulder the responsibility to negotiate the employees' best interest with the factory decision makers. In a setting where rules and laws are bendable and changeable, employees in effect have virtually no entitlement to rights. Everything comes down to negotiation. Therefore, the workers expect the *zongwu* not only to be the one speaking for them but also be sophisticated and diplomatic in negotiating for them. This also throws some light on workers' reluctance to engage in union activism. In Silk, Delicate and Cloud's opinion, it is not necessary to form a union to fight for workers' welfare. In their experience, there is nothing to be gained from fighting with supervisors; in fact, you stand to lose more from such action. From their perspective, what they really need is an articulate *zongwu* (general administrator) who is skilled at the art of negotiation and mediation: being *nenggan* (capable) and *huishuohua* (able to talk).

However, in this case, the *zongwu*'s inexperience led to my becoming the focus of the workers' strategies to have the issues in the dormitory dealt with. They saw me as someone who could *chutou* and raise the issues on their behalf. The workers kept on coming to talk to me, raising the issue of the poor quality breakfasts, a problem with the hot water in the shower room – and the lack of understanding of their deputy manager. They expected me to put these issues to the authorities on their behalf so that they would not have to risk 'sticking their heads out'. They chose me because I lived with them and they assumed I could understand the situation and was familiar with the problems. It was also because I was a guest and thereby sufficiently 'outstanding': no harm could come to me as a result of being still more outstanding. They knew I would

have many opportunities to talk to their deputy manager and therefore I was the best person to *bang tamen chutou* – to ‘help them by sticking my head out’ and intervening. I was very aware of the strong expectations placed on me. Unfortunately, after several occasions on which I raised issues for them, the decision maker in the factory warned them to stop using me in this way and declared that in future everything I asked for on their behalf would automatically be rejected. *Chutou* is really a kind of art.

The dangers of premature chutou

Now I return to the story of Sunny, which shows a great deal about how the job hopping phenomenon relates to *chutou*. Sunny’s story shows how *chutou* – in the sense of success – brings individuals a highly complicated social situation to deal with which can go wrong if they lack the sophisticated social and cultural skills needed to mediate the expectations of people around them. An inexperienced individual like Sunny may easily provoke people’s resentment and be unable to cope. It must be remembered, now reading the more detailed account of her story below, that Sunny was 16 or just 17 years old when she had the honour of being plucked out for special promotion at THS.

As the youngest child in her family, Sunny never suffered from being a ‘child left behind’ (*liushou ertong*). Although her parents did leave home for *dagong* while she was in junior high school, they were absent from their village in Henan province only for relatively short periods. (Her father went to Shandong to build houses. Her mother went to Tianjin to be a nanny, where she stayed for half a year before returning.) Therefore, it might be said that she was not forced to learn ‘survival skills’ at an early age. The schools Sunny attended never taught her how to speak Mandarin,⁴⁶ even though every public school in China is required to do this. Sunny’s primary school teacher taught in the local dialect, as did her junior high school teachers later on. When she was six years old, she attended preschool for one year and then entered the first grade of primary school. The teacher was a local woman who had chosen to teach in

⁴⁶ Mandarin should be the official language in school. However, given that teachers never teach Mandarin in the school, most of young workers cannot speak Mandarin well, which makes Sunny’s good Mandarin – something she acquired outside of school, it seems – outstanding. This is one of the reasons she was able to get promotion very quickly.

the local school after graduating from high school – instead of leaving for *dagong*. This ‘role model’ evidently played a part in Sunny’s reasoning: a local girl with a high school degree, she believed, should either leave the village for *dagong* or, alternatively, become a teacher in her home town. She considered these two options to be at the same level, with neither one being preferable. There were around 20–30 students in her primary school class. Although the trip to school took the students an hour in each direction, Sunny said that the children in the village all ‘ran’ there in the early morning every day, crossing a river on the way. Outside school hours, Sunny loved playing with a ball (*tiaopi qi*) at home. I asked whether she had had to help with domestic chores but she said ‘no’: as the youngest child in her family, she was considered too small and too young to take any responsibility for such work.

There are four children in Sunny’s family. Her eldest brother was 24 years of age when I met Sunny, working in the construction industry. He married a local woman and lived with her in Sunny’s home town. They did not yet have children. Sunny’s eldest sister, who was 23 years old, married a man from Anhui province who was a gear wheel technician in a factory in Zhejiang province. This sister lived in Zhejiang with her husband. She had previously worked in a weaving factory but then shifted to work in ‘international trade’ (*waimao*), i.e. for a company involved in buying and selling with international clients. She had one daughter, only a few months old. This baby girl was ‘left behind’ in her husband’s home town in Anhui and was taken care of by the husband’s parents. Sunny’s second sister, 21 years old, had a baby boy, who was four months old when I met Sunny. She was staying at home while she cared for her child. She had married a local man from the same village; he stayed in the village where he worked building houses.

When she was 11, at the time when her parents went away to work, Sunny was sent away as a boarder at junior high school because it was too far from her home to walk every day. The dormitory was very big and could accommodate all the girls in the same class. The students were expected to wash the dishes and clean the dormitory by themselves. Sunny said she always used to kick the duvet off the bed while she was sleeping and, as the cold air surrounded her, she would suddenly realise that now there

were no parents present who would pick up the duvet and place it over her in order to shelter her from the cold.

After Sunny graduated from junior high school, she decided by herself (as she told me) not to pursue further schooling. The main reason for this was that she reckoned she had not learned anything in school. She commented that the most useful things she had learned in the three years of junior high school were *limao yongyu* (courteous expressions). At the age of 14, she left for a three-month stay in Shenzhen, going with a villager whose parents were working in a factory there. Although she worked for the three months in that factory, which mainly produced plastic flowers, helping to pack the products, Sunny uses the term ‘play’ (*qu wan*) to describe what she did during this period. The main purpose of this journey for Sunny was to ‘go out and see the world’ (*chuqu kankan*), she said, not to work for money.

When Sunny returned to Henan, her mother opened a small grocery store and Sunny helped her mother run the shop. It was not long before her elder sister left to work at the weaving factory in Zhejiang with her paternal sixth uncle – and Sunny decided to go with them. While working at the weaving factory, Sunny injured her hand when she tried to change the broken thread in an automatic weaving machine. Her thumb was pierced by the needle and she cried out in pain. As a result, she quit the job.

After leaving that job, Sunny quickly found another one in a larger textile factory in Zhejiang. Not having any relatives who could introduce her to this factory, she simply got information about the job opening from an advertisement posted on the front gate. However, she only worked there for a few months, quitting this job when she found out that this factory was associated with the previous one. Her former boss often came to the current factory to discuss business. Sunny was afraid of bumping into him in case he realised that she, a former employee, was working there now. No matter how remote the chance of this might be, it was a risk that she did not want to take. And, if they had bumped into each other, what did Sunny think was going to happen? I asked. She said she had no idea how to cope in such a situation. This possibility of an embarrassing scenario scared her, so she left her new job. However, she remained in Zhejiang living with her sister.

When Sunny was almost 16 years old, her second eldest sister got married. She returned home to the countryside for the wedding ceremony and then celebrated the Chinese New Year. After the holiday, Sunny planned to go back to Zhejiang and find a new textile factory in which to work. She thought that would be the best option because she now had experience of such work. She knew how to do embroidery and operate the weaving machine. However, her mother stopped her. Her mother thought that working in the textile factory was too tiring and suggested that instead Sunny should go to Shenzhen to work in a factory in the electronics industry. There was a relative of the family working in Shenzhen at that time, who helped Sunny get a job in an electroplate factory in Fuyong in Shenzhen, where she started work as a solderer. After just one month, she felt too tired to continue in this work. Her mother then tried calling the factory director at THS, who was also from Henan and in fact was a family acquaintance. As a result, Sunny came to THS to work, doing quality inspections at the factory. She arrived at THS on her first day with the wife of her cousin. When I met her, it was her second spell of working at THS, having quit her previous job there but returning later.

During her first spell at the THS factory, she soon got a chance for promotion. It was a very busy time when she arrived and the factory was short staffed. The original group leader, a young man, had been transferred to work on machine repair. The deputy group leader became the group leader. The factory needed another deputy group leader to fill the vacancy. At that time, Sunny had worked in THS for about two months. She was considered to be a smart and articulate girl. Thanks to her good Mandarin, she stands out as she appears to understand better than others the ‘theory’ behind the work practices, something which most workers found difficult to express (although maybe they understand it quite well). It was common for the workers to know how to do the work but be unable to explain this to others. Sunny appeared to be the best candidate for the job and so the factory director assigned her to become the new deputy group leader.

However, when I talked to other workers about Sunny’s promotion they told me a different story. Following her promotion, Sunny was viewed by the others as a high flier. Many workers who were much more experienced than Sunny had failed to get

promoted. There were rumours amongst the workers implying that Sunny had a ‘special relationship’ with the factory director because he also came from Henan. Rumours circulated that they were acquainted before she came to the factory (and it was true that there was a family connection). Some said that the factory director liked Sunny because she knew how to say sweet words to please him. The expression people used to describe their feeling that her promotion was unfair was *jiu changzhang xihuan ta* (it happened because the factory director likes her). My impression was that the other workers were not angry with the unfairness, as such, of the way she had been promoted. Rather, they felt envious, thinking ‘Why not me?’ They did not criticise the director for choosing the worker he liked. They just hoped that in the future they could be lucky enough to be the worker the factory director liked most and thus get selected for promotion.

After only four months in her new position, however, Sunny quit her job as leader. She told me it was because she felt that she ‘didn’t have enough confidence [*diquibuzu*]’. She had been ‘too young’ to be a leader and there were many unfamiliar aspects of the work. Sunny could *talk* as if she knew the work well, because she had heard the other workers talk about it, but in reality she lacked personal experience, never having done some of the work herself.⁴⁷ The first time she tried to quit, she did not succeed. She was persuaded to stay by the factory director, who said, ‘Sooner or later you will have to do it [*ni chizao yaozuode*]’. Sunny accepted his reasoning. She reckoned that if she could learn how to lead people early in life, then later on she would feel more relaxed about it (*huile jiu qingsongdian*).

However from the perspective of other workers the problem was not Sunny’s lack of experience. What bothered them was her clumsiness in social relationships. They said

⁴⁷ Since the work in factory relied on the correct hand movements, the ‘right gestures’ (in their word, *shougan*, feeling of hands) for the work to be done quickly and accurately, Sunny found her inexperience a serious disadvantage here. Some senior workers knew far better than her how to do the job quickly and perfectly using the correct ‘gestures’ since they had done it so many times before, accumulating knowledge through doing. In this regard, Sunny did not know how to lead her subordinates because she had not done those tasks before and had no knowledge on what the best ‘gestures’ should be.

that Sunny was not qualified for the position because she is inexperienced,⁴⁸ even more, she yelled at the workers in public in a way that did not ‘give them [literally, leave them] face’ (*liumainzi*). (As explained in Chapter 2, there is an art to such shouting ‘performances’ by leaders.) She herself ‘fooled around’ whilst telling others that they should be working hard. She was unable to resolve the problems the workers encountered and ‘passed the buck’ to staff working under her whenever higher ranking leaders blamed Sunny. The workers therefore felt that Sunny did not ‘behave like a leader’ and eventually refused to follow her instructions any more: all the workers in her section refused to accept the assignment of Sunny as their leader. The workers showed their resistance through the act of *jiaobudong* (refusing to be deployed). For example, workers would deliberately choose to follow other leaders’ orders, e.g. Flower’s, instead of Sunny’s. If Sunny was angry about this, they would ask Flower to approve Sunny’s orders before following them so that they made a show of obedience to Flower rather than Sunny. Most of the time, Sunny’s orders were simply ignored or, if there was no way of avoiding following Sunny’s orders, they would show their displeasure shown by working very slowly and producing products of low quality. Finally, as the conflict escalated, the workers stated that they would hand in their collective resignation as a demonstration of their disapproval of Sunny’s leadership and their determination not to work under her. Resignation is a very strong step, of course, the ultimate strategy they could adopt. In response, Sunny resigned from her THS post.

Sunny quit her job in November and returned home for the Chinese New Year. However, after the holiday, she chose to return to THS in February, this time as a basic worker in the same group. She took this low-level job reluctantly. She had changed her mind and wanted to be a group leader again because she felt she was getting old

⁴⁸ As the group leader in the assembly line, her authority was very limited (compared to head of Quality control, deputy manager, general manager etc.). Her inexperience placed her authority in danger. In the workers’ minds, Sunny’s limited formal level of authority plus her inexperience made her not sufficiently qualified to ‘give anger’ to them. Therefore, the workers regarded her shouting as highly inappropriate. Although the workers did not dare to challenge Sunny’s authority in public when she was shouting, afterwards they passively resisted in order to undermine her.

enough to shoulder responsibility, but the factory director did not approve her request this time. It was not long before Sunny found herself frustrated with this work and complained that the job was extremely boring (*meiyisi*) because of the endless repetition.

When I talked to Sunny while she was at THS during her second spell of working there, I felt (still aged only 17) she could not make up her mind whether she was a child or an adult. Sometimes she seemed to have decided to force herself to do something she disliked in order to act in ways she thought appropriate for an adult. For example, even though she felt reluctant to follow her mother's suggestion to work in Shenzhen instead of Zhejiang, where she had family, she had made up her mind to go to Shenzhen, telling herself, 'I can't always be with my family'. Then, when presented (by the factory director) with the idea that she would have to face something sooner or later (taking on a leadership role), she thought, 'Why not start earlier?' However, she also mentioned several times how young she was and that she was too young to choose between one thing or another. Justifying her decision to quit as leader, she would sometimes say she was 'too young to do that work'. She was right: it is a job that requires skills that are not written in manuals. 'Plucked out' for special promotion, she did not know how to deal with being *chutou*.⁴⁹

Chutou or not? Stuck in between two systems

Bu chutou (not being outstanding) seemingly stands in contradiction to the spirit of capitalism. If the workers do not want to stand out from the others, in order to reduce the risk of being offensive to their supervisors or alienating those working under them, how do the workers manage to be successful in the neoliberal economic setting in the SEZ? The workers could be said to be as contradictory as the meanings of *chutou*. They want to *chutou* (i.e. be successful in their career) so they avoid being *chutou* (i.e. being distinguished amongst their group). To put it slightly differently, the *condition* of *chutou* is to avoid being *chutou*.

⁴⁹ Sunny stayed for only two months at THS that time. Before THS moved to another district, she left the job and went home. No one knew where she went after that.

Silk told me she had rejected the opportunity to be promoted several times when she was younger because she did not want to leave her friends and become a leader on her own. Dong made the same decision. She reluctantly accepted the post of deputy group leader but she always wanted to quit the job and return to a lower rank so she could be with her old peers again. She said that she likes to work ‘with everyone’. When she was a basic worker, she was one of the group. Now she is different and special. She shoulders responsibilities. It has had a huge impact on her relationships with her original friends. Flower accepted the post of leader because she adores her leader, Red, and sees Red as her role model, so she is willing to become someone like Red. There are relatively few female leaders in the factory. Young female workers seemingly tend to reject the opportunity to become such ‘token’ (the numerically rare) female leaders (Kanter 1977: 206–42).

However, men’s reasoning about and feelings toward promotion appear to be quite different from those of women. Light says that he never feels the way I have described above. When he got promoted, he felt that this is what he wanted. Similarly, Pong decided to quit his job as a technician at THS because he felt the chances of getting promoted in that factory were nil. He said, ‘I am 29. I can’t always be like this [a low-ranking worker].’ He doesn’t want to be left out of the general trend – that men should be promoted. For them, being ‘left out’ and *chutou* are the two sides of the same coin. If they cannot get promoted by a certain age, they will be in the minority among their group; they will stand out as different. For female workers, if they cannot get married by a certain age, they will be in the minority among their group.⁵⁰

The contradictory feelings of young migrant workers toward *chutou* lead them to find a solution that enables them to avoid the risks associated with being successful, while

⁵⁰ Stafford’s (2000b) discussion of autonomy and dependence is relevant. Here, ‘being a minority when already being part of the majority’ seems to be a kind of compensation to human nature for people who live in an authoritarian society (i.e. the interpersonal relationship is either being oppressive or being submissive). To be in agreement with others while also being different from others is human. When society and its culture suppress people, constantly preventing them from being different from others in their group, people invent other cultural ways to cope with or break through such a situation. It is in such a context that the delicate dynamic of ‘being in the majority’ and ‘being a minority’ arises, as I saw in the factory.

also providing them with the opportunity to be successful. The culture of *tiba* is directly related to this. The prevailing practice of *tiba* in the factory, as described above, is the cultural means through which the workers cope with the potential dangers of *chutou*. Seeking for, hoping for, *tiba*, seeking to be cared for through cooperation, is a risk aversion strategy. This is especially important under the neoliberal regime, in which individuals are regarded as autonomous and risks are shifted from governments and corporations onto individuals themselves (Ong 2007). When laws do not protect individuals' rights and the system does not treat social actors equally, the individuals from the bottom of society, such as the young migrant workers I met, confront bigger risks than people with advantages. They need caring/support from somewhere and seek it by forming cooperative relationships with their superiors and developing a set of skills specifically geared to nurturing these relationships. Based on their experience, they choose to adopt an 'obligation–reciprocity' mode as their economic strategy to overcome their disadvantaged starting position in the structure rather than demanding fair – rule-governed and impersonal – treatment or more legal rights (for example via the ending of the *hukou* system). If this 'obligation–reciprocity' mode sounds reminiscent of practices more typically associated with traditional China, this is not due to nostalgia. It is because a fair and impersonal system for distributing resources in the factory is simply absent.

To return to the question at the beginning of this chapter: why is job hopping so frequent among young migrant workers? The answer, I want to conclude, is because they seek 'special promotion' (*tiba*), using this term to denote opportunities that – from their point of view – appear to come suddenly and unexpectedly, and which are not based on the regular rules and may even involve the breaking of rules. Sunny job hopped and learned, along the way, the importance of sophisticated social skills (for her, 'old enough' people know these skills, i.e. she associates these skills with adulthood). The process of job hopping thus teaches young people cooperation skills rather than competition skills (or, more precisely, cooperation as a way of competing). Success is less related to being outstanding among fellow workers, through qualifications or job performance, and more related to the ability to negotiate in order to win allies.

CONCLUSION

By comparison with the Maoist era, with its surprisingly rigid class structure (Watson 1984), post-Mao China's economic reforms have eroded the old hierarchies.

Flourishing labour markets make 'social mobility a living experience for almost everyone' (Bian 2002: 92, 104). Bian suggests that this mobility is made possible by an 'individual's positional power and qualifications' and his or her 'network' (Bian 2002: 108). Social networks provide both information and influence for a social actor when he or she is seeking a job. And, of course, 'networks for mobility', in the Chinese context, are closely related to the notion and practice of *guanxi* (connections) (Bian 2002), which is the standard route through which migrant workers seek employment (Zhai 2003).

Because of the *hukou* system, new generation migrant workers have little 'positional power' in the city. Their 'subjectivity/personhood' could be said to be judged by two juxtaposed, somewhat contradictory, standards: 1) whether or not they are judged to be capable of becoming a 'producing self' by their boss, leader and other urbanites; 2) whether or not they are judged to be capable of becoming a 'consuming self' by their fellow villagers, parents and relatives (Yu and Pan 2008) (see Chapter 4). Their dream is social mobility but they have no 'positional power' and possess contradictory 'subjectivity/personhood'. In this situation, skilfully mobilising the information and influence from their social networks is arguably the best chance they have to succeed. Lacking competitive power due to the unfavourable structure, it seems quite reasonable for migrant young workers to turn to developing their 'cooperative' power in order to win the competition. The ultimate purpose of the frequent 'job hopping' of young migrant workers is to shift risk from the individuals who do the 'job hopping' onto the powerful patrons who facilitate it. Through practising *tiba* culture, young people who migrate out for social mobility have a chance to fulfil their dreams of 'establishing a career' and ultimately 'being a boss' in the state-led marketised economic system.⁵¹ By uncovering their motives for job hopping through the detailed ethnography here, we

⁵¹ According to my interviews, all male workers want to be a boss one day. A few female workers wanted to be a joint boss with their husband.

can see that they do, in fact, compete for success. However, their competition mode is very different from the one normally expected under neoliberalism.

The fierce competition in which migrant workers find themselves is characterised by hierarchical unfairness. One of the first things they learn in the factory is the importance of respect for hierarchy, given that authority can decide the rules and decide who the winners are. Meanwhile, when upward social mobility is determined neither by loyalty to the party-state nor the favour of the head of household, they have to compete according to the realities of the neoliberal economic setting as they experience it in order to climb the social ladder. Migrant workers gradually learn, therefore, that it is naïve to believe that competition is all about capability and performance. Finding out the true situation behind the rules is seen as part of becoming ‘adult’. In ‘reality’, they learn that they should devote their energy to competing for favouritism from authority. If young migrant workers appear opportunistic,⁵² that is what the social setting teaches them to be.

That it is the intention of authorities, rather than impersonal rules or regulations, that decides the outcome of competition is not a new thing for Chinese. According to Hsu’s ethnography (1971),⁵³ individual competition in traditional Chinese society was fierce, even though the society emphasised harmony and collectivity. The competition among individuals starts in the family among brothers. In ‘competition with Chinese characteristics’, the authority of the ancestors, i.e. patriarchal authority, is the key factor. The brothers do not fight for their own path; on the contrary, they fight for their father’s favouritism (Hsu 1971: 246–47, 267). Hsu argues:

This competition is strictly circumscribed by the authority of parents, ancestors and tradition. These several sources of authority dovetail into and re-enforce each other. They never conflict with one another. They provide the ground work and the limitation for both the means and the objects of this competition. In such a

⁵² ‘Opportunism ... is more than simple self-interest seeking. It is self-interest seeking with guile: agents who are skilled at dissembling realise transactional advantages’ (Williamson 1975: 255).

⁵³ Here, the use of *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow* is as an ideal toward which Chinese families aspired, but not as a picture of the reality that they actually reached.

culture competitors are like the jockeys in a horse race; to win and achieve distinction they have to proceed along a given track toward the same destination. Any branching off along a different track or toward a different destination means total failure. (Hsu 1971: 282)

After the arrival of socialism, this foundation of familism in China was largely eroded (Yan 2010). Chinese people no longer live under the ancestor's shadow (Yan 2003). Given the radical change that is happening in the Chinese family, with the power of youth is rising while the authority of elders is declining (Yan 2003), – it may seem surprising to see the 'spirit of the ancestors' revived, in a sense, in the working place. Yet, the competition among workers is surely 'under the ancestor's shadow', if ancestors are taken to mean all the authorities. The authorities are still able to 'provide the ground work and the limitation for both the means and the objects of this competition' even under the marketised economics of modern China. What transnational capitalism changes is that the 'ancestors' can now be chosen/changed through individuals' labour and effort. Like traditional ancestors, the enterprise ancestors do not necessarily care whether their offspring are capable, efficient or well-educated when they offer their blessing. To stick to the reciprocal obligations, to think for the betterment of the family/factory as a whole, to be flexible, loyal and submissive might, in the end, be more important. For young migrant workers, to compete for the favouritism of 'enterprise ancestors' they do not need to be capable, efficient or well-educated. That is exactly the life opportunities they are looking for and that suit their existing qualifications and positional power.

The process of job hopping among young migrant workers, I thus suggest, is a process of looking for the blessing of an 'enterprise ancestor'. Without an enterprise ancestor's blessing, they can barely survive in a social context where rules, social safety nets and powers can all be negotiable and are frequently manipulated by personal concerns. The migrant workers gradually learn that, through the process of 'growing up' and 'establishing their careers' with the blessing of an enterprise ancestor, their dream of success in the neoliberal economic setting may come true.

Interlude: Intimacy, Mistrust and Friendship

Up to this point, in Chapters 2 and 3, I have been talking primarily about life in the factory and the question of how young migrants deal with work and establishing themselves in their careers. In Chapters 4 and 5, my attention will turn to questions of family life and marriage. Here, as a way of building a bridge between the two main sections of the dissertation, I want to briefly discuss some issues related to living among strangers in the factory and, in turn, some issues surrounding friendship. Friendship plays an important role in the rite of passage through which young migrants are going. And in some respects – in spite of the wish most young migrants have to detach themselves, at least partly, from their home communities – it turns out that the best kinds of friends are precisely those who have a connection of some kind to one's original home.

SIMULTANEOUS CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE

Let me begin with the dormitory life of factory workers – I myself shared these dormitory conditions in the spirit of experiencing as far as possible the life of the young migrant workers. For me, one of the striking things about life in the factory was the physical intimacy imposed by dormitory conditions. (Men and women were housed separately.) . When I arrived at THS, the room I shared with three *dagongmei* had two pairs of bunk beds. But, in addition, it seemed that this was further negotiable. The first night I was there, Silk invited me to sleep with her in the same bed. I gradually learned that intimate bodily contact of this kind was not unusual well beyond the dormitory. Workers would walk hand in hand, sit on each other's laps, and hold onto each other to show they were good friends. Since the factories in the SEZ changed shifts at 6 pm, it was common to see four or five young women walking down the streets together – taking up half the road – hand in hand or with their arms around each other's waists. In the male dormitories young men also slept together in the same beds. Even though their beds were quite large, they huddled tightly together – 'to keep warm', I was told. I got the impression that both men and women rarely sought to avoid contact with

others of the same sex: they seemed to feel little need for privacy – on the contrary, they seemed to crave physical contact. They would say, for example, ‘I prefer hustle and bustle [*renao*]. The more people are gathered together, the more hustle and bustle there will be. I don’t like sleeping alone, it’s too cold and cheerless [*leng qing*].’ But, while this sounds quite cheerful, they also admitted that it was because they were afraid. During the weekend, if their roommates were all away, they would sleep in a friend’s room in order not to be alone.

At the same time, all this physical closeness did not per se equate to friendship. When Silk informed me that her co-worker, Delicate, was definitely ‘not my friend’, I was surprised and confused. Not only did these young women work together, they also gossiped about others and went together on shopping expeditions. They slept in the same room. Delicate also distanced herself from Silk, telling me, ‘I don’t ask Silk anything about her family or her boyfriend. I am not anyone for her. Why should I bother to ask?’

In my experience, migrant workers typically maintained a fine, but firm, boundary between themselves and others in both their public and private lives. If neither of two people intended to build up the friendship between them beyond a kind of ‘managed relationship’, they might treat each other with incredible indifference, as though the other one did not exist, like air. This seemed strange to me, especially given that their living space was so overlapping. The rooms they shared were very small. Inevitably, the room-mates would intrude into each others’ space by creating noise, making bodily contact, turning on the light etc. However, as well as seeking bodily contact, they had also learnt how to be blind and deaf to the actions of others – although they also knew how to hear but look as if they were paying little attention to what they heard. For example, although Silk often talked loudly on her phone for hours at night in the room we shared, I never heard Delicate or Fragrance ask Silk to stop. But they did have ways of displaying their resentment by talking to each other ‘casually’. For example, when Fragrance heard Silk answer her phone, she would say to Delicate, ‘Can you guess how long Silk will talk? You know, last night she talked till 1am’ (they often went to bed at 10pm). Delicate would say, ‘Sister Fragrance, it would be best if we don’t pay attention to her [*buyao li ta jiu hao le*, literally, don’t respect]. Here, no one can

discipline Elder sister Liu [*zaizhe li mei ren ke yi guan ta* – Silk’s nickname, given to her by Delicate].’ Even though they shared a room, it seemed that they did not think that they had the right to ask Silk to be quiet at night. Delicate told me, ‘We are not her relatives. Why should we be trying to control her [*guanta ganma*]?!’ This way of putting matters – as having no rights to interfere in another person’s behaviour but equally (or by the same token) having no responsibility for them either will be explored further here by reference to the question of workers’ feelings of mistrust towards their new environment, both inside and outside the factory.

Within the factory, there are various reasons why workers might feel mistrustful of their new surroundings and their fellow workers, such as the relative impersonality of factory life compared with social life outside (Carrier 1992). One more specific reason workers were mistrustful of each other was that (see Chapter 3) many, if not most, of them had themselves at some point used fake CVs and documents to apply for jobs.⁵⁴ However, clerical workers and managers also routinely lied on their CVs. Delicate, for example, had stated on a Human Resources form that her mother was a teacher. When I interviewed her, she told me that her mother was actually a farmer. Gold claimed to have a university degree but his colleague State-Union told me that Gold only had a junior high school diploma. (The two of them used to work together on the assembly line in another factory, where Gold had been promoted to a leadership post because his uncle had some power there.) Working (and living) in an environment surrounded by people with vague and hard-to-trace pasts, it is easy for migrant workers to conclude that others are not trustworthy.

At the same time, ‘scams’ seemed to be constantly happening around them. I met a migrant worker called Solid who was 31 years old and unmarried, which was rare for a migrant worker of that age in China. He often asked to talk to me privately in a meeting room during working hours. He told me he was an orphan and was unable to pay for the wedding ceremony and that was why he was still single. His parents had been killed in a famous murder in Xinjiang province, he said. I told him I had never

⁵⁴ The main reason for basic level factory workers doing this was because they were younger than legal age to work.

heard about that famous murder and he explained that this was because I was Taiwanese. After the murder, he said, the Communist Party assigned a cadre family to bring him up. He cried as he told me stories of how he grew up being bullied by other people. However, I gradually started to notice that his story was always changing and full of contradictions.

One day Solid told me he was going to resign and go back to his home town in two weeks because one of his relatives was ill. He begged me to lend him 200 RMB. I reminded him that he was an orphan and asked who this relative was. He told me it was his foster family. When I pressed him for more details, he was unable to provide any. He said that I could believe it or not but he did need my help. Then he wept. I felt he was lying as his face somehow did not look genuinely sad; he was even watching my reaction out of the corner of his eye. Despite this sense, I still 'lent' him the money and he promised me that he would definitely pay me back. Later, I heard that he had used the same story to borrow money from several migrant workers – or, if not this story, some workers and also leaders had apparently repeatedly lent him money because of his poor family background. One day, the manager found out that, when he was working in another factory, he used to gather a crowd to engage in an affray and accuse the factory of being behind in payment of their wages. No one in this factory knew that he was responsible for these events elsewhere because he was always polite and kept a low profile.

Migrant workers were vulnerable to deception in other ways outside the factory. They might be tricked into buying fake goods and fake foods. They might get robbed on their way home. Young men (who, in fact, looked similar to the young men in the factories) sometimes waited in the street to steal their wallets and mobile phones. Even those who had not experienced serious problems themselves heard stories about people who had been murdered or raped in nearby streets and workplaces. The prevailing view among these young people was that 'to trust others is naïve, the way a child behaves'. Thus, for them, 'growing up' and leaving behind a naïve and childish point of view became associated with learning a new kind of moral judgement. They acquired this both from their own experiences and being taught by others. The following episode illustrates this.

One day, there was a power cut at the factory and work was suspended. It was a very hot day at the end of June and no one wanted to stay inside the building. Silk asked if I would like to go to the other side of the economic zone and see the ‘mansions’ that belong to village cadres.⁵⁵ I went together with five migrant female workers. Feeling tired at one point, we sat on a lawn under a huge advertising billboard by the side of the highway that links Guangzhou to Shenzhen. The breeze was blowing and we watched the sun set. We all felt relaxed despite the great numbers of noisy trucks that were passing by, polluting the air. The young women started to chat. The topics of conversation were diverse: ‘Your shoes look so beautiful. Tell me where you bought them.’ ‘I used to work in Shanghai. Let me tell you what Shanghai looked like. It’s much better than Shenzhen.’ ‘Have you ever been to the thermal springs? What do they feel like? I heard they are sticky.’

But soon a quarrel broke out. The subject of dispute was in fact a question I had proposed: ‘Should we help other people?’ Needle said, ‘We should help other people and treat other people according to the general goodness found in humans.’ She pitied poor beggars in the street, she said. Then Needle was immediately attacked by the others. ‘It’s only in books that helping other people is the right thing to do. The world is not like that’, Silk replied. Needle tried to fight back: ‘You help other people. Then, other people will help you.’ Silk said resentfully, ‘You’re too naive. If you don’t bully people, people will bully you. So, what’s the point of helping other people? Society is much more complicated than you think.’ She turned to Needle and said, ‘I used to be like you when I was younger. It just doesn’t work.’ Fragrance asked everyone to be quiet, as she was the eldest among them, and she said:

Come off it. Today, we don’t bother to help other people because it will probably cause you more unexpected troubles. For example, if a truck hits a pedestrian on the highway [on their way from the factory to the market workers took a short

⁵⁵ The mansions were given as compensation for land expropriated by the party-state. The deputy manager told me that the factory had to pay a monthly salary to one of these local villagers under the heading of being a ‘shadow’ factory director of THS. This was also part of the compensation local government offered to local villagers. From this case we can see, local ‘rural’ villagers’ life was dramatically different from that of migrant workers, although they both held rural household registration.

cut that meant crossing the highway], the driver will come and see if the person has died or not. If the victim has not died, he will get back in his truck and then drive over the victim again and again until he/she died for sure.

I asked why the driver ‘has to’ kill the victim. They explained:

If the victim is not dead, then the driver will have to pay for the medical treatment. On top of that, the victim’s family will extort more money from the driver year after year. The victim’s family can cook up fake complications to extort even more money. The worst thing is that no one can tell when the extortion will end. The victim’s family can always say that the victim has suffered a further medical complication of some kind and needs to go to hospital again. If you don’t pay, they say, ‘Let’s go to the police station.’ What else can the driver do? He has to pay it. In the end, the driver will end up with his family damaged and their life destroyed [*jiapo renwang*].

Fragrance underlines the point: ‘Who can risk the rest of their life by being nice to others? No one can afford it, no matter how kind hearted they are.’ The other young women all nodded in agreement.

The expectation was that other people would take advantage of their good will or sympathy and thus leave them in an unfavourable position and harm their prospects. Even a person who still believes in acting humanely and helping somebody in trouble is thus taught by her peers that she is too naïve and had better be careful. They exchange stories about scams and fraud, warning each other of the horrible consequence of trusting others. Gradually, they lose not only some of their money but also some of their trust in humanity. In the end, they have learned not to trust people, especially those whose backgrounds cannot be verified. Learning these lesson about the nature of ‘reality’ and not being ‘naïve and childish’ is thus inscribed as part of ‘growing up’ in the milieu of the new China.

As well as learning not to help other people, by the same token, migrant workers now felt that they could not expect other people to treat them well. Their attitude was that people had to ‘fend for themselves [*ziquidaofu*]’, or ‘look out for themselves’, taking as their motto ‘Mind one’s own business [*gegugede*]’. Nobody had any responsibility for anyone else. Nor – see Chapter 2 – did they expect the system to protect them.

One day, we were surprised to see the electrician preparing lunch for all the workers in the canteen. We asked where the chef was. The electrician answered that the chef had asked for a day's leave to go to the bank to report the loss of his bank card. He had accidentally left his wallet in the bathroom a few days ago when he was taking a shower. Ten minutes later, he suddenly remembered it and went back to the shower room to look – but his wallet had gone. Light commented, 'Of course it would be gone. He should blame himself! Why did he leave his wallet in the shower room? When somebody saw it, they would definitely take it. Come on. Don't lure others into crime!' Fragrance also said, 'Of course it'd be gone. Why didn't he take more care? He only has himself to blame [*zizuozishou*, literally, to suffer from one's own actions].'⁵⁶ For them, everyone is responsible for taking care of themselves, no one can rely on others – and no one should be expected to shoulder the moral responsibility for treating others considerately.⁵⁷

These examples also explain why migrant workers often behaved in what might be called an aloof, cold or indifferent way to each other. They often said to me, 'I'm just concerned with my own business [*zuohao woziji jiuhaole*]' . Living in a relatively compact space with limited personal privacy, they must learn to deal with the untrustworthy, potentially dangerous, social environment around them.

The ultimate strategy for dealing with this, explored in Chapter 5, is to find a boyfriend or girlfriend to keep them company and then to marry them – so as to form a new family and a new protective environment. Before this is achieved, however, they try to stay close to the people they believe they can trust, in order to reinforce their connection with them, while avoiding others, including some they actually live and

⁵⁶ I asked, 'Didn't your teachers teach you to return any money you found?' They laughed and answered, 'I tell you it is impossible [*wo gaosu ni nabukeneng*]' .

⁵⁷ One day in July, it was very hot. The Taiwanese factory owner bought watermelons for his workers, who ate them and then threw the skin over their shoulders onto the ground. The owner told the workers, 'Hey, you can't throw watermelon skin like that [*wei, ni xiguapi buneng luan diu a*]. If the person behind you happens to step on the skin, he could slip and fall. If a pregnant woman happened to step on it, what will happen [*na zenmeban*]?' One worker answered, 'People have eyes. Doesn't a pregnant woman have eyes [*ren doushi you zhangyanjing de, nandao nageren mei zhang yanjing ma?*]?'

work with every day. They long for friendships, I would say, while harbouring suspicions about the majority of the people around them. But how can friendships actually be made?

MAKING AND HAVING FRIENDS

During my visit to Silk's home town in Hubei I noticed that, every time a text message arrived, Silk's mobile phone played very loud music. I got the impression that her family (father, mother, younger sister and grandmother) found this annoying but that they chose to put up with the noise. Only her younger brother dared to ask her to turn off the phone, shouting at her, 'The sound is so loud I could die [*chao si le*]! Turn it off! Turn it off or I'll throw your mobile phone away!' Silk just ignored him and never changed the ring tone. Her father and mother took no part in all this. Her home town friends seemed equally astonished by her nonstop text messages, laughingly saying, 'Your business is thriving' or teasing her: 'You're so popular. You must have many boyfriends. So, tell us the truth, how many boyfriends do you have?' In response, Silk would smile happily and reply '*Mei you la* [There aren't any].' I gradually realised that Silk deliberately kept her mobile phone volume loud because she liked to let everyone know that she had many friends and stayed very close to them.

While separating from their rural past and their parents, one way that young migrant workers deal with their liminal situation and seek to establish their own independent identity is through making friends. While kinship ties do not cease to have some importance, forming friendships is different. Making friendships with strangers and extending personal networks to include new people serves, to some extent, to integrate them back into society again, but now the society of 'modern China'.

I should stress, again, that although the young workers seemingly declare themselves 'separated' from their parents, kinship ties do not, in fact, disappear in the factory. Even though they are far away from their home town, they do not usually reject the support they gain from family ties (see Chapter 4 for an extended discussion of this). Even in the factory, where kin are sometimes working together, hierarchical differences of age still count: the elder relative can lecture the younger or ask them to wash their clothes or sweep the room for them. The younger can tell the elder their needs and

problems and the elder should resolve them. In some cases, the younger relative hands over their salary to the older relative, who will keep the money safe for them and decide how much they can ‘withdraw’.

However, kinship supports, it seems, function in a low-profile way compared to friendships, which are valued more highly by the workers I met. One of my informants told me more than once that she did not like to visit her relatives because she felt the distance between herself and her (rural) relatives was too great. And yet, she told me what a good friend she is to her *laoxiang* – i.e. to people from the same home town or area or, sometimes, province. She clearly distinguished – in her tone and the relative weight she placed on them – between *laoxiang* and kin as two distinct types of social relationships, i.e. between friendship and kinship. Her views were widely reflected in the behaviour and attitudes of the young workers. Although ‘cousins’ (of various kinds) were important to them, they tended to ‘hang around with’ boys or girls of the same age from the same provinces (*laoxiang*) and sometimes other provinces, rather than with their elder/younger relatives. Without giving up their kin-based relationships, young migrant workers hope that their social relationships can go beyond the given world of kin and seek to extend their social networks by building up friendships with strangers – but not just any strangers. The home town connection is what makes friendship possible, in many cases, and makes strangers seem trustworthy. In short, apart from fulfilling the most basic duties of relatives to each other, migrant workers would rather avoid showing they are staying close with their rural relatives in the city (both parties may feel uneasy when they get together) and prefer to amplify their association with *laoxiang* (the people from the same home town/area/province) when they are in the factory.

I should note here that there are important differences between levels of workers, something which affects the opportunities available to them for forming relationships. Normally, for basic workers on the assembly line, their friendships are limited to workers within the same factory. After someone leaves the factory, it is very difficult to maintain a friendship with them. However, for middle ranking workers, such as Silk, the situation is somewhat different. Her *laoxiang* friends are all from different factories. She told me that, while she had met some of them as a result of introductions by third parties, and others she had met by chance while they were engaged in some

business activity, most of them she had got to know through the internet. Whether or not they have access to the internet is crucial for the social relationships formed by migrants as it determines to a great extent what kind of social relationships they are able to create and sustain. As Silk was promoted up the managerial ladder, she gradually gained the right to internet access. When she had started at the factory, she had been a basic worker on the production line. When I met her, she had achieved the position of chief of the Quality Control section. Because of this position, she was provided with her own PC by the factory and her job was mainly office based. That means she was able to spend a lot of time online.

One day, one of her friends told her there was a Hubei *laoxiang* group on QQ, a Chinese version of MSN. She joined it and met many other white-collar *laoxiang*. Most of them are still young and in low-level management positions but a few of them are more influential and powerful. These friends she met on the internet are very different from those she met at earlier stages of her migrant journey, such as the friends who saw her off at the train station when she left Shanghai. She told me that socialising with these new friends has really changed how she imagines her future. Among other things, she has many chances of match-making or dating within this group. She is young, cute and friendly. Her low level of education is never a problem for boys. She is really popular. (Again, the question of forming intimate relationships and getting married is something I discuss in Chapter 5.)

LIMINALITY AND LAOXIANG

Against the background of mistrust and uncertainty that I have described above, the migrant workers I met tended to build up their substantial social networks starting with relationships they had *before* moving to the factory, or at least to form friendships on the basis of some kind of pre-existing connection. They would start with their cousins, aunts/uncles, classmates etc and then widen this to include previously unknown *laoxiang* (people from the same town/province). Then they would in turn extend these social networks, for example, by making new acquaintances through introductions or, if they had the opportunity, through internet groups. Generally speaking, they did not trust people who came to them without some kind of reference or connection.

In *Made in China*, Pun argues that *laoxiang* relations are the way that female migrant workers resist the ‘conspiracy of capital’: because capital tries to separate individuals from their original networks and isolate them in order to make them easier to control and exploit, migrant workers form *laoxiang* and kinship networks in order to resist (2005). However, it may be that Pun places too much emphasis on the formation of social networks in the SEZ as strategies of class resistance. Stafford (2000b), in a general argument related to attachment theory in developmental psychology, suggests that it is human nature to desire both attachment (i.e. dependable relationships with others) and autonomy (i.e. the freedom not to be overly constrained by others). People want to have both. If one side were suppressed, people would yearn for some cultural means to compensate. We can assume that maintaining close relations with one’s acquaintances, as migrant male and female workers do, is a normal human response when going to an unfamiliar new environment. When young migrant workers decide to stay close to their kin and *laoxiang*, they probably never saw this as an act of resistance. It may simply be a coping strategy. Carrier has suggested that factory workers place greater value on personal identities and on relationships as a way of dealing with the ‘impersonality’ of factory life (Carrier 1992: 552–53).

Following my arguments about migration as a rite of passage, *laoxiang* networking can similarly be seen as reflecting the strategies that Chinese young migrant workers use today. They want to show their *duli* – separation from their rural background and natal family – and their *chengzhang* – their maturity, as shown by successful integration into the world of the city. Yet they face two unsatisfactory options: embracing change and risk or being conservative and at ease/trusting. To form *laoxiang* networks offers them the best compromise after negotiating and weighing up these stances. First, the *laoxiang* network serves a social function: it fills the gap in social relations created by the search for ‘independence’ and cutting ties, thus maintaining the young people’s sociality, especially when conflict arises between children and their parents. Second, it serves a psychological function. Learning to build up relationships with *laoxiang* is a big step for young migrant workers (as they told me, ‘Now I know how to face strangers’). The young migrants want to extend their social network beyond the kinship network they were born into. To include strangers and *laoxiang* makes this step easier because, of all the strangers, it is the *laoxiang* who seem least strange. The young

workers have much in common with their *laoxiang*, including dialect, food, overlapping social networks, etc. Similar backgrounds bring with them a sense of security. Therefore, when young migrants are seeking their new social role and asserting a separation from their past and their parents, their *laoxiang* network satisfies their hope for something new while also satisfying their risk aversion and psychological need for trust. The *laoxiang* network balances the new and the old in a perfect way.

In this way, young migrant workers' wish to grow up both does and does not entail breaking their ties with the countryside. This indicates that their situation is really quite daunting and that to, a certain extent, they still rely on 'the past' to face the future. While *laoxiang* networks, may provide the illusion that they have integrated into the modern world, in fact they rest on linkages to their familiar environment and background. Yet, it is still true that *laoxiang* networks largely consist of strangers, so, while they may stand in for renounced local kin relations, they could also be called 'illusory' in the sense that they are substitutes for these at least partially renounced relations. These young people are stuck in the liminal phase.

Chapter 4

Migrants as Rural People: Home Town, Siblingship and Gender

Chapters 2 and 3 focused on the contexts in which new generation migrant workers seek to grow up (*chengzhang*) and become independent (*duli*) by experiencing modern urban China and establishing their careers. In this chapter and the next, I want to move towards the other aspect of growing up: getting married and establishing one's own family. How are these final steps of the transition to adulthood imagined and accomplished by new generation migrant workers? Previous generation migrants, as I have explained, were typically already married before they set off on their journeys; in this sense they were already adults. Their migration goals were not bound up with the process of gaining adulthood and becoming independent as, I am arguing, is the case for the current generation. In fact migration and marriage are deeply entrenched in the complex and ambivalent relationship these young people have with their natal families and with the rural communities in which they were raised – their 'home' towns'. If the ultimate question is where they see their final destination – where they see themselves marrying and settling down – this has to be considered within the wider context of relationships with 'home'. In what follows, I want to re-examine the relationship between young migrant workers and their home towns.

On the other hand – and this explains my starting point in this chapter – why not instead begin directly with the question of marriage? Long before the dramatic expansion of China's internal work migration in the 1980s, raising questions of migrants' sense of place and dislocation, a different form of internal migration had long been in practice: the system of 'marrying out' in which a woman moves to live in the locale of her husband, leaving behind her natal family and place of origin. Here we see the conflicts between market economy and moral economy embedded in and acted out around clashing conceptions of property rights and obligations.

Putting these aspects together, this chapter seeks to analyse the shifting roles and relationships in Chinese rural households after the period of economic reforms in order to understand the ways that the phenomenon of work migration has had an impact on household dynamics, while also considering how household dynamics have shaped the experience of work migration in particular ways. What brings these arguments 'home to roost' here is scrutinising *sibling* relationships within households, and the tensions arising through the different treatment of sons and daughters. How these tensions are resolved in turn suggests a gender-differentiated dimension to migrants' sense of place.

SILK'S GRANDMOTHER

When I visited the Hubei village with Silk during the Chinese New Year, I learned that the only person still living at home, waiting for everyone to come back for the holiday, was her grandmother. Silk's parents, who had been working outside the village, arrived at home a week earlier than us. Her siblings planned to arrive a week later, also from Shenzhen.

As I came to learn, the grandmother was usually quiet and seldom said anything. She never participated in games of mah-jong with Silk, Silk's mother and their neighbours. Even though the neighbours invited her to play, she just stood by the table and watched. But, once the neighbours had gone home, she would play mah-jong with her grandchildren, Silk's cousin (who is around 10 years old) and his friends, the children from neighbouring families.

She worked almost all the time. She swept the floor, cooked, washed the clothes and dusted the house. Sometimes she also did heavy labour: splitting firewood and shovelling snow. She was the oldest person in the family but I did not see her exercising authority. She was polite and somewhat reserved. She was the one in charge of making the famous Hubei 'salted fishes'. But she just got on with these activities on her own without ever asking Silk or her siblings to help, although Silk did sometimes help her. She never judged anything that happened in the family, so far as I could tell. When Silk's mother made comments about Silk's friends, Silk's grandmother just listened.

One day Silk went out to meet some friends. I did not go with her but stayed in the house, where Silk's grandmother was the only other person present. She cooked lunch and called me over to eat. She put food from many different dishes in my bowl but she herself just ate plain rice. I could not accept so much kindness. I understood she was trying to show her best hospitality but I declined and said, 'You are too polite. I don't deserve it.' Then, she suddenly began to talk to me; I had never before heard Silk's grandmother talk so much. She said she was like me. When she married into this village, she said, she did not know anyone. Her natal family was very far away. She could not go home very often. It seemed that my arrival had reminded her of her experiences when she had first come to this village. Like her, I could not speak the local dialect. I often slipped and fell in the snow because where I come from it rarely snows. I was not used to the food so I ate very little. I did not know anyone in the village and my social network there was entirely based on my status as Silk's dependent. Silk's grandmother observed all this and had probably experienced similar things herself when she was 20 years old. The only difference was that I would leave after three weeks but she had stayed for her whole life. She still acted with politeness and was still quiet after living here for 50 years, having had three sons, several grandchildren and a new house. She reminded me of the image of traditional Chinese women.

According to this image, Chinese women growing up under traditional patriarchal ideals were 'firmly rejected by their natal family' (Wolf 1972: 217) because ultimately they have to marry out. By definition, new brides are forced to leave their familiar environment (their natal village) upon marriage and live with strangers (i.e. with the bride's husband's family). This dramatic change typically causes a woman considerable anxiety: she therefore 'begins to prepare for her old age almost from the day her first son is born', in an attempt to build a secure position for herself from a starting point of insecurity (Wolf 1972: 215). After her son gets married, a new anxiety arises because she fears that her son's new wife will effectively monopolise him and move him away from his mother.

She fears she may be returned to the loneliness that marked her early years of married life, to that desolate period when she was firmly rejected by her natal family and not yet accepted by her husband's family. (Wolf 1972: 217)

The psychological issues here – loneliness, insecurity and anxiety – may prevent women like Silk's grandmother from ever forming a sense of belonging to the place where they live, no matter how long they have been there.

Today, in Silk's generation, however, almost everything seems to have changed. Young married women are not 'outsiders' any more in many senses, and they play a central part in household affairs (Yan 2006a). They are discerning about their prospective husband's disposition and career, the characteristics of their prospective parents-in-law, the place they will live and the size of the new house (Yan 2003). Even very traditional practices such as dowry and bridewealth have come to serve new purposes, reinforcing the bargaining power of the young (Yan 2005). Migrating out for work seemingly makes young women highly respected in their home towns and in their natal families in a way their grandmothers' generation could never have imagined. As described in Chapter 1, Silk occupied the most respected seat during meals with her families; her neighbours meanwhile recognise her as the head of her household. Today, it is said, traditional practices that placed Chinese women in an insecure and anxious position have become negotiable in the light of changing social conditions – including the significant numerical imbalance between the sexes and the huge numbers of young women migrating out.

However, it seems that, although Silk does enjoy this status in her natal family, she was determined to escape from her home town. Where traditional women were 'firmly rejected by her natal family' (Wolf 1972: 217), now the situation seems reversed, as witnessed by Silk's dramatic gestures towards her natal family, described in Chapter 1. Her behaviour seems to confirm what previous research has shown about new generation migrant workers: they are 'indifferent' toward their home town and want to distance themselves from it and all it stands for. From this perspective, Silk's stance is significant from a gender perspective and also irrespective of gender: she seems like the prototype of the modernity-oriented new generation migrant worker.

AFTER THIRTY YEARS' MIGRATION, 'WHERE DO I BELONG?'

Much recent research presents new generation migrant workers as relatively indifferent to their communities of origin (Wang 2010: 31; Wu and Xie 2006; Gao 2010: 9; Wang

2010). Seeking to pursue a modern identity in the city and experience the new lifestyle of modern China, they are keen to move the core of their life away from their rural villages of origin to the new destinations where they have migrated, seeking to lose their rural identity. They wish to rid themselves of the ‘typical’ characteristics of Chinese peasants, especially the immobility associated with the ‘enduring attachment to the soil’ (Fei 1992: 40). New generation migrants are thus portrayed as becoming more and more like the kind of actors appropriate to the neoliberal capitalist ideal, easily mobilised by capital and the market.

This generation is thus strongly contrasted with the received picture of Chinese migrants, who are commonly said (rightly or wrongly, as Stafford notes) to ‘continue to feel strong attachments to their native places’ (Stafford 1999: 316). There are a number of migrant home towns (*qiaoxiang*) in China where successful emigrants, who live even thousands of miles away, have remained involved in local affairs and contribute to community building as a way of showing their enduring loyalty.⁵⁸ This is reflected in their typical pattern of migration (as noted in Chapter 3) being ‘circulatory’: migrants travel back and forth between their work destinations and home town, as the best strategy for getting the best of both rural and urban worlds (Fan 2009). While, by definition, circulatory migration continuously moves labour and other resources between the place of work and home town (Murphy 2002: 13), the primary flow, it is argued, is back to the home town.

For these previous generations of migrant workers in the post-Mao era, it was arguably ‘household consumption [that] motivates migration’ (Murphy 2002: 22). Migrating to work outside their home town was just one of many economic activities engaged in to ‘increase their income and minimise ... their risks’ (Murphy 2002: 23). As a result, rural people do not have to rely on a single economic activity for a living. They get income not only from farming but also from wage labour in factories. However, they still see themselves primarily as farmers (Wang 2001: 68), with factory work treated as a supplement: ‘The old generation of rural–urban migrants ... were generally target

⁵⁸ One traditional motive for this continuing attachment lies in the concept of ‘glorifying one’s ancestors’ (Stafford 1999).

earners, motivated by the idea of earning cash income to subsidise their farming activities' (Yue et al. 2010: 545).

This is a risk-minimising strategy oriented to the home town as the locus of security. Hence older generations of migrants still mostly identify themselves with their place of origin. In a classic statement, Woon puts it:

Circulatory migrants, or sojourners as they are sometimes called, might be working in the community of destination for a long time and still consider the community of origin as their principal residence. *They leave not because they reject their place of origin, but because of the desire to participate in it more fully.* (1993: 57, emphasis added)

Whatever resources, information and skills they gained from the outside world they would bring back to their home towns, thus benefiting not only themselves but also those who remained behind (Murphy 2002: 22).

In short, previous generation migrant workers are generally seen as maintaining close relationships with their rural home towns (Wang 2001: 72–73) and, indeed, still identifying themselves with their home towns as 'where they belong' even though they may be absent for significant periods of time and, for at least some of this time, cut off from relationships with their children.

By contrast, it appears that new generation migrants are strikingly different. Their whole project of migration is seen in terms of severing connections with their rural origins and 'dis-identifying' with their places of origin. As far as the initial decision to migrate is concerned, one survey suggests that over 72% of rural youth will choose a job in the city rather than one in their home town, even when the jobs offer the same wage (Wang 2001: 71–72). Most new generation migrant workers – more than 97%, according to Wu and Xie's research (2006) – do not intend to return to their home town as their place of permanent residence. Some researchers suggest that migrants want to establish a family in the destination area if possible (Wang 2001: 72–3; Xu 2010: 1).⁵⁹ Thus, pursuing their dream, they are seen as migrating out in pursuit of individual

⁵⁹ See also Chapter 3.

desires rather than for the betterment of the household – which has also led to them being portrayed as selfish and self-centred. In the end, however, most migrants are eventually forced to go home (Yue, Li et al. 2010: 548). This has led to the criticism (not only in the media but also among ordinary people) that they are either naive or irresponsible because they ignore this basic fact about the likely final outcome of their launch into the urban way of life.

However, much empirical research shows that new generation migrant workers do, in fact, maintain very strong ties with their families and home towns (Fu and Huang 2009). For example, they return home regularly to ‘help during busy farming seasons, go home for life-cycle celebrations’ (Murphy 2002: 13). This certainly accords with what I observed during fieldwork and also overlaps with the job hopping behaviour described in Chapter 3. Indeed, I sometimes had the impression that, for many new generation migrant workers, their family back in their rural home town was still the core of their life, no matter how geographically distant from their ‘destination’ place of work in the city. Their main activities and choices were still made in relation to their home town even though they were physically present in the urban factory.

Young rural people thus seem to have contradictory attitudes towards their home town. On the one hand, they are ‘indifferent’ to it – it is not their future, they think – but, on the other hand, many of their key social relationships are still based on roots and networks originating there (see also Fu and Huang 2009).

WHERE DO I BELONG?

At virtually any point in their migration trajectories young people with rural backgrounds have a number of possibilities available to them, through kin networks and through doing business, when it comes to their future place of residence: they can stay at home, or move to the SEZ, or to a nearby small town, or to the capital of their home province, or to somewhere they cannot even imagine but where they have connections of some kind. Some scholars claim that new generation migrant workers are essentially ‘adrift’ (Wang 2010: 31), and this relates to the conflicting stances with regard to home.

Home and social security

For the young migrant workers I met in Shenzhen, *huijia* (returning home) was always considered as one option as their next step – but not necessarily a permanent step. When workers leaving the factory fill in their resignation form for the factory's Human Resources department, the reason they give for their resignation is often related to their family/home, *jia*. For example, they wish to 'return home' (*huijia*) or they 'have household affairs' to which they must attend (*ji ali youshi*). It is considered very normal to resign for such reasons. When they feel tired after working in the factory, they may return home to take some rest – and then come back to the city for a new job.⁶⁰ They also provide support for 'family/household affairs' in many ways: helping to arrange and prepare the weddings of their siblings, or taking care of parents who are unwell, building houses, going back to help with the harvest (this was mostly the case for older workers) or offering a hand when it comes to rearing siblings' children.

As noted in Chapter 3, quitting their jobs, going home for several months during the Chinese New Year festival and then switching to another factory once they return is a frequent cycle for migrants: job hopping typically involves going home 'between jobs'. For young people between jobs their home town is a place of transit. However, their home town provides more than just a temporary residence; it also acts as a centre of information. Migrants often learn of job opportunities from casual conversations over the Chinese New Year period, when they visit many relatives, friends and neighbours.

Consider the case of Solid-Will: after he quit his job as a chef, he went to Shanghai to work in manufacturing. But how did he get this position without any relevant knowledge or experience? Because his elder brother was doing business there at that time. Solid-Will's brother's own story demonstrates a similar pattern. Three years older than Solid-Will, he quit his job in Shanghai because of his wedding, which took place just before the Chinese New Year. The couple seemed unconcerned about being unemployed and newly married. I asked Solid-Will what his brother planned to do

⁶⁰ This pattern of job hopping via short periods at home is arguably comparable to previous generations' circular migration.

after the wedding and whether he planned to find another job. He replied, 'He will try to start a business and do it on his own.' Where would he go and what type of business did his brother plan to try his luck at? He said, 'He probably will go to Ningxia,⁶¹ the autonomous region of the Hui minority group. We have several relatives there selling shoes. They did quite well. So he wants to go there to take a look [*guoqukankan*].'

By taking advantage of a network of relatives, a newcomer can gain local information, psychological support and material assistance (e.g. a roof to sleep under, and some food to eat). At best, such contacts can secure jobs or business partnerships for them in the city. This strategy minimises the risk and thus enables the young migrants to try their luck and 'have a look' without shouldering excessive pressure. The network of relatives is the main reason they can treat migration decisions relatively lightly and move between jobs without hesitating or going through careful calculations.

Once they go to city, the *hukou* system means migrant workers do not benefit from urban social security (Fan and Wang 2008). That is another reason they may find it necessary to rely on support from their rural families in the interim. Because 'the wage sector escapes the burden of providing the welfare needed by migrants', their home town basically must shoulder 'the burden of reproducing' the migrants' labour power (Murphy 2002: 13–14). On the other hand, migrant workers regularly send remittances home and maintain contact with family members (Murphy 2002: 13). To send remittances home is not only a sentimental way to maintain social ties with family members but also the way out-migrants 'demonstrate their continuing memberships in their households and keep the door open for future reintegration into the origin community' (Murphy 2002: 11) when they cannot contribute any more to the labour market because they are 'sick, injured, pregnant, unemployed, or just too old to work' (Murphy 2002: 13).

Competing values, conflicting narratives of place

But meanwhile new generation migrant workers seem not to belong anywhere (see. Jacka 2005). Young people from the countryside today confront the problem of

⁶¹ The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is in the western part of China.

‘finding a place’: ‘where do I belong?’ is a question they must try to figure out in their minds. They are born to be farmers according to the *hukou* system but, unlike their parents, they don’t know how to farm (Wang 2001). They seemingly want to stay in the big cities or the SEZ where ‘their only hope for advancement’ is found (Murphy 2002: 14). But, as I have discussed, they soon realise the difficulty in this dream destination and get stuck in the factory (see Chapter 1). Going back to their rural home town, however, is typically rejected as a first option (Wang 2001: 72–73) – as Yan Hairong puts it, it is a kind of ‘space of death’ in relation to modern personhood (Yan 2003: 578). In this context, new generation migrant workers seem to have few satisfactory options. They must contemplate a way to juggle between ‘opportunity-seeking and risk aversion’ in residence and everything else.

In these circumstances, new generation migrant workers often express conflicting narratives of place. They say ‘The city is full of hardship’ but also that ‘I will stay in the city as long as I can’: ‘If they must die, they would rather die in the city [*si yeyao sizai chengshili*]’ – i.e. die trying to succeed. They speak of their home province with pride and describe their home towns with fondness and nostalgia – while stating they will never go back (Jacka 2005). They express fear and distrust of the city world and other people in their work environments – and yet they see this as exciting ‘modern China’. Some (males) say, ‘If I can’t achieve success in the city, I can/will just go home [*najihuijia*].’ Some (females) say, ‘I don’t know where I will live in the future. It depends on my future husband.’ These conflicting narratives relate to competing values and goals in the minds of new generation migrant workers (cf. Mills 1997; Constable 1999; Murphy 2002: 22). These dilemmas are also enacted in household dynamics in their ‘home towns’.

MIGRATION, SIBLINGSHIP AND FAMILY DYNAMICS

China’s internal migration, taking off in the 1980s, has now been occurring for about 30 years (Murphy 2002: 1). Over this period, the constant migration of rural family members has arguably changed the concepts of family and home town for rural people. Although a good deal of research has focused on changes to the Chinese family, not as much attention has been paid to ‘the internal dynamics of family life and the lived experiences of the individual’ within it (Yan 2011: 205) in relation to migration. In

what follows, I want to re-examine the relationship between young migrant workers and their home towns, especially through the angles of ‘being independent’ and ‘growing up’. What emerged most critically in my observations were issues focused around siblings. Among other things affecting these dynamics, the moral economy of the village applies different property rights to grown-up sons and grown-up daughters. This customary moral standard is challenged by the invasion of the market economy and the privatisation of household property, and an associated mentality of individual property rights. It causes implicit (and often explicit) tensions between siblings, especially the elder sister and younger brother. My ethnography will show how this gender-sensitive factor impacts on the relationship between migrant workers and their families and home towns – and how these tensions are resolved.

Sisters and brothers

There was a slogan painted in red on the wall near the main gate of Silk’s aunt’s house. The first part of it was hard to miss. It said, ‘If your first child is a son [*toutairuo shengnan*]’ But the rest of the words were hard to make out because the paint appeared to have flaked off. Dangyuan, Silk’s cousin, told me that the rest of slogan was ‘... never become pregnant again for the rest of your life [*yongsheng buzaihuai*]’. He also told me that it was actually due to him that the paint was so flaked: ever since he was a boy (he was 24 years old when I met him) he would often stand in front of the gate and scratch at the slogan with his fingers.

Dangyuan was the youngest child in his family; he has three elder sisters. The oldest one, Ling,⁶² was 35 years old and living in Shenzhen with her husband, who came from Guangdong. The second sister had died a few years previously. She had married a man from Hunan and reared a boy, seven years old at the time of my fieldwork. The boy was now in Hunan, being raised by his grandparents while his father was working in Zhuhai in Guangdong province. The third sister, who was 26, was a graduate of Shanghai University and worked in Shanghai. Dangyuan was 11 years younger than

⁶² Ling is Silk’s mother’s sister’s eldest daughter and Dangyuan’s eldest sister. See Chapters 1 and 3:

his eldest sister. He was a student in a university in Xi'an. 2008 was his last year at university and he had already secured a job, which he would start after he graduated, working for an electronics company in Tianjin City. When I stayed with the family, he asked me to take some photos of him because his future employer wanted him to send them a short self-description together with some photos.

As I did more and more interviews, I came to realise that the story of Dangyuan's family is one that is common amongst Chinese families. His siblings had quite different experiences on the path of migration – the order of birth matters. When I was preparing my research proposal, before I went to China, I was expecting to find either: 1) a society which lacks sibling relationships because of the 'one-child policy' or 2) if there were sibling relationships, then in theory, the only possible form would be between an elder sister and a much younger brother (Kipnis 2006). This is because the birth policy generally allows a rural couple who have a daughter as their first child to have a second child five to eight years later. Following the birth policy, it should be impossible to see many siblings in a family or to see elder brother–younger sister sibling relationships. In the case of Dangyuan's family, there were some evident differences between my research hypothesis and my findings. For example, the age differences between siblings were much smaller than the theory suggested. There was only two to three years' age gap between one child and the next youngest or oldest. In addition, I was surprised to find four children, rather than two, in his family.

After collecting more kinship data in the factory, and also my experience in the village in Hubei, I found that very few families actually have only one child. Although the number of children per family in my interviewees' generation was fewer than in their parents' generation, it was still the case that very few families had only one child. According to the kinship charts I collected at THS in Shenzhen, only two interviewees out of 41 were the sole child of their parents. The mean number of children in all 40 families on which I have data⁶³ is 3.33 children per family. One of the single children is an orphan; I was told that his parents had been murdered when he was just two years old. The other single child was from a family registered as a city household (*chengshi*

⁶³ One of my interviewees did not tell me how many siblings she had.

hukou). His parents did not dare to produce more children because they risked losing their jobs. A 19-year-old-girl told me that in rural areas people have a different mentality from urbanites regarding the decision to have more children. Although they know it is illegal, villagers do not care about this. She said, ‘Villagers are not afraid of losing their jobs, because they have land to farm. If an official comes to enforce a ban, they just hide or send the young child out for a while and wait until the official leaves.’ There are quite a few families with a second child even if their first child is a son. For example, my informant Light was the fourth son in his family. It is indeed quite common for a family to have several older daughters and a much younger son.⁶⁴ The parents will keep on having children until they get the son they desire.

Why does son preference still exist? There are many possible contributing factors to the strong desire to have at least one son in the family, even if norms of son preference are not as prevalent as in the past. However, on the basis of my fieldwork and also what has been described in the existing literature, I would like to focus on two factors.

The first relates to ideas about desirable masculine traits. The criteria used to measure masculinity, according to the informants I met in the factory, are the ability to drink large quantities of alcohol (men will often ask each other how much spirit they can drink) and sexual virility (questions are asked about how many children a man has). Producing many children is a potent way to express one’s manhood. The sex of the children is also important. ‘The more sons you have, the more masculine you are perceived to be,’ an informant from Henan told me.

Second, even in today’s China, villagers see having sons as the way to secure their life in old age owing to the lack of social security. To have as many children as possible and retain their loyalty in order to sustain your life after retirement is still the common aspiration in rural society. The prevailing – traditional – economic logic is that, to ensure a good life during old age, sons are a better investment than daughters because

⁶⁴ My research provided many examples of this sibling configuration. In addition to Danyuan’s and Silk’s family. Modesty’s fourth uncle had five children, of whom the first four were all girls, the eldest being 16 years old, while the fifth child is a boy aged six. I was also told that this was common.

sons always remain family members while daughters will not (at least in formal terms) because, according to custom, daughters will marry out one day (as illustrated very vividly by the case of Silk's grandmother). Obviously the valuation of daughters has changed dramatically but this underlying idea remains influential. Forming a reciprocal relationship between parent and child, which customary moral discourse recognises and supports, is the key strategy to handle the lack of social security: in reality, villagers need to have a son to enter 'cycle of yang' (Stafford 1995).

The next section explores the quite different experiences siblings have on the path of migration and how gender and birth order matter.

Silk as a sacrificed sister

Silk's parents were 'second-generation' migrants and, Silk, the eldest child, was one of the *liushou ertong* (children left behind), brought up by her grandmother while both her parents left home in order to earn money. She had been especially shy and intimidated at school because there were no adults in the village able to protect her if she was bullied. This left her feeling insecure. Her younger siblings were luckier than her and were taken care of while they were young by their mother, who had returned to the village; at that point, only their father was still working away from the village. This pattern is common. Generally speaking, it is the first child in a family who is most likely to be the 'child left behind'. After a few years, during which both parents work away doing *dagong*, the family's financial situation was usually sufficiently secure for at least one of them to return to the family home to take care of the children or, alternatively, to bring their children to the place where they worked so the family could be reunited. So, already, in respect to their *parents'* migration patterns, birth order is significant.

Silk herself left home when she was 14 years old, not too long after she dropped out of junior high school. As described in Chapter 1 and 3, she first went to Shanghai and then Shenzhen, following in her cousin Ling's footsteps. It was because of the remittances that Silk sent home (with Ling's husband arranging the bank transactions) that Silk's sister and brother were able to stay in school and graduate from senior high school (although they failed to get into university). Thus, through Silk's *dagong*, the

financial situation of her family gradually improved. As described in Chapter 1, she had also, using her *guanxi* (network, connections), arranged the financing of her family's new house. On our visit to her home town at Chinese New Year, we walked an hour through the snow to catch the bus to the nearest town to do the family's New Year shopping – out of her wages. Again, she had voluntarily stepped up to take responsibility for family matters. Silk seemed to be happy to do all of these things. However, she was *not* very happy when people asked about her plans for marriage. She was 24, the age when girls normally get married. Silk told me, with a complicated eye expression and a short sigh, 'I never think of myself' – meaning not only that she did all these things for her family but also that she never saved her wages for her own dowry. 'It's time to do that,' she added.

As explained in Chapter 1 Silk enjoyed a high status in front of her parents – she is basically the public representative of her natal family – and seemingly also in front of her siblings. However, at other times, it seemed that her siblings did not show her respect. When she called on her siblings to clean the house on the day before Chinese New Year (this is a traditional practice), yelling, 'Let's do it!', her brother responded, 'Why don't you start cleaning first? Why do you just stand there and shout at us?' Silk replied, 'I am doing it now. I am the one who gives the orders.' To which her brother responded impatiently, 'Complete nonsense!' Despite her brother's challenge to her authority, Silk did not change her stance about being in charge. She turned to her sister, saying, 'I'll clean this bedroom. You clean that one. Quickly!' Her sister replied, 'That room has already been cleaned.' Then, the sisters fought with each other and, after that, Silk gave up giving orders to her siblings and went back to her room on her own to do some dusting while her brother and sister went out to paste the customary New Year couplets (*chun lian*) by the doorway of the house. More than once, I saw Silk try to teach and guide her siblings but they, especially her younger brother, were unwilling to accept this. During our stay, Silk fought with her younger brother several times. He not only responded to Silk's lectures with angry retorts but even lectured her back, for instance telling her that she should stop spending so much money on her mobile phone. The tension between Silk and her siblings was obvious.

Interestingly, when quarrels with her siblings occurred, her parents went to ask Silk's forgiveness on behalf of her younger brother. One day, Silk had a serious argument with her brother. She cried and refused to eat lunch or dinner. Her parents stood by the door and apologised to her for her brother's 'childish behaviour' again and again. They said, 'Please forgive him, after all he is still a child.' They urged me to persuade Silk to forgive her brother or at least eat something for her own good. On that particular occasion, I felt that Silk's parents' attitude towards her was less like parents talking to their daughter and more as if they were begging a benefactor of the household on behalf of their son.

'The first daughter is like the parent'

Silk's family reflects the common sibling configuration in rural families: many elder sisters and one little brother. However, the role of the first female child in a family is different from her siblings. According to the life histories I collected, most families had experienced a change in their financial situation in recent years,⁶⁵ from being very poor to being reasonably well off. The young workers often use the term '*henqiong*' (very poor) to describe the past financial situation of their family and the term *haikeyi* (not bad) to describe their current situation. Correspondingly, the financial difficulties of the household were normally at their most severe during the childhood of the first child. As in Silk's case, the financial pressures on the family were then reduced somewhat when the parents, and eventually the first child, left for *dagong*, which meant that later siblings were born in a period when the family's financial circumstances were less strained.⁶⁶ In this socio-economic and cultural context, the first child was not only (unlike his or her siblings) likely to be a 'child left behind' but also most likely to be sent out to work in the interests of the household. The family strategy was to send the

⁶⁵ This period of family development followed Chinese economic development. According to my informants, the permission to travel in order to *dagong*, which became widespread after economic openness, changed their life.

⁶⁶ However, they might represent only the situation of the informants I met in 2007–08. For those born in the early 1980s, their 'growing up period' was just squeezed in between the eras of 'poor China' and 'rich China'. For those born in the later 1980s, their 'growing up period' was in richer family circumstances.

first child to *dagong* in order to earn money to support her siblings (likely to include at least one boy) and give them a better life.

In addition to their labour contribution for the benefit of the household's finance, it was already the case – before China's internal migration 'took off' – that the first child customarily had to shoulder more responsibilities than his or her siblings. They functioned as 'spare parents' in the division of labour within the family, treated as a 'mini-adults' rather than as children (Hsu 1971). If their parents were absent from the family, they became their siblings' *de facto* parents.⁶⁷ It is said: *zhangxiong rufu zhangjie rumu* – 'The eldest brother is like a father; the eldest sister is like a mother.' Most migrant workers I interviewed took these implicit rules for granted and practised them in their own lives. Thus, when Silk persisted in trying to lecture her siblings and give them orders, it probably reflected her attempt to fulfil her responsibility as the 'spare parent' – in some cases, when she believed her own parents had failed to fulfil their jobs.

According to my informants, the first children also seemingly get some (psychological) compensation from their siblings' achievements, knowing that they have fulfilled their responsibilities according to the household's decision that they should make money to enable their younger siblings to have access to better schooling. This echoes precisely the typical attitude of Chinese parents. According to Fong (2004), Chinese parents are willing to endure any hardship to secure their children's success. Silk told me how she had cried bitterly when her siblings decided they were going to give up schooling after high school graduation and leave for work migration just like her. At that moment, she felt that what she had done over all those years in order to pay for their education had been in vain. She felt that she no longer knew why she had bothered to do it and found it hard to accept that her own sacrifice had ended up with her siblings leading the same sort of life as she had. She felt 'incompetent/powerless' (*meili*) and disappointed. From

⁶⁷ This situation also occurred before migration 'took off', for example, if parents died young. The elder brother/sister would step in and take on the parental responsibilities towards the younger siblings.

her comments, we can perhaps also infer that Silk, in effect, wanted to realise her own ambitions through her sibling's upward mobility.

The situation described above in some ways reflects the traditional idea of cooperation within Chinese households (as discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to of the system of *tiba* (special consideration)): to mobilise all family resources to help the few members who are most likely to be successful (usually the son) and then wait until he is successful so that the rest of the family can also 'get there with him'. Even in an era when the rhetoric of individualism is meant to be dominant (Yan 2005: 643–45), people still normally act in the best interest of the household as a whole, not for their own individual interests – and, indeed, as argued earlier in this chapter, this a strong part of the logic of migration.

At the same time, there have been significant mutations in this 'traditional' pattern, very fundamental ones. Traditionally, it would be parents who made sacrifices in order to raise their children. Today, it is often the first child (especially if the first child is a daughter) who makes personal sacrifices in order to help raise siblings. Silk and Ling, both the eldest in their respective families, would often say with a sigh, '*Women mei nage tiaojian* [we didn't enjoy such [good] conditions] before]' and lecture their siblings '*Nimen tiaojian hao* [the conditions you live in are better [than I had]]' in order to urge them to study harder and make their sacrifices worthwhile. The younger siblings were in turn expected to do their best to achieve academic success and satisfy their elder brother's/sister's hopes, without consideration of their own personal preferences. This situation of rural-born children parallels that described by Fong for the singletons born in urban areas under the 'one-child policy,' who are forced to live out their parents' dreams, internalising their parents' hopes into their own aspirations (Fong 2004; Fong 2007). When parental authority collapses in the rural household (as discussed in Chapter 1; see also Yan 2003), the elder sister seems to step into the vacuum.

However, this is a fundamental change because it means that a kind of social balance seems to have broken down. Traditionally, when parents made sacrifices for their children, they could look forward to a future 'payback' from their children, according to the 'the cycle of yang', the reciprocal obligations between parents and their children

(normally their male children) (Stafford 1995; Stafford 2000a). Today, when it is the first child (especially if it is a daughter) who makes personal sacrifices in order to help raise siblings, there is no cultural system of ‘balanced’ reciprocal relationships between sisters and brothers – and thus also no guarantee that the sacrifices of today’s elder siblings (especially sisters) will be paid back in the future.

The hidden scenario

After ten years of *dagong*, Silk had made a significant financial contribution to her natal household. Her ‘role’ in the household had changed so that she had become the breadwinner and chief provider for the household. Her parents depended on her in many aspects of life, both large (such as when they needed a loan) and small (such as showing them how to assemble a gas stove (see Chapter 1)). There was an implicit consensus between her parents and Silk herself that she deserved more respect and power within the household because she shouldered more responsibilities than other family members. I have already described how she acted as ‘public representative’ on the Chinese New Year visits to other families (see Chapter 1). Silk apparently wields greater bargaining power than she ever had before in her natal household; her influence has grown in proportion to the financial contributions that she made. She could bargain for what she wanted and put her preferences strongly on the table when the household was making a collective decision. She thus seems to exemplify what Yan (2003) has observed, that the power within the household has shifted from the parents’ generation to the younger generation. This is how the situation appears at first sight, ‘on the surface’: Silk would seem to embody the rise of ‘youth power’.

However, in the end she cannot argue with patriarchal custom: ultimately she is only temporarily a member of her natal family. Silk and her family members all seemingly bore this inevitable fact in mind: Silk would finally marry out of her natal family and belong to another family. Although the sacrifices she had made for her natal family deserved respect and gratitude, she would still ultimately not be ‘one of our family.’ The other side of ‘marrying out’ and leaving the natal family is that caring for her parents in the future is, for the daughter, always optional, a matter of her choice, to ‘decide’ if she wants to provide a ‘limited form of yang’, i.e. support for her parents

(Stafford 1995: 91). In the parents' reasoning, daughters are not bound by reciprocal obligation and thus, from the perspective of seeking guaranteed care in old age, relying on a daughter's sentiments and good will – whether she will choose to support them in their retirement years – is clearly not as secure as relying on a son's obligations.

For these reasons, the shifts in power within Silk's household were temporary and symbolic. The respect she was given by her parents might even be seen as a compensation for her unrequited sacrifices – sacrifices that cannot be seen as investments for her own future (unlike the sacrifices of parents for children). If we view Silk's bossy and rude attitude toward her parents (see Chapter 1) from this perspective, what appears in her 'announcements of independence' is at the same time a frustrated daughter (expressing her frustration at the unfair situation by yelling at her parents) and guilty parents (who try to comfort the daughter by smiling and serving her but not actually able to change anything for her).

In recent years, Chinese gender ideologies have become increasingly loose (Yan 2006a). The village can accept daughters as the 'representatives' of their families if they are the eldest children in the family. Villagers expect these eldest daughters to shoulder the responsibility for their families and even make the sacrifices expected of parents. But, on the other hand, the village also reminds her from time to time that she only holds this position temporarily and thus that she does not even belong to her natal family. She acts as 'regent' waiting for her younger brother to grow up and take his rightful place. One day, she will finally have to hand her power back to the first male child, who is the real heir and new master of the family.

To put this more formally: here is a key locus of conflict between two systems: the market economy (with its logic that personal income belongs to the individual, and the individual decides how to use it) and the local moral economy (with its logic that 'household property is collective and the head can decide how to use it), each associated with different ways to allocate responsibilities, powers – and property.

YOUNG WOMEN 'IN BETWEEN'

Once, when I was sent by Silk's parents to persuade her to eat after she had the big quarrel with her brother and locked herself in room, Silk sighed and said to me:

I feel so heart-broken. I did it all for my brother. I don't have the right to inherit property. The house is his. I don't even save any money for my dowry. He treats me like I am nothing, like I am nobody to him [*wo sheme dou bushi*].

At that moment, I somehow felt that Silk was as anxious as her grandmother about the question 'where do I belong?' After two generations, the society of China has changed a lot. But Silk, as a female peasant, seemed still destined to repeat her grandmother's path.

Young unmarried women like Silk are caught 'in between' two economies of property claims (the market economy and the local moral economy) but they are also at an 'in between' moment in their lives: will they stay in the city or return 'home'? The tensions between eldest daughters and younger (male) siblings – and the parents' response to these – are far more than minor sibling quarrels. Rather, the property rights of the household are implicit here as tough and touchy issues among siblings.

Silk could potentially make property claims in terms of *both* the market economy and the local moral economy. The household property has been accrued largely as the result of Silk's contributions, her wages, labour and sacrifice. Thus, it could be argued, following market principles of individual property rights, that the property should belong to Silk herself. At the very least, she could claim partial ownership, as she contributed a share of the property from her wages. Equally, in the short term anyway, judging by traditional principle of *renqing* (human sentiment, sympathy), on the basis of her contribution to the household, especially providing for her siblings, the elder sister holds greater bargaining power.

However, according to customary practice on descent and inheritance, all the properties should pass to Silk's brother rather than Silk herself. 'In the longer term it is the sons who command the greater bargaining power – although on the face of it they are enjoying the free fruits of their elder sister's labour – because under the traditional understanding of family obligations and consequent property rights, they will bear the burden of providing for the parents' old age. When Silk says of her brother, 'He treats me like I am nothing, like I am nobody to him [*wo sheme dou*

bushi]' in a sense she is correct – not that he has no feelings/sentiments for her but that in moral economy of village she has no relation of reciprocity with brothers/siblings.

Traditionally, daughters in Chinese society had practically no property rights (McCreery 1976). Although the dowry she brings to the marriage can be seen as a part of household property that 'belongs' to her, this is entirely different from inheritance rights. As McCreery argues, 'rights to inherit have been legally defined, while rights to dowry have not ... the size of the dowry was up to the men who controlled the family's property' (McCreery 1976: 173). As a result, in a society where women do not inherit, their status is thus significantly lower than that of men (Yalman 1967: 172–79, cited in McCreery 1976: 163).

Daughters who are reaching a certain age are reminded by everyone that they will not belong to their home town and natal family for much longer. Villagers, as parents of young migrant workers, feel unease arising from the conflicting reasoning on property rights for siblings of different genders. They cannot rely on 'folk theory' to guide them. They express their unease in many ways and through a range of emotions, such as anxiety (e.g. parents worrying that their daughter is not yet married and pushing her to get married as soon as possible), guilt (parents feeling that they have not fulfilled their responsibility as good parents when making their daughters sacrifice so much), concern (relatives repeatedly ask an unmarried daughter when she will get married) and love (feeling that because they love their daughter they have to arrange her future life for her). Although, as is well known, there is significant pressure on young Chinese people of both sexes to resolve questions about their marriage plans, this is especially true with unmarried eldest sisters. The collective social expectation is that these young women will – and should – 'marry out', and this fact is invested with much emotion, concern and love, as well as some anxiety and guilt. The household dynamics reflect and play out these tensions – all of which focus on the eldest daughter.

Unmarried young women thus feel much anxiety about the uncertainty of belonging nowhere. They are in effect rejected by their natal family but have not yet found a future spouse. At the same time, it seems that it is the eldest daughter's task to relieve everyone else of these emotional burdens, to resolve the tensions of the household.

THE 'SOLUTION': MARRYING OUT AND MARRYING UP

The eldest daughters therefore have an awkward status. Having left for migrant work, their return, even on temporary visits, leads to an unstable power structure within the household, as manifested in the tensions between eldest daughters and younger brothers. What would happen if they decided to return home permanently? Even though Silk's brother in theory would welcome Silk to stay at home, in practice the dilemma presented by such an outcome would be severe. If she stayed, the customary or folk descent theory would be challenged. The category of unmarried daughters did, of course, exist historically: unmarried daughters were typically expected to be taken care of by their fathers. However, today that would seem to conflict with the rise of youth power, specifically the decline in the authority of fathers and the rise in the status of brides, as argued by Yan (2003). As he sees it, the increasing power of youth, correlated with the decline in the authority of elders, means that the conjugal relationship of husband and wife has replaced the father–son relationship as the most important axis within the family. Just as the power of sons can now exceed that of their fathers, especially after the sons have married, so too the son's power is now shared by his new bride. If the family lacks a powerful elder father, we can expect tensions to arise between unmarried elder sisters and younger brothers' wives, if not between the brothers themselves.

Crucially, if Silk insisted on her right to at least a share in the property, her parents would be faced with the huge dilemma of how to distribute their properties and how to make a fair balance between the reasoning of the market economy and the traditional moral economy. Evidently, this would be a hard decision for villagers who have in effect 'sacrificed' an elder daughter but must also consider the younger son(s) at home – and also take into account their own best interests in terms of old age security.

The way to resolve these dilemmas – or at least this appears to be the consensus among my informants about the best outcome – is that the eldest daughters should 'marry out' and also 'marry up' (marry a husband whose social and economic condition is better than that of her natal family) – and, ideally, that she should do so while the brother is growing up. If Silk marries out, the dilemma of distributing properties will be resolved

and if, at the same time, she marries up, her parents' feelings of unease can be put to rest. Her parents will feel comfortable because Silk will gain some 'compensation' (a house and other property) from her husband's family: after so many years of self-sacrifice, she will not have not suffered materially. Her younger brothers too will be relieved of the discomfort they feel about the situation. Although boys are less likely to be blamed for the tensions, it may be that this is part of the reason why sons with elder 'sacrificed' sisters often choose to stay in the factory, in order to avoid tensions with their siblings (and may also contribute to their seeming indifference to their home towns).

At a small social gathering in her home town, Silk and some of her former classmates were talking about the pressure on them to get married. Their parents were all pushing them to marry out (*jiachuqu*). Xiaoyi described how her parents had arranged quite a few 'marriage interviews' (*xiangqin*) for her. Silk and others show their envy, since their parents did not help at all in their marriage arrangements. However, Xiaoyi complained:

Everyone I interviewed, I rejected. This one is not good – he's too short. This one didn't qualify either – he's too poor. This one can't be right – I don't have feelings for him. I kept on telling my parents they can't just focus on objective criteria when selecting men. No matter how good his criteria are, I can't marry him if I feel like I'm going to vomit every time I meet him. After my sister-in-law got pregnant her skin became black and – even worse – her face is full of pimples. I already had marriage phobia even before seeing her situation. Now I really don't dare to get married. I don't know what parents are thinking about. They always push us to get married, to marry out. But they never think about if we are ready to get married or not [*youmeiyou jiehun de jichu*]. If they manage to marry us out very soon but our marriage is not good [*jiade buhao*], people will still gossip about it [*renjia haishihui shuohua*] [i.e. just as they would gossip if she had not yet married].

Her words were supported by the other girls. Xiao'er said, 'Yes. When and who you marry is decided by lover's luck [*yuanfen*] and perfect timing [*tianshidili*].'

Xiaoyi kept saying:

I told my mother, ‘As I haven’t got married, you are worried. You’re worried I haven’t got married by a certain age. But if I had already got married, you would still be worried. You would worry about my life after marriage. Given that, I’d better not get married.’

These young women liked to meet up from time to time – but only with those who were not married. They noted that, after they get married, how would they have time to sit and talk as they were doing now? They would be too busy serving [*fushi*] their household. After getting married, people talk about different, narrower, topics. ‘They talk about family. We have broader topics. We talk about what happens outside the village and the things that happened in the past.’ When seeing their married former classmates on the road, they could barely recognise them; they had changed so much after marriage.

These young women saw that the situation for females before and after marriage was totally different and this awareness has made them wary and in some sense even intimidated by the prospects facing them. Before marriage, the girl is treasured property for the groom’s family. In the wedding ceremony, the groom’s family has to ‘beg’ the bride’s family politely in order to take their daughter away in the wedding ceremony. Local people have a phrase – *taitou jiaguniang ditou taozifu* (you hold your head up when you marry your daughter out, you hang your head when you bring a daughter-in-law into your family) – to describe the hierarchical relationship between the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom. But, after a woman gets married, her time is suddenly filled with household errands and family affairs. Silk herself emphasised that the birth of a child and the responsibilities of raising children would mean even bigger changes.

It seems that many unmarried migrant young women, including Silk and her classmates, do not really want to change their current life. It is not necessarily in their personal interest to marry out and face another cycle of uncertainty. Unlike women in previous generations, male guardianship is not the main way in which women now secure their livelihood. They can support themselves financially. They often enjoy a degree of respect and power in their natal household. If they could choose, marriage

would probably not be their preferred option at this moment. However, although they may delay marriage, their natal household has, in effect, already taken the collective decision that they will be married out soon in order to resolve the tension within the household. Although probably not consciously reasoning in this way, and while often claiming to make a 'free choice', these young women still ultimately decide to follow the household collective decision and give up other possible choices (such as remaining single and asking to be given a share of the household property). This is probably because they do not know how to ignore or reject the expectations of their parents' generation. The tensions within the household, transformed and expressed in the form of parental expectations, pressure them to get married – out and up – as soon as possible.

For their own part, after so many years of self-sacrificing, these young women want to receive some compensation from their future husband's family for the sacrifices they have made on behalf of their natal family. Therefore, they too want to marry up (see Davin 2007). Typically they want to marry a rich man with high social status, preferably born in the city, or a migrant in the city with good chances for permanent residence. A man of this kind can help her escape the countryside permanently and, in effect, offer his wife a modern identity. This allows some sort of solution, bowing to parental pressure but also pursuing their own dreams (albeit in a limited way). Although often expressing reluctance to marry, at the same time they will expend a great deal of energy (including the energy of refusing potential partners proffered by their parents on arranging the best possible outcome. Reflecting the rise in youth power, a young woman today will often negotiate the bridewealth and interview the prospective match very carefully (Yan 2006a) and may even ally herself with her future husband to bargain for more bridewealth from his parents (her parents-in-law) in order to secure a better life (Yan 2005). However, it should be emphasised that this reasoning is what their community has taught them. It is as if, when elder sisters 'marry up', the unfair treatment they have received – in supporting their parents and brothers for many years – can be made right.

Perhaps the 'best' solution of all is to find a prospective marriage partner from one's *laoxiang* – a stranger from the same place – but one who has also made a success of

himself. At the same time, this would deal with the distrust that *dagongmei* feel towards people in the city (see Interlude section). Silk herself therefore refused her primary school classmate as a potential marriage partner because, even though she thought he was a ‘good guy’, she would never marry a young man coming from the same background as herself. This would not offer her an escape route or a way of changing her identity. At the same time, to marry someone from a totally different background would be too frightening. The perfect match for Silk, it seems, is Million. Million is Silk’s *laoxiang*, 27 years old. He grew up in the adjacent village and is also not as well educated as most *dagongzai* (young male wage workers). He left home to become a migrant worker in Dongguan in south China when he was 18. Starting as a basic worker, he is now a ‘boss’ (at least that’s what Silk told me, although I later learned that his company appears to have only himself as both boss and sole employee). He sells precision instruments to factories and has earned enough money to buy a Toyota car. When we paid a visit to his village in Hubei during the Chinese New Year, we were given a lift in Million’s car. We could all see that Million takes good care of Silk. However, Million has a girlfriend already and it is not Silk. This makes their relationship ambiguous. The main reasons that Silk considers Million an ideal match is that he is rich and successful but with a similar background to her own. Like her, he is not well educated, which Silk thought would provide a good basis for mutual understanding. Silk once turned down a potential date because the man had a Master’s degree, saying, ‘*Tai yao yuan le* [‘he is too far away].’ In addition, Million is her *laoxiang*. It might seem confusing that Silk rejected her neighbour as a future husband but sees Million as ideal. The difference is that being a – successful – *laoxiang* is an advantage. Million is in a position to choose where he and his wife will live after marriage and, at the same time, his background is familiar to Silk. His habits are easier for her to predict and control. Generally, it largely reduces the risks Silk has to take. She said:

I don’t want to marry a man from another province because today society is so turbulent. Who knows who is a liar? If he is my *laoxiang*, if he gets up to something I can figure out what the story is [*ta zemeyang, keyi dating dedao*].

Will Silk's dream come true? Even if it does, her future has become dependent on marriage. As young female workers often said to me, 'I don't know where I will live in the future. It depends on my future husband.'

CONCLUSION

While much research has debated new generation migrants' attitudes to their 'home towns', and how it differs (or not) from that of the previous generations, I am suggesting that the sense of belonging may be gender specific. More specifically, it depends upon gender and birth order.

When the elder sister sacrifices herself for her siblings for several years, what can she get in the end? The answer is 'being exiled from the natal family' – because her membership in the natal family is not permanent. At the same time, it can be asked, is she in exactly the same position as her grandmother's generation? On the one hand, like their grandmothers, daughters reaching a certain age are reminded by everyone that they will not belong to their home town and natal family for long. This certainly adds a gender dimension to young migrant women such as Silk constantly announcing their indifference towards their home town. Yet, in some ways, Silk's situation is more like that of parents who sacrifice for the son for many years and, when he finally grows up, he wants to throw them out of the door. It has been noted that migrant workers send remittances home not only as a sentimental way to maintain social ties with family members but also as a way to 'keep the door open for future reintegration into the origin community' (Murphy 2002: 11). But can this truly be said of *female* migrant workers? Such 'reintegration', I have been suggesting, would pose major problems.

In discussing household dynamics, I have shown not only the underlying reasons for tensions between parents, elder sisters and younger brothers –ultimately related to the clash between the market economy and the local moral economy in respect to property – but also how this translates into conflicting emotions (anxieties, guilt, unease, resentment) for the parties involved. The 'tensions' are thus both metaphorical/logical, concerning the two systems, and real emotions borne by individuals. It seems that it becomes the eldest daughter's task to relieve everyone else of these emotional burdens, to resolve the tensions of the household. Thus it can well be asked, to what extent have

today's young women benefited in the long term from the rise of youth power? The decline in the authority of the elders and the rise of youth power in the household might benefit the bride of a younger brother but not his unmarried sisters.

By contrast, while the parents of migrant workers push daughters out, they try to keep the son at home. The parents provide their sons, like Silk's brother, with a new modern house with new furniture (using Silk's financing), and they direct him towards prospective jobs and business partners in the cities through kin networks. By contrast with daughters, sons are always reminded 'they 'can come back anytime'. In my experience, this is highly effective in providing young male migrant workers with a final security backup. They find it comforting to know that 'at least they have somewhere to return' no matter what lies ahead on their migrant journey. Young migrant male workers often told me, 'If I can't achieve any success in the city, I can/will just go home [*najihuijia*].'

Certainly, home town and family/local networks function as a support system to ease the risks of living the modern urban lifestyles for the new generation migrant workers just as it did for previous generations – as Murphy notes, a link to home town 'increases [migrants'] income and minimises their risks' (Murphy 2002: 23). However the underlying 'son preference' throws a further light on attitudes towards the *hukou* system. Although the *hukou* system is structurally biased against the young migrants who wish to travel to work in city, it is actually perceived by migrant workers as acceptable. While the *hukou* system means migrant workers do not benefit from urban social security, they can find the necessary interim support from their rural families. Because 'the wage sector escapes the burden of providing the welfare needed by migrants', in effect it is their home town that must shoulder 'the burden of reproducing' the migrants' labour power (Murphy 2002: 13–14). Indeed, migrant workers even expressed pity for the urbanites who are forced to work very hard in order to maintain daily survival. My point here, however, is that the actual experience of this 'rural advantage' may be different for young women and men.

Concerning the question of the best final outcome, the male worker East-Sea, although enjoying a successful career in the city, told me that, if he has the opportunity to buy a house in the city, that would be the best option but, at the same time, there is no way he

would give up his house in his rural home town. (Indeed, it is his dream to return home one day ‘as a boss’.) More generally, as also indicated in Chapter 3, migrant workers want to give up their duty to farm lands by renting the land to others (which to some extent echoes Cai and Wang’s findings (Cai and Wang 2007) but, at the same time, when migrating out and in transitional periods as they ‘job hop’, they talk of wanting to keep the rural house – along with their local networks of relatives and neighbours and their identities of native place and household – but *not* the identity of being peasants)’. In addition, and crucially, for new generation *male* workers, this is where their *laojia*, their ‘old home’, is located and where they see themselves as having a continuing stake – concretised in the form of property, maintained through financial and social remittances, backed up by their ultimate obligations to support their parents in old age – to such an extent that, in the end, they feel they have the security of knowing that they can always return, ideally not to farm but to take up a non-agricultural occupation (see also Yue, Li et al. 2010). However much they aspire to belong to the city, they can at the same time maintain an ultimate sense of belonging ‘at home’. For young male peasants, their rural home town (including house, lands and kin/neighbour networks) is a kind of insurance against all uncertainties.

Evidently, as this chapter has shown, both male and female new generation migrant workers maintain and enhance links to their home towns in ways that challenge the conventional wisdom about differences between generations of migrants. It might be debated whether this reflects traditional peasant views about ancestral land, an ‘enduring attachment to the soil’ (Fei 1992: 40) or whether, on the contrary, it shows a ‘modern’ rational calculation balancing risk and security, especially in the light of the lack of social security for rural people under the *hukou* system.

However, I want to stress that the role of home towns as the locus of social security is applicable primarily to male migrant workers. Generally speaking, young female workers, like Silk, enjoy only a short term eligibility to enjoy the benefit of this ‘ultimate’ security; the so-called ‘rural advantage’ is essentially a male advantage. Migrating away from home for male workers is in some senses less risky than for female workers leaving their home town. Most important, the possibility of returning home is vastly more secure – and promoted by the community – for males than

females. We can thus say that migration is a dynamic gendering process in which negotiation happens between traditional principles and market principles. Young men and young women perceive the market in specific, and different, ways.

As I have been suggesting, the conflict between the moral economy and market economy creates tensions for siblings within the household – and the elder sister is generally felt to be the one with the responsibility for sorting out this tension. To resolve the tension, collective social expectations urge young women, once they have reached a certain age, to marry out and (ideally) up. This will solve everyone's problems, as they see it. The community does not care if this means pushing a young woman into another cycle of uncertainty after her years of 'sacrifice for the benefit of the household as a whole.

One can say that new generation migrant workers, male and female, generally have little idea where they belong, and this is something they have to figure out for themselves. However, female migrants, like Silk and her classmates, receive the strong message that they do *not* belong to their home towns, while male migrants, like Solid-Will, East-Sea and Silk's brother, know that they will always belong to their family in the village no matter where they are and how long they have been away. Indeed, because they are excluded from social security systems and protection in their destination places (in line with the *hukou* system), they sometimes have no option but to fall back on the bonds between them and their family/home town.

China's rural youth today have to handle a social dilemma. On the one hand, they are living through 'the individualisation of the rural family' (Yan 2011) and have no choice but to engage with the 'increasing demands for individuality, choice and freedom both from and being imposed on individuals' (Yan 2011: 207). On the other hand, they have to engage with 'the lack of institutionalised mechanisms for re-embedding of the individual beyond the family' (Yan 2011: 229). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that migrants actually maintain strong attachments to their families and home towns (not least in order to get necessary support) while also expressing their indifference to it (by way of showing they are autonomous, independent, 'modern citizens').

According to my research, although the goals of migration have changed (away from earning money for the household to gaining adulthood and being independent), family ties and home towns still play an important role in migrants' lives – not only because few other mechanisms are there to provide social security and protection but also as networks (of information and influence) leading to job opportunities. However, while both males and females may benefit from the latter function, I have argued that the role of home towns as the centre of social security is significantly different for male and female migrant workers. Consequently young female migrant workers migrant women spend much time deciding who they want to marry, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Migration and Love Marriage

Both the previous chapter and this chapter are related to the question of marriage. But Chapter 4 focused primarily on how other people (notably family members and/or members of the wider village community) view the marriages of migrant workers. This chapter is mainly about how female migrant workers themselves view it and deal with it.

As is well known, Chinese parents no longer automatically play the leading role in their daughters' marriage planning. This means that many young women have the power and freedom to make their own marriage decisions, and more specifically to arrange so-called love marriages for themselves. But it also means that they have the *responsibility* for arranging marriages by themselves. In short, the question of marriage is now directly linked to women's ability to 'act on their own' and 'be independent' (*zizhu*). For many of the female migrant workers I met during fieldwork, it seemed that the most attractive aspect of migration was, precisely, the opportunity it gave them to meet young men and subsequently marry a person of their own choosing.

Under the old system of arranged marriages, the availability of a husband to a woman was determined largely by the attributes of her parents, especially their socioeconomic standing. But, now that arranged marriages are no longer the norm, it is believed that a woman's *own* qualities have a great bearing on the choice of husbands available to her. By extension, the man a woman marries also tends to reflect back on her individually (and no longer her family), allowing people to judge her accordingly. (As I will discuss below, this includes judging her 'femininity'.) Meanwhile, if a female migrant worker does not 'marry out' (*chujia*)⁶⁸ by a certain age, she herself has to take responsibility for the consequences. She is likely to be punished, at least implicitly, by those around

⁶⁸ The term *chujia* (marry out) relates to the virilocal rule in Chinese kinship system. As stated in Chapter 4, the bride moves away from her natal family and into a stranger's house belonging to a man she will call 'husband' for the rest of her life. Thus, in Chinese, there is a different term for marriage for the bride and for the groom. For the groom, the term is *chu*, meaning to take (a wife). *Chujia* is the term used by the bride.

her, who may say, 'You are not desired because you wouldn't make a "good" wife.' This attribution, I want to suggest, makes girls and young women imagine and gradually learn what kinds of wife are 'good' and then try to fit themselves to that image.

To put this differently: in order to secure a marriage these young women must, in fact, give up their agency (or at least part of it) and obey the socially constructed standard of what a desirable wife should be. Those around them may punish any behaviour deemed inappropriate by warning them that 'you won't be able to marry out' if you carry on in this way. Although Chinese people today will not judge a woman as immoral if she chooses her own spouse and/or when she marries a man her parents do not like and/or even if she has premarital sex (Yan 2003), they *will* condemn her for failing to marry. The 'freedom' to choose one's own spouse therefore creates a kind of panic among some young Chinese women, I want to suggest, in which they are arguably controlled more than ever by traditional gender ideologies. Yet, I also argue here that today the most effective way for female migrant workers to undermine male domination may be, in fact, to embrace marriage.

FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS ARE KEEN TO MARRY OUT

In Chapter 4, I noted that the firm consensus among rural villagers was that female workers should definitely get married when they reach a certain age. Among the young women I met in factories, however, a rather more contradictory and ambivalent attitude towards marriage was often seen: they appreciated the freedom that being single brought but also seemed keen to eventually 'marry out' and, more specifically, to secure a love marriage. So how would this be achieved?

The young female workers at THS spent much of their leisure time talking to their friends on their mobile telephones. The most popular topic of conversation was how to 'find a good match' (*zhaoge haoduixiang*) and their progress in doing so. For example, one Sunday afternoon I listened as Fond-String, a 23-year-old from Jiangxi province whose desk was next to mine, talked to her friends over the internet from 3 pm until 8 pm. She talked about what kind of *duixiang* (object wooed, pursued or looked for',

here meaning ‘love interest’) she would like, while also updating them on her current *duixiang* situation.

For female migrant workers, trying to ‘find a good match’ was something distinct from flirting – and also different from falling in love or being romantic or having a casual relationship. A *duixiang* is someone a young woman could seriously see as a potential marriage partner. When a decision to be together has been made, workers will hand out candies, known as ‘relationship sweets’ (*tuotang*), to everyone in the factory. They may invite some close friends from both sides to eat in a restaurant. This ritual-like start to a relationship reflects the fact that both sides take it seriously. To *wanwan eryi* (just ‘fool around’ or just have a casual relationship) is, by contrast, generally considered taboo for these young women⁶⁹ – even if they sometimes engage in it. For example, Fond-String said again and again on the telephone, ‘I don’t regard relationships as a game. I am serious about them. How could anyone think that I am not serious about finding a match?’ She also told one prospective *duixiang*, ‘I hope that you don’t just want to flirt and fool around with me if we both agree to start a relationship.’ Why is having ‘just for fun’ relationships taboo for young women migrants? In Fond-String’s words, ‘You [young men] can afford to have a relationship only for fun, but I can’t [*wanbuqi*].’

A number of researchers have commented on the prevalence of talk about relationships and romance inside Chinese factories. Pun, for example, describes the jokes and laughter surrounding the topics of love and sex. Citing Paul Willis (1981: 29), she argues that this helps workers cope with the difficulties and tedium of factory life – ‘having a laff’ is a way to defeat boredom and fear. Therefore, Pun interprets this love-related talk as a ‘weapon of [the] weak’ (Scott 1985) in their battle against work

⁶⁹ At first glance, this appears to contradict Yan (2003), whose remarks that a rural woman will nowadays not be judged immoral even if she has premarital sex were cited on the previous page. Although I cannot say anything for the people in the northern China where Yan did his fieldwork, at least in my field a young woman will only be immune from criticism if it is presumed that she will be getting married to this man (that they are, in effect, engaged). If the couple eventually do not get married and the young woman needs to have an abortion, she is regarded with sympathy by those around her, who view her as the victim of a promise breaker. She herself will not mention it. The moral legitimacy of premarital sex is thus only as verifying the ‘engaged’ status of the couple.

alienation (2005: 154–57). However, my interpretation is the opposite of Pun's. In my experience, gossip and romance are not just ways of coping with, or resistance to, the work environment. However much female workers value establishing and developing their own careers (which they certainly do, as I have explained in previous chapters), relationship and marriage issues are ultimately much more important to them. As for the idea that gossip and romance provide release or relief to these young women in dealing with everyday work boredom, on the contrary, they appear to be quite anxious, uneasy and stressed about matters related to marriage. They believe that they can fail in work but they must not fail in marriage. As they themselves put it, 'Marriage is a woman's biggest enterprise [*hunyin shi nuren zuida de shiye*]' . So, again, how is this enterprise pursued?

ROMANTIC LOVE, INDIVIDUALISATION AND CAPITALISM

Current research suggests that openness to the possibility of romantic love, the practice of love marriages and also being sexually liberated are prominent characteristics of new generation migrant workers (He and Fu 2006: 10). This seems to confirm what much previous theory predicted: that the rise of romantic love is related to the economic development of a society and that romantic love is fostered by modernity, capitalism and individualism (Macfarlane 1987). In traditional peasant societies, marriage is 'largely based on arrangement by kin or other wider groups' (Macfarlane 1987: 124). Today, however, in the era of economic openness, Chinese people, even Chinese peasants, are seen as now able to enjoy individual freedom, conjugal privacy and romantic love (Yan 2003). However, empirical research on China also shows the other side of the rise of romantic love. New generation migrant workers are under huge pressure to arrange their own marriages, which is often very difficult to achieve (Zhou and Hou 2010).

Anthropological studies have demonstrated that romantic love, when it appears as an ideal marriage form in different cultural contexts, is not always an emancipating ideology (Parry 2001). Along with other processes of 'westernisation', it may lead to unexpected results. In the case of India, romantic love arguably reinforces social and gender inequalities, in some contexts. In Parry's research, formal sector workers'

critique of the lifestyle of informal sector workers includes the discourse surrounding romantic love. Romantic love is taken as a sign of superiority because it is the practice from 'modern' western society. Thus, formal sector workers' support for and practice of romantic love (companion love) is seen as showing their superiority to informal sector workers. The practice of romantic love helps formal sector workers reconfirms the status of men in the public and also in the household by making women more economically dependent (Parry 2001).

Without judging whether romantic love is an emancipating ideology, it can certainly be said that the rise of romantic love will have an impact on the pre-existing social structure. Romance might not necessarily be absent in peasant societies but it is rarely given as much weight as economic suitability when it comes to judging marriage prospects (Macfarlane 1987; Yan 2003). However, when a society starts to value romance, love and companionship as the premise of marriage – and thus implicitly view love from the perspective of capitalism (Giddens 1992; Evans 2003: 43–55; Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 14) – this also goes along with changes in ideas about personhood, social relationships and gender. In other words, the rise of romantic love is bound up with the renegotiation of the existing moral paradigm. However, the question has been raised whether this new marriage 'paradigm' contains an implicit class bias and, specifically, whether it is linked to the marginalisation of new generation migrant workers. Since the 'romantic revolution' in post-Mao China, being *fengliu* (handsome, pretty, clean, well dressed, know make-up, socialising and know how to talk) has replaced being *laoshi* (honest, decent) as the crucial requirements for the ideal mate for young peasants (Yan 2003: 76–79). Yan suggests that, in pursuing these new criteria, the new generation of young rural people has moved away from the collective economic goals of the family, in particular in placing more stress on the importance of intimacy in the conjugal relationship. However, scrutinising all these criteria, they seem to a large extent to echo the lifestyle and image of the urban middle class. From this perspective, the 'romantic revolution' in rural China reflects class differences. When adopted by young peasants, it arguably relates to their more general yearning to emulate the modern lifestyle of the urban middle class, i.e. their wish to be the desiring and consuming subjects of modernity (Andrews and Shen 2002; Rofel 2007; Yu and Pan 2008). This in turn arguably weakens the class consciousness of rural people and reinforces the

hierarchy of rural–urban relationships (see Weinstein 2006). For the rural migrants, to achieve this kind of urban lifestyle, and then to find and be an ideal mate, presents many difficulties; put colloquially, it is not an ‘easy job’. Rural peasants/workers are in an even more disadvantaged position than ever in the marriage market after the so-called ‘romantic revolution’.

The other negative side of the emphasis on romantic love is that it helps naturalise particular ideas about gender roles. Romantic love is heterosexual love. It preaches a specific picture of happy family life and implies that it is ‘natural’, which excludes those who cannot fit in to this picture. Women in particular are expected to provide considerable emotional labour:

It is the combination of women’s economic dependence on men and ideologies about the importance of love in making a relationship successful that has pushed women to specialise in the work of love. Relationships forged by choice, pleasure, and psychological intimacy may be less durable than marriages based on and maintained through economic ties between families, and so it follows that developing an expertise in emotion and pleasure of others is a critical skill that women need in order to help these fragile relationships survive. (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006: 25)

When romantic love stresses individual ‘free choice’ (in a context of gender inequality), it naturally gives men, as the power holders in the existing structure, more freedom than women. In this structure, women submit to men’s will and preferences in order to win their consent to stay in a relationship. Romantic love promotes a particular kind of femininity, based largely on men’s perspectives and masculine consumerism. It also arguably hinders women from sensing gender inequality – in the name of love – and thus weakens female worker’s class consciousness. (Weinstein, 2006: 162–63)

This raises the question of what love marriage means for migrant workers in their context. How do they perceive it as the new ideal marriage form?

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS AND VIRGINITY

When female migrant workers start seeing a particular boy this tends to lead to sexual relationships and pregnancy. Some couples rent a room outside and live together, and

then everyone assumes they are having a sexual relationship. Usually, female migrant workers quit their jobs once they become pregnant. They don't feel any shame about this, so far as I could tell. On the contrary, a girl's colleagues will normally congratulate her. For example, when Jade quit her job because she was pregnant and went around to say goodbye to each section, the leader of the factory asked her, 'Jade, why are you quitting?' She smiled and answered, 'I got promoted.' Delicate said, 'She has been promoted to be a mother.' That pregnancy before marriage can be seen as a joyous occasion is because people tend to assume the pregnant girl will soon marry the man who made her pregnant and thus it implies that a young woman has 'upgraded' her status to wife and mother. Here, the hierarchy of female status in factory workers' minds is clearly demonstrated. But if a young woman gets pregnant and her boyfriend does not want to marry her (which is rare), the pregnancy will be treated as a secret. Young women in this position will typically quit their jobs and keep a low profile.

In short, marriage is the ultimate reason to start a relationship. Therefore, a young woman's only serious boyfriend will become her husband if everything goes smoothly. That is why, as argued above, losing one's virginity before marriage is no longer considered immoral (Yan 2003; Pun 2005: 156). However, virginity is still a concern. Most young women certainly do not, in my experience, want to give theirs up for a young man who will not marry them.

BEING BEAUTIFUL AND DESIRABLE

Meanwhile, female migrant workers are very much aware of their looks. In the factory, the employees all wear a uniform: a blue shirt in summer and a blue jacket in winter. However, before going to the shop floor, the young women usually crowd into the toilet to look at themselves in the only two big mirrors in the THS factory. They style their hair by hand and then put on their hats. They adjust their hats to a particular angle and then check their image carefully. When the THS factory moved to a new location, there were no mirrors in the female toilet. Young women used the water fountain (which had a reflective surface) in front of the toilet as their mirror. Some young women tried to learn about make up and fashion but they found it very complicated. The factory environment did not provide them with many resources on these topics.

The Taiwanese manager laughed at them, saying ‘Young rural women still are young rural women.’

Indeed, female migrant workers seem to really enjoy trying to be beautiful in the service of ‘finding a good match’. If they spend money on dressing up, their parents (who know the ultimate purpose) will not generally accuse them of wasting money. In addition, they seem to enjoy receiving the care and attention of young men. The experience is relatively new for them. Many of these girls grew up as ‘children left behind’ (*liushou ertong*) in the countryside, with the result that they did not receive much care and attention during childhood (at least this is what they say). Silk is considered to be a beautiful young woman – therefore many young men were interested in her at the time of my fieldwork. But she told me she couldn’t make up her mind which one to choose. She told me this was because her experience of being a *liushou ertong* meant ‘that she enjoys being the focus of young men’s attention and care. She said, ‘When I was in the village, my parents all left home and my grandmother was old; no one really cared about me. Now I finally know what it feels like to be taken care of.’

In the SEZ, female migrant workers gradually come to realise that beauty and youth can be exchanged for attention, for money, and even for a ‘good life’. This provokes some young women to be ambitious. In the hope of securing a better future, young women are effectively gambling their beauty on a man.

Silk first realised that beauty is kind of capital for a young woman when she was 15 years old and was working in a factory in suburban Shanghai. One day, she told me, a male supervisor of the Quality Control section came to the shop floor. He asked all the female workers to stand in a row. Then, he looked them up and down carefully one by one. He picked out a few young women and told them they would be working in the Quality Control section with him from then on. Silk was one of them but her friend was not. Silk asked, ‘Do you know why these young women are picked by this male supervisor?’ I waited for her answer. She told me shyly, ‘Because these young women are more beautiful than the others.’ Silk also found that, after she moved to work in the Quality Control section, her work became lighter while her salary increased.

In her home town, she told me, the neighbouring family had two daughters. One year when Silk came home, the younger of the two sisters in the neighbouring family told Silk that her elder sister had married a Taiwanese man and moved to Taiwan. Her parents were apparently very happy about this. They believed their daughter would surely have a better life in Taiwan. They had themselves visited Taiwan a few months earlier. For most mainlanders, visiting Taiwan is considered a privilege, something they have to get approval for. Mainlanders have to prepare required documents to apply and wait for approval. It was not easy to get approval before May 2008. The huge cost of preparing the documentation and of travelling is also a problem. Therefore, the neighbour was proud of her sister's marriage. Silk told me, 'A marriage can change a young woman's life.' That is what she had learnt from these stories.

I was told several times that migrant workers went to knock on the door of the Taiwanese leader's room at night, wearing nothing, offering their bodies. What they wanted in return was not only some privileges but also a chance to have intimacy and then get married to these leaders.

Although, as I discussed in Chapter 4, female migrant workers must eventually 'leave' their natal families through marriage (a consequence of the patrilineal system), at least some of them do not find this sad. Silk, Fond-String and Delicate told me they did not envy their brothers who are able to stay at home after marriage. Unlike their brothers, female migrant workers had choices, they said. No matter whether they are keen to leave their home town for the big city or other provinces, or want to stay in their home town, they can achieve this through their marriage decisions. They also imagine that life after marriage will be better, as in the stories they hear from their friends, neighbours and relatives. They remain optimistic about this, despite the anxiety it provokes. Silk smiled and pointed out, 'Who knows what will happen tomorrow. Right?'

The social context of the factory in the SEZ provides many chances for beautiful female workers. The marriage decision of female migrant workers in this untrustworthy environment (see Interlude section) is to some extent like a business.

THE VIRTUES OF BEING MARRIED

For a woman in China's patriarchal system, the highest social status she can achieve is that of being a mother. To get married is to start climbing the social ladder of the patriarchal system. In turn, the next step in the 'female hierarchy' is to have a son, which is crucial for women's status, including vis-à-vis other women (Wolf 1972). Intriguingly, however, today in the public domain 'married or not' is more crucial than 'having a son or not' in determining the social status of female workers. If late imperial Chinese women occupied a 'kin-inflected category' (Barlow 2004) where they were 'always defined in terms of their roles vis-à-vis fathers, husbands, and sons' (Yang 1999: 39), today's female migrant workers may not attach themselves to their fathers and sons but they still believe that they will be defined in terms of their husbands. Marriage, it seems, is still the most crucial factor for female workers to achieve their adulthood.

For an older woman, an unmarried status will be judged as a serious shortcoming. In the office, women have many chances to compare themselves to one another. Female workers believed that, if they cannot get married within the usual marriageable age range, people will say they have done something wrong. In their words, '*Meijiehun, renjia huishuo shibushi you shenme wenti* [If someone doesn't get married, people will say he/she probably has some problems].' This is because getting married is understood to be a completely natural thing as women reach adulthood. Married women gossip about why some women (and men) do not get married. Judgements about being unmarriageable parallel judgements about career performance. No matter how well an unmarried woman performs in her job or how high the job position an unmarried young woman attains, she may still feel guilty and embarrassed about her unmarried status. She has 'failed' to marry herself out.

During a party for the mid-autumn festival in 2008, Peace, a 22-year-old man, proposed that we should all take turns to talk about our criteria for potential marriage partners. Everyone was excited about this topic. However, Art, a 26-year-old woman, blushed and couldn't say anything. She avoided answering the question by smiling. After a short silence, Delicate urged Art to give us an answer: 'You have to tell us, he said, 'and then we can help you find a man to marry. How old do you want him to be?' Art blushed

again. She still couldn't say anything. Her behaviour was very different from what I was familiar with from seeing her working on the shop floor, where she was confident and her subordinates were afraid of her because she yelled at them loudly and never feared their resentment. Sky, a 24-year-old married woman, asked Art, 'Do you want to find a sophisticated and prudent [*chengshou wenzhong*] man, one with ambitions for his career development [*you shiyexin*]?' Art nodded repeatedly. She asked Sky, 'How come you understand me so well?' It appeared that Sky had anticipated exactly what Art wanted to say. Sky smiled and said, 'Young women are all the same. Generally speaking, what young women want for their marriage prospects is very similar.' Sky enquired where Art's home town was located; after Art told her, Sky turned to her husband, Virtue-Bright, and asked, 'Do you have any classmates from there?' Virtue-Bright replied with a young man's name, adding, 'He is tall, good at playing basketball and has a good job.' People laughed again and said, 'Look how fast she acts. Sky, you are really an expert and you should be our marriage consultant!'

People tend to give married women like Sky the authority to speak out on questions related to other people's private lives. Married women are seldom challenged by others when they express their opinions on family, children, birth or relationships. For example, Needle and Jasmine, two married women, gossiped about the breast size of each young woman in the factory, about some sex scandals involving drivers and other female migrant workers, and also about the relationship choices of their colleagues. As she listened to this, Zhangsan, a 21-year-old unmarried young woman, smiled with embarrassment and asked, 'How can you talk about such things?' 'They replied loudly, 'It's no big deal [*yousheme guanxi*], both of us are already married!' Married women like to lecture unmarried young women, often ending by saying 'Later on you'll see how it is [*ni yihou jiu zhidaole*].' Even when unmarried women, like Silk, do not agree with what they hear, they avoid arguing about it.

The discourse and ethics of femininity

However, to get married in China today is not only about finding a life partner. For some of the young women I met in the factory, at least, the point is 'avoiding having to work hard' and 'being provided for in life by a man'. They often told me that career success is not their ultimate life goal. It is not only because they think a career will

distract them from their family (actually they made this point implicitly) but also because a career can actually damage their ‘femininity’. To quote them: ‘Women don’t need to be that hard working. They, of course, deserve a man to take care of them.’ Delicate told me: ‘If my husband can earn enough money, I will be willing to let him pay for everything for me. Why shouldn’t I enjoy his offer? Why bother to work that hard? [*Wo name xinku ganma?*].’ A woman’s ideal life (*haoming*) should include a husband who is able, and also willing, to provide for her and make her life comfortable. In this environment her ‘femininity’ can flourish.

But what is femininity? The Chinese term ‘*jiao*’ means ‘delicate’ or ‘pampered’ and can also mean ‘to act in a spoiled, pettishly charming manner’ – something generally considered a good thing in a young woman. Therefore, even though female migrant workers are capable of being tough and independent, they do not usually want to act in this manner because it will be detrimental to their reputation. For example, in Pun’s ethnography, she describes how female supervisors were often ‘taken as men’ because of their actions (Pun 2005: 145). Thus, female migrant workers learn to disguise their sharpness, power, ambition and toughness as obedience and weakness in a way that suggests they need help. To do otherwise is to risk being judged as man-like, i.e. as lacking in femininity, *jiao*.

One particularly interesting point is the way that the judgement made about a woman’s femininity may partly be a response to the husband to whom she attaches herself. Married women ‘compete’ with each other over the degree of their femininity using their husbands as a measure: the degree of femininity of the wives is indicated by criteria such as the jobs, titles, salaries, family backgrounds and appearance of their husbands as well as the extent to which the husbands indulge their wives. Here, people judge a woman’s femininity by her husband’s social status. Finding a rich husband who is willing to be an indulgent husband would be a woman’s biggest ‘success’. A woman who remains single cannot participate in this femininity competition and, to put it bluntly, she is destined to be a loser.

Before marriage, young women are under the threat of moral judgement, as I have explained. Their parents and other adults caution them that if they do *x* – basically, anything they feel a good girl should *not* do – these young women are at risk of

remaining single: no man will want to marry them (*ni name ... yihou jiabuchiqu*). Pun describes how the female workers are often reminded of their femaleness. ‘As a girl in the process of becoming a woman, one should behave as the culture require[s]: submissive, obedient, industrious, tender, and so on.’ Otherwise, the risk is that ‘you can’t marry yourself out’ (Pun 2005: 143–44). Under this pressure, unmarried single women do not in fact stand in a good position to negotiate within the patriarchal structure. However, after getting married, they become wives and then mothers. They are no longer afraid of being *jiabu chuqu* (unable to find a man to marry) and they are now able to negotiate with the patriarchal structure even through the use of radical feminist discourse. (I found that unmarried factory workers are often more conservative and more willing to stick to traditional notions than those who are married.) While in the past the radical action that women adopted to subvert male domination may have included the act of resisting marriage (Topley 1975; Stockard 1989; Watson 1994), today the most effective way for female migrant workers to undermine male domination may, in fact, be to embrace marriage.

Being a woman, marriage and women’s rights

As time passes, a single woman eventually finds herself in an awkward situation: she cannot successfully transform her status from the category of ‘young girl’ (*nulai*) to that of ‘woman’ (*funu*). She is obviously excluded from the former category because of her age but, by virtue of being unmarried, she also cannot be fully integrated into society as an adult. Consequently, her moral status is vague. Her rights, obligations and social relations are not very well defined in the cultural scheme. As Yang notes, these ‘women without a man’ also tend to be neglected and invisible in the ‘state feminism discourse’ found in China (Yang 1999). As single women fail to achieve clear membership and recognition of their status as ‘women’ (*funu*), they are also unable to enjoy/suffer the rights and obligations which society assigns to ‘women’ (*funu*) as a whole.

Whilst married women today are able to claim their rights, express their ‘bitterness’ or renegotiate their gender roles by using the discourse of gender equality, women who remain single have limited access to this discourse. In any case, most female migrant workers would rather suffer from gender inequality within the patriarchal society than

remain single. In short, they prefer to remain part of the majority. Today, Chinese married women are in a good position to argue for their own rights, responsibilities and gender roles. But this does not include those women who remain single or get divorced. Where new and old discourses overlap, married women have some space to negotiate: they argue in favour of following tradition when tradition benefits them and they argue for tradition to be overturned when tradition is a disadvantage.

One day, Duckweed, a 24-year-old single woman, pointed at Silver, a married woman of the same age, and said, 'Everybody take a look. This woman can't wash clothes properly. If a man's clothes are dirty, people wouldn't say this man isn't capable of washing clothes. People would say the wife this man married is not competent [*bu nenggan*].' Silver looked embarrassed. She kept quiet for a while and then she fought back. Silver pointed at Duckweed and said, 'You! Your thoughts are traditional. Everybody take a look!' Duckweed yelled, 'What's wrong with my thoughts?' Silver replied, 'You take it for granted that women should [stay at home to] wash clothes and rear children while men should go outside [of the house] to work.' Duckweed said, 'The reason we differentiate man and woman is in order to differentiate what they should do. The division of labour couldn't be any clearer.' Silver laughed at Duckweed:

So, have you returned to the era in which the woman takes care of the household affairs and the man deals with the outside [*nanzhuwai nuzhunei*]? You stay home to wash clothes, take care of the children and wait for your husband to come home so you can welcome him and say, 'Oh, you're back'.

Duckweed said, 'You get me wrong. I just want to make it clear that man and woman are responsible for different things. A woman washes clothes clean in order to show that she can do what she should do.' East-Sea, the 23-year-old married man in the office who was listening to their conversation, said, 'There is only thing woman should do nowadays. That is to give birth to a baby. Apart from that, washing clothes, cooking and so on, all can be done by man.' Duckweed disagreed and fought for her opinion, 'Cooking is all right. However, you rarely see a man wash clothes. Women do it.' East-Sea quickly responded:

Come on. I've seen it a lot. Today it is not unusual to see a man cook and wash clothes. While men are responsible for working, cooking and washing clothes

what else can women do? Then, you see, women play mah-jong. I saw many women play mah-jong when I was working in Longgang.⁷⁰ They have a child on their back and the mah-jong tiles in their hand [*beishang kunzhe xiaohai, shoushang mozhe majiang*].

According to their conversation, married women today are neither responsible for taking care of the household following the traditional division of labour nor responsible for being the main bread-winner in the household. East-Sea implied that women have nothing important to do today. They get together to gamble on the street all day long. ‘Their life is so carefree (*zhenkauihuo*).’

BEING INDEPENDENT (AGAIN)

As I reported in Chapter 1, female migrant workers told me that their motivation for leaving home was mainly to seek personal ‘independence’ (*duli*) and ‘development’ (*chengzhang*). However, as I have explained, they spend a good deal of their time seeking their perfect match. These seem contradictory. If they really want to be independent, why are they keen to attach themselves to a boyfriend or a husband?

Every time these young women talked about the criteria they used to judge the quality of a good match, it appeared they were paying attention not only to the man himself but also to the career of this man and his family background. Young women tended to think that their own ideal life in the future will be fulfilled by their husband. The lifestyle they will have and the place they will live are hugely determined by whom they marry. Fond-String wanted to find:

... a man who is older than me and owns his own business. If he has a shop, that would be great. Like my cousin’s. That guy my cousin married owns a stationery shop in Shenzhen. I like this kind of man. I want to find a man with his own enterprise [*wo xiangzhao yige youshiyede nanren*].

⁷⁰ A town name in the Shenzhen SEZ.

She also hopes the man she will marry is mature because this can partly guarantee that he will know how to take care of her. Maturity is not the result of education. Fond-String explained:

If he didn't have a good educational background, it wouldn't matter. I don't pay lots attention to that criterion. It would be good enough if he graduated from senior high school. If he had only graduated from junior high school, he had better have done *dagong* [worked for a salary] in the city for several years. The experience would make him more mature.

Personality is a concern too. She wants him to have a sense of humour and a mild temper because such a man will make her happy and treat her tenderly and considerately. She didn't want a well-educated match, because if a man thinks about everything in a more complicated way than her, she can foresee they will not be able to talk to each other (*ta xinsi taizhong – wo genta liaobushanghua*). She does not care if the man is handsome but she would enquire about his family background. If his family background sounds too poor, she would eliminate him from her list of candidates. She said, 'It's horrible for me if I have to live in the mountains. I heard there were snakes creeping into the room at midnight.' She never doubted she would belong to her husband's family after marriage and live with them. Ambitious in career, mature enough to know how to take care of her, tender in personality, if the man she married had all these criteria it would – at least to some extent – guarantee that her life in the future will be fine.

In setting the criteria for her desired match, a young migrant worker is portraying her hopes for her future life. However because her future life is not really under her own control, to reduce the risks she has to be very cautious in 'finding a good match', (*zhaoge haoduixiang*), just as the women in her mother's or grandmother's generations did – but especially in the risky environment of the city. Compared to the ability to provide an ideal future life, love, romance and joy are really secondary concerns in a marriage. Migrant young women never seemed to think an ideal future life could be created by themselves without being bound to a man.

In order to understand this it is useful to return again to the question of how in China being becoming *duli* (independent) may have a very different meaning from its sense in

an individualistic society like the UK or the USA. A collectivist society does not value independence and autonomy for their own sake, especially if that means being single too long. To stay single violates the ideal of the fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other and the emphasis on attending to others, fitting in, and having a harmonious interdependence with them (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In such a collectivist society, the house and family in it are aligned in a 'a political and moral continuum with community and state' (Bray 1997). Putting this a slightly different way, it has been suggested that Chinese families are traditionally like enterprises and thus emphasised 'order and efficiency' rather than privacy and separateness (Fei 1992; Yan 2003: 108,136). However, as Yan argues, after the 1990s and 'the rise of the private family' has become an ideal (2003: 218–23). This means, first, that 'conjugal independence [from wider kin networks] had become an accepted (Yan 2003: 109). Second, changes to living arrangements have been accompanied by a greater stress on privacy and private life (Yan 2003: 112–39). The net effect is that there is more emphasis on the importance of 'family harmony' and wives having a greater say in family affairs (Yan 2003: 98–102); overall there is more equality in gender relationships (Yan 2003: 210–12). Living in the era of 'the rise of the private family', getting married and forming a separate family offers Chinese people, especially women, a kind of moral refuge. If they remain single women, they will be judged in various ways: 'No one wants to marry you because you're not good enough', 'If you keep behaving like this, you won't be able to get married' etc – as I have explained above. After getting married, Chinese women are largely free from this kind of moral judgement. No matter what she does, a married woman today can fight back by saying, 'This is my own business.' Although East-Sea and Duckweed do not think Silver fits the image of a good woman, they said 'That's their family's business. If her husband feels that's all right, then that's fine [*tamenhaojiuhao*].'

Although to be independent (*duli*) is supposedly their main goal on this *dagong* journey, young female workers are not ashamed to be dependent on men. For young female workers, being independent has a different meaning from being self-supporting and certainly does not imply being single. In fact, it means 'to find a perfect match', get married to him and, in this way, they (man plus woman) are (both) able to 'be independent from their parents' families'. If a woman cannot find a man to marry and

has to remain in her parent's family/her natal family, that is a matter of shame. They will never be independent 'from their natal family'. Thus, something interesting has happened. Today, while the rights of women have greatly increased, single women are still discriminated against in moral judgements. Therefore female migrant workers gain real freedom only through getting married. For *dagongmei*, the *duli* (independence) they long for is 'conjugal independence' (to use Yan's term) rather than 'individual independence' as in the Western concept.

Time is limited for female migrant workers, they say. This results from two facts. First, their marriageable age range is limited. Secondly, the period they will stay in the big city is also limited. Fond-String is only 23 years old but she told me, 'I am old. I feel I am really old.' This is primarily because her age, 23, is on the edge of what many people consider a marriageable age. Meanwhile Art, the 26-year-old unmarried woman mentioned above, is regarded as *daling* (old). She was told by her male subordinate, Peace, that, 'At our age, we have time to pick and choose a perfect match. At your age, anyone should be OK to marry.' However, while a 26-year-old woman is 'too old' in the marriage market, a 17-year-old girl is felt to be 'too young' to have a relationship. One month after Admiring (a 17-year-old girl) decided to be together with Navigate, she was asked to return home immediately because her relatives and parents felt it was inappropriate at her age. However, Fly had had a girlfriend since he was 17, when he left home for the factory. He said that no one had told him this kind of thing was inappropriate: on the contrary, people teased him that he looked more mature after having a girlfriend. In brief: compared to young men, young women's marriageable age comes later and ends earlier.

Meanwhile, to summarise earlier chapters, the city in which these young people *dagong* (work as migrant labourers) is likely to be a stopping point rather than a destination. They are there only temporarily. 'I will go home in two or three years,' Fond-String said. They want to see the world, to learn 'how to be a proper person' (*zuoren*) and to earn some money during their stay in the city. Eventually, they will go back to their home town. Fond-String said, 'Before I go back home, I really want to find a boyfriend as I originally planned [*wobenlai xiangzhaoge nanyou zai hui jia*].' They are fully aware that the period they stay in the city is the best time to meet men

from different backgrounds and see interesting things from all over the world. If they are lucky enough, they can change their life overnight by getting married.

Even though they have ‘the right to control their own marriages’ (*hunyin zizhuquan*), it is not such an easy thing for these young women ‘to find a good match’. Their parents (typically living in distant provinces) cannot give them support even if they want to, so young women face the situation more or less alone. They feel pressurised, scared and anxious. Fond-String said on the phone, ‘I am very afraid to find a match outside my home town. Sometimes I feel lost and confused.’ However, no matter how many troubles may be brought by marriage, no matter how difficult it is to find a good match, and no matter how brave a young woman has to be to face the risks and consequences alone in this process, she almost never, in my experience, simply refuses to get married (e.g. think of other possibilities, like stay single). Giving up marriage means giving up adulthood, ‘femininity’, and a big chance to achieve what they want.

CONCLUSION

Today, it cannot be said that female migrant workers are the victims of their marriages as were women in previous generations. They are bound up in the ‘romantic revolution’ happening in the context of China’s ‘economic openness’. However, it seems that rural peasants/workers are in an even more disadvantaged position than ever in the marriage market after the so-called ‘romantic revolution’. In addition, the more they understand what a love marriage can do for their life, the less motivation they have to resist pre-existing gender roles or to stay single. Women devote much energy to fit themselves into the image of the ideal female spouse of the romantic love model in order to gain exclusive rights and freedoms that are not available to single women or lesbians. Once Chinese women gained ‘the right to control their own marriages’ (*hunyin zizhuquan*), it has arguably become harder for them to act collectively to resist patriarchy (as some traditional ‘marriage resisters’ did in the past). Although gender inequality still exists, the ‘joyful feeling (or say, ideology) of free choice’ makes this opaque.

Women in this situation do not show solidarity with each other and even tend to turn against each other. To stay single is judged by others as an immature choice, also indicating a lack of femininity. Unless they marry, female migrant workers will never

transform their social status into that of an adult woman; nor will they fit into the corresponding (new) moral role – and social status – associated with the rise of romantic love. At the same time, the right of a single woman to claim to the status of woman is also weakened. In short, the marriage of a female migrant worker will still greatly determine her rights, responsibilities and identity for the rest of her life. Much will depend upon the ‘quality’ of her husband, which will determine how her own femininity is judged. Even though the new courtship and marriage practices allow women to renegotiate their gender identities (Lee 1998: 130), thus arguably making them increasingly powerful (Yan 2003), the bargaining power of young women is inevitably reduced by their urgent need to gain adulthood, femininity and a promising future – through a man.

Conclusion

Before turning to the main themes of my Conclusion, I want to start with a few comments about a comparison that struck me during the course of my fieldwork: between the majority of Chinese migrants working in the SEZ, who came from mainland China, and the minority who came from Taiwan. The experience of the Taiwanese migrants was, in some respects, radically different from that of migrant workers from rural villages in mainland China. Briefly exploring these contrasts helps raise important questions concerning the migration phenomenon in general.

Most Taiwanese, and perhaps especially Taiwanese women, did not see migrating to work in the SEZ as the start of a colourful life or the opening up of boundless possibilities for a bright future. On the contrary, at least as some of them saw it, to work in the SEZ was like being in a prison. In common with other migrants, Taiwanese in the SEZ were not given full citizenship rights or a proper sense of belonging. But, unlike the rural mainlander, they did not imagine that some kind of ‘modern’ life was waiting for them there – indeed, they often saw the SEZ as being backward in terms of its stage of development. Life for them there was actually sometimes unbearable. Some of them told me that, were it not for the sake of their job (i.e. because their Taiwan-based employer had moved to mainland China or had expanded there) and/or for the money (because they could get a higher salary in China than in Taiwan), they definitely would not have come. The dangerous and untrustworthy environment of the SEZ, they said, made them fearful in regard to many aspects of everyday life. They felt bored in the factory compound but did not dare to walk outside of it (normally they asked drivers to take them if they really need to go out). Lacking durable personal networks within the SEZ, social activities were more or less ruled out for them. Taiwanese generally considered their lives suspended here – by contrast with the young migrant workers from the mainland who believed that working in the SEZ was to be the start of their new lives.

Unlike young female workers from the PRC, Taiwanese women had no expectation that they would meet someone in the SEZ and get married to them. Their best chances for marriage were in Taiwan, as they saw it, and so they needed to wait until they were

back there before this matter could be dealt with. Therefore, going to the SEZ to work was normally recognised as the last thing that a single Taiwanese women would want to do. Even for married women, the decision to move there might lead to guilt and blame. If they left their husband and children behind in Taiwan, as was done by Orchid, a manager I met in Kunshan, they would blame themselves all the time because they had not shouldered the responsibility of taking care of their family and devoted too much energy to work. Orchid told me that she worried that other people would take this as a sign of her selfishness. Normally, to keep and compensate their Taiwanese employees, and retain their services, the factory would offer them return flight tickets to Taiwan twice a year. In short, for female Taiwanese workers, single and married, to work in the SEZ was generally regarded as a postponement of their future life and as causing damage to their current life.

By contrast, as I have described in this dissertation, for most young migrant workers from rural areas of China there was a taken for granted link between ‘migrating out’ and the possibility of achieving social mobility. They were expecting their new life to begin through migration. The contrast between their hopes and the tough realities they inevitably had to face was the main theme of the migrant journey as a whole. In this journey, young migrant workers were experiencing/learning the realities. As they tried to seize the slim opportunities actually afforded them, they had to make difficult decisions and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This was the very first time they had experienced ‘marketised China’ and the neoliberal economic setting of the SEZs. Not only was their position very different from that of Taiwanese migrants, it was also very different from that of young elite Chinese born in big cities and going to the top universities *and* from that of young peasants who have not had the experience of leaving home filled with hope.

The second thing I observed in relation to female Taiwanese migrants was their tendency to turn back to traditions, as it were, in the SEZ, rather than embracing the modern. In some cases, their migration was connected to a marital crisis because their husbands had moved to China without them. Mother Zhu, my host in Kunshan, had been, in effect, forced to come to live in Kunshan with her husband and son in order to save her marriage. Her son had suddenly told her that his father, her husband, for

several years had had a young mistress whom he had met in a nightclub.⁷¹ Mother Zhu came to China reluctantly: she had to sacrifice what she saw as a wonderful life in Taipei – including opportunities to visit with relatives and friends, having a successful career in a big company, going mountain climbing with colleagues, taking dance classes where her performance was admired (not least by men in the class) etc. All this she was willing to give up to save a marriage that, in the end, probably could not be rescued. Her husband himself had insisted on keeping the marriage going but also had to admit that the love between them had gone. Mother Zhu, having arrived in China, asked to meet the mistress. After talking to her, she recognised (as she herself put it to me) that she was less clever than this young woman from the mainland, who was almost 30 years younger but who apparently knew how to seize a man's heart by, seemingly, offering her innocent, tender submission.

This event almost destroyed Mother Zhu's faith in her own understanding of how to be a good wife. When Mr. Zhu left for China, she had been afraid to be left in charge of the household alone. She had struggled to live life by herself and take care of her children without her husband. Twenty years later, she (in common with many other Taiwanese women) was proud of her achievements: she knew how to arrange her life in Taipei independently and to live without a man. Her daughter performs well at school. When her husband came back to Taipei, she could show him around and introduce people to him. She said, 'After leaving Taipei for 20 years, he knows nothing about Taipei. He can only smile when I introduce him to other friends.' But now, she was losing her husband's heart seemingly *because of* all the achievements she has accomplished in sustaining a life in Taipei. All that she used to be proud of had now become a kind of sin that her husband and his colleagues had convicted her of: that is, of being too independent. Mother Zhu sighed when talking about her fate: she used to be a tender, naive and submissive wife. Her husband asked her to be independent when he decided to go to China. She had struggled to meet this standard – but when she

⁷¹ The son decided to warn his mother when he reckoned the situation was getting serious and might lead to a big disaster in his family when he learned that his father had recently bought the mistress an apartment and that they were calling each other husband (*laogong*) and wife (*laopo*).

finally achieved it, suddenly her husband blamed her for not being submissive and tender enough to be his good wife. No matter whether she was being submissive or being tough, the same respect was involved. In either case, she could be said to be following her husband's wishes.

When Mother Zhu came to Kunshan, she started to learn again how to be a submissive housewife, going to the market in the early morning, cooking every meal for her family, walking the family dogs when her husbands and sons went off to work in the factories, paying attention to her husband's wants and devoting all her time to family affairs. While she saw all these activities as in fact rather boring and difficult to bear, she said, 'Do I have any choice? The women in mainland China are very formidable [*lihai*]!' Mother Zhu told me, 'Be careful. Don't study too hard. Don't believe those who tell you that you will become free through study. A good marriage is the only truth for women.'

The case of Mother Zhu and other Taiwanese migrants leads me to ask two questions in relation to migration in China more generally. First, how much does the original social status of migrants and the specific social contexts of their migration make a difference to the experience of the migrant journey? Certainly, the people I met worked and lived in the same factories but they experienced life in the SEZ very differently. Taiwanese migrants in the SEZ in fact enjoyed better conditions of life and work, at least in a material sense. They had better accommodation and a higher quality canteen. However, compared with their life in Taiwan, it was perceived as just not good enough. Social discourse in Taiwan does not provide many positive narratives about migrating to work in mainland China. Taiwanese people either pity those migrating, if they are waged employees, or denounces them as money-chasers, if they are factory owners. The contrast with young workers from the Chinese countryside was very striking: their original background and the social discourse around them made them perceive their journey as 'the way to reach the modern world'. Although the tap water in the SEZ was always slightly yellow and has a strong metallic smell, it was still running water, and better than the underground water found in many rural villages. These young people might find the reality to be far from the one portrayed by the mass media but the social

atmosphere and social discourse around them encouraged them to keep the faith, to keep the illusion, and to carry on.

Second, what do traditions (especially traditions related to gender roles) mean to Chinese women – be they from Taiwanese or rural mainland Chinese backgrounds – in the context of a radically transformed economic landscape? Why is it that traditional gender roles appear, at least in some cases, to be re-embraced – even by prototypically ‘modernity-oriented’ Taiwanese – in spite of a context in which people are encouraged to be as modern and cosmopolitan as possible? By being (or at least acting) ‘less independent’ than a Taiwanese wife, a young female migrant – working, for example, in a night club – might earn a new apartment and a man’s heart (thereby achieving the goals of social mobility to some extent). So how did women in this specific context perceive/react to traditional and modern discourses about gender?

These two questions may be linked back to the question I proposed at the beginning of the dissertation. There I asked how young migrant workers take decisions as they try to achieve their hopes and desires for modernity through migrating out. I asked why Chinese migrant workers seemed to prefer to position themselves between modern and traditional personhood, rather than just fully embracing modernity. This is puzzling, given that their dream, or so it seems, was to have a more individualistic personhood, something that both the party-state and the social discourses around them actively encouraged. So, the question arising here is: why – and in which situations – did they actively decide to adopt a traditional personhood instead?

LIMINAL SUBJECTIVITY: ALIENATION, RESISTANCE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

In the previous chapters, I have examined the question of how young migrant workers become more individualistic in order to fit into China’s version of capitalism – to the extent that they actually do. I have observed their decisions in relation to gaining adulthood and, more specifically, in relation to sorting out their careers and sorting out their marriages. When it came to their careers, I found that young migrant workers did not respect the power of rules and regulations: they respected the power of people. They were not anti-authority, in my experience. Their job hopping decisions did not

show, as might be presumed, that they were keen to take part in market competition as such. On the contrary, they were keen to cooperate with power holders. When it came to marriage, I found they were not really free to choose their own spouses, in spite of the discourse that suggests they were. In practice, social expectations and gender roles hugely influenced their decisions in this matter of 'free choice'. Whether concerning career or marriage, the whole migration process did not seem to make them anti-authority or keen to take part in job market competition or ready to give up fixed social expectations concerning social roles in order to try to reach their true selves. Why not? Why did modernity not bring full individualisation to young migrant workers, as we might expect it to do?

As discussed in the Introduction, previous research provides two general perspectives on this phenomenon. From a 'migration/multilocality' perspective, the decision of migrants to position themselves *between* neoliberal personhood and traditional personhood may be seen as a matter of choice, a way of managing risk. From a 'class/quality' perspective, migrant workers do not exhibit full individualisation mainly because their relatively low social position leads to them encountering too many obstacles to reach the required degree of development. Thus we are faced with alternative explanations: are migrant workers deliberately positioning themselves in between neoliberal personhood and traditional personhood for the purposes of better risk management and access to resources, as the migration/multilocality perspective suggests, or are they struggling to achieve what they want (i.e. to be free from traditions and develop their individuality) but are prevented from doing so, as the class/quality perspective suggests?

From a class/quality perspective, young migrant workers' wish to be individualistic might be seen as fitting perfectly with the goals of management and transnational capitalism seeking to incorporate their 'recalcitrant' bodies into factory regimes of 'modern disciplinary power' (Pun 2005: 80). Pun's ethnography describes how Chinese workers were imagined by way of contrast with Hong Kong workers who – as 'capitalist subjects' – were 'disciplined, productive, and profit minded, and who possessed rational economic sense rather than political consciousness' (Pun 2005: 80). Therefore, the first thing the managers in the factory try to do, in relation to Chinese

workers, is to change their ‘red’ and ‘lazy’ socialist bodies, imbued with ‘peasantness’, into capitalist beings, i.e. into persons ‘born to be individualistic, competitive, hard working, and, most important of all, achievement oriented and therefore self-disciplined’ (Pun 2005: 80).

At the same time, the class/quality perspective draws our attention to the forms of resistance young migrant workers may adopt to fight back against disciplinary factory regimes. Pun discusses how the creation, reproduction and use of various interpersonal connections, like kinship networks, friendships and *laoxiang* networks, may be seen as playing a part in this kind of resistance, characterising them as ‘forms of intensive intimacy and solidarity that, by building bonds among workers, interfere with management control over workers’ lives on the shop floor and in the dormitories’ (Pun 2007: 253).⁷²

One factor in generating resistance may be the gap between how young migrants imagine individualism (as freedom, autonomy or individual development) and the ‘individualism’ that they experience in the factory through being a worker. As Pun describes, ‘The process of entering the factory at the beginning was a process of individuating the self, letting the individual realise that it had recourse to nobody but the self’ (2005: 9), commenting that ‘aloneness was an overwhelming theme’ of young *dagongmei* (2005: 9). Individualism as experienced seems more strongly linked, in fact, to processes of alienation and differentiation, as Carrier (1992) argues.

Carrier brings a Maussian approach to personhood to a ‘Marxian’ account of capitalist industrial production. In a context in which economic relationships dominate other relationships, he asks how alienation, ‘the sense of separation’ between persons and things and persons and other persons (Carrier 1992: 540), affects the ways in which people perceive and understand themselves, others and the environment around them. With industrialisation, as Parry puts it, ‘economic relationships become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationships’ (Parry 1986: 466).

Correspondingly, for Carrier, industrial capitalist society is characterised by an

⁷² Yet, she cautions, this should not be taken too simplistically as they also, in other ways benefit industrial capital. See below for further discussion.

expansion of impersonal relationships while interpersonal relationships are squeezed so that they exist only (or primarily) at home.

... the Maussian approach suggests that growing alienation in production is part of the broader differentiation of life into more 'purely' economic and more 'purely' social aspects. As a result of this differentiation, people come to conceive of themselves and their environs in two distinct ways. In one way, objects as well as other persons are separated from the self and are conceptualised in terms of abstract and impersonal frameworks and forces (such as utility, unit cost, sign value and 'the market'). In the other conception, objects and other persons are not so separated, and are conceptualised in terms of their relationships to the self and to personal forces (such as kinship, affection and obligation). (Carrier 1992: 541)

Impersonal relationships, associated with work and the economic sphere, involve a 'peripheral self' – the classic atomic individual separated off from pre-existing relationships and free to enter into contractual agreements (Barnett and Silverman 1979: 51). In the workplace personal identities are established in relation to 'one's performance at specific transient tasks' (Carrier 1992: 551). Following the logic of commodities, people experience themselves and perceive others 'not relationally but autonomously, as independent individuals' who are evaluated and utilised by employers (Carrier 1992: 552).

Thus, ironically, the 'independent individual' of western ideology in this environment is powerless and isolated. In the factory, workers have less control over production as they are seen as only a provider of labour power (Carrier 1992: 551). Although individuals in modern industrial society are believed to be endowed with a 'unique self' (Mauss 1985), in the workplace they are, paradoxically, substitutable: somebody else 'could come in "off the street" and do their job' (Carrier 1992: 552).

However, what we see in industrial capitalist society does not totally follow the logic of commodities. The 'core self' and durable relationships still subsist. 'The core is made up of "things which people believe to be real things, which are in an important sense thought to be internal to the individual or continuous with the individual as a concrete being"' (Carrier 1992: 551, quoting Barnett and Silverman 1979: 51).

However, what is especially interesting is that the core self and durable relationships

are not merely confined to the home and private relationships. Rather, workers tend to 'colonise' the impersonal world of work to make impersonality endurable. Carrier cites Granovetter's explorations of the way economic relations between individuals are embedded in social relations rather than acting autonomously as in the idealised market. Relations between people in the workplace:

... are not in fact alienated and impersonal, each rationally calculating how to use the other to best advantage. Instead, over the course of time these relations frequently 'become overlaid with social content that carries strong expectations of trust and abstention from opportunism'. (Carrier 1992: 541, quoting Granovetter 1985: 490)

Furthermore, people will even transform objects into a symbolically less alienated form and endow them with social identity and relations (Carrier 1992: 553). For example, workers in factories may speak of their 'love' for 'their' machines and tools (Beaglehole 1932: 132).

This picture seems to fit very well with the situation faced by young Chinese migrant workers after economic reform. Their dream of western style individualism in reality translates into alienation and impersonal relations in the factory, where they can no longer 'define [themselves] in terms of the link with their co-workers and their tasks' (Carrier 1992: 547). While the modern factory offers them the feeling of being 'independent entities' (Carrier 1992), it actually brings them an identity crisis. It becomes a problem they need to find a way to overcome. Their response is to 'colonise' the workplace with interpersonal networks built up through traditional logics and practices – as a kind of resistance to capitalism and, in Pun's terms, capitalist disciplinary control. At the same time, it is recognised that 'negotiating the boundary between the two realms, respectively personal and impersonal' (Carrier 1992: 553) is not easy to cope with, a cause of considerable tension (Beaglehole 1931). In this sense, a class perspective leads us to see traditional/interconnected personhood, which values interpersonal networks, very much as the means that young migrant workers adopt to fight against capitalist disciplinary control and form a stable identity and durable relationships when individualistic/modern personhood turns out to overlap with alienation in the factory context.

Nonetheless, there are problems with this picture, as my research has shown. It is not merely the lowest-level workers but the supervisors and middle management who engage in these interpersonal relationships and they do so as part of the routine ‘logic’ of factory work relations. Perhaps they too are resisting alienation? Or is this part of factory discipline and capitalist practices?⁷³

In the factory, as I have just been saying, one can argue that the strategies that young migrant workers use are quite traditional: they rely very much on kinship and interpersonal exchange. Although hoping to escape from their original background and context, the young soon adopt a mimicry of rural kinship relationships as the first step to establishing reciprocal relationships with others. For example, they project parent–child relationships onto their relationship with their supervisors. Consequently, they believe that a good supervisor should take care of them like a parent and that they have to please their supervisors like good sons/daughters following the obligations of filial piety. They project sibling relationships onto their relationships with their colleagues. Meanwhile, they believe good relationships between colleagues should involve sharing welfare and responsibilities and cooperating to fight against outsiders. They use this way to get resources when both official policy and market logics exclude them. Examples of strategies they internalise are the maintaining of networks in their home town which could serve as their fallback when they fail in the city; searching for someone to act as their patron in the factory; above all else, their priority is establishing wide and firm reciprocal relationships with people including friends, prospective marriage partners, strangers – in short, establishing or drawing on *guanxi*.

⁷³ Pun has explored these contradictions: ‘These kinship and ethnic networks benefit industrial capital by strengthening the recruitment, the training, and the disciplining of the labour force. ... Management also uses ethnic and kinship networks to intensify labor by organizing women workers along kinship and *tongxiang* (co-villagers) networks.... However, these same networks facilitate migration flows, job searches, and the circulation of work information, and they strengthen workers’ capacity to cope with factory life and the hardships of the city ... Hence contradictions exist Workers and employers both rely on networks that frequently work at cross purposes. There are forms of intensive intimacy and solidarity that, by building bonds among workers, interfere with management’s control over workers’ lives on the shop floor and in the dormitories. Workers also participate in localised dormitory networks that generate intensive information exchanges about external job opportunities and thereby create and strengthen workers’ mobility power’ (Pun 2007: 253–54).

When migrant workers call each other *xiongdi* (brothers) or call an elder male supervisor *shu* (uncle), it not only expresses their desire to establish relationships through courteous rhetoric but also transplants the whole set of implicit unspoken contractual obligations, rights and duties from household to the working environment and practices in their everyday life. For example, if I am your good *xiongdi*, once I get some resources, I am obliged to share them with you. If I am your uncle, I shoulder the responsibility to take care of you, resolve your problems and promote you by special consideration. Meanwhile, you should serve me like my niece or nephew. You will run the errands for me without any complaints in exchange. You should support me and be my ally if something goes wrong. The moral standard of reciprocal obligations, modes of cooperation and resource distributions embedded in the household system are therefore transplanted into the factory, as the strategy to grab the resources official formal mechanisms exclude them from.

The focus of young migrants on interpersonal networks and the will they show to fulfil customary expectations is, in my view, an informal way in which they mobilise resources from their rural home towns. They have figured out that this is an efficient way to ‘grab’ resources they are not entitled to (such as the social security from which they are excluded by the *hukou* system) and to reduce the risks of pursuing their big dreams. And, just as they mobilise interpersonal resources as redistributive mechanisms in the workplace, young migrant workers mobilise techniques of individualism back in their home towns. When they return home from the SEZ, they assert their rights by reference to the ideology of individualism as they have *imagined* fulfilling it.

From a migration/multilocality perspective, the possibilities created through mobility allows us to see how young migrant workers are able to shift between different personhoods and to perform differently in different social contexts, in the factory and in the home town, in order to achieve what they want. Surprisingly, although they migrate to the city with the dream of becoming individualistic, they end up learning more about being collectivist (or perhaps ‘collaborative’) while they are there. They leave their home towns to get rid of being collectivist (or collaborative) but eventually they are able to act very ‘individualistically’ when at home.

These two perspectives on migration are useful in various respects but incomplete for two reasons. First, the class/quality perspective does not apply unproblematically to, for example, the THS context because this is not a ‘capitalist’ factory in the strict sense. As I have pointed out, the wages and bonuses there are only loosely tied to work performance. They are instead bound to loyalty and affection. In this sense, the factory does not distinguish the impersonal sphere and the personal sphere very strictly, something which is the premise for the fostering of resistance, from the point of view of class. On the contrary, the managerial system of the factory seems to deliberately blur the boundary of these two spheres. Young migrant workers thus are implicitly ‘taught’ and ‘asked to’ blend the public/impersonal sphere with the private/personal sphere and vice versa. What kind of self is produced as a result of this? Secondly, the migration/multilocality perspective must deal with the fact that young migrant workers are not really in a position to be fully strategic – by which I mean that their ‘strategies’ are highly constrained by the power/hierarchical relations they operate within and by the absence of a legal status to match their ‘individualist’ fantasies. The migration/multilocality perspective, with its emphasis on migrants as social agents choosing to frame their own path, may obscure our awareness of the constraints and difficulties they confront.

In order to move beyond these approaches, I have approached migration for work as a rite of passage, arguing that young migrants from the countryside are effectively suspended in a liminal stage and therefore have what could be called a liminal subjectivity. They are caught in an in-between location (between rural and urban settings), an in-between status (between peasants and workers) and an in-between stage of the life course (between childhood and adulthood). They must cope with multiple layers of co-existing values (the values of marketised China versus the values of socialist China; values of individualism versus values of collectivism; values of urban setting versus values of rural setting; values of ideal childhood versus values of ideal adulthood). The juxtapositions between these ways of being and ways of thinking create uncertainty, fluidity and ambiguity, which sometimes give young people hope but sometimes leads them to a dead end. The liminal selves new generation migrant worker form can be said to be both the outcome of the confusion of life in such a

situation but also, in fact, the best strategy for them when it comes to handling their ambiguous situation.

LIMINALITY AND GENDER

Now I want to turn more specifically to the question of Chinese gender against the background of China's newly marketised economic system. Interrogating the two perspectives of class/quality and migration/multilocality from the point of view of gender, we shall see that the fact of being 'stuck in the liminal stage of femininity' is a crucial factor vis-à-vis the subjectivity of the young women I met.

From a class/quality perspective, the workplace may be understood as a context in which gendering happens in relation to the system of power (Lee 1998: 23, 27): through management measures, female workers are constructed to have a 'coherent and unified identity', such as that of being *dagongmei* (working daughters), in order to fit in with the best interests of transnational capitalism (Pun 2005: 134). This system largely overlooks the fact that female migrant workers are differentiated 'along lines of class, locality, family, age, and stage of lifecycle' (Pun 2005: 134) and tries to turn their bodies into 'docile labour', through the use of gendered managerial methods (Pun 2005: 144). In short, power relations are not only class-based but also gender-prescriptive (Lee 1998: 23). Femininity and masculinity as defined by gender ideologies are 'manipulated by management to facilitate control of ... workers' (Lee 1998: 27; Pun 2005: 144).

Individualism, again, for migrant female workers, is intertwined largely with the differentiated environment and alienation of the workplace. Capitalism and patriarchal ideologies cooperate to shape women as submissive and easily controllable workers. Women in the workplace feel a double dominance, not emancipation. Therefore, it is not surprising that female factory workers often dream 'of marriage and of returning home when they [tire] of wage labour' (Pun 2005: 135). Once female migrant workers weigh up the situation and see that changing to a 'new life' does not, in fact, bring them better status, they would often rather stick with traditional gender roles (Knorr and Meier 2000): to be a submissive wife and provide for their husbands.

The migration/multilocality perspective pays less attention to control and resistance as the reason women reject ‘modern gendered selves’, and focuses on processes of negotiation and compromise. Migration is adopted as a means by which rural Chinese women reconcile their desires to be modern women and their household responsibilities (as I discussed in the Introduction). A key question then arises: does migration, as a negotiation process, change women’s personhood?

At first glance it seems that it does. Unlike marriage, labour migration – which offers women an individual wage and brings women into the public sphere – is assumed to give women considerable power, not least through allowing them to negotiate their new status. Silk is an example of this. She seemingly held power in her natal family, even over her parents and grandmother.

Moreover, when seen from the perspective of gender, migration is not only an attempt to move from the margins to the centre (Jacka 2006: 5) but also an attempt to escape from the control of the patriarchal system (Jacka 2006: 7). The SEZ is generally believed to be able to offer unmarried migrant female workers more opportunities to meet a tender, romantic but ambitious and successful husband and then to ‘marry up’. That this fantasy can be successfully constructed is partly because of the uneven pace of development between cities and rural villages. Migration for some rural youth is the way to overcome this gap (Jacka 2006). In rural women’s minds, the SEZ is imagined as a paradise representing the wonderful modern life, which encompasses more gender equality, and this idea circulates from person to person. Through out-migration, women glimpse an escape from the unendurable gender inequality, oppression and even violence of life prospects in their home towns. Out-migration even has an effect in reducing rural women’s suicide rate, according to some reports (Lee and Kleinman 2000: 224–34). As discussed in Chapter 5, for female migrant workers, to find a marriage prospect in the SEZ means they are in effect practising love marriage, which is seen as more modern than arranged marriage.

However, the fantasy does not last long. We might expect working in the public sphere, as female migrant workers are doing, would make them ‘free from oppression’, as Rosaldo’s (1974) theory suggests. She represents the view that women are subordinate because they are agents of reproduction and occupy only the domestic sphere, i.e. they

are excluded from the public sphere (Rosaldo 1974: 17–42). Therefore, in principle, it should raise women's status if they start to participate in production. However, according to much previous research, this assumption is simplistic. Even though women take part in work, they are still treated unequally in the division of labour in the workplace and also in family relationships. Ultimately, participation in the public sphere of work may simply mean that women suffer a double burden as women, in effect, 'postpone' their liberation (Wolf 1985). In addition, when women participate in work, it is often for the economic benefit of their family or of society in general, and when unemployment rates are high they often are the first to lose their jobs. So it is hard to take outside employment, as such, as an index of the liberation of women (Jacka 2006: 38).

To put it simply: gender inequality in the settings of the coastal SEZs is, in some respects, little different from that found in rural villages. People in both places share more or less the same gender ideology frame, which embodies particular power relationships (Jacka 2006: 13). Apart from factory managers using patriarchal ideologies to manage female workers, urbanites also use pre-existing gender stereotypes to present the urban woman as modern by constructing the rural woman as 'other'. For example, female peasants are said to have the lowest *suzhi* (quality) (Jacka 2006: 41). Because of their ignorance of city life, female migrant workers easily become victims while female urbanites are supposedly smart and know how to protect themselves (Evans 1997: 172). After moving to the city, and working in the factory, which is far away from Shenzhen city, female workers experienced 'essential differences' between locals and migrants, male and female, as constructed by the elite.⁷⁴ No longer rural women, yet excluded from the category of city women – indeed constructed as everything an urban woman is not – migrant women occupy a non-position: they are 'abject' (as Jacka (2006: 13) argues, drawing on Judith Butler's use

⁷⁴ As Cohen points out, 'the notion of the peasantry as a culturally distinct and alien "other", passive, helpless, unenlightened, in the grip of ugly and fundamentally useless customs, desperately in need of education and cultural reform, and for such improvements in their circumstances totally dependent on the leadership and efforts of rational and informed outsiders, became fixed in the outlook of China's modern intellectual and political elites' (1993: 155).

of the concept) in relation to the available categories of gendered selves. Thus the premise of 'essential differences', i.e. the gendered version of rural–urban, excludes female migrants from participating in the emancipated gender ideology. Coming to the city as the place of modern freedom and equality, they find that they are deemed incapable of – even undeserving of – emancipation because of their essentially low *suzhi* (quality).

But perhaps the most depressing thing that the migration/multilocality perspective draws attention to is the fact that returning women (i.e. women who go back to the countryside) will often encounter serious problems. Women's mobility causes the stable gender structure in rural villages to be challenged (Jacka 2006: 8). When rural men face a masculinity crisis because their wife can earn money and work like them, they may beat them in order to show the wife their power and re-claim their masculinity (Jacka 2006: 191). Research shows high rates of mental illness and suicide among returnees (Murphy 2004a: 265). Before rural women went to the city, they could still imagine the possibility of better circumstances. When they return, their only hope of escape has collapsed, leading to despair.

My research suggests that young rural women's increased bargaining power, e.g. Silk's vis-à-vis her natal family, relates more to the changing power structure between young and old than a changing power structure between men and women. Therefore, we see Silk as definitely powerful in front of her mother but still failing to demonstrate her power in front of her brother. As an unmarried daughter, she still suffered from being powerless in many respects. The shared gender roles and ideologies across the urban and rural settings ensures this so, and migrating to the city does not, in this sense, change anything.

In general, the migration/multilocality perspective suggests that the opportunities, resources and benefits for migrants come from mobilizing the differences between the places from which they come and those in which they live and work. However, when the host place and native place practices what is, in effect, a very similar gender ideology and power structures, mobility will not bring female migrants more choices. Whether they adhere to their traditional gendered selves or try to be modern gendered

selves, they merely play out the dominated fate of ‘rural women’ or ‘female migrant workers’.

According to my research, however, there are still some phenomena that neither of these two general perspectives can explain. In the end both the class and the migration perspectives fail to give enough recognition of women’s active control over their lives – both in terms of the future and in terms of their present state of liminality. Both approaches are arguably too quick to assume, when women appear to follow gendered roles, that this automatically means that inequality and submission are being perpetuated. I will therefore now explain how women take active control, even if – seemingly paradoxically – the only way they can do so is by reproducing ‘traditional’ gender roles and ideology.

The female migrant workers I met in the THS factory, although they did feel worn out with their routine jobs and constantly complained about this, cannot be categorised as powerless victims. They actually stand a chance, in principle, to challenge gender inequality and emancipate themselves from traditional gender roles because they hold bargaining power as a result of the sacrifices they have made for their families and in order to have a career. However, they often choose not to change the gender structure and adopt the traditional roles because, ironically, they believe it offers them more opportunities for agency. In what follows, I want to explain this in relation to three things: 1) the notion of having a *haoming* (a good life); 2) the idea that having a good husband matters more than living in a good system; and 3) a systemic blindness towards the link between femininity and power relations because of the widely held belief in unchangeable (essential) differences between men and women.

The folk Chinese concept of *haoming* (a good life), especially for women, is fundamentally contradictory to what individualism promotes. To have a (strong and successful) husband to rely on is seen, in this view, as the best destiny women can have. Only poor women, whose husbands are incapable of providing for them, have to ‘be independent’ and ‘be in charge of everything’. Paradoxically, in such a value system, being dependent becomes the *privilege* of upper-class women. Only working class women and women with a poor destiny need to ‘be independent’ and ‘take responsibility’ via ‘being competitive’. They are the objects of sympathy by other

people. Therefore, women would rather stick to traditional roles and ‘pretend’ that they are weak and incapable. For them, modern gendered selves are puzzling and hard to accept (for example, many migrant female workers emphasised to me they did not want to be *nu qiangren* – a strong, powerful woman). Today, the situation of female migrant workers lets us see clearly that women are choosing to rely on men but this is not because they are incapable of supporting themselves. To be reliant on a man is, in effect, equated with happiness for women. It is the opposite of emancipation, in effect. But women only want to rely on men who are better (in terms of social status and financial situation) than them. Therefore, the boys in rural villages are at considerable risk of not finding a woman who will marry them. They are reckoned by rural girls to be not good enough to rely on because what they can do the rural girls can also do. Girls still want to find a stronger and more successful husband to whom they are willing to submit and be his traditional wife. For example, Cloud is envied by most of the girls in her factory because she married Light, the factory director, and also recognised as the most handsome man there. Their marriage is a ‘love marriage’, one could say. But every time Light and Cloud go out together, Light is always five steps ahead and leads Cloud to wherever he wants to go. When Cloud describes this, she says it with sweetness because it shows, as she sees it, Light’s masculinity.

Silk, as I have noted, is determined to find a powerful husband and marry up, which is the best strategy, as she sees it, for her to empower herself. For her, her agency shows in the way that she changes her position in the same power structure rather than seeking to disrupt the current unequal power structure. Rural young women believe that in the SEZ it is highly possible that they will find the kind of husband they are looking for.

People in both the SEZ and rural villages seem equally to believe – partly under the influence of discourses from China’s ‘romantic revolution’ – that a woman should attach herself to a man (rather than living independently) and define femininity in terms of being powerless/submissive before men. These are depictions not only of femininity but, correlatively, of masculinity. Connell (1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), argues that masculinity should not be seen as something ‘guaranteed’ by a patriarchal system but, rather, comes from the dynamics of lived

power relationships between man and women in everyday practice. Further, power itself becomes associated with masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Thus the greater socio-economic power of men in the SEZ, compared to both women and men in rural villages, is taken as making them more masculine. And, just as male urbanite/managers are thus more masculine, so rural–urban power differences make female migrant workers more feminine. It will make beautiful rural girls more desirable than relatively powerful Taiwanese woman (like mother Zhu). This is also the reason why Taiwanese employees seldom seek their marriage prospects here. Rural women, although they stand in a disadvantaged position in many social aspects, stand a better chance of winning in this ‘femininity competition’ than do intellectual women, career women and urban women. In this sense, traditional gender personhood is more attractive than modern gendered personhood.

Jacka argues that there has been ‘a general blindness to the deep, institutionalised imbrication between gender and power in contemporary society’ (2006: 65). She gives the example of patrilocal marriage and the puzzle of why women do not seek to change this despite the fact that it is the cause of ‘discrimination against girls in education and contributes to rural women’s marginalisation in employment and political participation’ (Jacka 2006: 65–66). In my research, I found a similar puzzle. Silk and her fellows do not question why the elder sister cannot inherit the house to which her wages contributed significantly and why daughters must marry out so soon without taking staying single as a realistic option.

Gender theorists have frequently examined the effects of ideologies of family and social roles as ‘natural’, i.e. the way in which it seems quite natural to accept that everyone is born with various ‘differences’ that cannot be argued against on ‘rational’ grounds. Yan argues that ‘the family is a socially necessary illusion about why the social division of obligations and rights is natural and just’ (Yan 2011: 205).

Differences in roles between family members, as ‘given’ by their order of birth, age and gender, are unlikely to be understood as matters of preferences, personality, performance or the intelligence of individual family members. They are taken as ‘given differences’ and, in the rural household context, far more weight is placed on ‘given differences’ than ‘chosen differences’. People believe that they cannot dispute ‘given

differences ‘but can only accept them and cope with the conditions to which they give rise. In this way, these ‘given’ differences’ do determine people’s options in life. Migrant female workers thus seem to take these traditional gender practices as inescapable premises that are not subject to their agency. Indeed, one of the theoretical contributions of feminist anthropology, according to Moore, is to break down the assumed identity between ‘women’ and ‘mother’ (Moore 1988: 12–41, 187). In some cultural constructs the understanding of ‘women’ is dependent on the social roles of ‘mother’, domestic sphere and reproduction – but in some cultures it is not. The association between women and ‘mother’ is not ‘natural’ but instead is culturally constructed (Moore 1988: 25). Similarly with other social roles women possess, such as daughter, sister, and wife: the rights, powers, constraints and status bound to each social role women occupy vary in different cultures, also in different times.

In any case, the reasoning of the female migrant workers I met seems to echo the way that discourses of ‘sexuality and gender frequently construct women and men as different sorts of individuals or persons. These gendered persons embody different principles of agency [active/passive etc]’ (Moore 1994: 50). Hence when Silk and some other workers insist that, although they want to have self-development, they do not want to be *nu qiangren* (a ‘powerful woman’, typically one who is successful in her career) the obvious conclusion to draw would be that that this is because it conflicts with the premise that women are essentially ‘passive, powerless, submissive and receptive’ (Moore 194: 50). In addition, *nu qiangren* means a woman successful in a ‘man’s field’ and so seemingly they are announcing they do not intend to adopt male forms of agency, being ‘active, aggressive, thrusting and powerful’) (Moore 1994: 50) – or, indeed, competitive. Rather, they would rather cooperate with men and influence their decisions indirectly. This reading corresponds with the imbrication of ideas of femininity and masculinity in modes of power explored above, adding the idea that even forms of exercising power are taken as gendered.

These considerations lead to a number of reflections and questions. On the one hand, should we conclude, for example, that when the young women I met thought they were making a rational choice in negotiating as many details as they could about their forthcoming marriage, they were in fact merely passively following prescribed gender

roles? Their actions are, in effect, reinforcing the patriarchal kinship roles that determine their fate by expecting them to marry out and face the inevitable uncertainty this brings. Why do these girls and young women never challenge certain aspects of the kinship system and instead just accept them? Is it simply that they see short-term benefits and ignore the long-term consequences for themselves and later generations of women? Or is it because they are stuck in between two different forms of femininity?

On the other hand, such a picture does itself seem to reproduce the idea of women's agency as passive while, at the same time, maintaining that 'nothing has changed'. As noted above, the experience of migration means at least that rural young women know that 'what they – men – can do, rural girls can also do'. This further suggests that a more instrumental attitude may be in their minds when they decide to pursue a life in line with popular ideas about what 'should' make women happy. Of course this in itself may seem to correspond to certain negative ideas of women, that they are manipulative, for example. Similarly, if women prefer to bend and weaken the male dominant structure – rather than challenging it totally – to get what they want, this is not unlike the strategy of women in traditional China (Wolf 1972; Ahern 1975; Martin 1988; Siu 1990).

It is not proposed to answer these questions here. However, we can see that the same phenomena can look quite different from different viewpoints. On the one hand, gender-specific roles and strategies do not seem to be fading away and being abandoned in the marketised China even though women do have some power to make their own choices. On the other hand, these 'old' forms are being filled with new ideas, serving new ends today, and are evaluated for their efficiency by female migrant workers. Thus gendered personhood is being reproduced but does it have the same significance?

Girl Power? Power relations between women in different social roles

Yan argues that the 'new family ideals based on gender equality', like mate-choice (love marriage) and marriage negotiation by the individuals, are empowering rural young women, making them no any longer outsiders in household affairs, and that

‘their rising power has also been more effective in challenging and changing the existing patriarchal hierarchy’ (Yan 2006a: 120). At the same time, he points to two limitations on young women’s power: 1) it is generally a challenge to the power of their in-laws, not the power of their husbands; 2) ‘girl power’ is precisely that, temporary, associated with youth. Women can, in fact, become even more conservative after they become mothers. But, even with these limitations, he believes ‘girl power as a social phenomenon is still on the rise’ (Yan 2006a: 121).

If the ‘phenomenon of girl power’ is on the rise, this is due to a range of other forces, notably the rise of youth power more generally in China, as well as background factors such as the encouragement to develop a ‘cosmopolitan humanity’ (Rofel 2007: 13) and the promotion of individualism. But behind the phenomenon of ‘girl power’, the possibilities for women to take active control are more or less still constrained and focused on ways of controlling a man, i.e. men remain the node points in power structures – and hence the leverage points for women’s access to power and social and economic benefits.

In order to control a man, women are, in certain relationships, able to control *men’s* access to resources and powers: as when mothers have the power to control their sons, as traditional women did (Wolf 1972) or, today, when women sometimes actively control their husbands. Rather than challenging the unequal structures that condition access to resources and powers by themselves, women are still using informal and indirect ways to access power – as in Silk’s reasoning that she can be compensated for the resources and powers she lost in her natal family from the resources and powers of her future husband. Or we could say that men are still recognised as women’s agents, i.e. the men can be seen to be acting in women’s interests.

Moore’s arguments of 1988 still hold good today. The assumed identity between ‘unmarried women’, ‘bride-to-be’, ‘mother’, ‘wife’, ‘daughter’ need to be broken down. Secondly, as she points out, what makes women subordinate to men is not because women are powerless. In fact, ‘women actually possess and wield a considerable amount of power’ (Moore 1988: 35). Women’s subordination is arguably because women keep on believing in the ‘myth of male dominance’ (quotation from Rogers (1975) in Moore (1988: 35) regardless of their ability to speak out, to make

decisions and to act. This is also true in the Chinese context, a fact that Yan's (2006a) account of 'girl power' seems to overlook. He seems to assume that women in traditional China were totally powerless and excluded as 'outsiders' in the domestic sphere without taking into account the power women gain in informal ways. Evans (2010) has argued that a change is happening: whereas women's informal ways of accessing power were in the past usually invisible and behind the scenes, today the encouragement of 'communicative intimacy', or 'emotional expressivity' (to use Yan's phrase) makes it more explicit and sometimes visible. It is arguable, in other words, that the change happening in terms of the so-called 'rise of girl power' is only making the invisible visible rather than empowering women more. Just as Evans argues, the celebration of communicative intimacy does not 'signify the emergence of more equal family or gender relationships, as recent theories about the individualisation and cultural democratisation of daily life in Western societies have argued' (Evans 2010: 980).

In light of Moore's emphasis on the persistence of the 'myth of male dominance', we might be less optimistic that the new family ideals will see a significant improvement in the power dynamics of gender. As romantic love comes to prevail as an ideal in marketised China, women as wives are enjoying more attention in popular culture: their agency and the possibilities open to them are widely discussed. However, this might simultaneously limit the agency of women in other social roles, perhaps especially those in the role of mother-in-law (Yan 2006a). When the new family ideals come into young migrant workers' daily life, arguably what was changed was the power relations *between women* in different social roles. Rather than undermining the 'myth of male dominance' in China, the new way is to urge female migrant workers to get married in order to become 'women as wives' to secure their higher status among other women.

Gender differences in strategies for networking

My starting assumption was that I would see gender-specific strategies related to networking because young men and young women face a different "reality" (see my discussion of this in the Introduction) and because they are oriented towards different life goals. Also, if networking in the SEZ means "blending in with strangers", to a

large extent, then the meaning and significance of this activity should not be the same for men and women. In brief, women are constantly reminded that they will marry out and live with strangers in an unfamiliar community in the future, so they might be expected to take the dislocations of migration in stride (i.e. it is what they have been prepared for). Also, many people assume that men's networking activities in China are based around reciprocal obligations whereas women's networking activities are based around emotional ties and "sympathy".

However, during my fieldwork I found few gender-specific differences in networking practices among migrant workers, at least when networking is understood in terms of the basic strategies the workers themselves adopt. My view, in brief, is that marketization has made strategies of networking relatively gender-neutral. As I attempt to argue in this thesis, marketization in China has changed the way people produce and consume, but has changed relatively little in relation to resource redistribution – something which is, in turn, very influential in shaping social actors' strategies and decisions. The resources still flow to the centre (i.e. to authorities of various kinds) and then are redistributed to the people associated with them, rather than being redistributed by impersonal rules or market logics (see chapter 2 and chapter 3). Under such circumstances, the practice of networking beyond given connections (such as kinship ones) in order to establish new connections (such as ones based on friendship) is extremely common. Moreover, these new relations resemble "comradeship", a relationship in which each person guarantees their loyalty and promises to act as an ally when necessary (Silver 1990: 1485).

According to previous findings, to demonstrate their friendship, Chinese men form brotherhoods, a fictive kinship relation, in which aid and affection can barely be distinguished (Strickland 2010). These brotherhoods are characterised by: clear hierarchy based on age (Smart 1999), the imposition of obligations (for example, relating to resources, time and loyalty) on those involved according to their position in the hierarchy (Gates 1987: 6); and exclusive and selective membership (Yan 1996: 224) with a range that is highly relevant to kinship networks (Santos 2008). Again, men's friendship tends to be based on "reciprocal obligations" rather than "sympathy". Friendships between Chinese men resemble relations of patronage, in which interest

and sentiment are fused in a nexus where political power, economic interest and sentimental affection are tightly intertwined. The term *guanxi* is usually used to describe such relationships (Smart 1999: 132). We can explain “*guanxi* friendship” among Chinese men as resulting from the fact that patriarchal structure offers them no possibilities for impartial, impersonal, neutral relationships (see Silver 1990).

In contrast to these male friendships, the friendships of Chinese women seem to be exempt from obligations and the morality associated with patronage. Instead, female friendships place greater emphasis on affective and emotional aspects. Previous research in Jiangyong, in southern China, shows that female-centric social networks are constructed on the basis of so called female literature (*nushu*), through which female friends express their affection for each other before marriage and the sadness of separation from friends after marriage (Silber 1994; Chiang 1995; Liu 2004). In Guangdong, female forms of expression include songs, domestic arts, stories, ritual knowledge and religious practice (Watson 1994: 26). What females want from friendship is predominantly companionship and understanding, and, therefore, considerations of patronage, exchange and utility calculations are less likely to be involved in their friendships (see Liu 2004).

Again, however, my argument is that the recent Chinese reforms have not changed the underlying mode of resource redistribution (see Chapter 2 and 3), and of course women have increasingly been encouraged to participate in the public sphere and play a role in market interactions. As women are enabled to enter the market, and to work for wages, they also have chances to associate with authorities and enter the circle of resource distribution as an individual player. This leads to a remarkable consequence. Female strategies for networking seem to have changed, and more specifically they are now using strategies formerly associated with men in relation to patronage, exchange and calculations of utility.

It has been claimed that the phenomenon of networking in the post-Mao era arguably disproves the idea that “comradeship” existed in pre-marketised China whereas pure, affective friendship exists in market China (this idea was based on a distinction being made between personal and impersonal spheres whereby “neutral strangers” could emerge, and thus the possibility of pure sympathy-based friendship (see Silver 1990)).

However, marketization paradoxically *doesn't* open the room to foster pure, affective friendship— in spite of it leading to a fuzzy distinction being drawn between the personal and the impersonal. Instead, I have suggested, it re-enforces some pre-existing moral mechanisms, ones which allow social actors, men and women alike, to establish interpersonal exchange relationships and “comradeship”.

However, gender differences do of course exist. To engage in too much networking activity is seen as contrary to the basic ideals of femininity. Based on my fieldwork, I learnt that, although women need to compete like men in order to survive in capitalist society, in reality, in order to maintain their female friendships, the factory girls either refused such overt competition or engaged in it very reluctantly. They even refused promotion in order to stay with their friends and avoid “entering a man’s world” (see chapter 3). For the sake of their female identity, they were also willing to have a male patron to shelter them from any risks they might take and from the necessity of being responsible for their own situation.

Female friendships and their “femininity” (as understood by them) therefore seemingly become obstacles to Chinese women’s integration into the neo-liberal economic system. Consequently, in contrast to its function in traditional China, gender difference in networking has made the situation of female workers more intertwined with patriarchal dominance than ever before.

LIMINALITY, YOUTH CULTURE AND CHANGE

In this last section, I want to return to the question of migration in general, and discuss the extent to which young migrant workers – rural youth – may be said to change during the process of migration to the SEZs. I will argue that young migrant workers do change, in some respects but that the change is much less than it is sometimes imagined to be in the press and the popular imagination.

Young people are often taken as indicators of social change by researchers (Buchmann 1989: 1; Durham 2000; Durham 2004). For example, the study of youth shows they are able, in certain contexts, to use creative ways to resist or contest class oppression (Cole and Durham 2008: 4). The changing way in which ‘youth’ or ‘maturity’ are envisioned

in a particular society can lead us to see more general changes in ‘what power is and how is it exercised’ and changes in ‘how people [relate] to one another’ (Durham 2004: 601). Moreover, a good deal of research has focused specifically on Chinese youth and the changes they appear to embody in contemporary China (Gold 1991; Kwong 1994; Yan 1999; Weber 2001; Hanser 2002; Weber 2002; Yan 2003; Yan 2005; Hoffman 2006; Yan 2006a; Yan 2006b; Hanser 2007; Rofel 2007; Yan 2009; Hoffman 2010; Yan 2010). But the young migrant workers I met and lived with in China do not simply promote and/or accept social change without making their own judgements about it. If the new roles offered up by the new China do not benefit them, young people may even act as tradition preservers, although in a strategic way. Traditions/cultures do not vanish suddenly. In this thesis, we have seen how hierarchy, loyalty, moral economy, and customary expectations work their way into this process of negotiation when young migrant workers are making their decisions.

My research shows that traditions can be reused in creative ways through being de-contextualised and re-contextualised. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 3, at a time when the Chinese family is arguably becoming privatised (Yan 2003), workplaces, such as the factory, are increasingly resembling family-corporations. The young peasants learn of the wane of the traditional values of the cooperative family at home in their rural villages and increasingly turn their families into private places where they share love and intimacy (Yan 2003) – but they learn to revive these same traditional values in the factory setting. The family mode of economic cooperation therefore does not disappear in the modernisation process of China. It is just displaced, following displaced migrant workers, from household to the factory. It is arguable that the new social discourses change young migrant workers’ ends, but the means they adopt are derived from traditions.

In the case of migrant workers, traditions do not function as moral guidelines. Instead, they are better understood as being the ‘best choice’, i.e. the most efficient life strategy available to them – not least because it is the most efficient way to acquire resources. Traditions have already established a certain degree of consensus among people and these can be adopted as the basis for establishing mutual trust and achieving basic consensus on cooperation. Especially when migrant workers feel the administrative

systems/environments are untrustworthy, to build up interpersonal reciprocal ethics by their own activities shows social actor's efforts to make uncertainty predictable (see Brandtstädter 2003).

Since people in the SEZ normally do not value the legal system or regulations that much, there must be some other mechanism to function as infrastructure to support transactions and interactions and make them trustworthy. Traditional ways, like the rules for gift exchange, moral economy or moral standards of reciprocal relationships, thus step into the vacuum, and serve as a kind of parallel resource distribution mechanism. In order to gain membership in such informal resource distribution systems, young migrant workers are keen to acquire knowledge of *guanxi*, i.e. of how to form interpersonal relationships of reciprocity. People are thus more and more interconnected rather than 'being individualistic'. But at the level of discourse, they claim they are individualistic, free and autonomous in order to show they have given up their 'peasantness' and live up to the standards of high *suzhi* (quality).

In this informal folk economic system, the 'free and autonomous' young migrant workers 1) understand how to practise (gift) exchange, what can be exchanged and what is worth exchanging (for example, they learn that loyalty and beauty can be exchanged for promotion); 2) understand performative behaviour and its meanings (for example, how to show the will of cooperation, loyalty and submissiveness in order to invite the trust of one's supervisors, or asserting one's personal interest/desire to too great a degree break a reciprocal relationship, etc.); 3) understand customary expectations and use them to judge if a proposed exchange is fair or not. In order to establish/maintain membership of such informal exchange groups for the sake of achieving better life opportunities, young migrant workers learn and gradually internalise a set of 'customary' expectations applicable to each social role and appropriate performative economic behaviour. Moreover, they are putting this 'folk theory' into operation and practising it in their everyday lives.

When meeting a crowd of strangers in the SEZ, migrant workers have no time, no energy and (in most cases) no chance to communicate and properly understand each other or the situation surrounding them. Meanwhile, they are also shouldering the responsibility of making many decisions about their lives in the new environment

without any relevant precedents to follow. When young migrants are required to make quick decisions on the basis of insufficient information, adopting traditional modes of behaviour and following the customary expectations attached to these is actually a rational approach for them to take.

Their desire to enhance their future opportunities in life, establish opportunities for negotiation, improve their negotiating position, and share the fruits of cooperation (all these skills are believed to help them succeed in the neoliberal economic system) within certain *interpersonal* networks makes young migrant workers willing to give up their limited agency and act obediently (but strategically) in the factory and stick to the more traditional/interconnected personhood. Therefore, ironically, given their context, the preference is for interconnected personhood over individualistic personhood. To some extent, it is because there is a lack of trustworthy legal system that everyone, no matter who you are, abides by. Without this important infrastructure for the market economy, the young migrant workers consequently stick to moral economy in order to guarantee a predictable and trustworthy transaction.

To be clear, young migrant workers *do* change, in the sense that they learn (or invent) ways to use the old means for new ends. Although they ‘adapt’ their personhood on the basis of ideas from the ‘traditional’ moral economy, the ends they want to fulfil are totally new ones, premised on the new reality they face. The changes that young migrant workers are engaged with seem full of tension and negotiation. We do not know how long they will be in a liminal state in between the old and new or sustain multiple subjecthoods. We do not know if they will shift to be more individualistic if one day they feel that laws are able to protect their rights. But we can definitely say that their change is so far not as dramatic and radical as it is sometimes assumed to be.

As noted above, Chinese society as a whole seems to perceive this generation of Chinese youth as the agents of social change. The term ‘post-1980s generation’, which represents about 200 million young people born between 1980 and 1989 – including, importantly, all the urban and rural youth – was invented to contrast this generation’s characteristics from the previous generations (Rosen 2009: 362). But, as Rosen’s research shows, this kind of contrast is usually unnecessary and unhelpful. For example, the members of post-1980s generation perceived *themselves* as less different

from previous generations than others do. Further evidence supports this. For example, after the Sichuan earthquake, these young people who had previously been perceived as more ‘superficial, self-centred and materialistic’ than their parents’ generation (Rosen 2009: 362) were – because of their actions in rescuing earthquake victims and helping the families – suddenly seen as showing ‘great compassion, benevolence, and gallantness’, because they had imbibed these from traditional Chinese culture (Rosen 2009: 360).

It is arguable that the valuations/commendations/discourses toward the new generation might reflect less on the real behaviour patterns of Chinese youth, or rather who they are, than it reveals about the attitudes and dilemmas of the society toward on-going individualisation. Thus it is arguable that the notion of personhoods and discourses specific to ‘new generation migrant workers’ in fact reflects people’s attitude (urban elite and media) towards the possible changes brought about by migrant workers.

As my research suggests, the changes manifested by migrant workers are, in reality much less than in people’s (the media’s) expectation. The reality/environment they are facing is still similar, in many respects, to that of previous generations (for example, without citizen residency rights, seen as inferior to urbanites, getting relatively low pay, excluded from urban life), so the personhood they will develop will in many respects presumably not be that different from that of previous generations. The change might exist in the attitude and percept toward migrant workers of urban elites and media. The term ‘new generation migrant workers’ and its discourses might reflect their contradictory feeling toward migrant workers. As China’s development and marketisation goes deeper and deeper, the urban elites on the one hand want rural migrant workers to raise their *suzhi* (quality) and make their life closer to that of the middle class. On the other hand, they still want migrant workers to work as hard as ever, continuing to be the producing subject, sacrificing their normal life for urban development. Urban citizens (and their voice through media) are actually asking young migrant workers to be a contradictory, impossible being.

For China’s ‘face’ and cosmopolitan status, they blame migrants’ low *suzhi* and ask them to raise it self-responsibility through social mobility. However, meanwhile, for urban/China’s development, they want them to endure hardship and work hard as

before. To construct their own modern identity, they want migrants to remain different from them in order to be the ‘others’ to verify their modern image. In this sense, they do not really want migrant workers to change and become middle class like them.

If new generation migrant workers now have begun to ‘get stuck’ in the city and show no will to go back to rural villages again, then to some extent this must be seen as the result of the social discourse created by the urban elites themselves. However, when migrant workers really believe in these images of the cities as places of hope for social mobility, marriage prospects – and the endless unknown possibilities – then, the urban elites seemingly do not know how to react. The paradoxical attitude toward migrant workers makes urban elites helpless and anxious in the face of the possible changes happening among the new generation migrant workers. Hence the ‘bad press’ of young migrant workers – they are ‘spoiled’, they ‘lack a of sense of reality’, they have ‘low threshold for stress tolerance’ (Chen 2010; Gao 2010).

In short, the idea that there is a distinctive ‘new generation’ of migrant workers’ and their image as ‘spoiled children’ are far from the truth. Young migrant workers, like their parents, still do not have residency rights in the host cities. They are still perceived as inferior to urbanites. They struggle even more (through migration) in gaining their adulthood and starting their lives. The issue is not even limited to what is the truth about the realities of the new generation migrant workers nor social reactions specifically to them. Beyond that, they have come to stand for social transformation itself, and the social responses toward the possible changes when new values/ideologies/lifestyles are coming in. The large amount of attention focused on ‘how young people are changing China’ shows people’s anxiety about the future direction of marketised China.

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Appendix I: Data of Interviewees at THS

I obtained the information in these charts by doing semi-structured interviews with migrant workers and collecting kinship charts from them. See Appendix V for the schedule of topics I used for the interviews.

THS									
No	Sex	Age	Marriage	P	Sibling	NoC	OoB	E	R
1	F	24	UM	2	FFM	3	1F/3	J	3
2	F	23	UM	1	FFMF	4	2F/4	J	1
3	M	30	UM	1	Orphan	–	–	J	1
4	F	25	M	1	FMF	3	1F/3	J	1
5	M	20	UM	4	FMMFF	5	2M/5	J	1
6	F	18	UM	5	MFMMF	5	2F/5	J	1
7	F	21	UM	6	MFFF	4	3F/4	S	1
8	F	16	UM	8	FF(M)F	4(3)*	1F/4	J	1
9	F	20	UM	2	FMF	3	3F/3	J	2
10	F	21	UM	2	FMF	3	3F/3	J	2
11	M	27	UM	2	MF	2	1M/2	S	3
12	F	17	UM	2	MF	2	2F/2	J	1
13	F	18	UM	5	FFF	3	2F/3	J	1
14	F	17	UM	1	FFMF	4	4F/4	J	2
15	M	20	UM	3	FM	2	2M/2	J	1
16	F	21	UM	3	FMMF	4	1F/4	J	2
17	M	24	M	1	MMF	3	1M/3	J	1
18	F	17	UM	2	FFFM	4	3F/4	J	2
19	M	32	M	1	MMMM	4	4M/4	H	3
20	F	19	UM	2	FFMMFF	6	5F/6	J	1
21	F	26	UM	9	FFMM	4	2F/4	J	2
22	F	29	M	2	–	–	–	S	2
23	F	20	UM	8	FFM	3	2F/3	J	1
24	M	28	M	2	M	1	1M/1	S	2
25	M	21	UM	1	FMM	3	2M/3	J	1
26	M	19	UM	2	MF	2	1M/2	S	2
27	F	21	UM	3	FF	2	2F/2	J	1
28	F	25	M	1	MMMFFF	6	6F/6	J	1
29	F	22	UM	8	M(F)F	3(2)**	3F/3	S	1

30	F	42	M	4	FFMF	4	4F/4	P	1
31	M	27	M	3	FM	2	2M/2	H	3
32	M	21	UM	7	FFM	3	3M/3	S	2
33	M	22	UM	3	FFM	3	3M/3	J	2
34	M	22	UM	2	MF	2	1M/2	S	1
35	F	19	UM	1	MMF	3	3F/3	S	1
36	M	24	UM	4	MM	2	2M/2	J	1
37	M	19	UM	5	FFFMM	5	4M/5	J	1
38	M	23	M	2	MF	2	1M/2	S	3
39	M	20	UM	1	MMM	3	3M/3	S	2
40	F	20	UM	4	FFF	3	3F/3	J	1
41	F	23	UM	5	FFFMM	5	2F/5	J	3

P= Province; NoC= Number of Children; OoB= Order of Birth; E= Education;
R = Managerial Ranking; * Child death; **Child adoption (leaving home)

Code of provinces(P):

1=Henan	4=Guangxi	7=Shandong
2=Hubei	5=Guangdong	8=Hunan
3=Jiangxi	6=Helongjiang	9= Anhui

Code of education (E):

P=primary school; J=junior high school [*chuzhong*]; S=Senior high school [*gaozhong*];
or vocational school [*zhongzhuan*]; H=University [*daxue* or *dazhuan*]

Code of managerial ranking (R):

1 = basic worker; 2 = middle ranking worker; 3 = manager or cadre

Totals for:

Sex

Female	24
Male	17

Marriage

Married	9	0.219512
Unmarried	32	0.780487

Age

Range in age	16–42			
Mode of age	Female	21	Male	20

Education

Primary school	1	2.439%
Junior high	27	65.954%
Senior high, vocational school	11	26.829%
University	2	4.878%

Education and sex

	Primary	Junior H	Senior H	University
M	0	70.3703%	63.6363%	100%
F	100%	29.6296%	36.3636%	0

Siblings

Single child	1	2.5641%
Having siblings	38	97.4359%
N/A	2	

Order of Birth

First child	Female	Male	N/A
Number	24	14	3
%	63.1579%	36.8421%	

Appendix II: Data of Interviewees at KS1

I obtained the information in these charts by doing semi-structured interviews with migrant workers and collecting kinship charts from them. See Appendix V for the schedule of topics I used for the interviews.

KS1									
No	Sex	Age	Marriage	P	Sibling	NoC	OoB	E	R
42	F	19	UM	1	FM	2	1F/2	S	1
43	F	35	M	3	FF	2	1F/2	J	1
44	F	33	M	4	MMFF	4	4F/4	S	2
45	F	24	UM	2	FM	2	1F/2	S	2
46	F	46	M	3	FFFMF	5	3F/5	S	2
47	F	45	M	3	FFMF	4	4F/4	P	1
48	F	38	M	2	MFF	3	2F/3	J	1
49	F	29	M	2	FFFM	4	3F/4	J	1
50	F	22	UM	5	FFMF	4	2F/4	J	1
51	F	22	M	7	FM	2	1F/2	S	2
52	F	44	M	3	MMFFFFFF	8	6F/8	P	1
53	F	43	M	3	FMFM	4	3F/4	J	1
54	F	42	M	L	MF	2	2F/2	J	1
55	F	21	UM	1	FFM	3	1F/3	S	1
56	F	29	M	2	MMFF	4	4F/4	J	1
57	F	25	UM	1	MF	2	2F/2	H	1
58	F	43	M	5	MFFMF	5	2F/5	P	1
59	F	23	UM	4	FM	2	1F/2	J	2
60	F	24	UM	1	FFFM	4	3F/4	S	2
61	F	22	M	8	FM	2	1F/2	S	1
62	F	24	UM	2	FFM	3	1F/3	H	2

P= Province; NoC= Number of Children; OoB= Order of Birth; E= Education; R = Managerial Ranking

Code of provinces (P):

1= Anhui	4= Sichuan	7=Henan	10= Guizhou
2= Subei	5=Hubei	8= Shandong	11 = Zhejiang
3= Local (Kunshan)	6= Hunan	9= Yunnan	12 = Shaanxi

Code of education (E):

P=primary school; J=junior high school [*chuzhong*]; S=Senior high school [*gaozhong*]; or vocational school [*zhongzhuan*]; H=University [*daxue* or *dazhuan*]

Code of managerial ranking (R):

1 = basic worker; 2 = middle ranking worker; 3 = manager or cadre

Appendix III: Data of Interviewees at KS2 and KS3

I obtained the information in these charts by doing semi-structured interviews with migrant workers and collecting kinship charts from them. See Appendix V for the schedule of topics I used for the interviews.

KS2 and KS3									
No	Sex	Age	Marriage	P	Sibling	NoC	OoB	E	R
63	F	21	UM	1	FFM	3	1F/3	H	2
64	F	31	M	10	MFFF	4	3F/4	J	1
65	F	30	M	11	FM	2	1F/2	S	3
66	F	30	M	5	FM	2	1F/2	S	2
67	F	26	M	1	MFF	3	3F/3	S	3
68	M	21	UM	6	MM	2	1M/2	S	1
69	F	19	UM	9	FFM	3	1F/3	S	1
70	M	27	M	12	FFM	3	3M/3	S	3
71	F	28	UM	4	F	1	1F/1	H	3
72	M	23	UM	11	FM	2	2M/2	H	3
74	M	33	M	2	M	1	1M/1	H	3
75	F	18	UM	1	MMF	3	3F/3	J	1
76	F	18	UM	7	MFFF	4	4F/4	J	1
77	F	18	UM	4	M	1	1M/1	S	1
78	M	20	UM	2	MM	2	2M/2	J	1

P= Province; NoC= Number of Children; OoB= Order of Birth; E= Education; R = Managerial Ranking

Code of provinces (P):

1= Anhui	4= Sichuan	7=Henan	10= Guizhou
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Code of managerial ranking (R):

1 = basic worker; 2 = middle ranking worker; 3 = manager or cadre

Appendix IV: Demographic Data for THS, KS1, and KS2

This graph, Demographic Data for THS, KS1, and KS2, has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.

Appendix V: Schedule of Topics for Semi-structured Interviews

訪談大綱 Schedule of topics for semi-structured interview

第一段、 畫親屬圖 Draw kinship chart for three to four generations

蒐集 3 - 4 代 (本人、父母、祖父母、子女) 親屬圖

1. 您是哪裡人？
2. 你是幾年生的？
3. 你的教育程度？
4. 婚姻狀況？子女？
5. 老公是哪裡人？有無兄弟姊妹？
6. 有無兄弟姊妹？幾歲？教育程度？他們目前在哪裡？做什麼？
7. 爸媽幾歲？教育程度？在哪裡？做什麼？爸媽的兄弟姊妹？在哪裡？做什麼？嫁娶哪裡人？
8. 祖父母在哪裡？跟誰住？
9. 你家有幾畝地？年平均收入是多少？你會種地嗎？

第二段、 生命史與工作史 Life history and work history

1. 個人歷史：

年齡	經歷	所在地	同住者	直屬家人狀況
1 - 3				
3 - 12				
13 - 15				
15 -				

2. 工作經驗：

No.	工作名稱	工作內容	工作時間	經驗累積
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

你覺得你從工作中學習到什麼？

3. 學習狀況：

	年紀	教導人
識字		
電腦		
其他		

- A. 如果條件允許，你現在最想學什麼？
 B. 你覺得現在最有用的知識、技能或能力是什麼？

第三段、工作狀況與決定過程 Decision making for job

1. 怎麼樣找到現在這個工作的？（親友介紹、學校、招工、考試...）
2. 當初為何決定離開家，出來打工的？
3. 通常收入如何處理，是自己用還是給別（家）人？
4. 家裡不缺錢，可以選擇的話，妳會選擇不工作嗎？
5. 是什麼原因讓妳不要再繼續唸書？誰決定的？
6. 是什麼原因讓你去（地方）？
7. 是什麼原因讓你來深圳？
 - i. 配偶的薪水誰處理？（自用、寄回家中等），誰養家？
 - ii. 生小孩後，曾考慮辭去工作在家帶小孩嗎？為什麼？
8. 做過/會想轉作服務業嗎？（比方洗頭、洗腳、桑拿、家政）？
9. 做過/會想轉作辦公室文員嗎？
10. 做過/會想自己出來做生意嗎？若是，會想在哪裡作？

第四段、移民與適應過程 Migration and adaptation

1. 去(地方)後，除了工廠跟宿舍之外，還去過哪裡？
2. 來(深圳)之後，去過哪裡？
3. 在這裡跟誰住？(如果是住宿舍，室友有誰？)
4. 平常幾點起床，幾點睡覺？在家鄉時呢？
5. 你覺得外面跟在家鄉有什麼不同？
6. 你覺得你自己在外面跟在家鄉有什麼不同？
7. 多久回老家一次？
8. 多久和父母聯繫一次？

第五段、價值觀 Values

1. 你最崇拜的人是誰？為什麼？
2. 你的夢想是什麼？(你以後想成為什麼樣的人？想作什麼樣工作？想擁有什麼樣的生活？)
3. 是否有宗教信仰？
4. 賺錢的多寡可以代表一個人的成就嗎？
5. 你覺得讀書有用嗎？為什麼？

6. 你覺得人與人之間是平等的？還是人本來就不一樣，有人掌握權力，有人服從命令？
7. 你覺得一個人是不是要勇於競爭？
8. 你覺得「關係」重要嗎？
9. 聽話、服從的人會比較容易成功嗎？若
10. 城市出身的人會比鄉村出身的人容易成功嗎？
11. 婚後的子女應該與父母親分開住嗎？
12. 你覺得法律跟法院可以解決糾紛嗎？還是應該透可信任的人來調解？

第六段、結婚與生子 Marriage

13. 有沒有男（女）朋友、老公（老婆）？怎麼認識的？是哪裡人？會想找哪裡人？
14. 幾歲結婚？
15. 幾歲生小孩？
16. 結婚後，會在這裡定居？
17. 結婚後，會不會希望老婆（自己）跟父母（公婆）一起住？
18. 希望有幾個小孩？生男孩還是女孩？生(男/女)孩，那時候公婆的反應？

第六部分、性別分工 Gender division of labour

1. 女性工作上比男性更強的優勢何在（如耐心、細心）？弱勢何在？
2. 你身邊有女強人嗎？你對女強人的看法是什麼？
3. 女人是認命的，這樣說對嗎？
4. 如果你老公的薪水比你低，你會沒面子嗎？如果你的薪水比老婆的低，你會沒面子嗎？
5. 你覺得養家是你(誰)的責任？