The London School of Economics and Political Science

Investigating the Cultural Practice of Migrant Workers in China:
Ideology, Collective identity and Resistance

Ziyan Wang

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Abstract:

Cultural practice and collective identity formation are crucial dimensions for the expression of agency within labour struggles. Although these have been eroded, alongside the erosion of the glory of the old urban working class in the post-reform era, working-class culture has played a significant role in China's modern history of revolution and socialist industrialisation. This thesis investigates the cultural practices of Chinese rural-urban migrant workers in relation to history and to collective political struggles in the wave of labour unrest in post-reform China. Based on extended participant observation, fieldnotes and interviews over the course of a year between 2013 and 2014, mainly with two grass-roots labour organisations, my thesis answers the following questions: What kinds of collective identities and working-class/migrant workers' culture do these new proletarian organisations construct? How do they understand and define the relationship between culture and collective struggle? What kinds of tensions are evidenced in the production of migrant workers' culture?

Focusing on how ideology, culture and collective identity are contested in relation to gender, class and workers' resistance, the thesis contributes to better understanding of the on-going process of working class formation. My primary findings sustain the thesis that the migrant labour activists have devised a new version of collective identity and culture for migrant workers in order to contest the cultural hegemony of the state and the market, to raise class consciousness, build alliances and potentially mobilise their collective power to challenge the structural inequalities and injustices in contemporary China. They have developed ideological innovation and hybrid methods to communicate and articulate class identity, interests and political agendas both inexplicitly and explicitly. Moreover, through analysis of ethnographic data, I also reveal the dynamic nature and complexity in the process. The politically charged new version of collective identity and culture sometimes encounters difficulties in articulating itself to ordinary workers. The cultural practices of migrant labour

activists are constrained by various factors in the surveilled and limited political space in China. In order to mobilise resources to survive and sustain their struggle, various compromises are made in the interaction with other social actors and in turn, these inflect the representation of their cultural practices.

Gender also revealed itself as a significant tension within the ongoing cultural practices of working class solidarity and collective identity construction. Solely stressing the axis of class in the construction of 'new worker' identity and the migrant worker's culture, older male worker activists tended to ignore the gendered working class experiences of rural women migrant workers and activists in labour activism. Consequently, even as they sought to counter the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism in China, the cultural practices of the migrant worker organisations rendered women as subjects of resistance and reinforced the hegemony of patriarchy in Chinese society. This entrenched gender and class dilemma was challenged by the practice of women labour activists who proposed intersectional understandings of collective identities, incorporating gendered subjectivities into practice and expanding the struggle to the realm of social reproduction to liberate women worker's agency in the class struggle and build broader alliances in striving for a more just society for all.

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Abbreviations

ACFTU   All-China Federation of Trade Unions

ACWF   All-China Women's Federation

CCCYL   Central Committee of the Communist Youth League

CDCC   Chaoyang District Culture Center

CCTV   Chinese Central Television Station

MWH   Migrant Worker's Home

NGO   Non-governmental organisation

NPCSC   National People's Congress

PRD   Pearl River Delta

SFG   Spring Festival Gala

SFW   Sunflower Women Organisation

SOE   State-owned Enterprise

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Encountering new worker's cultural practice amongst the ruins of the old

In 1984, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued their 'Notice on Rural Work'.[1] This document stipulated that: 'peasants who work, do business, and run the service industry are allowed to take care of their rations and settle their hukou in towns'. This new policy marked the beginning of China's rural-urban migration, which has been a key factor driving the country's impressive economic growth since the 1980s. The formation of Chinese rural to urban migrant workers as a social class took place alongside the disintegration of the urban working class as a result of the restructuring of public sectors, especially State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). These two processes constitute the transformation of the Chinese working class in the era of Reform and Opening up and caused significant social upheaval.

As someone born into a working-class family in the 1980s, I have personal memories of Chinese socialist factories and an emotional attachment to socialist worker's culture. My mother and her four siblings all worked in the same watch and clock factory in the city of Chongqing. My mother had always been active on the artistic scene of the factory, and once played the leading role in the factory worker's revolutionary opera[2] *The White-Haired Girl* in the late 1970s. I spent my early childhood in the worker's compound of the factory in the last days of the Chinese urban working class' glory, before the privatisation of SOEs came into full swing in the 1990s. Various worker-led performances in the state-run Worker's Cultural Palace and movie viewing nights in the community of the factory compound were my very first childhood memories.

[1] Also referred to as Document No.1 of the Central Committee in 1984. See: http://www.reformdata.org/records/1984.shtml

[2] Also called 'model operas', these were a series of shows engineered during the Cultural Revolution that told stories from the CCP's revolutionary struggles against foreign and class enemies.

Figure 1.1 cultural performance of the 'old' workers

The wave of lay-offs that swept the country in the 1990s left everyone unemployed. I vaguely remember that my mother stayed at home and tried hard to find another job when I was in primary school. She was lucky: as the artistic and literary backbone in the factory, she managed to find a new job with the local newspaper shortly after being laid-off. But my uncles and aunts and many others struggled for a long time to find new jobs in the then ruthless, capitalist-aligned, employment market. Two of my uncles went south and finally found jobs in the newly rising sun-belt in Guangdong province as experienced technicians to provide for their families. Protests and demonstrations by laid-off workers from former SOEs were unforgettable memories as I came of age, alongside the overwhelming mainstream media discourses that encouraged angry and depressed laid-off workers to adapt to the new market economy. Indeed, the mainstream media and the related cultural fora played crucial roles in this Chinese Communist Party-led ideological process of 'subject reforming' (Zhao, 2002, p.121), that aimed to challenge the socialist era identity of the laid-off urban working class and to 'create a new set of social beings for the market economy' (Won, 2004, p.72).

Morale in the factory compound fell, and the mood became desperate as former

socialist workers were dislocated and reduced 'from master to mendicant' (Solinger, 2004, pp.67-86). My family moved away from the factory compound. However, the memory of socialist working-class cultural activists would be invoked over and over again by my mother and her former co-workers. For my mother, being a woman worker in a SOE factory and being able to participate in the performance of revolutionary operas had been her pride and joy, as she recalls: 'the dance rehearsal cannot delay the production plan, we all worked long hours of overtime to ensure the completion of production quotas.' Though it was very demanding it was at the same time very rewarding: 'we were young, we felt that was very glorious, to prove that we can complete both the production task and the performance rehearsal.' Yet, this is a memory of mixed feelings, 'people now will think us as fools, we did nothing for money', my uncle would chime in as my mother reminisced about her experiences working in the factory. Indeed, those proud and joyful days only exist as memories now, after their factory was taken apart and sold, and after their collective worker's culture had faded from contemporary life. As ongoing market reforms changed socio-economic structures and dismantled the socialist workers' collective identities, the mainstream media in China was deployed to change the minds of wider audiences through an ideological process of constructing new consumer-citizen subjects for the market economy (Zhao, 2002; Won, 2004).

No story of this period would be complete, however, without an understanding of the multiple complex processes taking place at grassroots level. Alongside the top-down material and ideological dismantling of the socialist working class and the disintegration of their culture, began the formation of the rural-urban migrant workers as a new social class. Working with international capital, the Chinese state transformed these workers from rural peasants to wage labour. The successful launch of the new Chinese economy is inseparable from the contributions of migrant workers. Though the newly emerging working class in-the-making never enjoyed the welfare of earlier state-dominated working-class culture, they nevertheless started their own cultural practices. Specifically, in the 2000s, a leading grass-roots labour

organisation, Migrant Worker's Home (MWH) caught my attention with their proclaiming and reclaiming of a collective 'new worker' identity, and their fierce reconstruction of alternative working-class culture through their cultural practice.

The first time I watched the performance of MWH was in 2010 in Beijing. Their cultural practice immediately attracted my attention, as it was so different from my childhood memories of old socialist working-class culture. But, at the same time, it felt incredibly familiar. For my Master's dissertation, I began to analyse the alternative media products which formed their self-representation as a set of interlinked discursive strategies of identity construction. For instance, my analysis suggested that the songs from their first two albums, *All the 'dagong' people are families* and *Singing for the Labourer* and the dramas already displayed a clear sense of collective identity construction and anti-discrimination in their self-representation. After my first visit to Picun village in 2011, where MWH was based, and after meeting the core members of the organisation, I immediately realised that a text-based analysis of the artefacts they produced could only provide a brief glimpse into the complex and dynamic processes of their cultural practice.

MWH needed to be situated in the broader context of labour struggles and the class formation process in contemporary China. Consequently, I joined some of their performance tours from Beijing to Suzhou, Guangzhou and Hongkong in 2012. This experience provided a chance for me to get to know some of the grass-roots labour activists across China, and opened up possibilities for me to explore the role of culture and ideology in labour activism and the broader class formation process of what I was beginning to see as the new working class in China. Looking back, it was around this time that my initial curiosity solidified into an intellectual and political commitment to exploring the relationship between cultural practice and the formation process of the new working class in post-reform China. To a large extent, that was the genesis of this thesis.

The cultural practices of the 'new workers', the newly formed social group of rural-

urban migrant workers, are indeed a reconstruction amidst the ruins of the dismantled old socialist urban workers and the socialist system. The metaphor of ruin has two connotations: firstly, although the once dominant working class in the socialist era became marginalised, and the state-led cultural hegemony of the working class was dismissed in the post-reform era, this cultural and ideological legacy/history (see Chapter 2) must be foregrounded in order to understand the cultural practice of the 'new workers'. The empirical chapters of this thesis show that, indeed, the legacy of the past became a major reference point in practice (see Chapter 5 and 6). Secondly, precisely because it is not a CCP-led ideological project as the working-class culture in the socialist era often was, building upon the ruins of the past, the cultural practice of grass-roots labour organisations of migrant workers opens up possibilities and spaces to exert agency in resisting contemporary cultural hegemony. As the new, emergent working class, the migrant workers pursue a more egalitarian society in their struggles and once again challenge the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values and moralities that justify vast inequities and injustices.

It can be seen, then, that this thesis is about the cultural practice of Chinese rural-urban migrant workers in relation to history and to collective political struggles in the wave of labour unrest in the ongoing process of working class formation in China. In the following section, I consider the rationale of this research, what this research is about and why this research matters. An overview of the thesis is provided at the end of the chapter.

1.2 Rationale of research

1.2.1 Chinese migrant workers: The subaltern and the new working class

Rural-urban migrant workers in China, the majority of whom are categorised by the *hukou* (household registration system) as having rural-registered permanent

residences, have long worked as 'low-cost' labour in cities doing non-agricultural jobs. There has been an increasing volume of literature on migrant workers in China since the 1980s. As the largest emerging social group, almost every important social issue raised to explore present and future China issues, such as urban development, rural-urban relations and the tendency to reform, is inseparable from an awareness and concern of the 250 million rural-urban migrant workers (Guo, Pun, Lu, & Shen, 2011).

The uniqueness of this phenomenon is rooted in the parallel rural-urban development structure of China. It is why prevailing research on migrant workers tends to focus on their demographic features, investigating the decision-making process and the structural background of migration (Fan, 2005; 2008; Fan &Sun, 2008; Gallagher, 2011). Previous research reveals that the household registration system entitles urban and rural residents to differential social benefits (Solinger, 1999). Since the household registration system is built on institutional boundaries, migrant workers are the most familiar 'strangers in the city' (L. Zhang, 2001). Rural-urban migrants are still socially excluded in terms of political, social and economic aspects (B. Li, 2006; Smart & Smart, 2001). In a similar vein, migrant workers are viewed as 'subalterns' in China.

Admittedly, demographic and sociological research on migrant workers provides a rich foundation for knowledge on the conditions of the social group. However, viewing migrant workers mainly as potential or semi-citizens, based on the rural-urban divide and hukou status, such research mainly focuses on the process of 'citizenisation' of migrant workers during urbanisation. For instance, scholars have raised questions about obtaining the equal citizen rights as the urban counterparts of migrant workers, or obtaining the rights for urban hukou (Chan, 2009, 2010; Solinger, 1999). In this paradigm of studies, equal rights as citizens are set as the ultimate goal of all migrant workers, neglecting the heterogeneity of the social group and their diverse desires (for instance, gender quality, worker's rights).

Moreover, Shen (2006) indicates that two issues are especially relevant when considering the limitations of the current Chinese sociological studies of migrant workers, one of which is the relative lack of analysis of the working class. Since the concept of 'class' has gradually been subsumed from the state discourse since the Reform and Opening Up, social stratification has replaced class analysis in many current sociological studies. Most previous studies in this field fail to directly incorporate rural-urban migrant workers into the version of the reformation of working class in transitional China. The second issue relates to the preference of quantitative methodology in Chinese sociological studies; although statistical data provides the overall picture of rural-urban migration, 'the quantitative description also turned the heterogeneous migrant workers into an abstract social category' (Shen, 2006). Therefore, Shen proposes that further study of migrant workers should bring class analysis back into the theoretical discussion; and methodologically, a qualitative method such as ethnography could contextualise the statistically 'abstract worker' into a 'concrete worker' (2006), and this would be important for understanding the agency and subjective experience of migrant workers in post-reform China.

Migrant workers' class identity has recently attracted academic discussion (Pun, 2005; Pun and Lu, 2010; Silver, 2003; Shen, 2006; Pringle, 2011). Through decades of migration, migrant workers are de facto the major component of industrial worker in China.[3] Some studies suggest that migrant workers are part of China's working class or new working class (Q. Li, 2004); however others disagree, as Pun (2005) points out, the process of becoming new working class is problematic because the rural-urban dual structure creates institutional barriers to impede fundamental change and keep them in a 'semi-proletarian' state; therefore, the class formation process remains incomplete.

Whether the migrant workers are the new working classes in China remains debatable

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[3] The No.1 document of the CCP 2004 claimed the migrant workers were the major component of industrial worker and it was corresponded in an interview with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in 2010. See also: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-02/27/content_13062711.htm

in many senses, but one thing is certain: due to the dual identity of 'peasant' and 'worker', they are different from the old working class in Mao's China. Employing ethnography, Pun (2005) has investigated the identity of female Chinese workers and reveals the formation process of the 'new labour subject' (*dagong zhuti*), which implies that Chinese migrant workers are unfamiliar with socialist labour relations and the employment system (Gallagher, 2005, p.15); thus, their experience of becoming the 'new labour subject' or 'New Worker' is worth further investigation. Drawing on insights from E. P. Thompson's seminal book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Pun & Lu (2011) also suggest that studies of migrant workers should regard them as subjects in the process of creating social change and history rather than only investigating the issue from the perspective of social structuralism.

Although the term 'class' has been gradually replaced by 'social stratum' in Chinese mainstream discourse as part of the de-politicization process for the introduction of the state-lead developmentalist discourse in the post-Mao era, it remains crucial for investigating the resistance of Chinese migrant workers. As Pun, Lu and Zhang note, class perspective 'stresses the inherent structural basis of interests opposition within the Capitalist relations of production and highlights the inevitable conflicts between the Capitalist and the Working class' (2012, p.171). Thus 'in order to confront and respond to the conflicts of interests and the structural causes of social injustice', class discourse has to be brought back (ibid.). In other words, a class perspective offers a more adequate and comprehensive lens to understand the nature of the labour unrest of Chinese migrant workers as it is fundamentally a process of class formation. An increasing number of scholars trace the process of class formation of the migrant workers through analysis of labour disputes, protests, strikes and other forms of collective actions from the factory regime or labour regime, and examine the discipline of workers under a certain social institution (Pun, 2005; Smith and Pun, 2006; Pun and Smith, 2007).

The sociological studies reviewed in this section provide a series of insights for understanding migrant workers and labour struggle in China. I acknowledge the subordinate situation of migrant workers in Chinese society, but also consider them as the new labour subject and political subject in the class formation process. This thesis is also interested in the class formation process of the newly emergent rural-urban migrant workers, but I intend to explore this from the rather overlooked terrain of collective struggles, the cultural practice of migrant workers.

1.2.2 The cultural practice of migrant workers and the labour struggle

For decades, migrant workers have been studied as 'objects' in Chinese media and cultural studies. Research has tended to focus on how the 'migrant worker' has been represented and constructed in the mass media. Previous studies in this field have found that migrant workers are often stigmatised, stereotyped and thus 'othered' in Chinese mainstream media (Y. Li, 2006). It has been suggested that Chinese migrant workers, as 'subalterns' in China society, are 'voiceless' (Y. Chen, 2005; Wei, 2004). Indeed, some scholars have noticed that previous research on everyday cultural production and consumption focuses excessively on the elites in Chinese society (Zhao, 2008; Sun, 2014). However, with recent significant changes in political and social structure, economic development and cultural production, China's media and communication environment has also undergone rapid change in the past three decades (Naughton, 2007) and migrant workers have established their own autonomous cultural practice. Several attempts have now been made to investigate the lives of migrant workers with a focus on new media technologies (Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2013); yet holistic studies about the cultural and media practices of and production by migrant workers are still relatively rare.

Within the limited scholarly attempts that fall into the above category, Sun Wanning (2014) examines the cultural politics of rural migrant workers' self-representation and

shows 'the delicate ways in which migrant workers insert themselves into the symbolic order and make moral and political interventions in the field of public culture' through the mediation of various cultural practices (p. 243). Drawing on rich ethnographic material, Sun highlights a key epistemological assumption that it is necessary to combine sociology and the political economy of labour along with the cultural politics of rural migrant workers in order to provide a comprehensive account of the political subjectification (ibid). Indeed, through investigation into the cultural practice of migrant workers via the lens of political subjectification, we can further explore its relation to collective labour struggles and its implications in the labour politics of China. As Wang Hui suggests, 'the significance of culture lies in creating political agency' (2012).

Rather than investigating the cultural practice of migrant workers in a general sense to show the diverse voices, I opt to focus on the grass-roots labour organisations. First, different from individual workers' cultural practices (such as worker poets and writers), I consider that the cultural practice of grass-roots labour organisations are natural ideological projects for resistance. It is also evidenced in Sun's study that the migrant workers' NGOs demonstrate the strongest 'subaltern consciousness' in their cultural practice and 'a high level of awareness of the working classes' socioeconomic subordination and a high degree of willingness to talk back to power and take action in various kinds of claims-making on behalf of their cohort' (2014, p.250). Therefore, focusing on labour organisations is most fruitful to explore the relation between cultural practice and their seeking of collective power to change their subalternity. Moreover, a meso-level approach as a level of analysis between the individual (micro level) and larger structure (macro level) enable us to explore various social relations in the dynamics of interactions. For instance, through participant observation, I gained the chance to see their interaction with ordinary workers, other social actors (government, media and academia), as well as other labour organisations. Thus, the grass-roots labour organisation is not only the facilitator of labour movement but also the medium for researchers to see the dynamic

power relations and interactions that are one of the focus of this thesis.

Migrant Worker's Home (MWH) is one of the leading labour organisations in China and focuses on cultural activism. They have attracted both media and academic attention in recent years. Bu Wei, a media scholar who actively supports the cultural practice of MWH, acknowledged that the agency shows in their construction of new worker's culture and highlights their practice as a fulfilment of the migrant workers' cultural rights and 'cultural citizenship' (2012). The counter-hegemonic features of their cultural practice have been grasped by many scholars (Guo, 2016; Zhang, 2014; Kuo, 2017; Wang, 2017; Meng, 2017; Yin, 2019). However, most current studies focus on the representation by analysing the artefacts (songs, dramas, etc.) of MWH, with only two exception (Kuo, 2017 and Yin, 2019). With their ethnographic insights, these scholars have shed light on the alliance building of MWH, suggesting that it becomes a key organiser to network NGOs, left-wing scholars and students (Kuo, 2017) or through its process of building 'ideological allies' with intellectuals, students and journalists to contest the dominant values in ideological struggles (Yin, 2019, p.13).

My observations suggest that the self-representation of MWH indeed show counter-hegemonic characteristics and also their attempts in alliance-building in both ways. However, situated cultural practice in the formation of class and the waves of labour struggle, it is crucial for us to investigate how ideology, culture and collective identity are contested in relation to gender, class and workers' resistance from not only the counter-hegemonic discourses and representation they constructed, but also the motivation, personal experience and their understanding of their own practices.

For instance, we have to first understand how migrant workers themselves conceive of 'culture' and how they imagine the alternative culture of the 'new' working class in their own accounts of their experience of everyday lives, resistance and the ideological/cultural resources that they accessed in the ongoing process. In other words, to generate an ethnography of migrant worker activists' experiences as the

activists in constructing the alternative culture and collective identities. And more importantly, how they understand its relation to collective struggle. To truly give voice to those who are in 'subordinate' positions (i.e. the grass-roots labour activists), and those who are even more marginalised within already subordinate groups, such as women labour activists and the ordinary workers, and to account for the cultural and ideological struggle in Chinese labour activism, I place the agency and subjectivity expressed in the actions and motivations of the labour organisations and the ordinary workers centre-stage.

Without doubt, contemporary socio-political transformation in China has hugely influenced both the making of the social group and their acts of resistance. People construct their own forms of resistance in their own contexts. It is constantly shaped and reshaped in the process of negotiating, resisting with different social forces. What then are the tensions and conflicts in the process? For instance, looking into MWH's cultural practices, how they engage with hegemonic regimes of cultural representation is also important for understanding the complexity of the cultural politics of the migrant workers.

As aforementioned, the cultural practices of migrant worker's labour organisations are viewed as ideological projects and indeed, the cultural and ideological struggles of the migrant workers constitute a significant element in Chinese labour activism. Another limitation in the existing literature about MWH is that none of it, to my knowledge, has expanded its scope to truly situate it in labour activism. In other words, though few have revealed its alliance-building in cultural practice (i.e. 'networking' in Kuo, 2017; ideological alliance in Yin, 2019), how their cultural practices inflect the ongoing collective actions in broader labour activism remains hidden. Moreover, most existing literature lacks a gender perspective, with the exception of Yin's work (2019). The unequal gender power relation in MWH has also been observed in my fieldwork: in Chapter 6 I provide detailed analysis of the gender tension and reveal how it is disguised under the discourse of 'collectivism' and provide an explanation in

relation to how MWH conceive collective identity, culture and class struggle. Moreover, my observations are not limited to MWH. I was fortunate enough to expand my scope by following some labour activists who are closely associated with MWH (trained by MWH or worked with them) to see how they interpret the cultural practices of MWH, incorporate them into their collective actions and also modify them in their own struggles. For instance, how women labour activists of another organisation (Sunflower Women, SFW) challenge the rigid definition of collective identity in MWH's practice and proposed intersectional understanding of identities to incorporate gender and class together to liberate women workers in the class struggle and avoid reinforcing the patriarchal hegemony (Chapter 8). In turn, these observations brought reflections to further comprehend the culture and identity construction of MWH (see Chapter 7 and 8).

In summary, I consider the cultural practice of migrant worker labour organisations to be an ideological project of the subordinated social group that aims for political, social and economic change. In recognition of the subordinate and marginalised position of rural-urban migrant workers in the social structure, the standpoint of this study is to take the agency and subjectivity perspectives of the grass-roots labour organisations to investigate their culture practice, and to explore the relation between culture, collective identity formation, collective labour struggle in the context of 'new' working class formation in contemporary China.

1.3 Elaboration of research questions

The research questions have gone through several rounds of revision throughout the research process. The revisions were informed by the literature reviewed, the materials collected in the field, as well as my evolving understanding of the project. In this thesis, I scrutinize original data from two grass-roots migrant worker's labour organisations located in Beijing and Guangzhou respectively to examine three

research questions.

The first overarching question is what kind of collective identity and working-class/migrant workers' culture do the grass-root migrant worker labour organisation construct? How people imagine culture and the alternative is associated with their personal experiences as humans in their everyday lives. Therefore, they express subjectivity, exert agency and mobilise limited resources to sustain their struggles in particular ways due to their socio-economic context and the limited political spaces in which they are situated.

The second overarching question is: how do the grass-root migrant worker labour organisation understand and define the relation of culture to collective struggle? I address this question by providing an analysis of accounts from labour activists and observation of their practices, with a focus on identity, class consciousness, mobilisation and collective power. The purpose is to provide further understanding of culture and collective labour struggle in the Chinese context.

The third question is: what kind of tensions are evidenced in the production of migrant worker's culture? Throughout the empirical chapters, tensions and conflicts are detected and analysed in the process, from symbolic level to material practice, from communication with ordinary migrant workers, interaction with other social actors, as well as embedded gender tensions. The aim of focusing on the tensions is to reveal the complexity and dynamics in their practices. This will not only provide analysis of how labour activists resist (both covertly and inexplicitly), negotiate and compromise in their interaction with different social actors, but also consider the potential impact of these tensions. Moreover, the major tension between gender and class in cultural practice foregrounds the sub-question: what is the role of gender in the class formation process of Chinese migrant worker's labour struggles? I address this question by focusing on how gendered subjectivity and agency is exerted by women labour activists and how they incorporate gender and class into their labour activism.

These three research questions overlap, and together they aim to provide knowledge about the relationships between cultural production, collective identity formation, labour unrest and collective struggle in contemporary China.

1.4 Aims of the thesis

This thesis aims to provide knowledge about the cultural practice of the rural-urban migrant workers in the background of labour unrest and new working class formation in post-Reform China. By constructing a conceptual framework consisting of ideology, culture, collective identity (in relation to resistance), gender and class, it aims for a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing process of working class formation in China. Its focus on culture and collective identity will contribute to the knowledge base of Cultural Studies, Labour Studies and Contemporary China area studies.

As previous literature on the cultural practices of migrant worker labour organisations lacks a perspective on how ordinary workers perceive such practices, my thesis aims to fill this gap in not only providing an analysis of the labour activists' accounts but also their interactions with ordinary workers. By revealing the interactions and the tensions with how labour activists construct collective identities and how ordinary migrant workers experience their identities in their everyday lives, it also aims to contribute to the understanding of the collective identity formation process with ethnographic insights from China.

Only when we see the tensions that exist, how and why they exist, and their impact internally and more generally for the labour unrest and working class formation process, can we then comprehend the power dynamics in cultural and ideological practices. A comprehensive understanding of the construction of a collective identity in class struggle, and the cultural mobilisation efforts to potentially create a common

ground for organising collective power also contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of general political struggle.

Finally, this thesis aims to document the practices of the grass-roots labour activists. I consider this thesis to be a small part of the history of those who fought in the labour movement in China. The stagnating economy after decades of rapid growth has led to a surge in social conflicts, within which labour unrest is a particularly sensitive issue and under surveillance as the target of repression. The limited political space has been further tightened since Xi Jinping came to power in 2015. In December 2015, five Chinese labour activists were detained and in the following month, formally arrested in Guangdong province. Four were charged with 'disrupting social order' and one with embezzlement. Many of the grass-roots labour organisations I encountered in my fieldwork were forced to shut down in the following years, including my second host organisation, SFW. Labour activists were detained, 'disappeared' or forced into exile, including two of my key informants in Guangzhou. Even the survivor, the sophisticated MWH, have reduced their activities and further self-censored themselves under pressure from the authority.

What happened after my fieldwork caused me such intense emotional distress as a supporter of their struggles for social justice (the reflexivity on my role as researcher will be discussed in Chapter 4) that I was, for a time, paralysed. I constantly blamed myself for not being able to contribute more to their political cause, and to bringing them justice. Being able to tell their stories, their endeavours, and their resistance is a personal commitment and a political one at the same time. Although many of the stories analysed in this thesis are already part of history, the struggle of migrant workers continues. Those attempts of the labour activists are important data for comprehending their current situation and their potential in the future. The women migrant labour activists' efforts to articulate gender and class in collective identity, cultural practice and mobilisational efforts in labour struggles should be especially documented and represented. Moreover, by analysing the tensions in the process, I

aim to shed light on future activism.

1.5 Overview of the thesis

Chapter 2 contains an examination of the institutional and discursive aspects of the Chinese working class and its culture, and its role in class formation and collective mobilisations in history as a way of contextualising the subsequent discussion. It also discusses the socio-political context of labour unrest in contemporary China.

Chapter 3 constructs a theoretical framework of the thesis around discussion of two sets of interrelated concepts to understand how ideology, culture and collective identity are contested in relation to gender, class and workers' resistance.

Chapter 4 considers the research methodology of this research. I chose ethnography as my primary research approach because it is best suited to explore the experiences, subjectivity and agency in the cultural practice of the migrant worker labour activists and ordinary workers. By employing the data collection methods of participant observation and interviewing, I conducted one year of fieldwork in China. Working alongside the labour activists as a volunteer in the grass-roots labour organisations allowed me to observe the nuance in their practice, for instance the subtler ways of exerting agency or the concealed resistance when they interact with other social actors. It also enabled me to observe the 'disguised' tensions and conflicts in their practices. I then discuss the research design, methods adopted to collect and analyse data and how I carried out the fieldwork. This is followed by a discussion of ethics and a reflection of me as researcher and participant in the process.

Chapters 5 to 8 consist of the empirical analysis of original data. In Chapter 5, drawing on the accounts of the core members, its artefacts (including songs, dramas, publications) and observation of their practices, I examine how MWH conceptualises and understands culture and the 'New Workers' Culture' in the view of MWH. The

demonstration of their understanding of culture and how they imagined the alternative working-class culture they aimed to construct functions as the premise as well as the key reference point to further comprehend the dynamics in the ongoing process of cultural practices.

In Chapter 6, I identify three key themes: collective identity; the discourse of glory of labour; and the promotion of collectivism in the cultural practices of MWH that aim to pursue their political agenda for collective mobilisation. Through investigating the three major themes, I reveal the tensions and conflicts within the process. One major tension disguised in the promotion of collectivism is the gender conflicts that are further addressed in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7 uses one major MWH cultural event – the *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala – to depict the ways in which the labour activists interact with different social actors and negotiate their position on a variety of issues.

Chapter 8 discusses how women labour activists of SFW formulate gendered subjectivity in their labour activism to articulate gender and class struggle together in practice. I argue that the women labour activists' personal experiences of oppression and resistance together shape their understanding of the intersected identities of women and migrant workers in labour activism and lead to their various attempts to liberate women workers' agency in collective struggle. This chapter not only address the issues of gender and class dilemma in labour activism but also reveals how MWH's cultural practice inflect the ways in which the SFW perceive the role of culture and ideology in labour activism.

The thesis concludes in Chapter 9, which summarises the key findings, and limitations in my empirical discussions. In addition, it lists what contribution the present research has made and what issues are worth further study in the future.

Chapter 2: Workers and Working-class Cultural Construction in China: A Historical Review

2.0 Introduction

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx, [1852] 2008, p.7)

Migrant workers are making their own history by constructing their own collective identities and alternative culture as an important part of collective struggle. The Chinese working class has played a significant role in the Chinese political and social transformations of the 20th century. Working-class culture has also played a significant role in China's modern history of revolution and socialist industrialisation. To better historicise the cultural practices of contemporary migrant workers, this chapter aims to provide a necessary historical review of the working class and its cultural construction processes, with a focus on the relation of culture to political struggle. The chapter, therefore, covers three major historical periods: the revolutionary period before 1949; the socialist era (1949-1978) when the New China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong and the CCP, carried out radical socialist experiments and the process of making the socialist working class; and the reform era since 1978, when the 'old' working class suffered from the radical marketisation and the 'new' migrant workers emerged in tandem. The chapter then provides a concise review of the labour unrest and the 'new workers' in the making to contextualise the current debates.

As the thesis mainly concerns the collective identity, ideology and resistance of migrant workers though investigating the cultural practice of grass-roots labour organisations in the waves of labour unrest, I consider it to be political. Therefore, the review and discussion emphasise the culture and ideology of the vanguard party, the

CCP and the working class. The core of this chapter concerns how the CCP constructed working class culture in the revolution and socialist era, and how that culture was dismantled in the reform era. The main cultural policy and institutions are the focus of the review. Moreover, the review also considers how gender operated throughout the process.

2.1 The revolutionary era

2.1.1 The emergence of a Chinese working class

The entire 20th century was a very turbulent period in Chinese history. In 1911, the XinHai Revolution broke out to overthrow the Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in China. Subsequently, the Republic of China (ROC) was established on 1st January 1912. XuanTong, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, issued a certificate of abdication. The Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP), which was based on the guiding ideology of the Three Principles of the People,[4] began a long-term one-party dictatorship in China. The rule of the CNP ended in 1949 when it lost control over most of mainland China in the four-year civil war with the CCP and the CNP retreated to Taiwan.

The period before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 saw the early formation and development stage of the Chinese working class. China had suffered from both Western invaders and warlords during this era. The Western imperialist forces established their settlements in treaty port cities and enjoyed a high degree of extraterritoriality, while the warlords divided the country into several parts to control them with military power. With the initial industrialisation in coastal areas

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[4] Also known as 'San-min Doctrine' (*san min zhuyi*), a political ideology developed by Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the ROC. The three principles can be summarised as nationalism, democracy and the livelihood of the people.

(mainly the treaty port cities), the working class emerged.

As the new industries initially emerged in the treaty port cities, the workers were usually hired from the local urban residents or the peasants who left their villages due to various natural disasters and poverty (Chesneaux and Kagan, 1983, p.70). The peasants were the group from which the 'working class'(Hershatter, 1986; Perry,1993) originated. The working class that moved from the countryside to the cities between the late 1800s and the early 1900s shared some similarity in terms of origins to the rural-urban migrant workers in contemporary China, including 'the exploitation and alienation to which they have been subjected' (Carrillo and Goodman, 2012, p.2). For instance, the peasant workers in the early 20th century 'maintained close contact with their original rural districts, where they returned in the events of strikes or layoffs', and the working class 'remained very close socially to the peasantry', and this 'was to be highly advantageous politically to labour movement strategy' (Chesneaux and Kagan, 1983, p.70). However, the population remained rather small as the most widespread sector of production was still agriculture, and peasantry remained the largest population. It has been estimated based on a census in the 1920s that there were approximately 1.5 million workers in modern big industry and the service industries (ibid. p.68), less than one percent of the national population.

The early stage Chinese working class started their own resistance to capital from the very beginning. There were 152 strikes from 1895 to 1918 to demand wage increases or to protest long working hours and poor working conditions (Chesneaux and Kagan, 1983, p.73). Labour unrest played a crucial role in the political transformation in the revolutionary era. As Perry observes,

> The 1911 Revolution toppling the imperial system, the May Fourth Movement ushering in a new political culture, the rise and demise of the Nationalist regime, the victory of the Communists, and even the shape of post-1949 politics have all been deeply affected by the Chinese labour movement (1993, p.2).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the labour movement grew in tandem. As the CCP revolutionaries relied on the emerging Chinese working class and mobilised them to fight against the regime and old social institutions, the political influence of Chinese working class became significant. Some argue that the Chinese working class is loaded with political ideals beyond its original causes and its organisational degree is also highly political and constrained by the CCP mobilisation (Yu, 2006). Yu suggests that the ideological mobilisation efforts of the CCP organised workers on the shop floor. For instance, the party members and activists sought to turn factories into 'schools' for Marxism-Leninism through various activities (Chesneaux, 1968; Perry, 1993, 2012). By some accounts of the institutions behind the history of CCP development, the base of the CCP institution was the cultivation and utilization of cultural and ideological resources, which shaped the way class identity and class consciousness was forged by the CPP during the revolutionary era (Perry, 2012).

2.1.2 Worker's clubs and the labour movement

Before the CCP became a ruling party, its (class) political proposition was to fight for the exploited and oppressed workers and peasants. Mao Zedong clearly stated that the urban working class was the leading class of the Chinese revolution when considering 'who is our enemy and who is our friend' in the *Analysis of the Classes of Chinese Society*. He placed the political identity of the working class as the leading class at the top of the Chinese revolution. The Chinese revolution was first 'national and then social' and the 'unorthodox blending of communism and nationalism was an outcome of semi-colonial conditions in which the ruling class either associated itself with imperialist interests or was too weak to lead a resistance' (Lin, 2006, p.40-42).

In the class theory of the CCP, the working class is the class it depends on and represents, and it is also the identity of the party. When the CCP was founded, it claimed that 'the Communist Party of China is the vanguard of the proletariat, it fights for the proletariat, and the party for the proletarian revolution' (The Editorial

Committee of Central Committee of the literature of Communist Party of China , 1989, p. 37). According to Wang Hui,

> in the political sense, rather than saying that the working class is the premise of the existence of the Communist Party, it is better to say that the mission of 'making the working class be a class' and ultimately realising the 'overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the seizure of power by the proletariat' provides the direct impetus for the establishment of the Communist Party of China. It can be said that without this mission there would be no such party (Wang, 2008, p. 26).

In 1921, shortly after the establishment of the Chinese Communist Group, the Chang Xin Dian Workers' Club (*gongren julebu*) was established to promote, educate, organise and mobilise workers by means of publishing newspapers and magazines (*The Sound of Labour* and *Worker's Weekly*) and night school. Deng Zhongxia, one of the revolutionary pioneers of the CCP, helped the railway workers to form a trade union in 1921. In the following year, the CCP successfully mobilised over 2,000 railway workers in Chang Xin Dian to strike through the worker's club activities. The Chang Xin Dian railway workers' strike was considered to be the start of the Chinese labour movement as Mao Zedong praised it as 'the Chinese labour movement started from the Chang Xin Dian railway workers' strike'[5]. Since then, the Workers' Club and Worker's night school were the main forms of CCP's struggle in the cities. Subsequently, Shanghai Huxi Workers' Club, Anyuan Coalminers' Club, Jinghan Workers' Club were established (Deng, 2016).

The early revolutionary struggles of the CCP were closely linked to the labour movement in China. The CCP carried out revolutionary cultural practice activities for the workers in the cities. Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and Li Lisan, among other first generation CCP leaders, led labour movements in Chinese cities. They tried to spread

[5] Mao commented on Chang Xin Dian in 1956 during a meeting with Teng Daiyuan, the then-minister of Railways. See media report (in Chinese) http://www.chinapictorial.com.cn/ch/se/txt/2016-07/06/content_723721_2.htm

and practice the values and ideals of the Communist Party to 'enlighten' the workers by publishing worker's newspapers, establishing worker's night schools and Workers' Clubs in factories and workers' settlements, teaching literacy and advocating and organising workers to actively strive for their class rights and interests. Workers' Clubs in the cities not only played a leading role in culture and the ideological front of CCP's revolution but also become a very practical mobilising force to foster collective actions.

Anyuan coalmine workers' club was once considered the revolutionary heart of the CCP (Perry, 2008). In her analysis of the Anyuan revolution history, Perry explains how the CCP got 'ordinary Chinese to understand, accept, and in some cases embrace revolutionary authority' by 'cultural positioning' or 'the strategic development of a range of symbolic sources for purposes of political persuasion' (Perry, 2012, p. 4). The centrality and usefulness of 'culture' in analysing political struggles is repeatedly emphasised in her insightful analysis of Anyuan and sheds light on the contemporary migrant workers' political struggles as well.

The communication and cultural activities carried out in the worker's clubs not only played the role of education and communicated communism thoughts and collective identity formation, but also the initial organisation and mobilisation attempts of the CCP (Perry 2012). The early members of the CCP mainly constituted young progressive intellectuals. The Workers' Clubs also served as training grounds for the CCP in the revolution. In the process of organising the Workers' Clubs, they gradually trained and selected activists from the workers as the backbone of the labour movement. These labour activists also became important human resources in the following rural revolutionary struggle (similar to the current migrant workers, Chinese workers in the early 20th century mainly came from the countryside).

For example, in Mao Zedong's '1927 Report on an Investigation of the Hunan Peasant Movement' (*Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao*)*,* many backbone members of the peasant association that played crucial role in the movement were

found to be the former Anyuan coalminers who attended the night school classes of the CCP (Yu, 2001). Many worker-recruits from the Anyuan strike also participated as the backbone in the Autumn Harvest Uprising and joined the Red Army to fight the anti-Japanese war and the subsequent civil war (He, 1993, p. 182).

Although both Chang Xin Dian and Anyuan labour strikes were crushed by the warlord troops and the CCP seized the entire Chinese regime through a 'rural encirclement of cities' strategy (*nongcun baowei chengshi*) and an 'armed struggle' strategy (*wuzhuang douzheng*), the labour movements were the focus and main mode of its political struggle in the early stage of revolution. The struggle of these early urban revolution established the cultural and political relationship between the CCP and the labour movement and the urban working class. For the CCP, the labour movements in the cities made a historical preparation for the victory of the Chinese revolution and it had a great impact on the cultural policy of workers after the founding of the People's Republic. The revolutionary legacy also became an important source for some current grassroots labour organisations, especially MWH in terms of symbolic/discursive struggle and organisational strategy (elaborated on in the empirical chapters).

2.1.3 Women in revolution

Women's claims for emancipation emerged amid social and cultural dissonance in early 20th century China and women's emancipation was closely associated with the national modernising project (Liu, Karl and Ko., 2013; Wang, 1999). After the May Fourth Movement in 1919, there was a wave of liberal-leaning feminism promoting women's individual rights and freedom (in education, work, marriage) in cities (Wu and Dong, 2019). Yet the scale and scope of the gender liberation in the ROC was limited. For instance, the new gender practices promoted in the cities were a long way from reaching the rural areas and the vast majority of women in the countryside were only minimally impacted (Evans, 1997). Moreover, it has been suggested that the women's liberation movement advocated by male intellectuals at this stage remained

largely androcentric as the male intellectuals considered it a part of the enlightenment and national modernising project (Liu et al., 2013). Therefore, tensions over 'whether to stress nationalism or gender oppression in the mobilisation of women' constantly existed (Gilmartin et al., 1994, p.20). In other words, in the intersectionality of nationalism and feminism, women's liberation was subjugated.

Meanwhile, left-wing female intellectuals actively participated in struggles for gender equality alongside their goals of national liberation. Many joined the CCP in the 1920s acknowledging that women's emancipation could only be realised in a socialist society (Wang, 2017). The CCP established the Women's Bureau in 1923 and employed the term 'women's work' (*funv gongzuo*) rather than 'feminism' (*nvquan zhuyi*) to differentiate themselves from the liberal-leaning feminism after the May Fourth Movement. The terms 'represent a Marxist theory of 'proletarian women's liberation'' – by highlighting 'proletarian' it 'declared their concern for class oppression' and indicated CCP's 'major constituency in this early stage was the urban working class' (Wang, 2017, pp.30-31).

As modern industry and factories sprang up in Chinese cities, women were hired on tiny wages to run the silk looms and textile machinery. The textile industry of China was built with the labour of China's earliest women industrial workers. In Shanghai, two-thirds of all workers and three-quarters of mill workers in the 1930s were women (Honig, 1986). Even at the very early stages, women workers were the agents in Chinese labour unrest. For instance, in 1912, 5,000 women silk workers struck factories near Guangdong (Selden, 1995, p.72). Women worker's resistance constituted both labour and gender struggles in China. The CCP feminists actively participated in mobilising women workers in factories (Honig, 1986; Hershatter, 1986; Wang, 2017). For instance, Honig reveals how CCP women members established ties with women workers by joining sisterhood societies in the 1940s to organise workers and how they encouraged women workers to attend study groups on women's rights and participate in political activities such as taking part in Women's

Day (1986, pp.210-232).

However, investigating the everyday lives of urban working class, both Honig (1986) and Hershatter (1986) delineate 'barriers to the formation of working-class consciousness in Marxist sense, that is, a militant consciousness rooted in recognition of unified working class confronting capitalist' (Selden, 1990, p.54). As Perry (1993) points out in examining the strikes in Shanghai, '(d)ifferent workers engage in different politics' (p.239). The working class were fragmented in terms of employment, native place and gender. Perry suggests that instead of being the 'obstacles to the fulfilment of the 'true' mission of the proletariat', the 'intraclass divisions' could be a basis for 'politically influential working-class action' as the different segments of one class may have forged linkages among broader political players (1993, pp.1-3). Although their analysis was based on labour movement in the early 20th century, the diversity of demands and ideology is still true in contemporary Chinese labour unrest. Therefore, facing the diverse demands, interests and ideology behind labour unrest, what kind of collective identity is constructed for the Chinese 'new workers'? What discursive resources are employed in the process? Whose interests are represented? Whose voice has been excluded or shielded? Is it possible to forge a 'working class' culture? Is it possible to develop an alternative way of imagining the future? What kind of imagination is it and why is it so? What benefits and challenges might it bring to the Chinese labour movement and the Chinese workers? These questions will be explored in the forthcoming empirical chapters.

2.1.4 Mao's Yan'an talks: The two principles

> *In our struggle for the liberation of the Chinese people there are various fronts, among which there are the fronts of the pen and of the gun, the cultural and the military fronts. To defeat the enemy, we must rely primarily on the army with guns. But this army alone is not enough; we must also have a cultural army, which is absolutely indispensable for uniting our own ranks and defeating the enemy* (Mao, 1942).

The quote above vividly illustrates the CCP's understanding of the role of culture in political struggle. Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' is an important theoretical source of the CCP's cultural policy during the revolutionary and socialist era. The Yan'an Talks established two core principles: the first is the question of who the literature and arts are for and thus established the guideline of 'literature and arts for the workers, peasants and soldiers'; the second is to set the principle that 'literature and arts are subordinated to politics'.

'Literature and Arts for the Workers, Peasants and Soldiers' is the first principle of cultural policy and theory established by the CCP. According to Mao Zedong in the 1942 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art': 'the question of 'for whom?' is fundamental; it is a question of principle… Our literature and arts are all for the mass, the people. It is firstly for the workers, peasants, and soldiers, created for them and used by them' (Mao, 1942). In Mao's words, there was no such thing as literature without class attributes: 'in the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines', if it is 'not serving the proletariat, then it is serving the bourgeoisie' (ibid). It sets a distinct, binary opposition to the class stance of the culture workers. The principle of 'literature and arts for the workers, peasants and soldiers' is an attempt to establish the culture leadership of the proletarian (of which the urban working class is the main body) in the revolution, and to fight against and diminish the capitalist culture, pursing collectivism and opposing individualism.

Another important principal in Mao's Yan'an Talks is that literature and art are subordinate to politics: 'Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine' (Mao, 1942). Mao comprehensively expounded the relationship between culture (literature and arts) and politics, and set guidelines for the CCP's cultural works and the whole revolution. As previously noted, revolutionary literature and arts played a major role in the political struggle and

process of the Chinese revolutions before the Yan'an Forum. Mao was fully aware of the power of culture and ideology: 'Literature and art are subordinate to politics, but in their turn exert a great influence on politics. Revolutionary literature and art are part of the whole revolutionary cause… but only through politics can the needs of the class and the masses find expression in concentrated form' (ibid).

I am aware that there are debates on Mao's Yan'an talks (Goldman,1997; Hsia, 1963; Meisner, 2007), although such debates per se are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it should be pointed out that Mao's Yan'an Talks had their own historical context. In the 'revolutionary holy land' of Yan'an at that time there were many progressive intellectuals and youths, and there was a lot of controversy about the relationship between culture and revolution. Mao's speech was delivered in response to these controversies. More importantly, it is undeniable that it had a guiding significance for the CCP revolutionary activities after 1942 and the construction of workers' culture after the founding of the PRC. The influence of the speech on culture policy and the current migrant worker's labour activists are the main concerns for the thesis.

In 1943, the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee issued 'The Decision to Implement the Party's Literary Policy'. This clearly pointed out that Mao Zedong's 'Talks' 'prescribes the Party's basic policy toward the current Chinese literature and arts movement', and it required that 'all CCP literature and arts workers should study and implement the instructions of this document'. Since then, Mao's Yan'an talks officially became the principal document of the Party on the fronts of culture and ideology (The Editorial Committee of Yan'an Literature and Art Collection, 1985, p. 193). It also had a significant role after the founding of the PRC in constructing the cultural hegemony of the socialist working-class, as will be further discussed in the next section.

The cultural legacy from Mao's Yan'an Talks resonates with contemporary migrant workers' struggles. For instance, in my fieldwork, I found that the core members of

the migrant worker's labour organisation self-taught the Mao's Yan'an talks, and took its analysis of culture, revolutionary missions and actions as a theoretical and historical reference point to assess their own practice and imagine their own culture. I will further elaborate on how this inflects the migrant worker labour activists' understanding of culture and politics as well as the tensions in their rigid reading of it in Chapter 5 and 6.

2.2 Socialist China

2.2.1 Master of the nation

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the CCP placed the urban industrial working class at the forefront and established/defined the national nature as the 'people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants'.[6] Although the rural peasants were the main revolutionary forces for the party when seizing power during the revolution under the 'rural encirclement of the cities' (*nongcun baowei chengshi*) approach, the working-class was claimed to be in the position of leadership. When the national victory was won in 1949, the economy was in deep crisis. The New China needed support from the urban working class to maintain economic production, political stability and national development under the socialist project.

In the New China, the connotation and composition of the working class had changed with the completion of the socialist revolution and the socialist transformation under the rule of the CCP, who relied on the urban working class to achieve modernisation and industrialisation. The relationship between the workers and the means of production and their socio-economic status in socialist China had undergone

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[6] It was firstly proposed by Mao Zedong based on Marxism-Leninism and written into the Constitution of 1954 and 1982. See: http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html

fundamental change. As the means of production was owned by the state and the working class was announced as the 'master of the nation', the Chinese working class became the owner of the means of production and the 'leading class' in society. In official rhetoric, the urban working class was affirmed to be the most progressive class and the most advanced force of production in Chinese society.

Figure 2.1 Socialist urban workers assemble watch movement in Chongqing, China

In terms of composition, the working class covered most Chinese staff and workers (*zhigong*) who obtained income through wages with urban residential accounts (*hukou*), including the workers of state-owned and collectively-owned enterprises, the staff of government agencies and institutions (Huang, 2008, p.69 in Pringle, 2011). The work-unit (*danwei*) system was established in the 1950s as a means to connect the state with individual workers directly (Bian, 1994). The work-unit is the 'institutional core of industrial relations' in socialist China (Pringle, 2011), through which, the party-state can allocate and control resources (economic and labour). Labour is a 'national resource' rather than commodity in Maoist ideology, therefore the state can allocate it (Bian, 1994, p. 51). The party-state also provided a wide range of welfare, such as health insurance, housing benefits and food subsidies (Jia, 2009)

to urban workers through the work-unit system. Life-time employment, known as the 'iron rice bowl' was realised through the work-unit system as well.

However, the relationship between the CCP and the Chinese workers was not always smooth sailing but mired in labour turbulence in the process of establishing a 'worker's state' (Chen, 2014, p.3). Yet, the work-unit, as a top-down system, remains rather durable and stable in the socialist era. The 'master of the nation' was made by the revolution (Walder, 1984) and its privileges were granted by the party-state. The top-down process indicated that their privileges could be easily taken away when the party-state decided to reform (Wang Xiangxian, 2016). The embedded risk of the 'old' working class was also noticed by 'new workers' labour activists in contemporary China. For instance, informants from MWH emphasised keeping their autonomy and denied sharing the same destiny as the 'old' working class while fighting for their socialist political agenda (see Chapter 6). Moreover, the work-unit system was underpinned by the *hukou* regulation that 'strictly enforced boundaries that kept peasants out' of the work-unit membership and the privileges and welfare that came with it (Pringle, 2011, p.12).

2.2.2 Worker's arts and literature: Establishing socialist cultural leadership

The original essence of Chinese socialist cultural policy was closely linked to the class politics of the CCP. On 19th July 1949, the status of Mao's Yan'an talks was once again officially confirmed in the form of an official declaration. At the First Chinese National Literary and Artistic Workers Congress, the General Assembly adopted a resolution that stipulated Mao's Yan'an talk's principles as the 'new direction of development of literature and art' that the cultural community abided by. In terms of cultural policy, the Congress clarified the status of the 'workers, peasants and soldiers' as the 'master'. It was proposed to create a literary and art team of the workers for the workers. The goals were clearly stated as 'workers write about workers', 'workers play as workers', and 'workers sing about workers'. That is to say, they were not merely the objects and themes of the literature and artistic creations

from the intellectuals and cultural elites. Rather, they were both the subjects and the creators of their own culture.

On 12th November 1957, the official media 'People's Daily' published an editorial, clearly proposing the task and goal of establishing a true team for the working-class literature and arts. 'Worker's Literature and Art' was a culture policy formed under the principles of Mao's Yan'an Talks. Its purpose was to break the monopoly of intellectuals and cultural elites on literary creation, so that workers could truly participate in the practice of culture and so that cultural expression was no longer a privilege but something that ordinary people could participate in and enjoy. The introduction of the culture policy of 'Workers' Literature and Arts' reflected the legal status of the working class as the leading class on cultural and ideology grounds.

As a top-down culture policy promoted by the CCP, one of the most important characteristics of the 'Workers' Literature and Art' was the 'ideological production of centralized and unified leadership of the central government, that is, the centralized, unified and top-down ideology mobilisation from the state ruling power' (Hu, 2016, p. 112). In other words, it was a tool employed by the CCP to mobilise the working class ideologically and to construct a cultural hegemony in a preferred way. Thus, the urban workers could be united and mobilised under the 'proletarian ideology' to practice and realise the goals of the party-state.

Some scholars suggest that though the working-class culture developed in the socialist era led by the CCP can only be understood in the special context of the socialist state system, and the cultural practice of the socialist workers is the best interpretation of the socialist ideology in the Mao's era (Yuan and Ding, 2008). Admittedly, this state-led working-class culture did not originate purely from the consciousness of the urban workers. But it constructed a participatory politics of the Chinese urban working class that 'constitutes the 'whole life experience' of the Chinese workers as it is their 'living experience'' (Hu, 2016, pp.117-118).

2.2.3 Worker's cultural palace: Creating a working-class public culture space

The PRC, as a nation that relied on the urban working class and the union of workers and peasants, needed to fulfil its promise towards the working class. If it is fair to say that the workers' club was the carrier that the CCP employ to communicate revolutionary thoughts and ideals, to foster worker's culture and to mobilise resources and collective actions, it developed into the 'Workers' Culture Palace' (*gongren wenhua gong*) after the founding of the PRC. Before the Reform and Opening-up, almost all major and medium-sized cities had constructed a Workers' Cultural Palace in China. In 1984, there were 37,463 Workers' Cultural Palaces and Workers' Clubs nationwide (Liu & Wang, 1993). All the Cultural Palaces were vertically led by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU).

Though there were other forms of worker's arts and literature in this era, I opt to focus on the institutionalized Workers' Cultural Palace in this sub-section for the following reasons. First, on the culture and ideology fronts, the Workers' Cultural Palace is considered to be the most characteristic product of the class culture politics in the socialist period of the PRC. Secondly, it is a public cultural space for socialist urban workers constructed and sustained by the party-state and managed by the ACFTU. In other words, it is a political and ideological project that was materialized and institutionalized. From reviewing it, we can see how the main cultural policy and principles operated more clearly. Thirdly, the history of the state-led working-class cultural space echoes the new worker's cultural practice in contemporary China (Qiu and Wang, 2012). The party-state's practice on socialist cultural space is useful for the analysis of the migrant worker's cultural resistance.

The Workers' Cultural Palaces and Workers' Clubs had their origins in the 19th century Russian 'people's house' (*narodnye doma*), which provided a communal space for workers and their family to relax and socialize. To develop a proletarian culture (*Prolekult*) and reshape the masses along socialist lines after the October Revolution, a large number of workers' clubs and cultural palaces were set up by the

Soviet authorities (Siegelbaum, 1999, p. 79). The CCP drew on models from the Soviet Union while keeping the experience from the revolutionary era in building the Workers' Cultural Palaces.

The Workers' Cultural Palace's foremost purpose was to fulfil the political functions under the socialist ideology proclaiming that workers were the 'masters' of the nation and the enterprise. The Workers' Cultural Palaces also had the same role of cultural enlightenment as the Workers' Club and night schools in the revolutionary era. The urban working class was crucial in building a new socialist China and putting the country on the track to industrialisation and modernisation. The role of the Workers' Cultural Palace was to make the urban working class into the 'master of the nation', realise the cultural leadership of the working class and actively participate in the construction and management of the development of the nation's industrialisation (Hu, 2016). Moreover, it provided a public space for the urban working class to connect in a material form (Hung, 2013).

In the official slogan, the Workers' Cultural Palace was called 'the paradise and school of workers'. Rather than simply providing recreation for the workers, the CCP realised early on that setting up 'cultural palaces' to promote workers' culture and to launch educational programmes for the urban working class was not only a form of cultural welfare but also a national development strategy. Marx associated leisure with productivity and argued that free time – which includes leisure time as well as time for higher activities – naturally transformed anyone who enjoyed it into a different person, transforming their subjectivity, and it was this different person who then entered the direct process of production. Marx's 'higher activities' include education 'in the arts, sciences, etc.' that people do in their free time (Marx, 1980, pp. 142-148). The educational programmes (both technical and political) run by the CCP are in line with Marx's argument that it was crucial to ensure workers' personal development in leisure time and that this would ultimately enhance productivity.

The ACFTU approved the 'Regulations on the Organisation of Trade Unions Clubs (Cultural Palace)' on 7th September 1950. It stipulated the main functions of the Workers' Cultural Palace: 'It is the central place for the cultural and recreational activities of workers and their families. Through various cultures, arts and sports activities, enhancing the political, cultural and technological level of workers and their families, establishing a new working attitude and improving the health of workers to ensure the completion of production plans.' As stated in the regulation, political education and production agitation were the two most important functions in the initial establishment of the Workers' Cultural Palace.

The Workers' Cultural Palaces were the means and space of organising the urban workers' leisure time, raising their socialist consciousness as 'masters' of the nation and the 'leading force' of modernisation and enhancing productivity in a top-down political-cultural project. Hu studied the Shanghai Workers' Cultural Palace and suggested that the Palace served the political needs of the country in the three decades after the founding of the PRC. Its function is constantly changing. It was not so much a representation of the working-class culture and ideology. Rather, it was a demonstration of national ideology. However, it indeed profoundly influenced and constructed a new way of life for the Chinese working class and shaped a new Chinese working-class culture (Hu, 2016, pp. 58-59). The socialist worker's culture cast a long shadow on the subjectivities and identities of the Chinese urban working class even in the post-Mao era, and Workers' Cultural Palaces were just one form of it. For instance, it resonated with the various cultural activities the migrant worker labour activists tried to provide in the migrants community in the outskirt of the cities (see Chapter 5).

2.2.4 'Women hold half the sky'

In 1949, for the first time, the newly founded PRC wrote that 'women have equal rights with men in all aspects of politics, economy, culture and education, and social life' in the 'Common Program' (*gongtong gangling*), which had a temporary

constitutional effect, and it was written again into the Constitution of 1954 and 1982 (Du, 2017). It was confirmed by the Constitution that equality between men and women could be said to have been a basic national policy in the legal sense. Moreover, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was established to 'vertically reach all women down to the rural villages and urban neighbourhoods nationwide' (Wang, Z., 2017, p.12). The equalizing of gender and class during this period was intertwined in the broader socialist project and achieved significant outcomes. In 1949, women only accounted for 7.5% of the urban work force (Zuo, 2016, p.27), but nine in ten able-bodied urban women were employed by the end of Mao's era (Zuo and Jiang, 2009). 'Equal work for equal pay' (*tonggong tongchou*) between men and women was included in the Constitution of 1954.

Moreover, the ACWF employed various cultural activities (including drama, films, music) to communicate an ideology of gender equality among people (Wang, Z., 2016; He, 2017). The gender stereotypes were challenged by the imagery of 'new women' of the working class created by the discursive power of the party-state (Chen, 2003). Women model workers 'functioned as everyday icons' in the media and their jobs (such as tractor driver and pilot) breached the old gender boundaries (Chen, 2003, p.270). The slogan 'women hold half the sky' was proposed by Mao Zedong and has been widely used in various media (such as posters) to encourage women to participate in the socialist nation-building project.

Domestic work was recognized 'as a form of contribution to society' in the 1950s (Zuo, 2016, p.30). The then-prime minister Zhou Enlai considered that domestic labour was also a form of social labour and was equally glorious (W. Liu, 2007). Although such recognition remained symbolic as it continued to be unpaid, it brought the 'glories of labour' to the realm of social reproduction, while contemporary labour activism fell somewhat short in acknowledging it in their cultural practice (see Chapter 6). Various welfare policies were introduced to support the urban workers through the aforementioned work-unit (*danwei*) system during this era. Gendered

policy was also developed within the work-unit system for urban women workers. For instance, paid maternity leave was introduced in the 1950 Labour Insurance provisions that granted women workers 56 days off after child-birth, as well as free medical examinations during pregnancy.

Moreover, childcare and kindergartens began to flourish to accommodate women workers' needs in the 1950s. Deng Yingchao, the vice Chairwoman of ACWF, urged the industrial cities to 'consolidate or increase childcare agencies and kindergartens in factories' in her 1950 report (Deng, quoted in Zuo, 2016, p.35). Kang Keqing, another vice Chairwoman of ACWF considered the childcare centres to be 'important aspects of socializing housework' in her 1978 report (Kang, quoted in Zuo, 2016, p.36). In other words, as pointed out by women communist cadres, like Deng Yingchao and Kang Keqing in reports to ACWF, they not only acknowledged the burden of domestic work (childcare) of women workers, but also developed policy to ease the child-rearing burden of working mothers so that they could fully participate in the socialist nation building with their male counterparts. After almost six decades, the rural-migrant women labour activists also acknowledged the necessity of relieving women workers from domestic work to liberate their agency in the post-Mao China (see Chapter 8).

Admittedly, in reality, the state's position on gender equality was not always consistent. In the official discourse, since the 'Common Agenda', both men and women have had equal rights and 'equal work equal pay'; but in practice, these policies were suggested to have fallen short of the rhetoric. Feminist scholars reveal that the state has always used different gendering strategies to achieve gender division of labour in the field of production and reproduction. Harrel points out that, due to the fact that women still shoulder most domestic work, the double burden of work and family inflected women worker's engagement in social affairs and political meetings, campaigns that in turn kept them from higher-ranking positions (2000, p.71).

However, gender equality was placed under the class conflict/struggle and the

production goal that was subordinated to the state's modernisation and industrialisation plan during the socialist era (Gao, 1994; Song, 2012; Du, 2017). In the field of production, women played the role of a reserve army of labour, entering or exiting the production field according to political and economic needs (Andors, 1983; Gao, 1994). Moreover, some suggest that the 'socialist transformation took place without challenging traditional gender ideas about family roles' (Zuo, 2016, p.67), therefore by separating the production and re-production terrains by gender, women (especially working-class women) become the main bearers of domestic work in the field of reproduction and suffered work-family conflicts in the double burden of work and housework (Rofel, 1999; Evans, 2008; Song, 2012). Both the improvement and the limitation of the gender equalizing process in the socialist era had profound meaning for understandings of contemporary gender inequality in China.

2.3 Reform and opening up

2.3.1 Unmaking socialist workers

After the introduction of the 'Reform and Opening Up' in 1978, accompanied by intense changes in Chinese society, the composition and socio-economic status of the Chinese working class changed significantly. A large number of studies have demonstrated that differentiation and changes of composition occurred within the Chinese working class during the decades of China's social transformation. China's integration into global capitalism shifted the nature and structure of employment. China's labour relations have undergone a dramatic change over the last three decades. There have been two major changes in the structure of employment: the commodification of labour; and the introduction of casualization (Friedman and Lee, 2010, p.2). Urban workers in socialist China were allocated to various types of state- and collective-owned enterprises and entitled to a de facto lifetime employment that was expressed as the 'iron rice bowl' before 'the Reform and Opening Up' (Friedman

and Lee, 2010). With the reform of state-owned enterprises alongside the process of rural migration into the cities seeking employment opportunities, the socialist social contract made way for the market-driven legal contract for Chinese labour. The socialist protections, such as work units (*dan wei*), were demolished, thus workers have been forced into the exploitative capitalist system. The socialist working class was eroded and their relative position in society has changed dramatically.

The commodification of labour and the introduction of casualization are extremely painful processes for Chinese urban workers. The policy of mass redundancies from SOEs was known as '*xia gang*' (laid-off, literally meaning to step down from one's post) in Chinese. These laid-off workers had once been the 'master' of the nation but then dislocated and reduced to 'mendicant' (Solinger, 2004). The privatization of the state-owned sector triggered unprecedented levels of labour insurgency from the 'old' working class throughout the process (Friedman and Lee, 2010, p.518). The majority of unemployed workers 'have become desolate and degraded as probationary part-time workers in the informal service economies or jobless non-workers' (Won 2004, p.85). The socio-economic status of the working class decreased significantly. The vulnerable position of the industrial workers as the main body of the Chinese working class became an undeniable fact in the resource allocation system and ideological domain. The Chinese working class is no longer the 'leading class' but the 'underclass' (*diceng*) in the post-Mao era.

Even the process of being 'laid-off' is gendered as middle-aged women workers were among the first to be laid-off. According to official statistics, by the end of 1997, 11.51 million workers were laid-off in China's cities, of whom 6.8 million (or 59.2%) were women workers (Wang, 2003, p.161). Moreover, since the state also retreated from providing welfare to support the urban workers, the day-care centres or kindergartens established in many SOEs during the socialist era to 'liberate' women into labour force were closed (Jiang, 2007). Hence, the double burden of work and domestic work once again increased alongside other factors that led to women

worker's subordination. It has been suggested that with 'the increasing denigration of labour', women workers are losing their broader social roles in post-Mao society (Zuo, 2016, p.88). Though they never enjoyed the welfare, women migrant workers experienced similar difficulties, as I observed during fieldwork. The double burden and the intensified work-family conflicts of long working hours rendered their agency to participate in broader social affairs and labour a struggle (see Chapter 8).

2.3.2 Dismantling working-class culture

The market reform since 1978 has been a process of undoing state socialism. The market economy is synchronized with a market-oriented cultural policy. After the introduction of the national policy of 'reform and opening up' and 'emancipating the mind' (*jiefang sixiang*), the culture policy of the CCP has undergone considerable changes, and it no longer follows the spirit of Mao's Yan'an Talks. In the culture and ideology domain, there have been debates and conflicts about the culture leadership in the socialist era. Under the spirit of 'emancipating the mind', some culture workers began to constantly challenge the past literary and artistic bottom-line set by the Yan'an Talks.

The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee passed the resolution to stop using the slogan 'taking class struggle as the guiding principle' (*yi jieji douzheng wei gang*) and replace it with the slogan 'taking economic construction as the key' (*yi jingji jianshe wei zhongxin*). On 30th October 1979, The CCP decided at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Literary and Artistic Workers that the Party would 'no longer continue to mention the slogan that literature and arts are subordinate to politics' as 'this slogan is easy to become the theoretical basis for the interference of literature and art' (Deng, 1994, p.255). Deng Xiaoping proposed a new standard: 'Whether it is beneficial or harmful to the realisation of the four modernisations should be the most fundamental and only standard measure of all work' (ibid.).

Subsequently, the official *People's Daily* published an editorial on 26th July 1980 entitled 'Literature and Art serve the people and the Socialism' (*wenyi wei renmin fuwu, wei shehuizhuyi fuwu*). 'Workers, peasants and soldiers' were replaced by a broader term: 'the people'. The culture policy and principles of the Maoist era had been officially abandoned. Under the leadership of the new economic system and state power, the 'market' has become an important leading force in cultural production and dispelled the state as the single leading force. The party-state has withdrawn from the urban working class' cultural and entertainment activities, as the market reform has led to 'the unmaking of an entire generation of workers rooted in Maoist socialist tradition and institutions' (Lee, 2007, p.39). Workers' literature and arts have also moved from the centre to the edge of the culture and ideology stage.

Hampered by a lack of support from the party-state, the Workers' Cultural Palaces have been heavily affected in this process. According to ACFTU's survey in 2006, its grassroots trade unions have directly affiliated 26,000 Workers' Cultural Palaces and Clubs (ACFTU, 2006). The number has dropped significantly from the 1980s. Those that survived have transformed dramatically to adapt to the market economy. In parallel with the privatization of the factory and the wave of lay-offs, the Workers' Cultural Palace has also undergone a market-oriented transformation. In 2002, the Workers' Cultural Palaces were asked to detach from the trade unions in terms of affiliation and delete the name 'Workers' from the title. They could then be transferred to non-profit 'public' cultural institutions and funded by the local cultural department of the government (Xing, 2010, p. 823). In other words, the Cultural Palaces no longer solely served the urban working class, instead they served all urban inhabitants. The cultural public space of the workers has disappeared, and the urban working class as the subject has also withdrawn from the cultural leadership of the party-state. In other words, the cultural hegemony of the working class led by the party-state as a state-ideological project collapsed during the market reform.

However, the dismantling of 'old' socialist working-class culture and the 'disappearance' of public culture space of socialist workers does not mean the working class no longer needs their own culture space and their own culture. This demand exists as the new industrial workers in the cities, mainly constituted of migrant workers, emerged alongside the market reforms and the dismantling of the 'old' socialist working class from the Mao-era. The dramatic retreat of the Party-state from the cultural domain of the working class opens up possibility for grass-roots labour activists in the post-reform era.

2.3.3 The making of 'peasant workers'

With the destruction of the social contract and the emergence of market-driven employment relations, a large cheap labour force was needed to develop the market economy; thus, a new social group of rural-urban migrant workers emerged in this process of China's globalization. In tandem with the process of dismantling the socialist working class in China came the process of reformation of the Chinese working class, with rural-urban migrants as the main body.

Rural-urban migrant workers or 'peasant workers' (*nongmin gong*) are not new in China. As mentioned, peasants were the main source of urban workers in pre-1949 China (Hershatter, 1986; Perry, 1993). In the socialist era of the PRC, they were also employed as temporary labourers in state-owned or collective enterprises (Walder, 1984). However, the large-scale emergence of rural-urban migrant workers is a new phenomenon since the market reforms. Historically, all Chinese citizens were divided into two categories after 1955 – rural or urban – depending on the category their mothers belonged to. The effect of this policy was not only to control the spatial mobility of people, but also to differentiate the redistribution of resources for people's living conditions and development possibilities in the de facto favour of urban residents. As one of the fundamental components of the socialist economy, this particular redistribution system has been identified as being the source of the reproductive mechanism of social inequality (Szelényi, 2010).

The control of physical mobility in China has been loosened to provide the cities with cheap labour from the rural areas since the market reform. The mass pool of rural-urban migrant labour that was cloistered in the rural area by the household registration system (*hukou)* was set free in the mid-1980s to support the private sector. However, the rural-urban migration policies denied the rights of the migrants to urban *hukou* status, thus locking the migrant workers into a cycle of endless migration. The phrase 'peasant worker' denotes three basic elements: rural household registration (*nongmin*), the worker (*gong*) and the transformation of trade. This term also implies an ambiguous identity in the current social structure. 'Peasant worker' denotes a combination of peasant and worker and indicates the dual nature of the possessor's identity. This combination maintains the ambivalence of the identity and draws a boundary between migrant workers from both social categories of peasant and urban worker, and Chinese migrant workers are locked in this ambivalent position pending a fundamental change in the household registration system. According to an analysis of the census in 2000, less than 7.1% of interprovincial migrant workers obtained urban *hukou* status (Sun and Fan, 2011, p.99).

Moreover, the household registration system is interwoven with the introduction of the market economy and capitalist production relations in China. The subalternity of the rural-urban migrant workers has been noticed by many scholars (see Chapter 1). The Chinese state developed an institutional infrastructure for the reform while inheriting the socialist institutions and ideologies from the pre-market reform era (Chen, 2009, p.183). The structure differed from those of 19th century Europe (earlier feudal or bourgeois states). Although based on the study of female migrant workers, Sun's work highlights the double dilemma and the dual elements of oppression of the entire social group, as they 'must serve two masters, the Chinese state and the market, whose desires at times converge and at other times diverge' (2010, p.55). Therefore, the rural-urban migrant workers that emerged as the 'new workers' under capitalist industrialisation over the last four decades faced a unique socio-political context. First, the *hukou* system locked the rural-urban migrant workers in the semi-

proletarianization process and created divisions and ambivalent identities and rendered their class consciousness among the social group (Lee, 2007; Pan and Lu, 2010). For instance, Pun (1999, 2005) argues that the new term '*da gong*' (wage labour) signifies a lesser status as a hired hand in the market, compared to the term '*gong ren*' (worker) in the socialist era, which carried the highest status in the rhetoric. A second uniqueness is rooted in the official trade union (ACFTU). Due to the fact that the ACFTU was under tight control of the party-state, it did not actually represent the workers and the rural-urban migrant workers were not really recognized by it (Howell, 2012; Friedman, 2014). The role of the ACFTU in relation to workers and labour activism will be discussed in section 2.4.

2.3.4 The reproduction of gender inequality in rural-urban migration

Chinese rural-urban migrant workers are a highly heterogeneous social group (Niu and Xie, 2007). Rural-urban migration per se is also a highly gendered process, the patriarchy is deeply entrenched and gender inequality has been reproduced alongside the migration. In this sub-section, I provide a brief review of the reproduction of gender inequality in the migration process with a focus on the role of state and capital following the review of gender and class in previous sections, to better understand the gendered difficulties for migrant women.

As mentioned in previous sections, gender was placed under class struggle in the history of revolution and the socialist era in China. After the Reform and Opening up, the implementation of gender equality once again gave way to the goal of economic development. Physical differences between gender and women's roles in the family were once again highlighted (Woo, 1994). This affected women in the labour market, making women 'the last to be hired' and 'the first to be fired' (Entwisle and Henderson, 2000). In the countryside, married women bore the burden of agricultural production while shouldering the responsibility of reproduction: childcare, housework and support for the elderly, therefore they lagged behind men in the process of migration (Bossen, 2002; Jacka, 1997).

The patriarchal system has deep institutional and ideological roots in rural China. The distribution system of farmland and homesteads (*zhaiji di*) as the basic survival and production resources of peasants is highly gendered. Although in the statutory law, the land rights of rural women are confirmed, study on land rights of rural women reveals that many Chinese villages continue to use the 'Ding-Kou system' (*ding-kou zhi*)[7], a traditional patriarchal land system in rural China, which determines that women's basic rights are attached to male members of the family: a woman is a father's daughter or a wife to a husband, rather than an independent individual in the distribution of land in villages (Guo, 2016). The deep-rooted patriarchy is considered to be the institutional cause of rural women's poverty.[8]

Admittedly, working as wage labour in cities has given rural women the opportunity to temporarily escape the bondage of rural gender relations, and a certain degree of autonomy has been obtained by selling labour for livelihood (Pun, 2005). 'Seeing the world' and 'seeking opportunities' to expand personal freedom and life choices (Tan, 1997) has progressive meaning for the rural-urban women migrant workers. Some researchers argue that migrating from rural areas to cities enables female migrant workers to challenge their traditional gender role and structurally resist the patriarchy (Davin, 2005; X. Zhang, 1999).

However, the literature also shows that the state and capital use gender to create divisions between migrant workers, and that women workers are subject to multiple oppressions and forms of exploitation (Jin, 2010). Socio-structural gender differences are mainly reflected in three aspects: demographic characteristics, migration patterns and labour market (Tan, 1997). The various differences are intertwined with and constitute the inequality faced by women migrant workers: male peasants are first

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[7] A household system developed in the Qing dynasty that formulate man as 'ding' (丁), the labour, and woman as 'kou' (口), literally translated as the 'mouth'.

[8] The Chinese government has continued to introduce some regulations and guiding documents to protect women's land rights, and there have been some improvements. However, the problem of rural women's land rights is persistent. See: All China Women's Federation, 'Rural Women's Land Rights Protection and Rural Revitalization in the Past 40 Years', http://www.women.org.cn/art/2018/12/11/art_25_159540.html.

engaged in migration, and married women are left at home to undertake agricultural labour and family responsibilities (Jacka, 1997; Mallee, 1995). When married rural women unload their double burden and migrate to cities to work as wage labourers (Gao, 1994), studies have found that capital tends to pick women who are younger, single and have relatively more education (Fan, 2003). As Pun points out, the patriarchy is also involved in the construction of female migrant workers (2004). In other words, although migration and working in cities has brought change for female workers, the patriarchy still influences the redistribution of resources and opportunities in the labour market, and due to this deep-rooted tradition, women migrant workers are considered to be the subalterns of the marginalised social group of Chinese rural-urban migrant workers.

Moreover, regardless of whether they are married or unmarried, young or old, women usually get lower levels of jobs and salaries than men when they enter cities and factories (Davin, 1996; Du, 2017). Furthermore, with the imminence of life issues such as marriage, childbearing and childcare, many women workers face being re-embedded into patriarchal family relations after a brief period of 'freedom': due to the unfair access to urban welfare system of the '*hukou'* system and the aforementioned structural constraints such as the profound rural patriarchal land allocation policy, many rural-urban migrant women workers are forced to return to the countryside when facing childbirth and maternal status (Du, 2017). Those who manage to stay on in the cities also usually suffer multiple oppressions (Jin, 2010). This is also evidenced in my observation of the personal life stories of my key informants, May and June (see Chapter 8). These multiple oppressions experienced by women migrant workers have also been the starting points of their agentic embrace of resistance, and have shaped their understanding of collective identity and practice.

2.4 Labour unrest and new worker's culture in post-reform China

2.4.1 Increasing labour unrest and its limitations

Labour unrest has been increasing in China alongside changing labour relations. Lee argues that the problem in previous labour studies is not the lack of workers' experiences but 'a tendency to make a leap of faith from the existence of exploitation to [that of] resistance' (2007, p.xii). However, with the increase in the number of labour disputes in the last two decades, the labour struggle is gradually attracting more nuanced academic attention.[9] For instance, Chen analyses the role of workers' leaders in the framing of a labour protest at a state factory (2008), while Hurst stresses the 'mass frames' of workers' protests that are 'structurally rooted' in their collective life experience (2008, p.71) and Pun and Smith investigate the dormitory labour regime as the social space for female migrant workers to mobilise resistance in Southern China (2006).

Lee provides a comparative study of the protest of urban workers in state-owned enterprises[10] and rural-urban migrant workers[11] that draws on ethnographical insights and a broad political-economic analysis of labourers' struggles in China. According to Lee, 'the unmaking of Mao's working class' works in tandem with 'the making of new labour' in China's transition. While the old working class in the 'rustbelt' is more likely to adopt a socialist discourse against privatization, the new workers in the 'sunbelt' are more likely to adopt a discourse of protest. The contrasting features of the labour struggle of old and new Chinese workers are explained in a decentralized legal-authoritarianism framework (2007, p.12). In Lee's analysis, migrant workers prefer to use legal discourse to protest because a legal contract and discourse are the only legitimate weapons in the marketised and

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[9] According to the Chinese Labour and Social Security Statistical Yearbook, there were 19,098 arbitrated labour disputes in 1994 and 1,482 collective disputes. The number jumped to 500,000 cases with 13,000 collective disputes in 2007.
[10] Also referred to as the 'old working class' or 'Mao's working class' in the Chinese context.
[11] Also referred to as 'new labour' or 'new workers' in China.

privatized 'sunbelt' (2007).

Although rights-based discourse has been widely used, legalism is not the ideology or discursive resource that 'new workers' employ in resistance of the 'sunbelt' as Lee has suggested. Due to the lack of protection from the weak enforcement of the Labour Law and the high cost of legal processes, legalism is not always a useful weapon for workers in China. 'New workers' also seek symbolic resources from the state discourse of the working class to pressure the government. For instance, during the 2010 Nanhai Honda Strike, migrant workers sang the National anthem and referred to each other as 'comrade' in QQ groups. How the migrant workers used the national anthem to bring back the memory of socialist revolution in the Nanhai strike has been examined. Feng Xiang (2013) points out that the migrant workers singing the national anthem during the strike had a profound constitutional meaning, as it challenged the unjust laws constraining migrant workers' right to strike. Bringing back memories of the socialist labour movement and the CCP during the revolution has many implications for understanding the current labour struggle, especially the ideological and cultural resources of their practice. I will return to this point shortly, as the socialist discourse was also evidenced in my fieldwork in investigating the cultural practice of migrant workers and brought added dynamics to the process of their construction of an alternative culture.

The concepts of 'associational power' and 'structural power' are useful theoretical lenses through which to investigate the historical process of the formation of the working class from the interaction between class structure, class action and class formation (Silver, 2003). As already mentioned, understanding the formation of the class involves taking migrant workers as subjects and emphasising their subjective experience in transitional China. The predicament of Chinese labour is due to the monopolistic power of the party-state that 'deprives workers of the weapon of forming their own 'autonomous associations'; thus, leaving them without 'countervailing power at the point of production' (Friedman and Lee, 2010, p. 514).

The cellular feature of labour resistance is rooted in this lack of collective power/ organisational power. With the peculiar role of the 'trade union'[12] and the uneasy situation of labour NGOs in China (ibid), both the 'associational power' and 'structural power' in the process of class formation of migrant workers are constrained by the special system and institutions in which they are embedded. Since the right of association is strictly limited and because of the de facto absence of an independent 'trade union' under the political system, the problem of the complex relationship of state, capital and labour can hardly be resolved through market mechanisms and the game of labour and capital. The following sub-sections provide a concise review of the ACFTU and a brief discussion of the solidarity of workers to contextualise MWH's cultural practice.

2.4.2 The role of All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)

Trade unions in China are different from those found in many European, other Asian and North-American countries. The main union body, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), has had a monopoly on formal union organising in China. The ACFTU has a vast number of members – 302 million – making it the biggest trade union in the world (International Centre for Trade Union Rights, 2005). To understand the contemporary labour unrest and the political context for grassroots migrant worker's organisations in China, a brief review of the Chinese trade union is needed.

The ACFTU was officially founded on 1st May 1925. The Second National Labour Congress, which created the ACFTU, also adopted the Constitution of the ACFTU. According to the constitution, the goals of the ACFTU were to unite all workers and promote the welfare of workers. It stressed the 'unification, direction and reorganisation of the labour unions' to dismiss the dis-organisational impacts from different political affiliations (Lee L. , 1986, p. 9). As discussed in previous section,

[12] According to Friedman and Lee, trade unions in China act more like government agencies than workers' associations (2010, p.522).

the early stage revolutionary efforts of the CCP in the cites were associated with the launch of Workers' Clubs to mobilise workers and lead strikes. The main function of the ACFTU at this stage was also mobilising the workers into the revolution. After the foundation of the ACFTU, the CCP launched a series of labour uprisings in the cities but in 1927 most of the efforts were crushed by the Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP) regime. All the CCP-led trade unions were banned and the CCP's labour movement were restricted in the CNP-controlled area of China (the cities).

After the founding of New China, the ACFTU was re-established. Since then it became the sole trade union in China.13 As pointed out by Lenin and noted by the CCP leadership, the trade unions were 'transmission belts' between the Party and workers. The ACFTU after 1949 had been closely associated with the socialist economy system, dominated by the '*danwei*' (work unit) in the state-owned or collective enterprises and the life-time employment system of the so-called 'iron rice bowl'. As the CCP declared that the workers were the 'master' and 'owner' of the state, there were no capital-labour disputes in theory in the socialist economy. The function of the official trade union was different from those in the capitalism society.

More importantly, in the Maoist era, the ACFTU played a vital role in mobilising workers to support the industrialisation and modernisation of China under the leadership of the CCP. The ACFTU was responsible for organising political and educational work for workers. As illustrated in the previous section, the Workers' Cultural Palace was the public culture space led by the ACFTU in the socialist era to organise urban industrial workers to raise political consciousness, technological knowledge, and cultural participation.

The increasing pressure from labour activism urged the CCP to demand the ACFTU to reform. On 23rd October 2013, Xi Jinping gathered the new leadership of the

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13 It was dismissed in 1966 and replaced by revolutionary committees during the Cultural Revolution. It was then re-organised in 1978.

ACFTU in ZhongNanHai14 and delivered a speech to address the work on trade unions and workers. In the speech, Xi emphasised that 'the theme of contemporary Chinese labour movement is to strive for the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', and proposed that the ACFTU should 'mobilise the enthusiasm and creativity of the workers, and consolidate the Party's governance' and focus on 'the issues of most pressing concern and direct interest to the workers' (People's Daily, 2013).

Responding to the requirements from the CCP, the 'Pilot Program of ACFTU Reform'15 was adopted in 2015. According to Li Yufu, the vice president of ACFTU, the overall idea of the trade union reform was to remove the tradition of institutionalization, administration, aristocratization, and entertainment of the ACFTU and increase its political attributes, characteristics of advancement, and attributes for the mass (ACFTU, 2015). The work summary from the ACFTU suggested that developing migrant workers' participation was a key task of reform: in 2015, the total number of migrant worker members increased by 15 million, and in 2016, another 15 million people were added to the total. The number of migrant worker members reached 140 million, accounting for 50.5% of the total number of migrant workers in China (Worker's Daily, 2017).

However, according to China Labour Bulletin (CLB), the reform failed to tackle the fundamental problem of 'representativeness' as the 'trade union' of the workers. The status of workers' rights has not improved, and the collective action of workers has maintained strong growth. Thus, the CLB concluded that the reform 'has neither solved the rationality of its own existence, nor helped the CCP to ease the crisis of governing legitimacy and has not solved the problem of reasonable distribution of wages for enterprise workers' (China Labour Bulletin, 2018). In other words, despite

14 'The Central and Southern Seas', a former imperial garden and the central headquarters of the CCP and the State Council after 1949.
15 '*Quanguo Zonggonghui Gaige Shidian Fangan*' (全国总工会改革试点方案). The full text of the programme was not released publicly, and the full text could not be found on the ACFTU website. The specific content can only be traced in conjunction with the officially published interpretation reports.

the increase in member numbers, no substantial change has occurred in the relationship between the ACFTU and the migrant workers in terms of representation.

2.4.3 Overcoming the constraints? A legacy of solidarity and revolution

Without an alternative to the trade union and without the effective representation of workers of the ACFTU, it is difficult if not impossible for migrant workers to transform from 'structured power' to 'associational power'. Yet the demands of the workers have developed as strikes have become more frequent in the past decade. Elfstorm and Kuruvillla suggest that since 2010, there has been 'an important qualitative shift underway in Chinese industrial unrest: labour going on the offensive' (2014, p. 453). A reflection of the shift are the workers' demands during strikes. Some scholars note that other than demanding higher wages and full payment of social insurance, some migrant workers' demands went beyond the economic realm: asking for more politically sensitive issues such as improved representation (Pringle, 2011; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Chan and Hui, 2014). "Collective action by young migrant workers is testing the boundaries of the existing industrial relations arrangements" (Lee, Brown, & Wen, 2016, p. 231), however, most efforts from the labour NGOs to form a unified 'trade union'-like base for workers' collective actions have been heavily repressed in recent years (Kroncke, 2013, p.116).

In this limited political space, bringing back the memory of the revolution and the socialist era to the current labour unrest is an attempt to reclaim the rights of the working class and to contest the dominant ideology of capitalist neoliberalism. As briefly mentioned above, Feng Xiang suggests that migrant workers on strike singing the national anthem is similar to holding up portraits of Mao Zedong during protest as a way to bypass the 'intermediary such as the trade union' and 'overcome the barrier of unjust laws' to directly reach the ruling party (2013, p.8). The 'unjust laws' in Feng's analysis of the Nanhai Honda strike refers to the fact that the Chinese labour legislation has failed to provide meaningful collective rights (such as independent trade union and rights to strike) for the workers (Chen, 2007). For instance, the right

to strike was removed from China's Constitution in 1982. Although the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress[16] (NPCSC) approved the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2001, which including the right to strike in Article 8, it has not yet been regulated.[17] That is to say, as it was not clearly protected by law, strikes could still be criminalized as disruptions to public order (Chen, 2007, p.71).

Therefore, as the labour legislation was not in favour of their collective rights, the workers need to find another way to act. Meanwhile, the state has attempted to set limits on the forms of labour contention via different mechanism. For instance, through various legal and mediation channels that are crucial for individual employment rights (Lee, 2007; Chen 2014) and the official channel of collective consultation (Chen and Hui, 2014), the state intends to absorb the labour contentions. However, when the strikers employed the national anthem[18] as a discursive resource in labour unrest and brought back the memory of the socialist era, they 're-politicized the strike, making it a political expression rather than mere action in economic demands' (Feng, 2013, p.7). Recalling the tradition of socialist revolution in China bypassed the barrier of the ACFTU and the right to strike that rendered the collective rights and power of the migrant workers in the Nanhai Honda strike (Feng, 2013, pp.8-9). In summary, Feng illustrates the meaningfulness of the socialist revolution to migrant workers in terms of overcoming the current constraints and reclaiming the solidarity of workers.

Feng's insights on how to overcome the limits in labour legislation by re-politicizing the strikes through recalling the memory of socialist revolution also sheds light on my

[16] The permanent body of the National People's Congress (NPC), the highest organ of state power. It exercises the legislative power of the state and has the power to interpret the laws of the PRC, including its constitution.
[17] There were two exceptions: the prohibition of civil servants' strikes (Article 53 of Civil Servants Law, 2006); and the prohibition of strikes during periods of martial law.
[18] The anthem was composed by the young communist musician Nie Er, and it has been regarded as a 'rallying call' for solidarity in the Chinese revolution.

analysis of the cultural practice of grassroots labour organisations. First, I observe that the labour activists of MWH actively employed the symbolic resources from the socialist revolution in their own construction of collective identity and culture. Moreover, the Nanhai Honda strike was also often mentioned in MWH as a reference point to encourage collective power over solidarity of workers. For example, as Feng observed in the strike, MWH also acknowledges that it provides (if only superficial) legitimacy to the cause of their practice by adopting the socialist discourse, once the hegemony of the nation. Moreover, following the same thought, they emphasise the class identity as 'new worker' rather than other imposed naming (such as peasant worker or new citizen) to carefully position the social group in the socialist tradition, thus they can implicitly reclaim the institutional guarantee the 'old' working class once enjoyed. However, in the dynamic process of constructing an alternative culture for labour struggle, MWH's relation to the socialist revolution legacy is manifested in a more complex way than in one single strike. This will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

2.5 Conclusion

A review of the working class, the CCP and the worker's culture from the revolution-era to the Reform era reveals that various culture activities were organised by the pioneers of the CCP in the form of Workers' Club and night schools to not only spread revolutionary thoughts, but also as mobilisation efforts to lead strikes. It also serves to cultivate/select worker-recruits as human resources for future revolutions. Based on the experience of struggle and the analysis of the actual political situation, Mao Zedong proposed that 'literature and arts should serve the worker, peasant and soldier' and 'literature and arts are subordinated to politics' in his Talks at the Yan'an Forum on the Literature and Arts. The Yan'an Talks have since become the CCP charter in the field of culture and ideology until the Reform era. The revolutionary legacy on cultural and ideological struggle of the working class is echoed in

contemporary labour activism as will be elaborated on in the forthcoming empirical chapters.

The promotion of state-led working-class culture is based on a series of policies, and there is a national economic system and a state political basis for the implementation. During the socialist era, the urban workers were at the receiving end of the culture and ideology project launched by the CCP. The state-led working-class culture in the socialist era was the cultural hegemony, though it was dismantled during the Reform era. After the Reform, the party-state radically separated itself from the cultural activities, political educations and the public spaces of the Workers' Cultural Space. The socialist working class lost the support from the party-state's top-down cultural policy. At the same time, there were no similar institutions launched for the newly formed migrant workers in the cities. This provided space and possibilities for bottom-up cultural construction in the grass-roots migrant workers' organisations. MWH has emerged from the ruins of the socialist working-class culture groundwork in China.

China has undergone hegemonic transformation after the Reform and Opening Up; however, capitalist hegemony has not yet been unambiguously established as it is being constantly challenged by the class struggle of different groups of students and workers (Hui, 2018, p.67). The cultural practices of the migrant labour organisations plays a central role in the battle to resist the cultural dominance of capitalist neoliberalism. In the empirical chapters (5-8) I will elaborate on the disappearing cultural space and on worker's literature and arts that are re-rooted and sprouting in the migrant workers' community on the edges of cities. The workers' communities they have built are more or less inclusive of the recreational and educational functions of the former Workers' Cultural Palace led by the CCP. Although there is no political party behind MWH, no support from a ruling party and the ACFTU, as with the former Cultural Palaces, like its predecessor Workers' Clubs in the revolutionary era,

MWH attempts to achieve a composite work of political and cultural enlightenment of their fellow workers.

However, workers' culture in the contemporary grassroots labour struggle is a very different story from that in the socialist era. The fragmented grassroots migrant workers' labour organisations are counter-hegemonic voices and forces in contemporary China. Migrant workers' grassroots labour organisations like MWH have to 'fight' for survival, to maintain independence and gain support (or at least tolerance) from the government, and constantly 'fight' for resources from external social actors. To deal with practical situations, their strategy and tactics of struggle must be very practical and flexible, which also makes the 'new worker culture' they have constructed extremely complex.

The gender dimension has also been reviewed. Women workers actively participated in the movements on national liberation and labour struggles in the revolutionary era, as well as in the socialist modernisation and industrialisation. Admittedly, women's status has been significantly improved. However, there are still serious structural gender inequalities in contemporary Chinese society (Hershatter, 2004). In many cases, China's leadership examines the relationship with women's status from the standpoint of the patriarchy (Wolf, 1985). It seems that in every collision between gender equality and other goals, gender equality is considered secondary. It is the case from the state level, and it remains the same in contemporary labour struggles. In my fieldwork, I found that sometimes the male leaders in labour organisations also (deliberately or unselfconsciously) take a patriarchal position in examining the relationship between gender issues and their resistance to repression by class positions and the rural-urban dual structure (see Chapters 6 and 8). The sexism is reproduced within the cultural practice of MWH, and in the ideological struggles and broader labour activism in China.

According to the 2016 National Survey Report on Migrant Workers, among the 169.34 million migrant workers, 53.68 million are women, accounting for 31.7% of

the total number of workers.[19] There is no doubt that women form an important part of the Chinese migrant workers group, and that their rights and demands cannot be denied or overlooked if a cultural and ideological base of solidarity is to be built for mobilising collective power in the class formation – and emancipation – process. In this context, a set of questions needs further investigation: Should any specific gendered concerns be inserted into the mainstream migrant worker's struggle? In what ways and to what extent can Chinese women workers' organisations engage with historical women's liberation and the urban feminist movements? Under what conditions does women worker's participation in the Chinese migrant workers' labour movement lead to any change in gendered power relations in other spheres (such as the private sphere, and the workplace)? These questions will be explored in Chapter 8.

Finally, I discussed the labour unrest and its constraints in contemporary China with a brief review of the role of the ACFTU. This helps to further contextualise the cultural practice of MWH in labour activism. Moreover, Feng's analysis of how migrant workers use the socialist revolution legacy to reclaim solidarity of workers and bypass the constraints to appeal to the ruling party by re-politicising the strike shed light on the understanding of MWH's adoption and interpretation of the legacy of the socialist revolution in the forthcoming empirical analysis.

[19] National Survey Report on Migrant Workers, '*nongmingong jiance baogao*', see: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-04/28/content_5189509.htm#1

Chapter 3: Ideology, identity and resistance in the context of working class identity formation in China

3.0 Introduction

The previous chapter contextualised the migrant workers and labour unrest in China historically. In this chapter, I aim to discuss some interrelated concepts that are at the core of this study, namely, ideology, hegemony, identity, culture, resistance and agency. The aim is to provide a theoretical framework based on these concepts, which will help the analysis of my ethnographic and interview data, and explain more fully the research questions.

3.1 Ideology, hegemony and counter-hegemony

3.1.1 Conceptualising ideology

Ideology is a central concept in analysing the cultural practice of Chinese migrant workers' organisations because it sheds light on the deep structure of domination and the possibility of resist. As a concept, ideology can be traced back to the French philosopher, Destutt de Tracy, who defines ideology as 'science of the formation of ideas', but it is popularised by the Marxist theory. The following discussion on ideology will mainly follows Marxist tradition.

The account of ideology found in the writings of Karl Marx, and some collaborative works with Friedrich Engels, provides a profound understanding of the relevance of the concept in modern societies. As Ricoeur comments, it raises questions as to how we understand both our own identity and the social world we inhabit (1986, pp.32-

33). In seeking to explain why class-divided societies can sustain themselves and why the subordinate classes do not fight back against exploitative arrangements, Marx conceives ideology as part of the superstructure that veils and obscures basic economic relations of production to the working class (Marx and Engels, 1964). Thus, Marx considers ideology as a feature of all class-divided societies that consist of certain false and distorted ideas, assumptions, values, beliefs and so on linked to the agendas and interests of the ruling classes.

In elaborating how the ideology of the ruling class comes to be adopted by a subordinate class, Engels used the term 'false consciousness' to address how it functions to conceal and mislead the oppressed, and prevent the subordinate classes from identifying their own class interests and their political ability to assert these interests (Engels 1893, in Eagleton, 1991.p.89). As the ruling class owns both the means of production of material and the means of production of ideas, the class that is the ruling material force in every society is also its ruling 'intellectual force'; Marx argues that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Marx and Engels, 1964). The function of ideology, then, for Marx is to legitimise the interests of the ruling class, to mask the exploitative arrangements on which class-divided societies are based, and to maintain the stability of such unequal capitalist societies. That is why, for Marx, the critique of ideology is a revolutionary act in order to release individuals from distorted forms of understanding that keep from contesting subordinate positions.

Contesting orthodox Marxist accounts of ideology, Althusser re-examines the essence of ideology and argues for a greater attention to be paid to the imaginary and material characteristics of ideology. Firstly, influenced by the Lacanian psychoanalytic understanding of the 'imaginary order', Althusser argues for that as we cannot reach 'the Real', thus 'false consciousness' as a concept is ineffective (1971). In this view, ideology is a system of representations, and it 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (1971.p.109). In other words, as

we rely on language to establish the 'reality', ideologies are not representations of 'the Real' but our social and imaginary 'reality'. Another argument about ideology is that it has a material existence (ibid, p.112), and is anchored in real practices and institutions: thus *imaginary relations produce material consequences* as subjects live their relations as if they were real and they act accordingly.

According to Althusser, ideology has a profound relationship with subjective experience as he argues that ideology 'hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects' (1971, p.115). He uses 'interpellation' to illustrate how he imagines that subjects are consistently constituted by Ideological Sate Apparatuses (ISAs) such as the family, religious organisations, educational institutions, the media and so on. Through the process of 'interpellation', individuals are 'hailed' into social interactions with the ISAs, thus not only turned into subjects, but also into ideological subjects. However, Althusser's theory of ideology has been criticised by scholars like Hall (1986) and Eagleton (1991), who argue that his strongly structuralist approach leaves no space for understandings of the agency of subjects to resist or contest the process of interpellation or ideology itself.

3.1.2 The vanguard and Ideology in revolution

Some scholars have considered ideology from the perspective of the writings of another influential Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci. But before moving forward to Gramsci, it is worth briefly reviewing Lenin's thoughts on ideology which have dominated many Left groups and parties for decades. As illustrated in the previous chapter, Lenin's accounts of ideology had a great influence on the Chinese Communist Party, especially in the revolution and socialist era. Different from academic debates, Lenin's theory of culture and ideology is more of a political theory that guides revolutionary practice for political purposes during actual revolution. For Lenin, every ruling class has its own ideology, thus in class struggle, every class wants to win power must develop its own ideology. In the revolution against

capitalism, a battle rages between bourgeois ideology and the proletarian or working-class ideology. In *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin argues that the working class will not spontaneously become political by fighting economic battles with capitalists, but that they need to be educated in Marxism, the ideology of the proletariat. In other words, the struggle between alternative ideologies becomes an important determinant of successful revolutionary practice in the political sphere. Moreover, Lenin insists that Marxists need to form a political party as the vanguard and the role of the Marxist vanguard party was to politically educate the proletariat to oppose to the world view of the bourgeoisie, which is the 'false consciousness' that constitutes the cultural status quo to facilitate the exploitation of the proletariat (1963).

Lenin's thoughts not only had an important influence on the Russian October Revolution and the Soviet Union, but also became a very important reference point in theory for the Chinese communist revolution in the same period. Many of the CCP's cultural and ideological theories can be traced back to Lenin as illustrated in Chapter 2 (i.e workers' clubs, nights schools). During my fieldwork, I found that some of Lenin's thoughts had indeed been adopted by Chinese migrant workers' organisations in terms of how they perceived the relationship between labour struggles and working-class culture and ideology, as many of the symbolic and ideological resources are drawn from the CCP's revolutionary practices (see Chapter 5&6). For instance, 'false consciousness' has often been mentioned by members of MWH in organisation seminars to explain why young migrant workers are increasingly identifying with mainstream (capitalist) values and beliefs. The next section discusses another influential Marxist thinker, Gramsci who advanced my understanding of the dialectical relations of ideology and class struggle differently from Lenin's accounts, with a focus on the discussion regarding hegemony (absolute ideological control) and the possibility of counter-hegemonic practices.

3.1.3 Hegemony and counter-hegemony

Gramsci developed his own theory of ideology that went beyond Marx and that broke with Leninism. His theories become a major reference point in the social sciences on ideology, hegemony and resistance. Gramsci (1971) identified two forms of political control: one is force, domination or direct physical coercion which is institutionalised in a series of coercive apparatuses (eg. army, police, law, prisons, etc.) and used to bring dominated groups into conformity with the demands of the ruling class. However, for Gramsci, in the long run force alone is not enough to account for the sustaining of the ruling class in power. Another form of control is what he terms *hegemony*, the manner in which ruling class mobilises and acquires 'active consent' from dominated groups through ideological, political, intellectual, and moral leadership to form a 'collective will'. This consent is mediated via a complex system of 'hegemonic apparatuses' throughout the social formation. Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony to explain why the working classes, the exploited in the capitalist society, lack the will to overthrow the capitalists ruling them. During my fieldwork, when asked my informants, both rural-urban migrant workers and urban residents who participated in various events of MWH's cultural practices expressed similar ideas on how they perceive the status quo as 'nature', or in their own words, 'the world is like this, you have to change yourself to adapt to it.'

The concept of hegemony analyses how the state power is formed, explains what role culture plays   in reinforcing the inequality of social relations and explores the potential strategies to resist and challenge the hegemony. It has been suggested that Gramsci provides a more 'humanistic' perspective on the theories of ideology as he stresses the role of culture and consent in ideological reproduction and contestation (Eagleton, 1991; Thompson, 1984; Žižek, 1994). Gramsci's view on ideology allows for the essential role of language and discourses as mediums of state power (1971,p.323), highlighting the role of language and everyday (common sense, folklore, etc) as a crucial basis of economic , political, hegemonic struggles. The

emphasis here does not mean that Gramsci prioritised the notion of the superstructure over that of the (material) base; rather, it indicates that while he didn't turn Marx upside down, his theory placed far more emphasis on the interactions of base and superstructure mediated through language and consenting imaginaries.

Hegemony is neither monolithic nor stable as 'common sense' is 'continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life' (ibid, p.326). Paradoxically, therefore, there is always some space for resistance to hegemonic ideology. Scholars who follow Gramsci have coined the term 'counter-hegemony' to refer to Gramsci's description of the attempts of individuals or groups to challenge hegemonic power through actions, movements and thoughts (1971). Since the existence and reproduction of the ruling class is dependent on its ability to exercise 'hegemony' over the subaltern, the development of a revolutionary working class consciousness requires the construction of 'counter-hegemonic' ideology and culture that rejects the domination (Gramsci, 1971, pp.206-208, 416-418). The cultural practices of migrant workers are admittedly in many senses counter-hegemonic practices which seek not only to unpack the 'common sense', re-mobilise 'collective will' of the migrant workers, but also try to provide an alternative imagination of economic, social and political transformations. This leads us to Gramsci's metaphor of the 'war of position' in class struggle.

3.1.4 War of position, praxis, organic intellectuals and culture

Gramsci's analysis was not only concerned about the dominant set of ideas, but also with how to challenge hegemony (which for him was embodied by Italian Fascism and colonial capitalism) and to forge alternatives. Distinct from the Leninist view of 'vanguardism' in political leadership, Gramsci stresses that the political party can play a role in initiating and promoting revolutionary counter-hegemony, leading struggles and articulating as well as diffusing the ideology of the subaltern classes amongst

subaltern groups. A party should challenge hegemony and contribute to the emergence of autonomous, active and politicised citizens as the political party implements education, political formation, empowerment of its militants function in the struggles (Gramsci, 1971).

For Gramsci, the struggle against an existing exploitative hegemonic system should be mobilised at the economic, the political and the cultural levels to make transformation happen. A strategic distinction has been made between the concepts 'war of manoeuver' and 'war of position': the former refers to armed struggle through force against the violent and coercive apparatus of the state; the latter is mainly fought on cultural and intellectual fronts to gain decisive influence over a proletarian culture and counter the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoise (Gramsci, 1971), reducing the consent of the populace. In other words, a 'war of position' aims to increase critical class consciousness and to propagate revolutionary organisation for the 'war of manoeuver' so that there is a cultural basis for a new form of society, rather than a mere shifting of who controls the existing social system. Therefore it is considered a decisive stage in class struggle as Gramsci claims, "in politics, once the war of position has been won, it has been won definitely"(Gramsci, in Cammett, 1967, p.202).

A 'War of position' is considered as a process which "slowly builds up the strength of the social foundation of a new state" by "creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society" (Cox, 1983, p.165). Though Mouffe points out that the 'process of disarticulation-rearticulation constitutes, in fact, the famous 'war of position' which Gramsci conceives as the revolutionary strategy best adapted to countries where the bourgeoisie has managed to firmly establish its hegemony due to the development of civil society' (2015, p.197). The socio-economic situation as well as the way in which power operated and consolidated in contemporary China is certainly different from that in western capitalist societies. However, as discussed previously, the collective actions of the labour movement in

China are far from the point of thinking how to overthrow the regime or seize power by collective force. Therefore, to look into the long-term 'war of position' is significant for understanding the dilemma and progress in migrant worker's struggles and the future of labour struggles in China.

The philosophical theorising of the role of praxis and of organic intellectual in Gramsci's work are also helpful for me in examining the labour activists' cultural practices in China in Chapters 5 to 8. As a Communist leader, and a major political figure in inter-war Italy, Gramsci's aim was to establish a praxis theory to guide the politics of revolutions in Capitalist nations. The philosophy of praxis, as Gramsci puts it, is 'the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths , even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the… deceptions of the upper class and — even more — their own' (Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.395-6). Such an interpretation stresses the importance of human agency, and indeed, I found the labour activists also point out the significance of both accurate knowledge and education in their cultural practice.

It is worth noting that Gramsci illustrates the social functions of intellectuals in relation to ideological struggle and cultural hegemony. According to Gramsci, traditional intellectuals are 'the dominant group's 'deputies', their functions are to elaborate ruling ideologies, educate the 'people' and secure the hegemony of dominant social groups. Thus, Gramsci uses the term 'organic intellectuals' in contrast, as those who according to Gramsci, might come from the ruling classes but have chosen their loyalty as being to the subaltern classes and represent the 'subalterns' by articulating the feelings and experiences of the 'masses' and unpacking 'common sense' in order to challenge it. As for Gramsci, the challenge for the working class is to develop its own organic intellectuals and to win traditional intellectuals to its side (1971,p.10), as intellectuals are viewed as key agents in any 'war of position' (ibid, p.243).

Culture lies at the heart of any revolutionary project for Gramsci as it is 'how class is lived', and it shapes people's 'ability to imagine how it might be changed, and whether they see such changes as feasible or desirable' (Crehan, 2002, p.71). "Cultural politics is the process of producing ideas. Through practicing new ideas or update old ideas, it changes old political path and create new social force" (Wang Hui, 2015). Moreover, as Wolf argues, it is essential to bind culture to considerations of structural power, as culture forces us to look at connections, between "material relations to the world, societal organisation, and configurations of ideas" (Wolf, 1999, p.289).

Rather than fixing the concept of culture here, I want to leave it open and flexible as one of the aims of my thesis is to explore how MWH understands culture and how they construct 'New Workers' Culture', as well as how they communicate their conceptualisation of 'culture' to different social groups, which tells us a lot about the power relations within the politics of culture.

To examine the cultural practice of MWH in the light of Gramsci's view on 'war of position' allows me to consider its role and progress in the broader picture of the highly contested sphere of the labour movement/ unrest and class struggle in China. What has been constructed in this 'war of position' of the migrant workers?

3.2 Identity, subjectivity, recognition

3.2.1 Conceptualising identity

A considerable body of literature has been published on the concept of identity, which plays a crucial role in defining people's individual and collective sense of being and belonging. Western writings on identity since the 19th century fall broadly into three

groups – those that refer to biological traits as a determinant of identity, those that have been categorised as structuralist and assume a unitary being, and a third category, which can broadly be called poststructuralist, which has complicated the notion of a unitary identity, suggesting that identity is more fluid, overlapping and possibly also different in different contexts.

Further, there also exist a number of non-Western philosophical positions on identity. In China these have tended to follow the cultures of Confucianism and Buddhism. Buddhism views identity in a very different way than Confucianism. As in Buddhism, 'holding onto the illusion of individual selfhood is the source of suffering', the path to salvation is 'deliverance from the self, not from worldly sufferings due to social conditions' (Ho, 1995, p.122). Tu (1985) suggests that selfhood in Confucianism demands the participation of the other as the ultimate goal of life is self-realisation. Thus, individual identity in the Confucian cultures tends to be interwoven with the collective sense of being and belonging. Ho argues that the self in Confucianism is 'subdued', as it is 'conditioned to respond to perceptions, not of its own needs and aspirations, but of social requirements and obligations' (1995, p.118).

Even from that brief summary, it is possible to see that identity is a complex and highly contested concept with many potential axes including class, gender, race and experience. It has been applied to a wide range of research concerning these dimensions and arouses both academic and social concerns. Indeed, the tension between the somewhat essentialist views taken by the structuralist theorists and the more fluid, non-essentialist views taken by poststructuralist theorists, have been the subject of major debates on identity in academia.

From a biological determinist and essentialist view, there is 'some intrinsic and essential content to any identity which is defined by either a common origin or a common structure of experience or both' (Grossberg, 1997, p. 356). Identity has been viewed as something stable, fixed or biological (Woodward, 1997, p. 3).

This understanding of identity has been critiqued severely in the past decades. If identity is something biological as suggested above, then there should be no difference between the rural and the urban, no difference between the migrant workers and the urban middle class. After all, they are mostly all Chinese people. In this sense, perhaps the only biological difference is the sex difference. But this view certainly runs counter to what different classes and those from rural and urban areas experience and to how they perceive their identities in reality.

Structuralists also tend to view human identity as relatively universal, homogenous and fixed, whether this be based on class (Marxist views of identity), on kinship (in an anthropological view) or on childhood experiences (different psychoanalytic views). For my work, of course, the Marxist tradition of class analysis of identity is of great importance and I will discuss it further later by connecting class consciousness and the idea of alienation.

The primary post-structuralist approach argues that identity is never a fixed position that is determined at the birth of people but is socially constituted through interaction with others. In this view, identity does not 'signal that stable core the self' (Hall, 1996, p. 17), rather it is 'always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery' (Calhoun, 1994, pp. 9-10). This position has been received favourably in many Western academic institutions, and draws extensively on the work of Foucault.

Foucault argues that subjects or identities are produced in dominant discourses thus identities are the 'ideological constitutions of the self' (Howard, 2000, p. 368). Although post-structuralist accounts of identity are powerful in challenging the main structuralist views, one major limitation remains that they fail to make plausible links between structures of power and the inner life or psychic consciousness of human beings (Butler cited in Bethan & Stokoe, 2006, pp. 29-35). Hall describes the paradox for a writer such as Althusser in the following terms: 'whereby for a subject to be capable of 'being hailed' it must have some kind of psychic coherence and existence

prior to discourse' (cited in Bethan & Stokoe, 2006, p. 32). In other words, the agency of the subject might be being disregarded precisely in the post-structuralist accounts which most attempt to celebrate agency and deny determinist structuration.

In thinking forward on this issue, Paul Gilroy illustrates identity from a more strategic and positional perspective that it is 'a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which this fragile subjectivity is formed' (1997, p. 301). In this view, identity construction is always an ongoing process. Handler suggests that 'the uttering of every statement about 'who we are' changes if only slightly, our relationship to who we are' and 'to talk about identity is to change or construct it despite the dominant epistemology of identity, which species immutability' (1994, p. 30). This changing and dynamic feature of identity enables people to 'rediscover and redefine their content, not through an exclusive gaze to the past, but with a parallel focus on present experience and on the future of transformation and change' (Georgiou, 2006, p. 40). With an awareness of the dynamics of identity, a reflexive approach of identity stresses the sense of belonging and continuity (ibid.), it views identity as a process of 'becoming' as well as 'being' (Hall, 1994, p. 394). As will be shown in chapter 5 and 8, this view in particular resonates with some of my (activist) informants' perceptions of their own identities throughout the years of being migrant workers and activists.

A reflexive approach to identity also requires a recognition that power struggles exist throughout identity construction; as Laclau argues: 'the constitution of social identity is an act of power' (1997, p. 33). Furthermore, identity is associated with power in another way as it is a 'signifier' in modern politics, it has 'a pivotal relationship to a politics of location' (Hall, 1996, p. 2). In identity politics, people need to 'identify with a collective identity which provides an idea of themselves they can valorize' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 25).

3.2.2 Collective identity and the politics of identity

Collective identity is very relevant to collective action and to social movements as it shapes the sense of belonging that grounded the 'we-ness'. Jenkins points out collective identities 'emphasise how people are similar to each other, what they are believed to have in common'(1996, p. 80). Creating collective identity is one way of building solidarity to 'act collectively and consistently' and organisation plays significant role in 'building a movement around strong ties' of collective identity that 'will lead to action, alliances, interaction' (Tarrow, 1998, p. 119). Solidarity and the sense of belonging are built through collective identity construction in social/labour movement.

3.2.3 Subjectivity and recognition

Subjectivity is closely linked to identity as it 'is the way in which individuals interpret and understand their circumstances and is bound up with the sense they have of themselves' (Knights & McCabe, 2000,p.423).It is constructed through a person's location in a social field or set of social relationships (McDowell, 2009,pp.66-67). In other words, it 'is a reality based in practices' (Kelly, 2008, p.103). Also it implies a 'subject as a productive and singular agent of change' (Evans, 2007, p.23).

I find Foucault's conceptualisation of subjectivation helpful to explain the ways in which subjectivity is formed. As Foucault argues, people explore the relationship with the self through subjectivation, 'the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations' (2000, p.264-265). I adopt subjectivation to analyse the ideas and practices of my informants in the Chinese grass-root migrant worker's organisations and how their practices shape and reshape the subjectivity and identity of themselves and other's. For example, how the labour activists reflect on their everyday lives and struggles (see chapter 5 and 8). I consider MWH's cultural practices can also be viewed as self-forming activities, through the process of which a working class self is crafted for the labour activists.

Identity is also linked with the politics of recognition. Charles Taylor argues that ' the supposed link between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being' (1992,p.25). Taylor points out that people can 'suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people of society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisioning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being'(ibid.). In other words, he is concerned with the consequences of the problems of recognition have for the marginalised groups, for example, women in patriarchy society and rural-urban migrant workers in China. It is helpful for me to see the rationale, perception and significance in the labour activists (in both organisations)'s cultural practice to resist and contest the misrecognition embedded in the social class, rural-urban duality and gender.

3.3 Class: identity, class consciousness and alienation

3.3.1 Class identity, class and class consciousness

Class is one of the most important axes of identity. Although the post-structuralist accounts on identity (class and other axes, such as gender) make powerful case to challenge the structuralist accounts, the problem with post-structuralist view of class identity is a lack of the 'embedding symbolic inquiries in concrete, material practices and relations' (Krinsly, 2007, p.347). In other words, understanding of class identity needs to be situated in everyday practice of workers and consider broader structural factors. An analysis that places an emphasis on social class as a component of identity draws attention to the fundamental inequalities of power, wealth, social standing, lifestyle, culture and opportunity in societies for social scientists (Crompton 2008,

p.658). 'It also draws attention to the relationships and interactions between different kinds of inequality, especially in terms of the development and influence of sources of power and inequality' (Savage 1995, p.25 quote in Goodman, 2004, p.8). That is to say, 'we' are freer or more fluid than we thought, but our identities are still shaped, enabled or constrained. Therefore, I think it is important to look into class in Marxism.

Marx refers to 'class' as a group of individuals who share the common position with regard to the existing forms of production (Marx et al., 1998). In capitalist society, due to the possession of economic resources, or ownership, there are two major classes: the bourgeoisie as the dominant class and the proletariat/ working class as the subordinate. For Marx, the exploitation of surplus value will inevitably lead to antagonistic class conflicts and to certain forms of social consciousness, so that the workers will actively pursue their class interests through resistance, thus resulting in the transformation of 'a class in itself' into 'a class for itself' (ibid.). Orthodox Marxism regards the formation of the working class as the subsidiary phenomenon of capitalist relations of production because the class structure is considered as having an objective existence, thus class formation is the logical result of a certain class structure. In other words, the structuralist approach views classes as 'real', thus workers understand their 'position in the relation of classes as class relations' (Krinsky, 2007, p. 347).

However, this view has been thoughtfully critiqued by E.P. Thompson as 'economic determinism' and 'structural reductionism' (1991). Thompson does not deny that the economic structure is the objective condition for class formation. Rather, he points out that the formation of a class is a more complex historical process than the derivative of certain economic relations. Thus, in order to understand the formation of a working class, factors besides the production process such as history, culture, experience, and lifestyle have to be considered (1991).

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson argues that class formation is the intersection of external determinants and self-action as the working class shapes the self and is being shaped at the same time (1991). For Thompson, the transformation of a 'class of itself' to a 'class for itself' is when people draw conclusions from their shared experiences (whether it is from the history or their own life) and articulate their common interests and realise their interests is distinct from and mostly opposite to the others (1991). In short, although the class experience of workers mainly based on the relations of production, class consciousness or awareness is shaped and constructed from the experience through complex interaction. Drawing on his insights, the Chinese migrant workers in the making is also an active process, 'which owes as much to agency as to conditioning' (ibid.).

As Chinese scholar Wang Hui points out, class politics lies in the interplay between division of labour and political mobilisation (2015). In this theoretical context, subjectivity becomes prominent in understanding the current situation of Chinese migrant workers' resistance. From post-structural tradition, subjectivity is constructed through discourse, 'workers cannot articulate their experience as class experience without class discourse as medium' (Pun et al, 2012, p.121). As mentioned in chapter 1, the Marxist concept of class and its emphasis on exploitations in social relations of production (Lin, 2015) has been downplayed in contemporary China as the notion of social stratum (jie ceng) replaced it in mainstream discourse (Pun and Lu, 2011). Yet, I found 'class' still being very relevant in the cultural practice of MWH as they claimed that their construction of collective identity and the alternative culture are 'defined by class' (chapter 5 and 6). Thus, how the Chinese migrant workers with ambivalent identities re-construct subjectivity from class experiences? Is it possible for them to forge class consciousness? The way in which the Chinese migrant workers represent themselves becomes very crucial as it concerns the class consciousness, class discourse of the on-going process of the Chinese 'new' working class and their resistance in reality and their future.

Furthermore, as gender is one of the basic categories in social life and one of the basic axes of identity, it also one of the factors that constitutes the differences in the heterogeneous social group of rural-urban migrant workers. The intersection of gender and class also need to be investigated in the process of class formation in Chinese migrant workers' resistance. Class is gendered as gender provides articulation and naturalising differences and inequality (Scott, 1988, p.60). Rofel (1999) points out that class consciousness has frequently dominated over gender consciousness thus the gender differences in experiences of labour have tended to be downplayed. It is true that I found in my fieldwork, gender has revealed as a major tension in the cultural practice of MWH, and even in broader labour activism in China. The various ways in which gender was subjugated to class will be discussed in chapter 6 and 7.

3.3.2 Alienation

In my fieldwork, I found that 'alienation' has been mentioned by labour activists of MWH in their cultural practice as a reference point for them to construct the alternative for the social group. Therefore, a brief discussion on alienation is necessary here. Alienation is a concept developed by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and further discussed in the critique of political economy in *Capital*. Alienation is considered as 'something rooted in the material world' rather than merely 'in the mind or in religion' (Cox, 1998). Drawing on his study of Hegel's philosophy, Marx's account of alienation is expressed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* as the phenomenon through which people's own labour is transformed into 'something alien' and a power which rules them as a kind of natural consequence. For Marx,

> The object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour

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embodied and made material in an object, it is the objectification of labour… In the sphere of political economy, this realisation of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation. (Marx, 2000, p. 324).

Alienation, in this view, entails a loss of control through the separation the agentic being from the conditions of meaningful agency. Labour is central to the ideas of alienation. According to Marx, there are four aspects in which the worker is alienated in capitalist society: alienation (1) from the product of labour, (2) from the activity of labour, (3) from our species-essence/human essence, (4) from other workers (Ollman, 1976).

Marx's theory of alienation has a profound resonance in Chinese rural-urban migrant worker's cultural practice. For example, in MWH's performances, they often ask the question 'why the wealth of society has become more and more, but the gains of our worker's labour became less and less?' Though the labour activists rarely mention Marx explicitly in their answers to the question they asked in performance, instead, they only point out the injustice in the sharp contrast they observed. But these questions actually echo with Marx's accounts:

> The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The *devaluation* of the human world grows in direct proportion to the *increase in value* of the world of things. Labour not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a *commodity* and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general. (Marx, 2000, p.324).

As will be discussed in length in chapter 5, the four aspects of alienation have also been used by labour activists in their articulation of their cultural practices.

3.4 Agency and resistance

3.4.1 Resistance: overt and covert

What constitutes resistance is still debatable. Seymour defines resistance as '…intentional, and hence conscious, acts of defiance or opposition by a subordinate individual or group of individuals against a superior individual or set of individuals' (2006, p. 305). In a similar vein, Parker suggests that 'the term 'resistance' should be limited to actions the actors themselves describe as aiming to defy, subvert, undermine, or oppose the power and repression of dominant forces' (2005, p. 87). Their definitions on resistance are explicit and clear-cut. Indeed, in my fieldwork, I observed practices by migrant workers that directly challenge dominant forces in China, even constructing an ideology related to emancipation. But at other times, especially in the complex interacting relations with dominant forces in society, there are a lot of actions that simply cannot be categorised as resistant, if resistance it is defined in this clear-cut way.

Focusing on the implicit everyday resistance in the Malay villages, James C. Scott sees 'resistance' as lying in between structure and agency: 'most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites' (1985, p.136). He adopts the notion of 'transcript' (hidden and public) to analyse the actions of the subordinated groups and broaden the connotation of resistance. According to Scott, the subordinated groups develop various methods, including 'rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors' as a subtle form of contesting the 'public transcripts' (1985, p. 137). In repressive societies, these methods allow 'a veiled discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the public transcript… in which ideological resistance is disguised, muted and veiled for safety's sake' (ibid.).

Scott's work provides an insightful argument that the subordinated are more likely to adopt 'ordinary weapons' to gain benefits and to avoid oppression rather than to directly challenge structural constraints. Other than the form of resistance (in its most clear-cut definition) that explicitly challenges the hegemonic and dominant groups, there are also cases of actions and speeches (i.e. jokes) that work in a more complex and implicit manner. Scott's work enables me to recognise the resistance and the power relations within these speeches and actions of my informants.

However, White (1986, pp. 50-51) and Banaji (2017) argue that Scott's approach does not clearly point out what exactly is being resisted and that Scott grouped dissimilar phenomena under the heading of resistance. If the compromises of the migrant workers can be interpreted as 'working the system' rather than challenging it, then why should we call it resistance? How many different forms can resistance take and still remain resistance, particularly if the system does not change and even comes to accommodate some of these forms?

As Foucault argues that 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1998, pp. 95-96). By analysing Bedouin women's resistance, Abu-Lughod provides an insightful critique on the 'tendency to romanticise resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirits in its refusal to be dominated by analysing power and resistance at multiple levels' (1990, p. 42). By situating resistance in power relations and identifying multiple forms of resistance, she suggests that we should use resistance as 'a diagnostic of power' (ibid). Recognising the dialectic interaction of power relations and resistance provides a way to analyse the interaction between MWH and other social actors as will be discussed in chapter 7.

3.4.2 Understanding agency

Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p.970, cited in Banaji, 2017) proposes a definition of agency as, 'the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations'. Agency does not necessarily consist of 'resistance' to oppression. The exercising of agency does not always challenge dominant forces but rather can reinforce existing hegemony (Banaji, 2017; Bain, 2005; Madhok, 2013; Mahmood, 2001). In her ethnography of Indian children's use of media, Banaji (2017) argues, agency 'exists as a potential rather than an essence' (p. 196) and 'can be expressed through a host of actions on a spectrum of conformity and resistance'(p. 193). For Banaji, who examines the ways in which working-class children integrate and creatively reuse materials and technologies in their everyday lives, agency ranges from 'defiant alienation, through complex negotiated and ephemeral acts of implicit subversion, to apparent conformity or co-option' (ibid, p. 35). Her accounts of 'contaminated', 'embodied' and 'ephemeral' agency amongst different classes of children and young people enable me to analyse the various forms of agency manifested in the cultural practices of MWH in different temporal-relational situations.

Agency can take various forms of performance. By examining the subjectivity of social workers in India, Madhok argues that 'speech practices' should be recognised as a way of exercising agency under certain oppressive circumstances as over-emphasising agency-as-action might lead to an 'action bias' (2013). In her analysis, based on the perception of the negative consequences their potential action might lead to, the subjects chose not to take action in order to avoid perceivable loss (ibid). In the context of contemporary China, labour activism is closely monitored by the

government, any collective actions of the migrant worker's grass-roots organisations risk severe repression.

During my fieldwork, I observed various actions and speeches of my informants directly and indirectly challenge the hegemony. But at the same time, in an oppressive social and political context, my informants also develop different tactics in resistance to avoid negative consequences. For instance, MWH members strategically employ the state discourse of 'mass line' as a way to justify the value of the migrant worker's cultural practices, and potentially to gain resources. The various resistance and agency formation of the labour activists in multiple power relations will be discussed at length in empirical chapters.

This chapter has outlined some of the main concepts I draw upon in my thesis. In the next chapter, I will explain the methodology that I utilised to explore the cultural practice of migrant worker's labour organisations in China.

Chapter 4 Methodology: Doing ethnographic research with migrant workers' labour organisations in China

4.0 Introduction

In the previous chapters I discussed the historical context of Chinese migrant workers as well as the theoretical and conceptual framework of this thesis. In this chapter I discuss my research methodology.

To investigate the cultural practice of migrant workers' labour organisations in China, I conducted an ethnography for a period of one year between 2013 and 2014 in China. I used ethnography as my primary research approach to understand the cultural practices and resistance of the migrant workers. To examine these issues, it was necessary to spend a prolonged period with the people who engaged in the process of cultural practice. Working alongside the activists and the migrant workers over a significant amount of time as a participant researcher not only allowed me to ask about and probe their perceptions, opinions and actions but also to observe more nuanced operations of power in their political struggles, subtle forms of resistance and expressions of agency and subjectivity. Participant observation and interviews were the main data collection methods used during my fieldwork.

In this chapter, I set out to discuss ethnography and the rationale for adopting it in this research. I then explicate the research design, ethical principles, and the methods adopted to collect and analyse the data and explain how the fieldwork was carried out. This is followed by a discussion of reflexivity, focusing on my relationships with the informants, how our positionality influenced the whole research process and reflecting on my conflicting roles as a researcher and an activist in the field.

4.1. Ethnography

Ethnography has undergone significant 'upheaval and reflection and decolonial critique' as method, methodology and epistemology in social sciences after Malinowski (Banaji et al., 2018, p. 98). A multi-level working definition of ethnography is summarised by Raymond Madden as, firstly, 'a direct, qualitative social science research practice' that involves 'fieldwork with human groups, societies or cultures, experiencing the daily ebb and flow of life of a participant group'; secondly, it is 'a form of non-fiction writing that is based on systematically gathered data from fieldwork and other relevant secondary sources'; that also builds 'theories about the human condition' through a 'combination of research and writing' (2010, p.34).

According to Clifford, the characteristics of ethnography means that it is appropriate for research that focuses on meaning systems, controversial traditions or cultural creation (1986, p.3). From a functional point of view, ethnography helps researchers to understand human behaviour better, to understand the complexity of society and to find out the actual needs in people's lives (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, pp.133–6). Ethnography assumes a central role in researching marginalised groups and cultural studies (ibid, p.168). Moreover, it offers the potential to develop theory rather than merely verifying or modifying existing theories (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In other words, it is an attempt to 'marry narrow and broad approaches to theory-building by combining inductive and deductive perspectives' (Madden, 2010, p.17).

Ethnography has been adopted in media research since the 1980s; although mainly employed in audience research and cultural studies, it is used in empirical research concerned with understanding media and communication practices in social life settings, made possible by bringing the 'holistic' view from anthropology to media and communication studies (Radway, 1988). The research objects of media ethnography extend from particular texts and audiences to understanding media and communication in people's life experiences (Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001). In media

anthropology, media is viewed as people's living practice and cultural practice. The necessity of understanding the media and communication activities of particular social groups in society and their cultural contexts is highlighted in order to foreground concerns about the following issues: the exercise of power and the potential of social movements; the reinforcement of inequality and the resources of imagination; and technology's impact on individual and collective identities (Ginsburg, Abu- Lughod, & Larkin, 2008; Banaji, 2015 & 2017).

This thesis investigates the cultural practices of migrant workers in China in relation to history and collective political struggles in the wave of labour unrest. Ethnography has been adopted in this study for the following reasons. First, the nature of this thesis is to examine the causes and processes of cultural practice in the rural-urban migrant workers' labour organisations. Ethnography, as an effective method for exploring the causes and processes of a phenomenon in its natural setting, fits the nature of the research.

Second, as this thesis concerns the ideological and cultural struggles in terms of collective identity construction – meaning contestation as well as actions and rationales in a living context. As discussed in Chapter 1, the subordinate position of the social group in the Chinese context has been well-established in existing sociological literature. Considering the significant role ethnography assumes in studying marginalised groups and culture, it suits this project.

Finally, as this study stresses the agency and subjective experience of the migrant workers, as the researcher, my interpretation of the particular social group could only be grasped through the relation of my own subjective expression, behaviour and actions, and context. Therefore, the researcher must approach the meaning system of the labour activists and ordinary workers through direct experience and in a self-reflexive manner. Although I come from a working-class family and have grown up in urban China, having done a Masters and currently undertaking PhD studies in the UK, I must admit that there are cultural differences between my own experiences and

those of rural-urban migrant workers. Engaging in ethnographic fieldwork enables me to explore and comprehend the experience of workers and activists without speaking over, or for them.

The researcher does inevitably play a role in an ethnographic study. As John Brewer points out, '(t)he natural science model of research does not permit the researcher to become a variable in the experiment, yet ethnographers are not detached from the research but, depending on the degree of involvement in the setting, are themselves part of the study or by their obtrusive presence come to influence the field' (2002, p. 20). The post-structural turn in ethnography 'marks a shift from the idea of the *researcher as observer* to the researcher as a (*politically) committed author*' (Banaji et al., 2018, p. 100). Therefore, reflexivity becomes pivotal in an ethnography.

Feminist scholars also have also contributed to my understanding of knowledge production in this research. Haraway conceptualised situated knowledge as 'partial, locatable, critical knowledge' that allows space for multiplicity and difference as the 'subjugated' standpoints promise more adequate, sustained and transforming accounts of the social world (1991, p.191). The feminist scholars critically evaluated the conventional idea about the 'neutrality' of knowledge and argued that knowledge is situated, and the construction of 'reality' is embedded in power-relations (Hartsock, 1983; Haraway, 1991).

The constructed 'reality' portrayed in this thesis is based on the researcher's interpretation of the experience, perception, and actions of the migrant workers in the process of their cultural practices. Therefore, the outcomes are inevitably influenced by my reading of previous literature and my own positionality, as well as my interpersonal relations with the informants. I discuss reflexivity further in section 4.3.

4.2 Research design

Due to the uncertainty and complexity of doing ethnographic and qualitative research

in complex political conditions, the research design in this project did not follow a linear process. In this section, I discuss the ways in which the project was carried out, including the formulation process of the research questions, the process of data collection, as well as the analysis of the collected data. I start the section by considering how the research questions were formulated and then discuss the selection of the field and provide an overview of the methods used in collecting and analysing data, as well as the ethical principles that underlined the whole project. This is followed by a portrayal of how the actual fieldwork was conducted from the beginning to the follow-up study.

4.2.1 Research question formulation

As mentioned, the whole research process was by no means linear. The research questions were revised again and again in response to the collected data and the preliminary analysis, as well as through my review of the literature. These kinds of changes made in doing qualitative research are not rare, as ethnography is 'a nonlinear dynamic system' (Agar, 2004, p.16). Although my initial curiosity about the cultural practices of migrant workers and their relation to labour struggles and collective identity formation never changed, the research questions were not finalised until I started writing my empirical chapters. Before I went back to Beijing for fieldwork, my initial research questions were designed to examine how migrant workers' organisations used media and communication, what collective identity was constructed via their self-representation, and how they used media and communication in protest mobilisation.

Indeed, immersing myself in the fieldwork as researcher and activist at the same time enabled the development of my initial curiosity and research interests. Many interesting issues revealed themselves during the fieldwork. For example, as my fieldwork unfolded, I realised that the cultural practices of Migrant Worker's Home (MWH) are closely associated with the core members' personal experiences and their understanding of culture, identity and resistance. Such an observation confirmed the

need to change the focus of the investigation from how they use media and communication to how the migrant worker labour activists perceive their everyday lives and resistance to culture and labour struggle. Furthermore, the reading and re-reading of field notes was also considered a means by which a researcher comes up with new questions (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002), thus I was required to adapt my research questions to the empirical data collected.

4.2.2 Selection of the field

4.2.2.1 Multi-sited ethnography

I used multi-sited ethnography to conduct the fieldwork. From the integrity of anthropological research and the requirement of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), the traditional ethnographic approach is to start in a specific geographic space – the site. In recent decades, the development of the theory of 'social production of space' has given legitimacy and necessity to multi-sited ethnography and un-sited ethnography (Falzon, 2009, pp.3-6).

The relationship between humans and space is a dialectic since 'there is a constant 'dialogue' between humans and the places they inhabit, and this is not only true for indigenous peoples' but also true 'of humans generally' (Madden, 2010, p.38). Space is not only geographical but also social, therefore in ethnography, the purpose of '(c)onstructing a field site is an attempt to put boundaries around an ethnographer's inquiries into a human group or institution' (ibid., pp.38-39). In regard to multi-sited ethnography, the 'site' is distinguished from the geospatial perspective. From a social space perspective, these geographic spaces link internally and point to the same social space. Hence, in identifying the field site, the critical tasks are to identify the range and boundary of the particular social space and to identify the needs and connections of different geographic spaces.

For the research object of this thesis, the field site is the social space in which the

practice happens. First of all, as a study of migrants, to constrain the investigation in one geographic location risked the danger of misunderstanding the migrant life and not grasping the meaning and complex interaction of their practice. Moreover, according to previous working experience with the activists and labour organisations, some of their work was geographically mobile across the main industrial zones in China. Therefore, the ethnographic fieldwork needed to cover their practices across different geographic sites.

4.2.2.2 Sampling strategy and selection of cases

Even within longstanding ethnographies, a sampling strategy is required to provide a guideline for the selection of case studies, key informants and wider interview respondents. As part of a deeply qualitative research method, the sampling strategy is not to strive for representativeness in general as in quantitative research but is instead based on 'information-richness' (Kuzel, 1999, pp. 33-35). Representativeness implies that the samples point to a finite population in the sense of probability; however ethnographic research often lacks a finite population, and even if there is one, it does not represent the purpose of ethnography. In other words, the sampling strategy of an ethnography needs to stress the complexity of information carried by samples in order to achieve 'information-richness.'

Appropriateness and adequacy are the leading indicators of information-richness. In this study, I used the 'criterion-based' mixed sampling strategy: 'typical case sampling' – 'snowball sampling' – 'confirming and disconfirming sampling' (Kuzel, 1999, pp.33-35). As the social space of cultural practices of Chinese migrant workers' grass-root organisations are embedded in organisational and interpersonal networks, snowball sampling was employed due to its effectiveness among interpersonal networks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Therefore, my entire body of fieldwork has been conducted through the organisational and interpersonal network of Chinese migrant workers' labour organisations. The choices I made as a researcher owe a lot to the nature of the social spaces that these groups inhabit in China today rather than to my

convenience as a researcher.

The detailed steps that I took in sampling were:

> (1) developing a set of identification criteria for Chinese migrant workers' grass-roots labour organisations;
>
> (2) finding the preliminary cases and key critical informants;
>
> (3) rolling the snowball through organisational and interpersonal networks;
>
> (4) detecting and identifying *disconfirming* cases; and
>
> (5) circulating the process.

Based on my previous experiences with Chinese migrant worker organisations, workers and the research questions as well as the general sampling strategy, the issues regarding the identification criteria and case selection need to be demonstrated here. In recent decades, the number of labour NGOs has boomed in China, but they vary in nature (Chan, 2012, p.15). What I mean by 'Chinese migrant workers' grass-roots labour organisations' meets the following criteria: (1) organisational independence; (2) migrant worker community based; and (3) founded and operated by migrant workers. Following the identification criteria and the sampling strategy, two particular grass-roots labour organisations of Chinese migrant workers were chosen as case studies: Migrant Workers' Home (MWH); and Sunflower Women (SFW).

4.2.2.3 Brief description of MWH and SFW

According to the aforementioned sampling strategy, I selected two migrant workers' grass-roots labour organisations as my primary cases to explore the cultural practices of Chinese migrant workers in labour struggles. In this section, I briefly present the two sites to set the scene for my fieldwork.

Migrant Workers' Home (MWH)

Established in 2002 and based in Beijing, Migrant Workers' Home is one of the most famous migrant workers' organisations in China. Its predecessor was the New Workers' Art Troupe, before it developed into an NGO with secondary organs such as a local labour union, migrant children's school, community charity shop and career training school. MWH was selected as the preliminary case for three main reasons.

Firstly, MWH is one of the most developed and famous migrant workers' grass-root organisations in China. As it started from an art troupe and continually engages with various media and cultural practices, it was expected to provide rich data for the investigation into the role of media and communication regarding collective identity construction and the symbolic struggle on media representation. Secondly, as well as being a developed migrant workers' organisation, it has constant contact with other organisations and performance tours in China. Hence, it suits the purpose of examining the relationships between cultural practice and community building, networking and mobilisation. Thirdly, it has a much longer history than other similar organisations, thus not only could it provide more extensive data for analysis, but also a relatively broad time range could be more useful given that this study understands identity and cultural construction as a dynamic and ongoing processes.

Sunflower Women (SFW)

The SFW is a gender-specific grass-roots migrant workers' labour organisation that was established in 2012 in the Southern industrial Guangdong province in China. It attracted the researcher's attention as a 'disconfirming' case in terms of highlighted gender issues in the initial snowball case sampling process. As discussed in the theoretical section, class and gender are intersected in the process of identity formation. Secondly, the SFW has a long history with MWH as both of its co-founders knew the core-members of MWH before they started their own organisation. For instance, May, co-founder of the women worker's organisation was trained by and

worked with MWH before the establishment of SFW in Guangzhou and maintained close contacts with the core members of MWH ever since.

Indeed, there are other women migrant workers in Beijing. Although the relations of those organisations with MWH are also close and I have collected data related to their interactions (see Chapter 7), I selected SFW for another important reason. The geographic difference is significant to reveal the complexity and dynamics in the labour struggle of China. As the 'world factory', the labour unrest in Guangdong province is more active in terms of collective actions than in Beijing. The local political environment is also diverse. To some extent, the SFW can be viewed as an extension of MWH in a very different context. Hence, the data collected from SFW could supplement the data from the preliminary case to provide a more comprehensive overall understanding.

4.2.3 Methods of data collection

Two data collection methods were employed in conducting ethnography in this thesis: participant observations and interviews.

4.2.3.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, open-ended interviews and life story interviews were employed and integrated into the fieldwork to collect data.

A semi-structured interview acts as a highly focused probe that can break the defences people set up for their hidden thoughts and beliefs (Berger, 1998). In terms of people's behaviours in specific social contexts, the objective is to derive a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations (Gaskell, 2000, p.39). Moreover, the semi-structured interview can ensure a detailed collection of data, allowing investigators to ask follow-up questions to monitor the process (Berger, 1998). I found semi-structured interviews were most productive at the end of the fieldwork when I – as a researcher, observer and participant – had accumulated

enough understanding of the sites and a certain degree of rapport and trust had been formed with the migrant workers I was observing. Moreover, the semi-structured interview also offered me a chance to collect data from respondents outside of the community in which I resided as a researcher. It allowed me to collect data from mainstream journalists, other NGO partners and scholars who had interactive relations with my two host organisations.

Life story interviews and open-ended interviews were originally adopted as supplements to my semi-structured interviews during the fieldwork before the actual fieldwork was conducted. I found these methods to be useful and productive when working with the labour activists and ordinary migrant workers. Life story interviews, also described as biographical narrative interviewing, are the 'most effective means for gaining an understanding of how the self evolves over time' as 'a meaning maker with place in society, the culture, and history' (Atkinson, 2002, p.128). The subjective perspective of the life story interview is helpful in understanding what constitutes the 'reality' of the respondents and also helps to 'create community' through sharing (ibid.). I consistently found this to be the case. The life stories shared by the core-members of both host labour organisations showed me how their own experiences in everyday life shaped their understandings of identity, culture and resistance: as McAdams notes, '(i)dentity is a life story' (1988, p.18). For instance, the intersected oppression of gender, class and hukou status experienced by the migrant women labour activists shapes the ways in which they understand the necessity of incorporating gender and class into their resistance (see Chapter 8).

Additionally, while conducting the life story interviews, I found it productive to share some stories of my own with the informants. For example, providing some basic personal information in the ordinary worker interviews could be a good 'ice-breaker. It not only benefited me in building trust with the informants but also uncovered some sensitive or hidden issues (reflected on further in section 4.3).

In the second field site in Guangzhou, I conducted interviews with the leaders of

women workers involved in the collective action case assisted by the SWF, as well as the staff members and student interns in the organisation. Through the contacts of the SWF, I also managed to interview labour activists from other labour organisations in Guangdong (Appendix B providers a list of the main informants in the fieldwork.).

4.2.3.2 Participant observations

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I conducted a semi-structured key informant interview with two members of MWH. This helped me to collect some basic information about the questions from my research proposal, but I was often given very brief answers. Qiuyun, a young member of MWH and my second interviewee, told me afterwards that she felt a bit nervous about answering the questions as she did not want to give 'wrong' answers. I realised that some informants were more willing to share their opinions in a casual setting, and that the formal setting of that first interview simply emphasised my power in relation to my interviewees. This was especially true in terms of ordinary workers who were not used to the setting of a formal interview. Also, interviewing alone is not sufficient to fully explore the experiences, perceptions, behaviours and actions of the informants. Participant observation, the core of ethnographic research was therefore the method used in the fieldwork to collect data.

Participant observation has been defined as 'the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting' (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999, p.91). As the primary data collection method of ethnography, it has been suggested that the advantage is to develop a 'holistic understanding of the phenomena under study' (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p.92).

Although interviews are an effective way of collecting rich data to provide insight about people's subjective perceptions of experience and the world around them, specific issues are much better observed or talked over during informal conversations

rather than asked about within informal interviews. For instance, this was the case when it came to noting the concealed 'resistance' from MWH members to the mainstream media and academia (see Chapter 7).

Moreover, I found in my fieldwork that participant observation allowed me to avoid some ethical dilemmas and better protect my informants. For instance, before conducting my fieldwork, I planned to seek contacts through personal network (such as from former classmates in universities) to arrange interviews within the local government to investigate their perception of the cultural practice of migrant workers. However, shortly after I started my fieldwork, I realised that there were potential risks for my informants (especially in Guangzhou). Therefore, I made the decision to change my plan. Yet, this did not mean that I completely ignored interactions with the local government in investigating cultural practice. Participant observation allowed me to collect data during various encounters between activists and officials in natural settings.

In this research, using the two types of interview and participant observation in combination as the data collection toolkit proved to be compatible. One of the irreplaceable advantages of participant observation is that the researcher has the opportunity to observe and compare the differences between the oral report and the actual behaviour of the informants. In many cases, these differences can reveal very rich information. Furthermore, the integration of participatory observation and interviews helps to balance the relationship of 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives in fieldwork. The 'emic' refers to the researcher participant's view (as an insider) and the 'etic' refers to the researcher's view (as an outsider) (Kottak, 2011). The two ways of understanding need to be 'synthesised to explain particular human phenomena' (Madden, 2010, p.19).

In addition to the participant observation and interviews, I collected a considerable amount of secondary data during my fieldwork. This included: artefacts produced by both organisations; the activists' posts and discussion on social media platforms

(Weibo and Weixin); worker's writing online; labour organisations' reports; and reports from the mainstream media.

4.2.4 Ethical principles

The ethics of research concerns the appropriateness of the researcher's behaviour in relation to the subjects of the research or those who are affected by it. Ethical issues can arise at any stages of the research: planning, implementation and reporting. Although some ethical issues appear a matter of courtesy and common sense, they often involve some complexity. Social researchers must accept the responsibility of ensuring the rights, privacy, and welfare of the people and communities that they study.

According to Gray (2009, p.73), there are four main areas of ethical principles:

- Avoiding harm to participants;
- Ensuring informed consent of participants;
- Respecting the privacy of participants; and
- Avoiding the use of deception.

As discussing labour disputes or protests has the potential to cause harm in participants' work and daily lives, ethical issues were considered even more seriously in this study. This was of special concern in Guangzhou, where there were ongoing labour disputes and surveillance on labour organisations.

In designing the research, potential risks for harm were accounted for in order to take steps to alleviate the situation in advance. For instance, never interviewing any migrant workers participating in labour disputes in their workplace or factory-provided dormitory, always keeping conversation confidential, and storing identifying records securely to avoid information falling into the wrong hands or becoming public.

I asked for formal permission from the head of both of my host organisations at the start of my fieldwork. I prepared a topic guide and a consent form in advance of the interviews. Interviewees were aware that I was recording our conversations/interviews. With some of the interviewees who I came to know well during the fieldwork, the consent form seemed too formal – they felt uncomfortable signing a consent form and they were more comfortable talking casually in a natural setting. In such cases, I clarified my research purpose and asked for their permission to participate, then I recorded the whole process, instead of asking them to sign the consent form.

I guaranteed anonymity to my informants at the beginning of the fieldwork and reiterated this guarantee at the beginning of each interview. However, some of my key informants told me that they did not mind being public as they had done nothing wrong. I agreed that the voice of MWH should be heard, and due to their high profile in the mainstream media, it is almost impossible to keep the key informants from MWH anonymous.

However, the situation was different for other labour organisations. During my fieldwork there were ongoing assaults from police in the second site. More severe clamp downs and repression from the government happened following the completion of my fieldwork, as mentioned in the introduction. Therefore, any informants except for core members of MWH have been given aliases in this thesis to maintain their anonymity and safety.

4.2.5 Fieldwork

In this subsection, I provide detailed accounts of how I conducted my fieldwork. As mentioned in the introduction, I knew the core members of both host labour organisations prior to commencing the fieldwork and even prior to this whole project. I first approached the co-founders of my first host organisation, MWH to conduct a coursework interview in 2010 and have maintained contact ever since. I accompanied

MWH art troupe's national tour in 2012. During the tour, I met labour activists across China and built initial contacts with the co-founders of my second host organisation, SFW. The fieldwork discussed here started in October 2013 when I formally presented myself as a researcher and worked as a volunteer in my first host organisation. I divided the whole process into two stages – the fieldwork and the follow-up study – for the purpose of clarity. The timeline of the fieldwork is illustrated in Appendix A.

4.2.5.1 Fieldwork from October 2013 to September 2014

From October 2013 to June 2014, I worked with MWH. When I started my fieldwork in 2013, Xu Duo, the co-founder of the organisation asked me to assist the work of the newly formed community trade union. The community trade union was formed with the support of the Beijing municipal federation of the trade union as an experiment and Xu Duo was appointed as its leader. The community trade union's office is located in the compound of MWH and is a room with only two chairs and a desk with a computer. Xu Duo's dormitory is linked to the office with a wooden door. I usually went to their office and listened to them providing consulting services to migrant workers. This enabled me to always carry a mini-notebook and a pen, making it easy to take fieldnotes.

My experience at the community trade union provided a good starting point for me to become familiar with the field site. It allowed me to observe the routine daily workflow of MWH, and to build a network of contacts with staff, volunteers and migrant workers. Some of the interviews were conducted in nearby restaurants during lunch breaks. Sometimes my informants invited me to have lunch or dinner at their dormitories or in their rented housing in Picun village. JiaJia and QiuYun were even kind enough to offer to let me stay with them when it was too late to catch a bus home. Indeed, as Gurney (1985) points out, female researchers are more aware of safety issues during fieldwork. In some cases, I accepted their offers in order to avoid an unsafe commute during late nights. I have to note, my decisions were made based

on the rapport built during the fieldwork and my interpersonal relations (friendship) with the young women members of the organisation. Staying in their quarters, I found a more casual and relaxed setting, and my informants were more willing to share their ideas and opinions.

Xu Duo's team also led music workshops for ordinary migrant workers in the Picun village community. These art workshops were organised very loosely and usually started with lyric writing, sometimes ending with debates on topics related to the cultural practice of MWH. These debates were very interesting for me as a researcher. It was during those debates that I found gaps emerging between the core members of MWH and the common migrant workers in the community and elsewhere. I realised that it was important to examine these gaps between the core members of MWH and the others in order to get a full picture of the struggle in relation to culture and ideology. This is why tension in the struggle of culture and ideology became one of the foci of the empirical chapters.

Figure 4.1 A view of the construction site

I accompanied the performers to some of the rehearsals and to performances of the art group formed by the migrant workers and young staff of MWH. They also gave performances alongside MWH's Art Troupe on construction sites or public performances organised by MWH. Xu Duo considered the workshops to be another opportunity to provide education for the migrant workers in the local community.

In November 2013, my main tasks as a volunteer in MWH changed dramatically. In one of the weekly meetings, Sun Heng announced that MWH would soon start preparations for the 2014 *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala, one of the most important and famous cultural events of MWH – I had watched the previous two and found them essential for understanding the migrant worker's culture as promoted by MWH. I thus explained my research interest to Sun Heng, and he welcomed me to join the preparation committee of the Spring Festival Gala as a volunteer.

Joining the preparation committee enabled me to record how MWH organised the event from beginning to end. I participated in almost all the work activities during the four months of the whole process. My tasks were 'mainly helping with the work related to media, but really whatever we need and whatever you can', as Xu Duo put it. This included coordinating media regarding Spring Festival-related interviews; writing the press release; documenting media coverage; taking photos/video clips and uploading them to MWH's Spring Festival Weibo accounts, and assisting in the coordination between MWH and other labour organisations. The *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala was an exciting case to examine the dynamic power relations and the resistance between MWH and other social actors. The findings are presented in Chapter 7.

Most of the time, I stayed in a place in the east fourth ring of Beijing. Occasionally, I stayed in the Picun village for a couple of nights due to late workshops, study groups, performances or because I did not want to terminate conversations with informants. I usually wrote up my fieldnotes at night after leaving Picun. Mobile phones became a handy tool in the fieldwork. As it was part of my assigned tasks, I took photographs with my iPhone, which helped me to remember events. I also used the iPhone to record conversations when I felt it necessary. Compared to a recorder like a Dictaphone, the iPhone attracted much less attention from interviewees thus they felt more relaxed, although I was open about my actions, which my informants and interviewees appreciated.

As MWH is active across China, I was able to interact with student volunteers, migrant workers, scholars and other labour activists, in Shanghai, Jiangsu, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Kunming, Tianjin and Taiwan. I travelled with MWH's Art Troupe several times during the fieldwork outside of Beijing. This not only allowed me to place my research within a broader scene of labour unrest in China but also enabled me to find out how MWH interacted with other labour activists and how they communicated their construction of collective identity and alternative culture to different people. For instance, the 'music seminar' (*chang tan hui*) developed by MWH as a hybrid form in their cultural practice to communicate their political ideology and demands via art performance was observed and will be further elaborated on in Chapter 5.

In May 2014, I felt it was time to depart from Beijing and to meet the southern labour organisations in the Pearl River Delta to broaden my scope and further explore the dynamics there. From June to August 2014, I worked as an intern at the SFW in Panyu district, Guangzhou. During my three months of fieldwork in Guangzhou, I stayed with May, co-founder of SFW, in her spare room. This arrangement provided me with ample opportunities to observe and conduct informal conversations with one of my key informants in the SFW. Many interesting conversations happened spontaneously during our dinner time or when we took a stroll in the neighbourhood – the biggest challenge was finding time to take notes. I usually typed key words on my mobile phone and then wrote up fuller notes when I was alone in my room.

During that time there was an ongoing worker-led collective bargain case, assisted by the SFW. My tasks include providing support for the staff and the women migrant workers participating in the labour dispute. This enabled me to observe most of the strategy meetings between the SFW and the workers. I also participated in the 'Home Visit' (*Jia Fang*) initiative that the SFW conducted for women migrant workers. Being introduced by May as one of the student interns at the SFW, I was able to quickly gain the trust of the women migrant workers. The 'home visits' and the

discussions and work meetings about them allowed me to comprehend the gendered difficulties for women workers in participating in collective actions. Moreover, it enabled me to see how the activists and workers perceived and understood these gendered issues, and how necessary and crucial it was to tackle these difficulties in the labour movement.

In later months, the harassment from the local government became more frequent and the channel of funding was blocked for the SFW. June, the other co-founder of the SFW, asked me to help her to initiate a crowdfunding project to support the 'Dagong mum's mutual aid day care center'. The process of establishing and running the crowdfunding project was another excellent chance to observe and examine the complicated and difficult positions of women workers in China. More importantly, in exchanging ideas with the activists and workers, it revealed another case study of how women labour activists react to gendered oppression that rendered their agency and how they expanded their resistance to tackle it. These findings will be presented in Chapter 8.

The fieldwork in Guangzhou also caused me to realise the huge difference among labour organisations in China and their understanding/ideas about the role of culture and ideology, as well as the effective process of labour struggle in China. Through close observation and multiple conversations with local labour activists, I was able to investigate their motivation and rationale. Although no consensus has been reached on the approach to labour struggle among activists and organisations, some of the labour activists in the PRD who focused on facilitating collective actions (strikes, protests and collective bargaining) expressed their understanding of cultural and ideological struggles in labour activism and their concerns about explicitly engaging with it. Their perceptions, opinions and concerns helped me to further reflect on the relation of cultural practice and broader labour unrest in China. More detailed discussion on this issue will be presented in Chapters 7 and 9.

In September 2014, I returned to Beijing to revisit MWH. The purpose of revisiting

the first field site was to collect more materials and keep me updated after new questions arose from my three months in Guangzhou. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the core members of MWH during this period. I found it very useful to conduct semi-structured interviews towards the end of the fieldwork since, after a long period of participant observation, the well-informed researcher can invite the interviewee to reflect on many issues previously observed.

I briefly presented some of the preliminary findings from my fieldwork to my participants in a seminar. It was no surprise that the cultural and ideological importance of MWH was confirmed by the core members as it was what they strived to promote. Again, there were young labour activist from southern China questioning the meaningfulness of 'doing arts and culture work', as the discussion occurred shortly after a famous labour activist and lawyer from a southern labour organisation that focused on collective bargaining cases had given a lecture to members of MWH. Their responses and the debates between them suggested the complexity of the role of culture and the challenge of MWH's work in the context of labour unrest in China. I was aware that academic interpretation can differ greatly from an informant's perceptions.

4.2.5.2 Follow-up study

Following my departure from China, I maintained contact with most of the core members from both host organisations via WeChat and Weibo and maintained observation of the online discussions among the labour activists and some of the migrant workers.

My desire to keep in touch with my participants resulted not only from my role as a researcher but also because during my time conducting fieldwork, I had worked closely with them and built a deep sense of concern about their causes and their personal safety and wellbeing. This was especially the case with the women labour activists from SFW. Sometimes we chatted online to discuss issues of mutual concern

and even via video-calls about some questions that arose from my data analysis. May and June always gave me feedback. Those conversations are not formal interviews, but talking with them online can also be considered part of the fieldwork. These follow-up conversations and contacts enabled me to fill in missing information when writing up the chapters of the thesis, and some of the follow-up online conversations were incorporated into the thesis. For instance, I updated Lv Tu's comments and feedback on the disagreements on worker's culture between MWH and the action-oriented labour NGOs in the Pearl River Delta via WeChat (see Chapter 7).

However, maintaining contact with the migrant workers from both sites was much more difficult. Some of the women migrant workers who participated in the labour disputes quit their job after receiving little compensation from the factory and moved on. Most changed their jobs and location in the following months and disappeared from the community of both sites. Among those who stayed, their workload consumed too much of their time and they rarely appeared online.

4.2.6 Data analysis

This subsection discusses the data analysis process, including the two methods used in analysing data and brief notes on the transcripts and translations used in the process.

4.2.6.1 Thematic analysis and discourse analysis

To get a sense of the patterns and insights arising from my extensive data in terms of fieldnotes, images, found materials and interview transcripts, I used thematic analysis; its techniques of repetition, similarities and differences are core to this method (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.102). According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is a method 'for identifying, analysing and reporting' the important themes in the data that are 'in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (2006, pp.78-82). As an ethnographic investigation of Chinese migrant workers' cultural and media practice and dynamic

interactive relations with resistance in transitional China, the data collected from fieldwork was not highly concentrated but somewhat fluid. Thematic analysis helps to explore various aspects of data from surface meanings to the interpretative level of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). It helped me to ascertain the underlying patterns of ideas, assumptions and ideologies in the scattered data from fieldnotes and interview transcripts.

The process of identifying themes was based on the following principles: the recurrence; the relativity to the research questions; the discordance with the literature reviewed; and the diversity/differences between one concept/issue among different people. To identify the themes, I read the interview transcripts and fieldnotes repeatedly and intensively. The software NVivo had been suggested and tried to assist the process of data analysis. But I found it much more productive to do it myself in an old-fashioned way: reading the materials on paper and coding them with a pen. A sample of a coded transcript is attached in Appendix C.

Discourse analysis is often used as supplementary data analysis method to thematic analysis. As this thesis concerns the ideological struggle of collective identity and alternative culture construction, discourse analysis was considered necessary. I adopted an intertextual analysis approach to guide my analysis. Matheson (2005) argues that texts make sense through their intertextual dimension as language and human society are inextricably linked. In other words, it emphasises how the making of new meanings is achieved through the connection with previous or other ideas and texts (ibid.). This aspect was especially helpful in investigating the artefacts produced by migrant labour activists in their cultural practice. Moreover, critical discourse analysis (CDA) informed my analysis of the texts produced by mainstream media (both commercial and state) and the government (including CCP party leader speeches and official documents). As van Dijk (1993) points out, the focus of CDA is 'top-down' elite discourses to show how language and discourse or communicative events involved in the '(re)production of dominance and inequality' (p.279).

4.2.6.2 Transcripts and translation

The fieldnotes and interview summaries were written in Chinese, but the themes and analysis were written in English. All the in-depth interviews with the core members of both my host organisations were transcribed in full. However, I did not transcribe all of the other interviews due to the significant volume of work involved. Because of the sensitivity of the topics, I could not recruit a third party to transcribe the recordings without potential risk to the interviewees. Instead of transcribing them all, I listened to these recordings repeatedly and selected appropriate, representative recordings and clips to use in the thesis. The selection of recordings was mainly based on three criteria: the degree of conformity between the content and analytic themes, the importance of it to the integrity of the story, and the articulacy of the interviewees.

All the interviews and conversations were conducted in Mandarin, with some exceptions in a Chinese dialect. I translated all the original materials used in the thesis into English. In an attempt to provide an understandable translation to the English reader that was at the same time close to its original meaning in Mandarin, I employed and combined the methods of literal and free translation in the process. I considered this to be essential in examining the cultural and media practices of migrant workers. Many terms and words were frequently used in the original materials with very different connotations. In order to examine them, I directly used the Chinese pinyin in the text to avoid oversimplification. Additionally, as the researcher's 'socio-cultural positioning' also affects translation (Temple & Young, 2004, p.168), I was required to reflexively examine my own positionality, as discussed in the next section.

4.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the core concern of ethnography. As ethnography relies on the 'whole-body experience' of the researcher, they are both user of methods and research instrument at the same time (Madden, 2010, pp.20-23). The ethical basis of the fieldwork – the reliability of data and the validity of theoretical interpretation – required the researcher to be fully aware that the empirical research on human behaviour and meaning systems can only provide 'partial facts', and which part of the facts can be provided depends on the 'position' and action of the researcher in the field (Madden, 2010, p.23).

Some criticise reflexivity as a 'naval-gazing activity' and suggest that it serves little function in bridging the power relation between the researcher and the researched and thus suggest that searching for positionality through reflexivity is a hopeless endeavour (Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Rose, 1997). I do not think reflexivity can serve to bridge the power relations between the researcher and the researched and erase the structural inequality between them. It would be hypocritical of me to claim that I am 'one of them' when working with the migrant workers in the villages of the urban fringe. However, reflexivity is not just a self-comforting process, but it helps me to consider the following questions: who am I; what I am engaging with; what are my relations with the informants? In my experience of doing fieldwork, reflexivity helps me to raise the consciousness of my own situation and recognises the fact that I will always observe others through my own lens.

Moreover, reflexivity is important in 'situating the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained' (Sultana, 2007, p.376). I reflect on the process of doing fieldwork in the following sub-sections to illustrate how I presented myself and the conflict in roles, as well as my gender and class position in the fieldwork. The purpose of the discussion and reflection on the researcher's role and class and gender positions is to reveal the power relations involved in fieldwork and to provide a more thorough understanding of the research

that is produced.

4.3.1 Researcher's role

Self is the starting point for observation and the first question I faced in conducting the fieldwork was to address 'who I am' in the field. With consideration of ethical principles, I made the decision to keep my identity as a researcher overt to my informants. I was granted access to both of my host organisation and expressed my research interests to the key informants (the core members and the staff). However, as I also worked as a volunteer and intern in both organisations, in many situations when encountering ordinary workers and people outside of the organisations, I was often introduced by other labour activists as a volunteer or an intern rather than a researcher. I identified with how they presented me in these circumstances to avoid causing trouble for them. Yet, if asked by workers or other informants, I always informed them that I was also a PhD student carrying out my research.

Indeed, it was very hard to make clear-cut dichotomies between right and wrong, especially when something happened such as an emergency during the fieldwork. The first dilemma regarded how to present myself publicly in the field. For example, during my fieldwork in Guangzhou I was questioned by the Guo Bao (national security) police informally about my identity when they came to the office to 'monitor' the practice of the SFW. According to textbook, I should have told them I was a PhD researcher from LSE. However, I knew that would bring trouble to SFW as my key informants, as May and June told me many times about how sensitive it was at the time as the SFW was under surveillance due to their intervention in collective labour disputes. On my first day at SWF, I was asked by May to be cautious about my association with foreign institutions (meaning LSE) as it might be used as an excuse by the local police to harass them. In order to 'do no harm' to my informants and respect their wishes, I only told the Guo Bao police that I was a research student who was doing my internship at the SFW and refused to answer any follow-up questions. This worked because I am Chinese and at the time there were two other Master's

students from a local university actually doing internships in the labour organisation.

As an intern or volunteer who actively participated in both labour organisations, I considered myself an activist at the same time. To actively participate in the labour organisation was not only a decision I made based on my personal position but also to some extent inevitable for conducting the fieldwork. This was best exemplified in one of my labour activist informant's comments after he kindly shared his ideas about MWH and collective actions, 'you know, many people don't like talking to researchers. They came to ask us questions and left, nothing changed. It is a waste of time… I am willing to talk to you because you helped in the S factory [collective bargaining] case'. The reciprocity built into the process of being an activist enabled me to explore the issues as a researcher.

In the process of my fieldwork, being a researcher and an activist at the same time not only helped me gain access to different groups of people but also allowed me to reach the insider stories of the activists in the migrant workers' labour organisations. But were there no risks or disadvantages in being a researcher and activist at the same time? Some scholars argue that it is necessary to study phenomena in a 'natural setting' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). That is to say, a researcher should minimize their impact on the natural setting. I was acutely aware that being an activist who participated in the labour struggle with my informants ran the risk of changing the setting. For example, I helped the women labour activists to raise funds to maintain their day-care centre for migrants to reduce their burden of childcare. The act of self-introspection goes beyond mere self-reflecting and becomes an ongoing self-analysis, raising political awareness. As Callaway suggests, reflexivity can be seen as 'opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge' (1992, p.33). My assistance certainly inflected the 'natural setting', however, I think it was unacceptable and socially impossible for me to refuse to help and see the day-care centre close down.

To some extent, my dual roles as researcher and activist enriched the fieldwork. Abu-Lughod suggests that having multiple identities like the 'halfies' helps 'unsettle the boundary between self and other' (2006, p.153). This was especially true in conducting ethnography on the labour organisations. As Banaji et al. point out, in order to collect good data, it requires the researcher to 'continually make efforts at interaction to develop relationships' and indeed it 'will yield the types of exploratory, learning interviews and discussions that provide deep insight into culture, values and ways of knowing' (2018, p.111). This was evidenced throughout the whole process of fieldwork in interactions with labour activists. I argue that acting as a researcher and an activist at the same time can be disturbing but fruitful in conducting research.

4.3.2 Class and gender in fieldwork

The positionality and biography of the researcher plays an important role in the whole research process (England, 1994). Positionality is important because 'knowledge is valid when it includes an acknowledgement of the knower's specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation' (Maher & Tetreault, 1993, p.118). The researcher's identity (including class and gender) and interests (theoretical and practical) have an impact on what data could be collected and how the data is interpreted. Therefore, I need to discuss how my positionality affects the process of knowledge production.

My first reflection on class inequality occurred during my interaction with key informants in their resource mobilisation. At first, I didn't realise how sensitive my informants were about their underprivileged position in society. To my surprise, even MWH, the most visible migrant worker's organisation in China, was not so confident about attracting mainstream media attention. For instance, when preparing the press conference to announce the 2014 'dagong' Spring Festival Gala. MWH invited many mainstream media in Beijing to attend. Yet, Sun Heng contacted me the day before the press conference and disclosed that he was worried that many had not responded to

confirm their attendance. He asked me if I knew anyone working in mainstream media and was willing to attend and report on it. Indeed, I was not alien to journalists in China: as a postgraduate of journalism in China, I know plenty of alumni and friends who became journalists or worked in the media industry after graduation. I posted details of the press conference on my social media account and called some alumni to see if they knew anyone who would be interested in covering it. Two journalists contacted me and attended the press conference the next day.

I was happy to help MWH get more visibility in the media. But I must admit, both the core members of MWH and I acknowledged that such favours illustrate the structural privilege of the researcher in terms of class and educational background. This awareness of structural privilege and underprivilege was evidenced in both of my host organisations. For instance, when I was assisting with raising funds for the *Dagong* mum's day-care centre of SFW in Guangzhou, the women labour activists expressed their frustration in terms of seeking financial aids to keep the day-care centre and attributed it to their underprivileged position as women workers. In her own words, May said, 'who am I? I am a woman worker. I don't think people will listen to me'. That's why she and others insisted on seeking help from journalists and academics who had more resources and voices. These experiences in the fieldwork and the reflections on them enabled me to further consider the impact of the unequal power relations between the activists and other social actors in the cultural practices.

The languages and pronunciations used were also manifestations of the power relations between the researcher and the researched. As DeWalt and DeWalt noted, the ability to speak the local language or dialect is identified as a key element in participant observation (2002, p.4). I used standard Mandarin most of the time during fieldwork. However, in certain situations when my informants were more comfortable in talking in dialect, I spoke in dialect as well. Many ordinary workers I encountered in Guangzhou were from the south-western provinces (Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Guizhou) close to my hometown and the dialects in these provinces were similar.

Being able to communicate in dialects with ordinary workers helped me to collect data as a researcher. Han, the women migrant worker I interviewed in Guangzhou, told me that her husband Chen Ge was willing to join the discussion because he could talk in dialect, but '*Pu tong hua* [standard Mandarin] made him nervous' as Han suggested. Moreover, according to my worker informants, the ability to speak standard Mandarin without an accent was considered a symbol of status of education and urban *hukou*. The 'embarrassment' of not being able to speak 'good' standard Mandarin expressed by my informants when communicating in dialects helped me to comprehend the rationale to battle the 'feeling of humiliation' MWH members promoted (see Chapter 5).

Some scholars argue that a researcher's gender may have a significant impact on fieldwork (Killick, 1995; Moreno, 1995). Gender cannot be neglected when considering the interactions between researcher and informants and it affects the kinds of data a researcher can collect in the field. As a female ethnographer, my gender also influences the fieldwork, including introducing some limitations – for example, gender divided group discussions, thus I could only participate in women's groups.

However, I consider that my gender was helpful in exploring more sensitive issues with women informants. It is worth noting that it is not gender alone that made the informants willing to disclose and discuss issues: self-openness was required in exchange for the openness of the informants. For instance, when I was discussing sexual harassment in the workplace with May, my key informant in Guangzhou, after sharing couple of cases that women migrant workers encountered in their workplace and the difficulties the SFW activists facing, May asked, 'have you ever experienced it in your life? If you tell me I will share the story of how we managed to counter it in our experience'. Here, the informant invited the researcher to be in an equal position to her to discuss more sensitive issues. The self-disclosure certainly inflected the power relation between the researcher and the informants at such times.

Also, my personal life helped to open up conversations, especially issues related to

gender roles. Sharing personal experiences with the informants creates 'shared understandings of the compromises they have negotiated' (McKay, 2002, p.193) and 'offering their own stories as gifts prior to receiving the gift of another's story, places the researchers on a par with the participant'(Al-Hindi & Kawabata, 2002, p.103). Being a single woman in my 30s often attracted interest/concern from my informants, especially the women migrant workers, as most of those I encountered were married in their early 20s. Disclosing my own marital status revealed many sensitive domestic discussions. For instance, Liang, the women worker who participated in collective action, expressed her surprise at first, before telling me that it was not bad for women to be single as 'you are free, you can do whatever you like… it will be very different when you are married'. Therefore, in sharing my experience as a single woman with a married women worker informant, I was able to further probe her ideas about domestic labour, traditional gender norms and how she perceived these gendered difficulties in labour struggles.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed ethnography and why it was adopted in this research before I considered the research design, including how I formulated my research questions as part of a dynamic process, and the mixed methods used in collecting and analysing data. As Rose argues, reflexivity can be considered 'as a strategy for situating knowledges' (1997, p.306). In section 4.3, I conceptualised reflexivity and discussed how my dual role as researcher and activist inflected my fieldwork. I argued that the role of activist actually contributed to building rapport and trust with the labour activists when conducting the research. As the labour struggle remains politically sensitive in the Chinese context, building trust and rapport was crucial for this researcher. I am also aware that my gender and class position brought both advantages and challenges to the fieldwork in my interaction with informants, and I reflected on the impact they brought to the research.

Chapter 5 Understanding Culture and Imagining New Worker's Culture

5.0 Introduction

This chapter aims to answer the following two questions: how does MWH conceptualise and understand 'culture'? What is the 'New Worker's Culture' in the view of MWH? The analysis is based on different core members' accounts of their own experiences and thoughts, supplemented by various media artefacts (songs, dramas, workshops and books) from their cultural practice, as well as observations from fieldwork. I chose to build the analysis on the narratives of several core members of MWH because although it is a large grassroots labour organisation in China, it has a small group of core members that act as its 'masterminds' and the voice of the organisation. Thus, their accounts should best represent the ethos of the organisation.

In the first two sections, I demonstrate that MWH's understanding of culture has gone through two main stages of development. In the beginning, culture was conceptualised in a narrow sense as cultural products, and even more narrowly, it was understood as 'literature and arts'. Therefore, at the early stage, the focus of their cultural practice was on the creation of songs and art performance as an art troupe. With the development of the organisation and the participation of intellectual elites, the core members reflected on their own everyday life and practices, as well as the injustice facing the migrant workers. They gradually developed a broader conceptualisation of culture as 'a whole way of life' to anchor their practices, to eliminate the hierarchy embedded in the common expression of culture, and to make culture more inclusive for the migrant worker. Finally, in order to articulate the counter-hegemonic nature of their cultural practice, they define culture more broadly

as a whole way of struggle in their narrative. The evolution of the conceptualisation of culture has led them to move from representing workers' 'arts and literature' (*wenyi*) to constructing an alternative culture of migrant workers. The cultural practice has displayed a long-term resistant agency to construct the collective identity and culture of the migrant workers. In the third section, I illustrate what MWH imagine the 'New Worker's Culture' should be like.

5.1 From *Wenyi* to *Wenhua*

The ways in which MWH understands culture are closely linked with its core members' life experiences and their own evolving sense of identity. Xu Duo is one of the co-founders – he left his hometown in 1999 and went to Beijing for his love of rock music, chasing his dreams of becoming a rock musician. He enrolled in Midi Music Academy for two years of professional music education. After graduation, he tried to make a living by doing street performance in Beijing subways tunnels. According to Xu Duo, like most migrants, the core members of MWH came to Beijing with the hope of achieving a better life and following their dreams: 'We all have some hobbies of '*wenyi*' [literature and arts], and have some kind of artistic aspiration at that time.' Xu Duo met another co-founder, Sun Heng, in 2001: 'He was teaching music at a migrant children's school at the time and just came back from a year-long road trip in China… I was inspired by him, and then I also started to teach music to children of migrant workers'.

Sun Heng is considered to be the inspiration for many in the labour activism field in China, according to many informants. He was born in a small town in Shanxi province in 1975 and spent his adolescence in Henan province. In the autumn of 1998, Sun Heng quit his job as a middle school music teacher and went to Beijing, China's capital as '*bei piao*' (literally translated as 'floating in Beijing'). He explained why he abandoned the so-called 'iron rice bowl' as a schoolteacher in Henan: 'I was

in pain, I felt confused. During the daytime, I lived to fulfil other people's expectations. During nights, I can't sleep. So, I went to Beijing.' Sun Heng's first job in Beijing was as a porter at the Beijing West Railway Station, while he also performed music on streets. His hard experience of *bei piao* became an important reference point in his later cultural practice and engagement in labour activism. He described his days in Beijing and how he started to identify with workers:

> *A very practical problem at the time was to survive, so I have to work restless for different part-time [jobs]. At that time, I felt that my vision was very narrow, and I needed to learn… I rented a small room outside Tsinghua [university], worked part-time jobs during the day, and went to audit classes at night. Life was so difficult then. I had to spend no more than ten yuan [roughly £1.00] for a whole week. Beijing was so bloody cold. I had no money then, so I had to endure the coldness. I drank alcohol to keep warm. It was at that time I first realised why our manual worker brothers like to drink spirts, they need it. One day, I got cold, I felt so dazed and homesick. I borrowed some money to buy honeycomb coal [to heat]. I met a coal-selling old man, he saw how I was and encouraged me, 'young man, you are also here to dagong [selling labour]? Stick to it, the hardship will pass'. His words warmed me.*

As shown in his own account, Sun Heng actively audited classes in different universities in Beijing while he worked as a manual worker. But after some time he felt he needed another kind of education that the classes in universities could not provide: 'the education of life and society'. He left Beijing in 1999 for a year-long tour of China: 'The knowledge I learned in universities cannot help me to explain the world or change it when I encountered difficulties. But the tour let me to know the '*laodong zhe*' [labourer] in all walks of life at the bottom of society. From them, it gave me a lot of inspiration in life.' For instance, in the summer of 1999, Sun Heng met a construction worker, Biao Ge, who inspired him to write the famous song of the same name 'Biao Ge'. Sun Heng talked about Biao Ge repeatedly in his performances

and seminars about the questions the construction worker asked: 'he spread his empty hands in front of me and asked 'why do so many people look down on us? We use our blood and sweat to build the city'. He said, 'I want to believe I will have a better life through hard working, but why by the end of the year, what I have is only empty hands?'[20]

Sun Heng returned to Beijing after his year-long road tour around China. He said the encounters and experiences made him to reflect on what had happened to society and urged him to further study. He continued to audit classes and encountered the principle of a migrant children's school when attending an event hosted by the 'Son of the Peasants', a left-wing student association in Beijing Normal University in 2001. Then he started to volunteer to teach migrant children music classes.

Another co-founder, Wang Dezhi, also came to Beijing following his dream to be a star. Dezhi was born in the rural area of Inner Mongolia in 1977. He dropped out of school due to family poverty when he was 13. He helped his parents to make ends meet and thought of many ways to increase income for the family. In his spare time, Dezhi liked to listen to '*xiang sheng*' (crosstalk), the traditional performing art in China. He was very into it and dreamed of performing *xiang sheng* on China Central Television's (CCTV) National Spring Festival Gala. In the winter of 1995, Dezhi took 700 yuan (roughly £80) and went to Beijing to resume his dream of *xiang sheng*. He went directly to CCTV with his own *xiang sheng* manuscript after he arrived in Beijing. Inevitably, he did not make it to the National Spring Festival Gala. Instead, he started to *dagong* (wage labour) in Beijing. He worked as dishwasher, pantry worker in restaurants, deliveryman and other manual jobs as a migrant worker. Dezhi met Sun Heng in 2002 and started to perform *xiang sheng* with Sun Heng, Xu Duo and others. Dezhi's dream of performing in the Spring Festival Gala was later realised in the cultural practice of MWH in 2012.

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[20] The 'empty hands' refer to wage arrears facing construction workers in China.

Figure 5.1 A poster of the Art Troupe in a migrant worker's community with a caption: 'concert of labour', create miracles with hard-working hands.

In 2002, the 'Dagong Youth Art Troupe' was formed in Beijing. Xu Duo recalls the day they announced the establishment:

> *It was the 1st of May, the Labour Day. We used a tricycle to carry a lobby drum and two small, broken speakers, guitars on our back. We rode from the outskirt of North Fifth Ring Road to the Lama Temple at the inner side of the North Second Ring Road to perform in a party held there for a charity that serves migrant women workers. It was in this performance that we announced the establishment of our Dagong Youth Art Troupe.*

As the predecessor of MWH, Dagong Youth Art Troupe was a performance group that provided free performances to migrant workers. They took their own original songs and plays to factories, construction sites, migrant communities, and migrant children's schools. As mentioned earlier, culture can be defined in a narrow sense as (*wenhua*) literature, arts, and artistic performances. Understood this way, culture is often used interchangeably with another word, *wenyi*, which literally means 'literature and arts' in Chinese. Looking at the history of MWH's development, their early understanding

of 'culture' is clearly more in line with 'literature and arts'. This is also evidenced in Sun Heng's accounts when he recalls the original intention when the art troupe was first formed: 'In fact, the intention at the beginning was very simple, that is, self-entertainment. There were no particularly strong values'.

5.1.1 Feeling humiliated and battling discrimination

This understanding of culture is closely associated with how MWH core members reflected on their everyday lives and their own identities. Xu Duo described the changes that participating in the art troupe brought to his identity and practices: 'I realised that I am not a musician sit up high and far from the people. I am also an ordinary *dagong zhe* [labourer]… When the illusion of being an 'artist' is broken, I feel that I suddenly have a new perspective on reality'. This new perspective on reality, embodied in the cultural practice of MWH, is a transcendence of suffering and experience of their own to the social group of migrant workers in China. They tried to make sense of their own challenges in everyday life and their broken *wenyi* dreams to be a 'star' in the mainstream media. Xu Duo believed that he and others were no longer the only focus of their own pain and suffering. They began to consciously pay attention to the life and difficulties of other migrant workers surrounding them. This change also manifested in their cultural production. Xu Duo wrote the song '*Dagong Haozi*' ('Work song for the labourer') at this stage, which included the following lyrics:

> *We are coming to the cities to work,*
> *Sticking out our chest when we are working,*
> *No one is nobler than others,*
> *We are singing our own song.*
> *We love our life,*
> *That's why we left our hometown,*

Coming to an unfamiliar city,

Working hard to finish the job.

We work with a conscience [liangxin],

We live upright and with dignity [tangtang zhengzheng].

(lyric extract from the song, Dagong Haozi, written by Xu Duo, MWH)

The lyrics 'Sticking out our chest' and 'we live upright and with dignity' express a strong sense of reclaiming the dignity of being a migrant worker in the city. The line 'No one is nobler than others' rejects the hidden hierarchy of the *hukou* status, which created an 'invisible wall' in the cities and demeaned the migrant workers as 'second-class citizens' in their own country and denied them access to equal resources and rights (Chan, 1994; Solinger, 1999). The agency of resistance displayed in this song came from the personal experience of Xu Duo and his reflection on the structural injustice against the migrants.

Xu Duo mentioned many times the feeling of 'humiliation' (*xiu chi gan*) he experienced when he first came to Beijing: 'A newcomer like me who lives on the edge of the big city, usually feels a strong sense of shame and humiliation when we first arrived in Beijing'. He went on to explain the source of this feeling:

the most fearful thing when renting a small room to live in the suburban village [chengbian cun], is the public security defence team21 [lianfang] to check the temporary residence permit [zanzhu zheng]. Sometimes when I sleep in the room, I have to make sure the door looks like it is locked from outside to create an illusion of no one being in the room… When we go out for art performances, we are also afraid of being fined, and in worse situation, being caught and put in the

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21 The Public Security Defence Team is a mass organisation established in China to assist the police with maintaining local security. Though it has played some roles in maintaining local security since its establishment, the disputes over the illegal enforcement of law, abuse of lynching and its lack of law enforcement subjects have continued. The Defence Team is usually in charge of checking the temporary residence permit. There have been many news stories regarding the disputes and abuse in the process. For an extreme example see: 'A migrant worker has been beat to death during checking temporary residence permit' http://news.sina.com.cn/c/300175.html

shelter.

The statement above sums up the daily threat of violence, and the abuse of power from the Public Security Defence Team in migrant workers' lives. The feeling of shame and humiliation as newcomers to work in the cities was shared by many of my migrant worker informants in Beijing and Guangzhou. Rather than the direct threat of violence, it can be a more subtle form of threat, linked to inferiority. As discussed previously, it is quite common for migrant workers to experience unpleasant social encounters such as verbal disrespect, deliberate avoidance, or being looked down on by some urban residents. The feeling can also be considered as the perception of discrimination. The individual recognises unequal treatment and expresses it emotionally. According to Zhen Mei, women migrant workers also expressed the feeling of shame, though from a different perspective:

> *When I first came to Guangzhou, I was very young and shy. I didn't dare to go out alone without a senior fellow [lao xiang]… I still remember that I didn't know how to take the bus at that time. I asked the ticket seller on the bus, she said something in local dialect that I could not understand. Then she asked me to alight the bus with her hands pointing to the open bus door… I felt that other people on that bus were staring at me and laughing at me. It was so embarrassing, and I don't want to lose face [diu ren] like that again.*

The feeling of humiliation came from her *hukou* status, which underpins the physical coercion, the discrimination and the symbolic violence that migrant workers are regularly subjected to. It is structural repression imposed on the social group and an experience shared by many. Thus, the lyrics of '*Dagong Haozi*' invited the migrant workers to reclaim their dignity to resist the status-based discrimination and inequality. Through consciously identifying with the migrant workers, Xu Duo communicated his own feelings and experience with the social group in his songs as the lyric suggests, 'we are singing our own song.' The feelings of insecurity, fear, and humiliation brought about by such structural and institutional discrimination were so

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significant in migrants' accounts. They experience and perceive the 'otherness' of themselves in the eyes of the urban residents and in the discourses of the mass media. The feeling of shame is rooted in the subordinated group's experience of being 'othered' and oppressed. Once they identified with the social group, the art troupe tried to resist the sense of inferiority in their cultural practice.

Xu Duo recalls that the main subject of the art troupe's performance was 'battling with discrimination' at this stage. For example, Sun Heng also wrote a song called '*Dagong Dagong, the most glorious*' to reclaim the dignity of migrant workers. It remains one of the main themes in their cultural practices and contributes to both the re-naming of 'new worker' and the alternative narrative on collective memory. There is no wonder that the 'temporary residence permit' became the first exhibit on display in the 'Dagong Museum' of MWH. I will come back to the discussion about how MWH challenges the discriminative mechanism of both the naming of '*nong min gong*' (peasant worker) and non-local household registration management behind the 'temporary residence permit' later in Chapter 6.

5.1.2 Authenticity and the people's arts and literary view

Authenticity is a feature that is constantly stressed by MWH. In every performance and in the music seminar that I observed, they talked about 'being the true voice of their own and the migrant workers.' Sun Heng commented on the link between authenticity and their understanding of culture:

> *I have my own idea of beauty. I think beauty is real, the emotions from our heart, that's best… arts and literature [wenyi] cannot be separated from life; it should be the natural part of common people's [lao bai xing] life. When I feel tired from work, I sing. It doesn't matter whether the singing is off-tune or not. I sing for expressing my real feeling and for saying what I have to say. This is 'wenyi'. It does not have to be so high, so elite. We hope it can return to the labourer themselves, return to the lives of the people [renmin]. Our life is our culture.*

With such reflection on their own identities and everyday life experiences, their understanding of culture is also developing. In turn, it affects the aims, methods, and content of their cultural practices. The art troupe made a distinction between their own *wenyi*/cultural practice and the mainstream *wenyi*: 'I think we are practicing literature and arts of the mass [*dazhong wenyi*], not of the elite.' Xu Duo continued, 'we are writing our real life into the songs.' Though still in a preliminary stage, it is clear that resistance is an embedded feature within their practice. Stressing the 'authenticity' means to represent their own lived experience in their songs and other performances. The 'real' lived experience, both of their own and through their communication during the performance with other migrant workers as marginalised, repressed and exploited, leads to resistance to the injustices they have encountered.

Claiming the authenticity of their artistic performances led to the claim of visibility as being the main objective in their cultural practice. The slogan 'having our voice heard' was put forward during this time, as stated on the cover of their first album: 'the *dagong* youth art troupe is using arts to have our own voice heard.' In contemporary society, the importance of the 'struggle for visibility' relates to whether one can obtain certain 'presence' or 'recognition' through media in public spaces 'which can help to call attention to one's situation or to advance one's cause'. Hence, the 'mediated visibility' becomes 'a principal means by which social and political struggles are articulated and carried out' (Thompson, 2005, p.49). At the beginning of the new millennium, it was a rare yet powerful claim, and their cultural practice successfully attracted attention from media and academia, which provided visibility (though limited) of MWH in the mainstream media. The visibility of the authentic migrant workers' voice in representation is stressed and indeed important. As a social group, it has been represented by the dominant force in various media in society. The misrepresentation and under-representation of the migrant workers in mainstream media has been noticed by members of MWH. Striving for visibility in the slogan 'have our voice heard' suggests a rejection of the gaze of the mainstream media and society of imposed images of the social group.

Moreover, the emphasis on the authenticity of their cultural practice is associated with the symbolic resources of the socialist legacy they adopted and re-narrated, the 'people's arts and literary view' (*renmin wenyi guan*), which was extracted and summarised from Mao's Yan'an Talks. As illustrated in Chapter 2, Mao's Yan'an Talks on arts and literature were one of the cornerstones of the CCP's cultural policy before the Reform and Opening-up, setting the guidelines for 'literature and arts for the workers, peasants and soldiers', which indicated that 'arts and literature' should serve most of the people and thus has been claimed by the CCP as the 'people's arts and literary view'.

Employing the CCP discourse and cultural principle from the socialist era has two layers of meanings here. First, reclaiming the 'people's arts and literary view' and thoughts from Mao's Yan'an Talks is an attempt to further legitimate their aim that culture should serve 'the people' (*renmin*). Though the cultural policy changed dramatically after 1978, the CCP did not abandon their constitutional role and continues to claim the party represents the people of China. No matter how commercialized the cultural production and consumption in contemporary China is, the claim cannot be denied by the CCP. Their interpretation of culture (*wenyi*) in line with the state discourse in Mao's era directly challenges the widely held notion that arts and literature are not for the migrant workers, and 'culture' means the high arts, which was exclusive in the post-Mao era.

The possession of cultural capital, in its narrow definition of the arts and literature, is out of the reach of the migrant workers. Stressing that authenticity and culture belongs to the people resists the elite view of culture after the socialist urban working class had been forced to withdraw from cultural production and lost their status. For MWH, the migrant workers, as the emergent working class, once again claims themselves to be the subject in a new form of culture. The core members gradually formed a new understanding of their own class identity and the social group of migrant workers. As they started to identify the migrant workers as the 'new working

class' in China, they realised the significance of collective identity for the social group. In turn, MWH emphasise re-constructing collective identity in their cultural practice.

Secondly, though in a preliminary stage at this time, the revolutionary legacy brings a sense of the relationship between culture and political struggle into the narrative of the art troupe. Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks elabourated on how pro-socialist culture facilitates the success of the political struggle of the revolution. Rights and dignity are stressed in their cultural practice. Based on their understanding of the legacy from Mao, the core members clearly stated that their position is with the ordinary migrant workers, as the slogan of the art troupe is 'reclaiming our dignity with songs, defending our rights with arts and literature' (*yong gesheng nahan, yong wenyi weiquan*). Furthermore, from their later practices, educational and consciousness-raising mobilisation has clearly been a focus as well.

The revolutionary legacy of the CCP has been one of the major reference points and sites of symbolic resources for MWH. They constantly make references to and employ discourses from the CCP revolutionary legacy in their own cultural practice and try to build an alternative narrative onto it. This view of culture (*wenyi*) can be considered the starting point to challenge the appropriation and commodification of cultural activities by the dominating group, to ask who the dominating group are, and implies the identification of their position in society. Many recurring themes in their later cultural practice emerged in their performance during this period.

5.1.3 Exploring culture beyond arts performance

The performance of the art troupe is a dialogical process. The group not only communicates their own ideas such as anti-discrimination to the migrant workers but also responds to their difficulties. During their performances for the workers, they constantly encountered various practical problems and difficulties of the migrant workers. They found that 'they have no suitable place to go after work if they want to

learn something or even just entertain, many don't know how to defend their rights and interests, and many people were so lonely and have no others to support them… many things', Xu Duo recalled. Therefore, the organisation developed to address the more practical/material difficulties of the migrant workers. 'We realised that it is beyond the scope of literature and arts, and also beyond the capacity of art troupe,' Xu Duo explained, 'that's why we became the Migrant Workers' Home, so we can provide culture and education for migrant workers and also help workers to defend their rights… we consider it as the reality demands more from us, and we have to face it'. The development from 'Dagong Art Troupe' to 'Migrant Workers' Home' expands their practice, and at the same time the process also broadens their understanding of culture from the 'literature and arts' of migrant workers to 'a way of life and its related struggles.'

5.2 'We can do more': Culture as 'a whole way of life' and 'struggle'

<u>Extract from fieldnotes:</u>

The art troupe just finished tonight's performance. The local host organisation hired a bus to send us and some of the students and their staff back to the city centre. I happen to sit beside Sun Heng, so I asked him how he felt about the earlier performance. He seems a bit tired and not very interested in talking.

A young girl, who looks like one of the college students of the local host organisation, wearing a hoodie and a Yankee baseball cap, walked towards us on the moving bus. She stopped at our row and smiled apologetically at me for interrupting our conversation, then turned to Sun Heng: 'Big brother Sun, I am a fan of you and the art troupe. I just want to tell you that your songs are so much encouragement for me. I think you are so powerful. You did a lot for the migrant workers.'

Another fan of the art troupe comes to pay tribute, I tell myself. It is not uncommon during the performance tour. Usually, the member of the art troupe will thank them

and exchange some short conversations about their job/study and life.

But Sun Heng replied with questions this time: 'Really? Sometimes I ask myself, what is the purpose of singing and dancing? Does it really bring change to the lives of people?'

The girl was stunned and replied with a short answer, 'yes, it does.'

Maybe he also felt the awkward atmosphere, Sun Heng smiled at her and said: 'Of course, encouragement is important. But certainly, we can do more. You can do more. There is more to do than singing and dancing…'

Sun Heng's reply to the girl can be seen as a question to himself and about MWH's cultural practice. Certainly, it does not suggest that they think the art performances are useless. Rather it demonstrates their wish to broaden their cultural practices, as he said, 'certainly we can do more.' As demonstrated in the previous section, when they identified themselves with the rural migrant workers and made themselves the 'real voice' of the social group in their cultural productions, the dialogical process urged them to face the 'real needs' of the social group.

In this section, I illustrate how MWH further developed their understanding of culture and the implications of it for their practices. Motivated to respond to the 'real needs' of the migrant workers, they expanded their practice from art performances to provide more diverse cultural service for the migrant workers. Their understanding of culture also gradually developed beyond arts and literature (*wenyi*) to reflect and in turn guide their practice. In subsequent parts of this section, I analyse how they narrate and communicate their understanding of culture in their works and to the ordinary migrant workers. In the process, the intellectual leaders of the organisation adopted the scholarly conception of culture from Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson and contextualised it to fit the aims of MWH.

5.2.1 Establishing the citadel

The year 2004 has been described as a turning point for MWH as the art troupe published its first music album and received its first royalty. This royalty became the starting funds for their further cultural practice. It provided the basic material resources for building the Tongxin migrant children's school in Picun village and for renting two compounds as the base for their practice. Xu Duo described their moving to Picun village as 'establishing the citadel', because this meant that they now had the space and community for cultural practice. As discussed in the Chapter 2, the space for workers' culture has existed for a long time in the socialist era in the PRC and disappeared in the process of marketisation, both symbolically and materially. The socialist urban workers who once enjoyed 'the workers' cultural palace' in the cities lost their space for cultural and educational activities. The '*nong min gong*,' the peasant workers, who emerged alongside the Reform and Opening Ups, have never been entitled to enjoy what their urban counterparts had. But at the grassroots level, a migrant workers organisation once again built the cultural space for the emergent working class.

In the first two years after the establishment of the 'Dagong Youth Art Troupe,' MWH had already moved beyond art performances. They organised various cultural activities and attempted to provide cultural services for migrant workers. Many of the cultural activities begun in this period have developed and continued in later practice, such as the 'worker's little theatre,' 'workers forum,' and 'workers' mutual aid library.' When they built the 'citadel' in Picun village, they expanded the organisation to fulfil multiple different 'needs' of migrant workers. With some support from Oxfam and other funders, they provided services to the local migrant community and the whole social group in various forms. In addition to the Tongxin migrant children's school, MWH built the social enterprise 'Tongxin mutual help second-hand store' (*tongxin huhui*) in 2006 to help local migrant workers to cut down the cost of living in suburban Beijing. A museum of migrant workers, 'Dagong culture and art museum'

(*dagong wenhua yishu bowuguan*) was established in Picun in 2008 to re-narrate and reconstruct the history of the social group. The training programme of young migrants was also introduced and turned into the 'workers' college' (*gongren daxue*). Various cultural and media events have been organised, the Arts Festival of Migrant Workers and the Dagong Spring Festival Gala, which have become nationally famous.

MWH members describe their actions as answering the 'real' needs of the migrant workers. Indeed, they expanded the scope of their practices and they contended that their understanding of culture broadened in the process of their practices. Yet the core members thought their practices at this stage were not guided by a certain ideology or a clear political agenda. Maybe Sun Heng's words are the best explanation of the dynamic process of action and ideas in their cultural practice: 'a lot of things we did without a clear idea of it. Many times, it is an action ahead [of theory]'. Actions were derived from their persistent reflection on their identity and culture and a continual attempt to evaluate the everyday lives of migrant workers, as well as a strong sense of making changes to the status quo.

Nevertheless, with the development of various practices, they tried to explore a way to articulate their understanding of culture in an inclusive and equal/democratic way for not only themselves but also migrant workers in general. Before singing his song '*My guitar will sing*' in a performance for local workers, Sun Heng explained MWH's rationale:

> *We are not singing for admiration. We sing so that everyone can sing. When everyone opens their mouth and sings their songs, this world has the potential to develop in a good direction. Everyone is suppressed and cannot talk. Everyone cannot feel, cannot express. I think that is a horrible thing.*

The metaphor of singing – 'we sing so that everyone can sing' – indicates their desire to encourage people to participate, to open the doors to deeper levels of cultural and political engagement.

Though they claim that they always put 'action' before 'ideas', Sun Heng said that 'we never started from a beautiful idea or concept, but from the life of the people. If we don't have our own songs, we sing it; if our children have no school, we build it; if there is no history of our own, we build a museum for it. This is the logic of us.' But theoretical self-education has never been stopped. For example, during the routine study meetings of MWH when I participated in fieldwork, we spent many weeks studying and discussing the book *Philosophy for the Masses* (1936), written by Ai Siqi, a CCP intellectual from the revolutionary era.

Ai Siqi's book was written to popularise Marxist philosophy in China. The core members recalled that they first studied the book as a textbook of Marxist philosophy many years ago. Wang Dezhi often told people that this is the book that let him '*fajia*' (establish himself) and he understood it as a book that transformed him completely. Dezhi confessed that at first he was not interested in Marxism, socialism or Maoism. He considered these to be 'strange things from the past', even 'fairy tales' (*tian fang ye tan*). But through learning together with other members, his views changed. Sun Heng also spoke very highly of the book and the CCP intellectual, Ai Siqi. He said that Ai Siqi was a true philosopher of the people who made the 'high' philosophy approachable for poor people, as his book explained complex philosophical ideas in a folksy and plebeian language, 'so easy to understand that everyone can study it'. To explain and write in such a language is also a principle in MWH's own knowledge production. They attempt to avoid so called 'abstract' words or concepts in their own cultural practice.

The core members also remained in close contact with various left-wing student associations (such as Marxist societies in universities), organisations (like Utopia) and intellectuals in China. As revealed in Dezhi and Sun Heng's accounts and evidenced in their narratives, the core members of MWH were influenced by their own study of Marxist philosophy in Chinese literature.

5.2.2 A whole way of life: Remove the hierarchy and invite participation

For the members of MWH, a more inclusive understanding of culture is driven by their practice, the eagerness to respond to the needs of the workers, and the urge to broaden the scope of their practices. Lv Tu made reference to Raymond Williams and deployed his notion that 'Culture is Ordinary' and is 'a whole way of life' to articulate how MWH understands the concept. Lv Tu is considered to be in charge of the theoretical and intellectual work of MWH. She has a PhD in social development from Wageningen University and met Sun Heng when she worked with the Ford Foundation on a project about Chinese migrant workers. In 2005, she went to Picun village for the first time as a researcher and joined MWH in 2008. She is also the co-founder, Sun Heng's partner. According to other junior members of MWH, Lv Tu is considered to be the organisation's 'own intellectual' who does research for the organisation and provides educational courses for members and workers.

For Lv Tu and MWH, Williams' conceptualisation of culture is a very inclusive one. To understand culture as a whole way of life suggests the recognition that all human activity is equal in cultural worth; thus, it removes the hierarchy of 'high' and 'low' in the conservative view of culture. In their practice, to define 'culture' as 'a whole way of life' in MWH's cultural practices and to communicate their understanding of 'culture' to ordinary migrant workers plays an important role in removing the hierarchy within the connotation of the narrow understanding of culture/*wenhua* in everyday expression and the hegemony behind it, thus it becomes an invitation for the ordinary workers to participate.

The term 'culture' is usually interchangeable with 'knowledgeable' (or it refers to someone who has received a certain level of education) in casual communication in the Chinese context. For example, when appearing in a sentence like, 'you are cultured' (*ni you wenhua*), it means 'you are knowledgeable.' Many migrant workers understand *wenhua*/culture in this narrow sense. Hai Xia, a women migrant worker in Guangzhou, replied to my question about what she thought of 'culture' with a

question: '*wenhua*? I have very little *wenhua*. I dropped from school and came to Guangzhou to seek a job in factories when I was 16'. Here, *Wenhua* means that she has received limited education. In many cases, when asked about culture in fieldwork, ordinary migrant workers gave similar answers as their usual first response.

As Hall (1997) points out, discourse is not an abstract code, but structures that are integral to practices and forms of power. This narrow assumption of culture demonstrated in the accounts of ordinary migrant workers is not novel and implies the predomination of education in culture. The direct link between 'culture' and 'knowledge' or 'level of education' implies a hierarchy and further marginalisation of migrant workers. In one of the workshops, Lv Tu explained 'culture' to local migrant workers: 'I am not talking about the degree of education. No. The culture we are talking about here is a person's life… What is the fundamental part of human culture is what kind of person you are becoming'. A similar interpretation of culture appears many times when MWH core members communicate their understanding of culture to ordinary migrant workers. Though they have already challenged the exclusive assumption of 'arts and literature' (*wenyi*) as 'high arts' and claimed that it should serve 'the mass' and 'the people', to adopt a more inclusive definition of culture as 'a whole way of life' for MWH means to give voice to the lived experience of themselves and the migrant workers. Thus, it broadens the scope of their practices and encourages people to participate in activities beyond the production of art performances.

Breaking the link with an educational degree in daily expression and putting emphasis on the everyday life of humans eliminates one symbolic hierarchy within the meaning of 'culture' in the Chinese context, which has marginalised migrant workers. It suggests a re-evaluation of migrant workers' everyday lives as a site of social agency. Xiao Meng, a former labour activist and woman migrant worker, expressed her excitement about MWH's definition of culture: 'I am inspired, I thought culture is something very far from us, you know, it belongs to the *wenhua ren* ['cultured

people', usually referring to cultural workers or intellectuals]. But it turns out that culture is not a matter of intellectuals. We all have *wenhua*'. Since the everyday lives of migrant workers are actually sites of culture, in MWH's conceptualisation of culture, ordinary migrant workers are invited to be the subjects of their own culture and to participate in its construction. In an anthropological sense, this culture functions as an invitation for ordinary migrant workers to identify and participate in their communication with the social group and opens up the basis for further mobilisation, critique and resistance.

5.2.3 Culture and destiny: A holistic approach to struggle

During my fieldwork from 2013 to 2014, the organisation's scholar, Lv Tu, was writing and finalizing the knowledge production of MWH with the book *Chinese New Workers: Culture and Destiny*. Though resistance has been deeply rooted from the beginning of their cultural practice, MWH first summarised the relationship between culture and resistance as 'culture determines destiny' and 'culture as a holistic approach of struggle.' There were many discussions regarding the role of culture in migrant workers' lives and in the broader labour movement of China both within and without the organisation. In one workshop, Lv Tu shared her concerns:

> *…why do we say that culture is destiny?... we found that everyone has a sense of powerlessness [wuli gan] in their work and life… the mass suicides in Foxconn are because workers cannot bear the pain any longer; they can only end the pain by giving up their lives. Every individual is way too powerless [wuli], hard to resist the arrange of destiny.*

She continued to explain the powerlessness of the workers' experience as the outcome of the factory culture, which undermined their ability to think, communicate and mobilise as a collective force to resist; thus, their destiny was doomed. The process of discipline through the various mechanisms in factories has also been examined in detail in Pun Ngai's *Made in China*. Lv Tu gave another example of the Nanhai

Honda strike in 2010:

> *I interviewed the women's worker representative in the strike. She told me why they could achieve it [strike]… many of the workers were graduated from the same vocational high school [zhi gao], they knew each other; they hang out together and eat and cook together off work. So, in this way of life, social communication determines they can build trust… that's why cultural life is so important… The way of life determines the direction of their destiny.*

Though the reasons behind both the workers' suicides of Foxconn (Hua, J. 2018) and the Nanhai Honda strike (Chan, & Hui, 2012; Lyddon et al., 2015) were much more complex (and scholars have analysed these cases from different angles), Lv Tu used these two cases to build her points of view on culture and workers' resistance and to suggest that workers can change their destiny if they are able to mobilise and act collectively. Culture, understood as 'the way of life' in her accounts, is suggested to be the basis of formulating collective actions. She then made reference to E.P. Thompson and proposed to conceptualise culture as a holistic approach to struggle, 'I especially agree with Thompson, of course, the struggle should not be limited to strike or protest, rather, in fact, I feel that your everyday life can also be the battlefield of culture.'

'The battlefield of culture' described by Lv Tu is a war metaphor and such metaphors are recurring themes in MWH's cultural practice. In their works of art, the members also employ various symbolic and cultural resources from the socialist revolutions of CCP and worldwide to emphasise the resistant characteristics of their practice. For instance, in Xu Duo's song '*Life is a Battle*', the lyric 'idle boast the strong pass is a wall of iron, with firm strides we are crossing its summit' (*xiongguan manbu zhen ru tie, erjin maibu cong tou yue*) is a direct quote from a poem by Mao Zedong.[22] Mao wrote the poem in 1935 to illustrate the hardship and bravery of the soldiers in the

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[22] It is from the poem '*yi qin e, lou shan guan*' (忆秦娥·娄山关).

Long March of the Red Army. The wall of iron implies the hardship of the fight, but with determination and bravery, they can 'cross its summit'. Culture is indeed a prime battle ground for MWH – it is inherently political. The ideological struggles, the battlefields of consent, the alliance formation process, and the 'war of position' are always ongoing. Since the dominant never ceases fire, the counter force has to 'use all their lives to illuminate the journey'.

Culture as a holistic approach to struggle suggests their desire for a more developed campaign, a mechanism for resistance and change to the dominant culture in all its manifestations; thus, the people can 'determine' their own destiny. The cultural practice of MWH has many facets, but one its core concerns are the causes of mobilisation and resistance. Why should we mobilise together, identify with each other, and promote social change for a more just and better society? In a sense, MWH serves the role of the 'organic intellectual' in the broad and scattered labour activism in China. For example, alongside the theorisation attempts, such as publishing books and knowledge production, various educational efforts were made to stabilize and communicate the knowledge MWH produced. The routine workshops and classes in the Picun village function as pedagogical efforts to raise consciousness and sense of belonging.

In addition to routine workshops and classes for the local community, a hybrid form of 'music seminar' (*chang tan hui*) was developed to reach out to broader audiences nationally during art performances that were part music performance and part lecture. Sun Heng, the voice of MWH, is always the one who leads the music seminars with eloquence and passion. They often start with Sun Heng sharing his story of why he and others from MWH work on labour activism. The narrative covers how MWH identified various social injustices from cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect to economic marginalisation and deprivation encountered by the migrant workers, and how MWH has tried to fight against it in their own way by responding to the 'real needs' of the migrants. The songs of the art troupe have been chosen to

bind the whole narrative and to make it entertaining and enjoyable. For example, before singing the song '*Why?*', Sun Heng said the following to reveal social injustices and encourage the audience to challenge the unfair status quo collectively:

> *We rarely ask why now, it seems that the existence is reasonable, including injustice, including oppression, seems we get used to them. Some other people say you don't need to worry, human history will go forward itself. You are so small, what can you do? What can you change? But I always want to ask why? Why it is always us, the workers, peasants, the labouring people are hurt and aggrieved?… I don't have an answer, but I believe that when more and more people start to think, question, and challenge this world, maybe the answer will be found. The strength of one person is very weak, but when there are 10, 100, or 1,000 people together, it may promote change in this society.*

During my fieldwork, I observed how the 'music seminar' (sometimes the art troupe, sometimes only Sun Heng) carefully and flexibly adjusted its focus, themes and language to address the different audiences of migrant workers, labour activists, and university students. For example, it tried to connect the two social group by suggesting 'you are students now, but when you graduate, you will also become the wage labourer [*laodong zhe*] in the society… maybe some of you think you will be better because you have a degree, but it's possible that you will also experience the similar situations as our migrant workers', or sometimes it would address the contributions made by student volunteers to encourage participation. The music seminar creatively combines educational and informative content with music entertainment to spread MWH's message to different communities and social groups.

Some elements in the cultural practice of MWH resonate strongly with the cultural mobilisation in the CCP's workers' club during the revolutionary era and the workers' cultural palace to build a hegemonic block of the socialist working class in the socialist era. As discussed in previous chapters, the CCP workers' club and palace were heavily influenced by Lenin's call for 'theoretical struggle', which means

educationally, to the working class and its most able members: 'training the masses in political consciousness and revolutionary activity' – 'we can and must educate workers so as to be able to discuss these questions with them.' For example, the Workers' College, officially known as Beijing Tongxin Entrepreneurship Training Centre, is a hybrid of revolutionary cultural mobilisation efforts and practical entrepreneur skill training, as the two names suggest. First introduced in 2009, it is held twice a year to provide half-yearly training to young migrant workers.

The brochure published in 2014 states that the Workers' College helps workers to master computer application technology and social and cultural knowledge, and more importantly, they can learn about fair values. It is a half-day 'quasi-military' management school. Students can learn computer repair, software applications, and other skills, but they also take a series of social and cultural courses, including Marx's theory of surplus-value, Solidarity Economy, and Agricultural Cooperatives Society. Its core ideas are mutual aid, solidarity, and cooperation. There is no tuition fee, but students will 'trade' their labour for knowledge. That means students are required to regularly work in the organic agricultural garden contracted by MWH, and to sell agricultural products for the maintenance of the Workers' College.

According to Sun Heng, the Workers' College 'aims to teach its students outlook on life and values, to tell them that this society should respect labour [*laodong*], not money.' Sun Heng believes that the biggest problems the young migrant workers face are that they are very confused/lost (*mi mang*) about their future and feel unfair about social inequalities. Therefore, besides basic professional skills, the Workers' College also hopes to teach students that 'Instead of personal success, Workers' College advocates collective development. The idea of the school is that labourers should take the path of cooperative society and become collaborators rather than bosses and wage-labour. To overcome the exploitation relationship.'

After the half-year training, some of the students change their life path. They work as labour activists in different organisations. Although most students returned to work in

factories for a living, there are still many people in MWH's networks who are graduates from the early training sessions. For instance, my key informant and gatekeeper in the southern China labour organisations, May, is a former student of the Workers' College among with some other activist informants. Chen Yan, a young member of MWH, commented on the way the Workers' College works, echoing how MWH conceptualises its culture and practice:

> *I think the education branch of MWH offers a relatively long period for people to know them. The Workers' College provides half-year training to workers. For other workers, they may be only heard one song of MWH, or watched a performance. What people think of MWH also depends on the length of knowing them. The more you know, the more easily to identify… That's how it fosters a 'backbone' for labour activism.*

Elizabeth Perry (2012) has shown that the Workers' Club in China's little Moscow of Anyuan during the revolution 'served as the central node for a growing network of political activism' (p.98), the Workers' College of MWH functions in a similar but more covert way to cultivate the 'backbone' of activism among young migrant workers and to mobilise networks in contemporary China. Politics, for its part, is always cultural, and culture is political. For MWH, culture is also the collective experience built-up through struggle and constitutes the broader labour movement in contemporary China.

For MWH, culture as a whole way of life and a holistic approach to struggle determines the 'destiny' of the migrant workers. It is necessary to construct a new kind of culture that can help the migrant workers to resist and change their 'destiny' collectively. Sun Heng's words best summarise the urgent need to construct a new culture to change the destiny of the social group:

> *I believe in true unity, true solidarity based on common values, shared identity, same dreams and pursuits, and shared destiny. Thus, we have to establish our*

autonomous culture. If we don't have our own culture, I think there is no hope for us. If a person has no culture, no ideology, no identity, no direction, no objective, this person has no future – the same as a social group. If a social group has no culture of its own, it has no future.

To resist the injustices and to change the destiny of the migrant workers, MWH imagines a new kind of culture, an alternative to the dominant culture, and opens new possibilities for the future.

5.3 Imagining new worker's culture

Though 'authenticity' has been emphasised in their understanding of culture and their own cultural practice, it does not mean that MWH's cultural practice or cultural products are a simple and direct reflection of ordinary migrant workers' lives. For MWH, the New Worker's Culture they are constructing and promoting is not the working-class culture in a general sense. Rather, it is a vision and image generated and formulated in the dialogical practice of the organisation. They have made a distinction between themselves and the migrant workers. It is inseparable from their experience of subordination in society and their understanding of culture's essential role to resistance and change. Therefore, it is a cultural rebellion in nature, with goals to challenge the fundamental structural arrangements of the economy as well as political representativeness. Moreover, as shown in the previous discussion, MWH is informed by many different left-wing resources, from orthodox Marxism to many ideological resources from both the revolutionary era and the socialist era of China, all shedding light on their image of the New Worker's Culture.

In this section, I demonstrate how MWH imagines the New Worker's Culture. It aims to provide a sketch of what the New Worker's Culture is, what it ought to be, and what it is fighting against in MWH's understanding of what they are constructing. I

also point out the implications of practices linked with their understanding of New Worker's Culture. There is no doubt that the situation in practice is much more complicated; tension, conflicts, and compromises are always found in a dynamic process. Before I move to the analysis of how the construction process is played out in reality, it is important to know how MWH perceives and imagines the New Worker's Culture themselves as it is their starting point as well as the reference point for their practice.

5.3.1 'Define it by class'

Extract from interview

Wang Dezhi: Now we must talk about the problems faced by new workers. The main problem of new workers is that though there are huge numbers of people, there are no organising and no culture of their own, and no platform or opportunity to unite their strength. The problems faced by them are the same, no matter in terms of rights, culture, politics, or economy. Then, as a worker, as a bottom class worker [di ceng gong ren], is there a way or power to change this situation, and what can be done? This is a real problem.

Researcher: I see, so what is the role of MWH in it?

Wang Dezhi: Especially MWH, our organisation. Admittedly, it is a bit famous. It's not big, but we do have some reputation out there. We still have a bunch of people willing to do some stuff together. We have the condition to do things. Then, facing the problems I said, we start with culture. It can be that we want to improve the worker's understandings or to fight for the worker's voice. This is what we mainly do, to establish the subjectivity of the workers. This is a key point for our work.

Researcher: What is the New Worker's Culture in your own words?

Wang Dezhi: It should be defined by class [jieji]. I still hope to define it by class [jieji] or social status [jieceng]. It is the culture of the working class and the worker's social group. Our real life, like, the living status [shengcun zhuangtai] of the workers, the forms and conditions of their employment, politics and culture. The reflection of our real life or the focus of real life may be the manifestation of our culture. It should be the culture that reveals the status quo and represents the trend of the workers. I think this should be the culture of new workers.

Sun Heng said that he thought the mainstream culture is terrible, as it is apolitical, dis-identified (*qu shenfenhua*) and it disavows class, 'that is to say, it will make you feel like an atom, you have no identity to belong, and you are not clear about who you are. No sense of belonging, no group to belong to'. Both of the above accounts point to the necessary of fostering collective identity in the New Worker's Culture, and it is essential to be a class-based and class-focused identity. For MWH, the class-focused reconstruction of collective identity of the 'new worker' is the core of the New Worker's Culture as it concerns the shared values, ways of life, ways of being of the social group, collective power for resistance, as well as a common future as a class.

Therefore, the New Worker's Culture should be defined by class, and it requires crafting a collective identity with a class focus to mobilise the strength of the migrant workers. As experienced in their own practice, members of MWH understand the importance of collective identity as it regards how they make sense of their life, their position and actions, how they make sense of the cultural products they produce, and how they interpret their own grievances in life as political and demand change. It leads to the re-naming of the social group from *nongmin gong* (peasant worker) to *xin gongren* (new worker) to unpack the ambivalence in the naming of *nongmin gong* and stress the class identity of the social group as the basis for solidarity and potential collective action against injustices. The tensions and rationale within the process of the re-naming of 'new worker' will be discussed in the next chapter at length.

Although MWH clearly puts an emphasis on the class identity of the migrant workers and has re-named the social group as the 'new worker' of China, it does not suggest they consider the migrant workers are already the working class, as, for them, it is not yet a 'class for itself.' At a conference in Shanghai we attended, Sun Heng explained why they think this:

Since we are talking about the subjectivity of the new workers, I think, for now, the new workers cannot be called as a class. Because in my opinion, there are many conditions that need to be met in order to form a truly powerful class… the first one is to have class consciousness as a class. That is to say, we, as a group of people facing the same destiny [ming yun], must have a common ideology [si xiang juewu], we call it class consciousness. I don't think we have it now. Then, when you have the class consciousness, you still have no force/power. You need to organise to mobilise as a whole. If these two conditions are not met, it cannot be called a class, and it has no power.

After emphasising class consciousness and the organisational power of the working-class, he continued to explain why these conditions are not met:

I think it is the same with one individual and a social group. The reason a person feels confused and lost, feels no way out is because this person is ideologically unconscious [sixiang bu juewu]. Thus, our bodies cannot be liberated, and it means our actions cannot be emancipated. It is the same as a social group. If the social group felt lost and confused and ideologically unconscious, it cannot find a way out.

Stressing the lack of class consciousness, he suggested that although as the 'new worker' the migrant workers in China have common relations to the means of production, it cannot be defined as a 'class for itself' due to the fact that they are not organised in active pursuit of their own class interests. His accounts exemplified MWH's understanding of the organisational and ideological resources in the class

struggle, and they put emphasis on 'ideological consciousness' (*sixiang juewu*) as the precondition of forming the organisational power/collective actions of the new working class. As culture is understood as a site of agency and construction of social power and relationships, therefore, the New Worker's Culture is about facilitating the process of class consciousness, to help the migrant workers/the new worker to culturally construct a 'class for itself'. It also reflected in MWH's practice, for instance, the Workers' College is correspondingly defined as a cultural and educational platform to let the 'new workers' clearly realise who they are and their own value and to mobilise a network of resistance, as shown previously.

5.3.2 Resistance to cultural hegemony

Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose, but your chain.
(The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels, 1998)

The organisational scholar, Lv Tu, once recalled the moment she began to realise the pivotal role of culture in the class struggle. It was during a discussion about 'whether society is fair', most of the workers who participated in the discussion at the time believed that the society was fair, and if it was not, that was normal. Her accounts exemplified how 'common sense' functions in society. As a form of 'everyday thinking' that works intuitively, without forethought or reflection (Hall & O'Shea, 2013), common sense is 'an inadequate explanation' of society whereas hegemony serves as a kind of discursive 'terrain' shaping people's mapping of the world (Hall, 1986, p.36). 'I realised that the problem of workers being oppressed could not be solved by any violent revolution, but by various long-term ideological struggles… we need to analyse the reasons behind the workers' views', Lv Tu continued.

To foster the class consciousness in the construction of the new worker and its culture, they articulate it mainly in a 'deconstruct-construct' style. Firstly, it is narrated as a critique of mainstream/capitalist culture. Then, based on the critique, they claim what should be the New Worker's Culture in binary rhetoric, both in representation and in

action. In the narratives of MWH, they always claim that the New Worker's Culture they advocate is the opposite of the mainstream culture. In one of the music seminars, Sun Heng described the terrible mainstream culture:

> *They create fantasies, for instance, the 'science of success'. It promises you to be rich; you can achieve success if you work harder; it's all the mainstream propaganda. What is the reality? I think, after the development in the past decades, the reality is, the gap between the rich and the poor keeps growing. Different interest groups are more and more overt in real life. Such as, those who have the privilege, those who hold the capital, are different to us, the workers, and the peasants. Also, the divides in the intellectuals are severe. I think this is real life... We propose this new culture, and value is also a wish to resist.*

His words make very clear how he understands the dominant culture as part and parcel of the system of modern alienation. In organisational knowledge production, Lv Tu had the following to say:

> *If we do not resist the 'brainwashing,' 'disengaged reality' and 'created illusion' carried out by the mainstream culture, then our material life will continue to be exploited, and our spirit will continue to be in a state of confusion and numbness* (2014, p.275).

The commonsense 'fantasies' created have veiled the 'reality' of various injustices. Thus, for MWH, the New Worker's Culture has to be the counter-hegemonic practice through which critically examining reality reveals the injustices hidden by the ruling ideology and culture. In this revealing process, it is hoped to reshape people's understanding of the world, which is understood as the foreground of collective actions of resistance. For the core members, the 'dominant culture' (*zhuliu wenhua*) in society is understood as the hegemony that hinders the migrant workers' ability to be a class for itself. Therefore, they need to build a critique of the 'dominant culture' of capitalism and neo-liberalism.

Moreover, the cultural hegemony of capitalism and/or neo-liberalism, for the core members of MWH, is understood in line with the orthodox Marxist claim to be an aspect of the 'false' consciousness of the migrant workers. Or, in their words, the 'illusion' of the migrant workers. This view is linked to the core members' own experiences, as shown in the previous sections. For instance, Xu Duo discussed how he detached himself from the illusion of becoming an artist and identified with the migrant workers. Thus, in order to foster collective identity, they need to reveal the illusion of the 'dominant culture' first so that the ordinary workers can identify with their 'true' class position. Many of the cultural productions of MWH address the 'illusion' or the 'false consciousness' of the migrant workers – it is at the core of the critique of the New Worker's Culture in their cultural practice.

While unpacking the 'false consciousness' and 'illusion' of the dominant ideology and culture, MWH presents the New Worker's Culture in binary rhetoric as the 'positive' (*ji ji de*) to the 'negative' mainstream. As Sun Heng puts it, 'resistance is just one chapter of the story. You can't only do resistance without building something new. The other side is ourselves, our workers. We have a common destiny, common interest, and common situations in reality. Therefore, we should find a kind of culture to mobilise the power in everyone and to form a common sense'.

In my interviews with the core members, as well as in many art performances, they described the New Worker's Culture as a 'positive ideology and culture' (*ji ji de jingshen wenhua*). The New Worker's Culture is also called '*laodong wenhua*' (labour culture) by MWH and used interchangeably in their practice. According to my discussion with the core members during our study groups, the reason for stressing the binary rhetoric and the importance of 'labour' is linked with their wish to combat what Marx theorised as 'alienation' under capitalism in their cultural practice. Based on their own experience and informed by theoretical resources of orthodox Marxist literature in Chinese, they articulate in an inexplicit way the alienation in their narrative. Often without using the word 'alienation' directly in lyrics or speeches to

avoid the risk of being too abstract, they describe the feelings, emotions and conditions in their cultural products and education processes. As the capitalist mode of production alienates and estranges people from their 'species-essence', to resist it should reclaim the 'species-essence' of human, labour/work (*laodong*).

For MWH, the labour culture or the New Worker's Culture is, as Sun Heng puts it, 'a human culture', which indicates the de-humanization features of capitalism, 'treating people like some kind of economic animal' and 'turns people into machines' under the capitalist mode of production and its culture/ideology. Thus, to resist the process of alienation, they want to reclaim the glory of labour, which is a resistance to the representation and symbolic. 'Respect the value of labour' and 'advocate the dignity of labour' were the core of the positive culture and constantly stressed in their cultural products. At a music seminar, when asked to explain the value of labour, Sun Heng replied with questions: 'our workers, our labourers, we create the world, we built the skyscrapers, the roads, and bridges, we should be proud about it as our hard work build the cities, but why we cannot afford to buy a house in the city? Why can our children not get an education in the city? Why cannot we be proud of the outcome of our labour (*laodong chengguo*)?' Reclaiming the 'value of labour' (*laodong jiazhi*) has been explained as a way to reveal and to question the alienation of the product and the process.

Therefore, to be a human without alienation becomes a prominent discourse for MWH: they claim that the positive culture of new workers should make people be 'real human' (*zhenzheng de ren*). Sun Heng mentioned many times that the dominant culture is not 'human-oriented' (*yi ren wei ben*), 'it doesn't serve the purpose for human development, but treats humans as some kind of economic animal.' The concept of alienation is employed in their narrative. In her explanation of the 'real human' in the positive New Worker's Culture, Lv Tu started by saying that this world produced many '*jing shen fen lie*' (directly translated as schizophrenia, but I think she means alienation here), 'work is only a means of earning a living, not a process of

realising the purpose of one's life and itself; work is just to make money, and to make money to do what you want to do. In this way, the self at work and the real self are divided. It creates a split of mind and action, and it causes psychological pains'. Therefore, the 'real human' advocated in the New Worker's Culture should be a person of words and deeds together to resist the alienation in a Marxist sense.

Moreover, the New Worker's Culture should emphasise the collective as a way to resist the alienation of each other. Many of the core members constantly stress the collective feature of the positive culture they are constructing. The rationale of stressing collectivism in the New Worker's Culture relates to the core members' perception of working class and labour struggle, as well as practical considerations to maintain the organisation. However, there were tensions concealed and disguised under the name of collectivism. This is also a site of conflict that I will address in the next chapter, linked with how collectivism has sometimes been used as a way to sustain the power relation within the organisation and to marginalise a certain gender.

To sum up, this subsection illustrates how the New Worker's Culture is imagined and narrated as the opposite of the capitalist/neoliberal culture, a critique of the dominant. In my observations, the core members imagined the New Worker's Culture, sometimes called 'the labour culture', around their understanding of the Marxist concept of alienation and narrated it in their own words. Thus, they stress the New Worker's Culture should be a culture of the human, the (unalienated) 'real human'. Such claims suggest MWH's political agenda for a fundamental change, as will be discussed in the next subsection.

5.3.3 Utopian alternative: 'A community of freely associated individuals'

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. (The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels, 1848, 1998).

The last layer of MWH's imagination of the New Worker's Culture goes beyond the ideological domain and criticism of capitalist culture to challenge the economic domain. According to the core members, they want to explore a way out, a desirable future for themselves, for the migrant workers, the working class, and every labourer (everyone). In other words, an alternative vision/imagination of how society as a whole should work. When asked about what he thought was the core or base for the New Worker's Culture, Wang Dezhi's words best explained the ultimate goal:

The core of us is actually the same as what the Communist Party advocated… In line with the Communist Manifesto. It is the same as the ideal that Marx and Engels thought… To put it bluntly, I hope that most of our poor people will let themselves live a life of dignity through unity and solidarity. It is basically like that. We are doing small practices, and you can call it an experiment if you like. It's our brothers and sisters who are poor and can't see the way out. We are doing things together and letting ourselves live a life of dignity. We are doing this practice ourselves.

The ultimate goal of the culture is stated as changing the world collectively to the ideal of 'living a life of dignity.' But in Dezhi's account, they were influenced by the grand political ideology of the Communist Manifesto. They started from small experiments in practice. The experiment he mentioned is the practice of MWH's Tongxin Commune. In line with their understanding of culture as a holistic approach to struggle, they expanded their practice to experiment with a commune, sometimes referred to as the workers' cooperative. Sun Heng recalled that they had first been introduced to the concept of a cooperative from a training session provided by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) China: 'the idea was already there from the beginning.' Though MWH started their social enterprise 'Tongxin mutual help second-hand store' very early, the idea of a commune fully came into practice after they secured farming land in a suburban Pigu district to establish their organic farm.

The Tongxin Commune referenced both the Paris Commune 1871 and the Chinese

People's Commune in the socialist era. It suggested an exploration of a completely different way of life from capitalism. Sun Heng talked about the essential implementation plan of the economy of the commune, 'in the outside world; it is mainly an economic development model based on private ownership, private-owned enterprises. However, for our organisation, we hope to implement collective ownership and develop a collective economy'. Some core members were passionate about the concept of the commune. Guo Liang, the drummer of the art troupe, said the commune was what workers' culture was really about. Lv Tu considered that the Tongxin Commune should be a community of both economy and culture, within which every member had their own subjectivity as the master of it.

When their practice was criticised as unrealistic, Sun Heng announced their acknowledgment of the utopian feature and replied with a strong statement of the core value of the New Worker's Culture:

> *I know many people say that we are utopian, I must say that we are, and we have only one goal in all of our works. That is, we hope everyone can live with dignity as a labourer [lao dong zhe]. If we look at the larger scope of our entire human, I hope, as what Marx said, to be 'a community of freely associated individuals.'*

Their utopia had a name – 'a community of freely associated individuals' – in which the society that alienated labour would cease, and people would be free to pursue their individual goals as set out in Marx's writing. The quote from *The Communist Manifesto* above was repeatedly mentioned by Sun Heng when discussing the ultimate goal of MWH's cultural practice. The comment about being utopian was not considered something that was necessarily bad for MWH; rather, it symbolised the communistic and egalitarian features embedded in their cultural practice, although they can't always explicitly claimed the exact words of 'socialism' or 'communism'. 'Everyone can live with dignity as labourer', in a very abstract sense implies the ideal kind of society in the imagination of MWH. Since it requires a fundamental change in how society is organised, it is in a sense utopian; they boldly linked their own cultural

practice to this grand political ideology to imagine the ideal and to experiment with their own conditions, marking a distinction from other labour organisations in China. This passion for utopian goals was also shared by some other members of MWH, including Meng Zi, a young member who shared his excitement about the commune:

> *What we are doing is an exploration for the workers and the poor; we are not the elites, all of us. That's also the rule [of MWH]. The elites may achieve things rather fast, but we'd rather cultivate people in the process of working. [Speaking fast in excitement.] It's the old saying, 'don't judge a person by his success or failure [bu yi chengbai lun yingxiong]'. No one knows if we can succeed, MWH is exploring. If we fail – [He paused and didn't finish this sentence. I felt that's a future he doesn't want to think about.] But if we succeed, it's a meaning attempt for China, even for the world.*

The passion, the excitement, and the desire expressed were common within MWH. The commune, as a small-scale experiment of the communist ideal, was embraced and cheered as a possible way out for themselves, the migrant workers, and the world. The cultural prominence of utopias has a long history since Thomas More in 1516. Ruth Levitas (1990) suggests that there are at least three functions of utopia: it can be a source of motivation for social change or a criticism of the current society, as well as compensation for people to escape from their current reality. Psychologically, it also has been suggested that engaging with utopia, an ideal vision of a society, 'tends to elicit… broader social change motivation' (Fernando et al., 2018, p.789). The emotions expressed in advocating the commune, the 'community of freely associated individuals', suggest that MWH uses the utopian character to encourage social change and evaluate of the injustices of the status quo. The utopian character embedded in the New Worker's Culture, in the practice of MWH, is an invitation for people to imagine something beyond capitalism and to strive for a better world.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how MWH developed their understanding of culture and how they imagined a New Worker's Culture should be. I demonstrated that their understanding of culture is not static but is a process of learning and developing. I argued that their understanding of culture is developed along with their identity and their everyday practice. Indeed, the ongoing process of their understanding of culture is actually the history of the organisation, as the practice and the ideas cannot be separated from each other. Their own personal experience, their dialogical cultural practices with migrant workers, their adoption and employment of different symbolic and cultural resources, and their desire for change, together shape and reshape their understanding of culture and their own cultural practices.

Culture was first understood as *wenyi* (arts and literature) when they focused their practice on art performance and produced cultural products for migrant workers. With the expansion of their practice, culture began to be conceptualised in an anthropological sense to remove hierarchy and invite participation from ordinary migrant workers. When they actively make reference to a broader conceptualisation of culture and emphasise the potential for resistance within it, it suggests that they no longer view it in purely instrumental terms as a 'weapon' or a 'tool' in the political struggle for migrant workers. Therefore, by employing Thompson's assertion that culture entails a holistic approach to struggle, political struggle and cultural struggle are dynamically related in their cultural practice.

Though they have broadened their understanding to encompass their practice and re-connect culture with political struggle in narratives, this does not mean that the process is linear. Rather, they have integrated many different definitions and understandings of culture to formulate the alternative the New Worker's Culture. Moreover, they have flexibly separated it from *wenyi* to 'a whole way of life' and 'struggle' for a different purpose and to communicate with different social actors, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

The development of their understanding of culture and their practice has led to the imagination of alternative culture and society as the New Worker's Culture. MWH's narrative of how they imagine the New Worker's Culture resonates with Lenin's two classical conditions for revolution – 'Only when the 'lower classes' do not want the old way, and when the 'upper classes' cannot carry on in the old way – only then can revolution triumph' (1920). What MWH are attempting in their construction of the alternative imaginary of this new kind of culture is to encourage more working class people to actively desire a better society beyond capitalism. MWH is constantly asking, 'As a class, what makes our lives miserable? How do we want to live our lives? How can we achieve it? How are things now, how should things be, and how do we get from here to there?' Their imagining of the New Worker's Culture is their attempt to provide answers. These questions were important, as Charles Taylor points out, only through the persistent articulation and deliberation of strong evaluations, and action possibilities derived from them, can a modern community reach the decisions that may serve as the foundations of viable political institutions (2004).

For MWH, the New Worker's Culture should firstly be the culture of the new workers, with the class identity as its decisive feature. It aims to raise the class consciousness of the new working class of migrant workers in China, to foster it from 'class in itself' to 'class for itself.' To achieve it, they have put much emphasis on revealing the 'false consciousness,' the 'common sense', or the 'illusion' in the dominant ideology and culture. The New Worker's Culture is MWH's engagement in the struggle against hegemony and the definition of reality in this sense. At the core of what the New Worker's Culture proposes is the working-class idea of society as a collective democratic totality (whether socialism or communism, the core members covertly use both words interchangeably in private).

Imagining an alternative is not a novel approach in the history of the labour movement in China, or indeed worldwide. The history of the labour movement is indeed the history of attempts to develop an alternative. Many cultural, ideological,

and practical resources have been employed in MWH's cultural practice. Constructing alternative culture is a complex and long process, full of contradictions. In the next chapter, I will illustrate and discuss the changes have played out in reality, along with the tensions and conflicts within their cultural practice.

Chapter 6 Collective Identity, Alternative Discourse and Exclusion: Examining the tensions and conflicts within MWH cultural practice

6.0 Introduction

The role and position of Migrant Worker's Home (MWH) within the narrative spaces are provided by their interaction of diverse polities. In order to articulate collective identities, interests and foster potential alliance of broader force, MWH constructed alternative discourse in their cultural practice. Different discourses reveal different logics of resistance. This chapter aims to examine how MWH makes these ideas work in their own context and discusses the people whom they are trying to mobilise. What are the tensions and conflicts within MWH and why do these persist? The analysis will be presented in three sections, focusing on three core themes/features of the New Worker's Culture, namely, collective identity, the discourse of glory of labour, and the promotion of collectivism.

6.1 New Worker, Labourer and Alternative History

In this section, I examine the two most salient features of the collective identity construction in MWH' s cultural practice, the re-naming of the social group of migrant workers and the construction of alternative histories and memories to support mobilisation. I will first analyse the two interlinked names in MWH's cultural practice: the 'new worker' and the 'laborer'(*laodong zhe*). These two terms connotates different meanings for MWH and have different implications, as well as serving different purposes in their practices. Then I demonstrate how MWH constructs alternative narratives of the history of the social group as well as the socialist era.

6.1.1 Claiming for new collective identity: Unpack, construct and expand

> *We are the workers of the new era,*
> *We are the pioneers of a new world,*
> *Hand to hand, shoulder to shoulder,*
> *Stand upright on our legs between heaven and earth,*
> *and march forward courageously.*

The extract above is from one of the earliest songs of the art troupe. Although the song is called 'Dagong, Dagong, the most glorious', and it didn't explicitly claim the word 'new worker', the lyrics suggest MWH have started to refer the social group as the workers from the very beginning. In its decades long cultural practice in China, MWH has used many different terms as forms of self-identification. From the start, '*dagong*', originally a Cantonese word that means 'working for a wage' is the most commonly used one. This is a popular term that implies the 'exchange of labour for a wage (Lee, cited in Pun, 2005, p.12)' and 'connotes the commodification of labour (Pun, 2005, p.12)'. It is a term that highlights the individual's relationship to the market and to capital.

In 2009, the core members decided to change the art troupe's name from 'Dagong youth art troupe' to 'New Worker's art troupe'. The prominent change in name marks a development in collective identity construction. 'The meaning of identities are achieved through naming, through citations that become socially shared' (Georgiou, 2006, p.42). What name is 'avowed' or 'imputed' is crucial in the work of collective identity expression (Snow, 2001, p. 7). These changes of 'name' are a significant feature in the cultural practice of MWH and their construction of the collective identity for the emergent working class made up of migrant workers.

6.1.1.1 Unpacking 'nongmin gong'

Unpacking the imposed naming of *'nongmin gong'* (peasant worker) is a crucial practice as it reveals the rationale for re-naming a social group. As discussed previously in chapter 2,'*nongmin gong*' is the term that the mainstream Chinese society and media use when referring to rural-urban migrant workers in China. It is a prevailing lable (?) of this social group that is widely used in media discourse and government documents. In one of the music seminars (*chang tan hui*), Sun Heng shared his own experience working as manual labourer in Beijing and how he started to question the imposed naming and the stigma attached to this implicit construction of identity,

> *We are all here to 'dagong', they called us 'nongmin gong' [peasant worker], (I) especially hated this word. [They] think that we are dirty, messy and bad [zang, luan, cha], with low 'suzhi' [quality]. These ideas had never entered my mind before this. [They] say low 'suzhi', then it is low 'suzhi'. But when I experienced it, I started to reflect on these words, those ideas. ...'*

The accounts above expressed a very strong resentment to the naming of '*nongmin gong*'. As illustrated in Chapter 5, combating the feeling of humiliation and battling the discrimination has become the very first impulse of resistance when the founders of MWH become conscious of the stigma attached to the word '*nongmin gong*' (peasant worker) in their personal experience. Sun Heng's accounts indicate his reflection on unpacking the negative connotations of the extensively used term '*nongmin gong*'. As aforementioned, these workers have been constructed via this distorted image in mainstream media for decades. Thus, the term used to describe them has a specific 'intertextual' meaning in the Chinese context. The words, 'dirty', 'messy' indicate the stigmatisation and discrimination against migrant workers as they are often constructed as 'troublesome outsiders' and 'alienated anomies' (Huang, 2017) in the mainstream media. Moreover, 'suzhi' as a dominant discourse promoted

by the government in China, denotes human quality. The 'suzhi' discourse emphasises the embedded personal qualities by categorising subject identities into high and low 'suzhi', particularly between the rural and urban residents, thus legitimising the 'inequalities that exist at the systemic level' (Sun, 2009, p.8). The rhetorical dichotomy of low and high aims to construct a symbolic order, as 'there is always a relation of power between the poles (Hall, 1997, p.235)'.

In the speech of *New Worker's Culture Fired the First Shot*, they state as an explicit aim the destruction of the term that mainstream society imposed to the Chinese migrant workers' identities,

> *But we are neither peasants nor workers.*
> *They call us peasant workers.*
> *Becasuse we are 'dirty' and 'messy'.*
> *Because we are the 'low quality (di suzhi)'.*
> *Because we are the 'second-class citizens'.*

The extract above precisely identifies the status of 'in-between' of migrant worker as they are neither peasants nor workers. '*nongmin gong*' denotes a combination of peasant and worker and indicates the dual nature of the identity. The combination maintains an ambivalent identity and draws boundaries of migrant workers from both peasant and urban worker social categories. They are not peasants because they already left their land and worked as industrial workers in cities. But they are not full 'workers' in the sense demanded by the Chinese social context due to the social policy arrangements. By highlighting this 'in-between-ness' and maintaining the ambiguous state of their identity position, the term keeps them from locating their identity fully in either social category, and consequently from forming bonds of solidarity with either category.

Revealing the connotations of imposed naming challenges the dominant discourse and

makes re-naming necessary. Sun Heng's explanation of the reason behind the renaming of new workers confirmed their rationale,

> *This 'new worker', it is what we are promoting in recent years. As there was not such a word before. What we knew before this word was the naming of this social group by outsiders — the government, scholars, specialists. They named this social group externally. For example, 'nongmingong' [peasant workr], 'dagong zai' [wage labour boy], 'dagong mei' [wage labuor gir]). We discussed a lot about those words, there are a lot of identity discrimination in them. There are even injustice embedded in these words. That's why we propose the concept of 'new worker' to name our own social group.*

6.1.1.2 Constructing 'new workers': The three-folded meaning

A detailed analysis of the term 'New worker' reveals that there are three-folded meaning within. I argue that the three folded meaning of 'new worker' is foremost the triple rejection of three imposed identities, the '*nongmin gong*' (peasant worker), the old working class, and the 'new citizen'. The triple resistance in the discursive construction of 'new worker' demonstrates the political mobilisation efforts within MWH's collective identity construction.

First, the term new worker is certainly a rejection of the frame imposed by '*nongmin gong*'. By discarding 'peasant' and emphasising 'worker', it attempts to discursively eliminate the ambivalence and the dual nature of the imposed identity. As stated in their announcement of changing the art troupe's name in 2009, 'the change of naming …established our subjectivity.' By insisting on a new naming, the hierarchical imposition of '*nongmin gong*' is fully rejected. Through producing the new symbolic resources that could be spoken of, they intend to 'establish' their 'subjectivity'.

The core members of MWH take naming of the social group very seriously and insist

on promoting the new name. Because they understand the naming of the social group is not only against cultural domination but also associated with their demands for economic and social justice in the cities. Rejection of '*nongmin gong*' and the stigma and ambivalence associated with it repositions this social group into the category of workers in China. Thus, taking 'worker' as the foothold in naming discursively give more legitimacy to the collective identity as it subtly reminds hearers of the pre-existing socialist working-class discourse in Maoist China. Although the working-class discourse has been 'subsumed' (Pun, 2008) and/or 'depoliticized' (Wang, 2008), it still retains some legitimacy on the basis of CCP's rule. By strategically borrowing and linking to the symbolic resources from the historical state discourse into their own identity construction, MWH attempts to bind itself discursively to state power. In effect, they work on the assumption that any denial of the working class is also a challenge of CCP's legitimacy of ruling. When they managed to re-position and discursively re-locate the social group into the category of workers, they position their demands beyond the symbolic realm as the following extract from one of their music seminars shows,

The name of a person is very important, everyone should have their own names. If you don't, others will not respect you. We are new workers, this is our identity, it is crucial. ...we call on the state to give us basic fair guarantees so our children can go to school in the cities, so our workers can have the guarantee that they can afford housing, and live their lives.

Yet, the prefix 'new' used in the naming deliberately differentiates this social group from the pre-existing socialist urban working class in China. The word 'new' serves the function of 're-signifying and re-moralizing', it links with 'everything good' and makes everything bad 'associated with the old' (Skeggs, 2004, p.92). Also stated in the announcement of the new naming, MWH stated 'Yes, we are the contemporary new worker, rather than others'. The adjective prefix of 'contemporary' stresses the temporal feature of this re-naming. Through using such a temporal-indicative prefix

they signify their distinctions from the urban workers who have already lost their central status in post-Mao China. Thus, 'New Worker' becomes a unique chosen identity for migrant workers who do not necessarily feel that they share the destiny of the old socialist urban workers.

The foregoing differentiation reveals a tension between the old working class and the newly emergent migrant worker identities in MWH's cultural practice. Most of the old working class became history in post-Mao era, the remaining urban working class are referred to as the State Owned Enterprise (henceforth, SOE) workers. MWH want to differentiate themselves from both these groups for different reasons. Firstly, when asked about the difference between the SOE workers in contemporary China and migrant workers, Sun Heng explained,

The SOE workers, though also workers, are the workers within the system [tizhi nei]. If they encounter problems, they can turn to the state, the government and the relevant departments. But we, the new workers, we are rural hukou, though we came to the cities and work as workers. When we have troubles, who can we turn to? Will the government care about us? We can turn to the law, but there is a high bar [to use legal service], which we normally cannot afford. We have to count on ourselves.

Then how about the *old* working class of the past era? In one of the study group seminars of MWH that I chaired, I arranged a screening and group discussion of the documentary *West of the Tracks* (*tiexi qu*) which documented the impact of the decline of heavy industry on the socialist workers in Tiexi district of Shenyang, China. When I asked about what they think about the documentary, a young member of MWH commented: 'I can't say I like it or dislike it, I feel so depressed, this film gives me a feeling of despair.' Another one added: 'it is depressing, but to be honest, in the opening I find that they at least can get remuneration because of occupational hazards, I feel their condition is better than our migrant workers' condition. I worked

in factory in Dongguan23, I had never heard of anyone get remuneration for that reason.'

These comments from the members of MWH indicate two different perceptions of the old working classes in China. As discussed in chapter 2, the 'old' working class has lost their status as the 'master' of the nation and the subject of the state-led socialist industrialisation project. Indeed, the feeling of 'depression' and 'despair' is deeply embedded in the experience of the laid-off workers in the giant rust belt SOEs (Li, 2015). For the workers of MWH, those are the 'negative' emotions and feelings they have to try to contend with and combat in building a more positive identity.

As the New Worker's Culture represent the 'positive', there is no doubt that they want to make a distinction between the 'nation's masters' from yesterday and themselves. The second comment implies something else. Due to the hukou system, the migrant workers never had the opportunity to enjoy the glory of belonging to the old working class. Leaving the rural areas in the countryside and becoming the *new workers* of China, they were never entitled to the protections shown in the documentary we were discussing. Their different life experiences and work experiences always make it difficult for them to envision themselves as belonging to the old socialist working class. How they perceive the old socialist working class is also influenced by how they construct the alternative history of the socialist era for the New Worker's Culture, which I will discuss in more detail later in this section.

The last strand of meaning in the name 'new workers' is a robust denial and contestation of the naming of 'new citizens'. With the continuous acceleration of urbanisation in China, and after decades of unequal treatment compared to their urban counterparts, some local governments started to issue policies to provide the same social welfare provisions to the migrant workers. In 2006, The Qingdao Municipal

23 A city in central Guangdong province and an important industrial city in the PRD.

Government stipulated that migrant workers who have obtained a temporary residence permit are included in the unified management of the city's citizens and enjoy benefits such as insurance, mortgage, driving test, travel abroad, and children's enrolment. At the same time, the Qingdao government took the initiative to change the naming of 'nongmin gong', calling them 'new citizens'. Since then the term 'new citizen' has been used to replace 'nongmin gong' in some cities in media and government documents. In 2014, Li Keqiang, the Chinese Premier of the State Council, particularly emphasised in the State Council executing meeting that for migrant workers who have been living in cities for a long time and have relatively regular jobs, they must be gradually integrated into urban 'new citizen', and enjoy the same basic public services, and rights.

But MWH rarely use the term 'new citizen' as a form of self-identification and insist on stressing their identity as workers in their cultural practice. The term 'new citizen' promoted by the state is a word without class attributes as Sun Heng explained his understanding of the two terms,

> *In my view, the 'citizen' identity puts more emphasis on the material, interests and social welfare of the concept of citizen. On the other hand, 'worker' focuses on the class attributes behind, while (the concept of) citizen seems not emphasising on the class attributes. So, you see why the government prefers to advocate '(new) citizen'. What behind 'new citizen' is the ignored interest of working class. That's why we rarely use the term 'new citizen'. We are not against it either. ...But worker is a producer, what behind it is his/her labour value, it's different. ...*

MWH's insistence on using the term 'new worker' in their naming strategy suggests that they are determined to define their social grouping as part of the working class. It is linked with their imagination of the alternative culture and political agenda of new workers. Besides its lack of class axes, Sun Heng reveals another reason behind their

refusal of the naming of 'new citizen'. The naming of 'new citizen' is commonly used in southern labour organisations to echo local government advocacy, and to position the social group referenced within the discourse of 'civil society'. According to Sun Heng, the ideological underpinnings of citizen and worker are different for Chinese migrant workers,

> *they are ideas and theories from the industrial civilizations. ...I think it's different. What we are advocating is completely searching for local discourse, local logic...we cannot say that we are stuck with or infatuated with this ideology from the West, after all, from another historical stage. More importantly, I think it is necessary to explore and find a Chinese road based on our social reality.*

The accounts above indicate a long existing tension within contemporary Chinese labour activism. There is no consensus on ideology and approach. Different organisations use different naming strategies, advocate different struggle strategies and methods, communicate different ideologies. The doubt and challenge about the lack of localization of the discourse of 'civil society' used in southern labour organisations is considered a hidden reason of the refusal of this naming.

6.1.1.3 Expanding the basis for alliance: New worker and labourer

Besides the naming of 'new worker', 'labourer' (*laodong zhe*) is another term MWH used continually in their cultural practice to indicate collective identities. When asked about the differences between 'new worker' and 'labourer'(*laodong zhe*), Sun Heng explained this way:

> *The concept of Labourer is broader, including everyone. The essence of human being in our views is 'labouring'. Humans work, produce, labuor, contribute. That's why I say 'labourer' is a broader concept. Moreover, the reason we*

choose to use 'labourer' is because it's the representation of the value, the core value of labuor [laodong hexin jiazh]). On the other hand, 'new worker' focus on a certain social group. We came up with this term based on the condition of the new workers social group. ...That's the difference. But actually, the new workers are also one very prominent group among all the Chinese labuorers.

First of all, Sun Heng's account illustrates the connection they make between the term 'labourer' (*laodong zhe*) and the core of the 'new worker's culture' they are constructing and promoting, namely, the culture of labour. 'The essence of human being is 'labouring' is inspired by Karl Marx's account of work, which, at its best, is what makes us human and allows us to live, be creative and flourish. Discursively, the connection between the naming of 'labourer' and the slogan of 'the most glorious thing is labour' are both situated in the core value of MWH's construction of 'new worker's culture', the value of labour. It has been suggested that the employment of the term 'labourer' (*laodong zhe*) is to destigmatise '*dagong*' by reviving the positive value of labour and give the migrant workers (*dagong zhe*) a subjective identity (Zhang, 2014, p133). Admittedly, the employment of 'labourer' is to articulate the naming of collective identity to the culture and labour as Sun Heng said, and it has the implication of anti-discrimination.

His explanation suggests MWH acknowledges that 'labourer' as a broader concept is a more inclusive indication of collective identities. Therefore, to adopt a broader term deliberately in their cultural practice suggests the intention is to make their cultural practice more inclusive as 'everyone' can be a 'labourer'. Symbolically, to make it broader opens up the basis for alliances in society as it tries to point out the similar position of migrant workers and other social groups in production relationships in contemporary China. Afterall, as discussed previously, they have already crafted the naming of 'new worker' which heavily emphasises the class identity of their erstwhile social group. As the word 'labourer' could refer to most of the working population including almost all people who exchange labour for wages, using the word to name

an identity avoids drawing attention to the specific situation of rural-urban migrant workers (i.e *hukou* status) and expands the basis for alliance-building between working class groupings.

6.1.2 Collective memory and alternative history: Museums and the socialist legacy

Re-narrating history is crucial in the process of collective identity construction in MWH's cultural practice. Though intertwined in the construction of the New Worker's Culture, there are two layers of history which have been re-narrated. The core and the main body are the construction of migrant worker's history materialized in the form of museums, and communicated through various artistic and cultural performances. This is supplemented by the re-narration of the socialist history of China to justify their cause and to build an ideological basis for a common future.

6.1.2.1 'Without our history, there is no future for us'

The idea of building a museum of migrant workers was mooted in 2006. Sun Heng recalls the scene,

> *I was visiting a museum, then all of a sudden, there was the thought: Why are there no museums for our migrant workers? We are the main force in national construction since reform and opening up, but we can't hear our voices in mainstream history. No one records our history. Then we thought, we should build one of our own.*

Elsewhere, the core members shared the same concern about the underrepresentation of migrant workers in historical memories,

the labourer created history but never enters this history. All the history belongs to the ruling class. ...Why so? Because making history requires recording from specialists, the historians, but these resources are controlled and in the hands of the powerful.

That is to say, constructing collective memory and narrating the history of their social group is foremost a move of resistance on the part of MWH. It is an attempt to resist the lack of representation or the misrepresentation of their group in mainstream history.

In 2007, under the sponsorship of Oxfam, MWH started their reconstruction of an abandoned factory into a museum in Picun village. On labour day in 2008, the '*Dagong* art and culture museum' officially opened. They recorded the purpose of building the museum on banners that hung them on the walls. Every visitor will notice the slogan on the wall as soon as they enter the museum,

> *'Without our culture, there would be no history of us,*
> *without our history, there is no future for us.'*
> *and, 'Recording workers' history, respects the value of labour'*

The strong messages on the banners suggest that MWH acknowledges the importance of *memory* in shaping cultural meaning-making. Constructing the history of the social group of migrant workers is to construct their collective identity. It implies the common past, evokes their shared memories, and promotes a collective future.

There are five special exhibition halls in the museum: the history of the migrant workers, women migrant workers, migrant children, labour NGO and a physical display of work and living conditions of the workers. Within the five exhibitions, the history of the migrant workers is the most important one as it sets in the main hall of the museum. The exhibition outlines the process of rural-urban migration since 1978.

The Sun Zhigang incident[24] and the abolition of the custody and repatriation system[25] (C&R, *shourong qiansong*) has been presented in the exhibition as the iconic events. As discussed in previous chapter, the feeling of humiliation experienced by the core-members of MWH has personal significance for their early identity formation and resistance practice mobilisation. The display of the temporary residence permit (*zanzhu zheng*), the media reports of Sun Zhigang, and the terrible C&R system portrays the painful shared past of the social group: the discriminative policies based on hukou system.

By displaying various documents, items, media reports related to the life and work of migrant workers, the exhibition points to various difficulties faced by migrant workers, ranging from economic exploitation (low wage, poor living conditions) to the lack of labour protection measures (wage arrears, work injuries, occupational diseases), and lack of belonging and cultural life. The other four exhibitions serve similar functions from different perspective. The women worker exhibition displays the diary, letters, marriage certificate of women workers as well as the tragedy of 1993 Zhili Toy Factory Fire[26] which highlights the harsh working environment and the lack of protection of women workers. The migrant children's exhibition raises concern about the unequal rights set by the hukou barrier and how these undermined the educational opportunities of migrant children and caused painful separation between children and parents in migrant worker's family. The major issues migrant workers commonly face and the iconic events were depicted to evoke emotion and generalize the sense of belonging. The labour organisation exhibition shows the

[24] It refers to the death of the migrant worker Sun Zhigang in Guangzhou, 2003. Investigation shows that his death is a result of physical abuse while being detained under the C7R. It attracted huge attention in media and the public, resulting in the abolition of C&R.

[25] Established in 1982, the C&R system was an administrative procedure by which the public security bureau could detain people if they did not obtain a hukou or temporary residence permit, and return them to the place where they could legally live or work (usually the rural areas).

[26] The fatal fire killed 87 young workers and seriously injured 47 more. The victims were almost all women because they had been locked into their dormitory building due to the owners of the factory were concerned about possible thefts.

practices from the grassroots across China to encourage resistance and mobilisation.

Through their exhibitions and displays, MWH construct a whole narrative about the collective memory of this social group. The construction of 'we-ness' is essential for collective identity formation. Various resources are generated and mobilised to create and evocate the shared sense of 'we' and to strengthen the internal bonds in the social group. ' '(W)e-ness' anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences' (Snow, 2001, p.3), the sense of belonging concerns most the commonality and is discursively constructed by depicting the shared past and present, suggesting a shared future. It is worth noting that when selecting items for the exhibition, MWH also place their emphasis on the class identity of workers. As stated by my key informants, they consciously select exhibits that clearly highlight the class identity of workers, such as labour contracts, work injury certificates, factory uniforms, and various labour tools.

While an alternative history of the migrant workers is represented in the exhibitions, a tension stemming from gender emerged during my fieldwork when I participated in the museum activity. Shortly after the Spring Festival 2014, Sun Heng asked me to help with filming a short documentary of the museum so that MWH could upload it online to access a wider audience. When we were filming the commentary for the women worker's exhibition, Qianli, the long-term volunteer for the museum suggested it was better presented by the museum administrator Qiu Yun. Qiu Yun is a young member of MWH and once a migrant worker. She drafted the commentary and assisted in all the logistics of filming. We all agreed it was a great idea, but Qiu Yun was reluctant and kept telling us that she had no confidence to face the camera. As a long-time interpreter for the museum, her commentaries were actually very smooth, though she kept telling us she was not prepared and could not manage it. This kind of self-doubt by women activists was quite common in my fieldwork, and implies the subtle exercising of gender power relations I will come back to in later sections and in chapter 8. To my surprise, when Qiu Yun interpreted the women workers' exhibition,

she said,

> *Compared with male workers, female workers tend to be more introverted [nei xiang] and to have a weaker sense of resistance. In reality, they often do not receive the same treatment as male workers, and often suffer sexual harassment as well.*

The female workers are perceived as weaker because of their own personalities ('introverted') even implying that they became the victims of lower payment and sexual harassments due to aforementioned reasons. The depreciation of female workers' agency and capacity for resistance which came up in Qiu Yun's commentary was something that I had not anticipated. I asked why she said so, she told me that it was just a repeat of the usual commentary for the women worker's exhibition. 'It is true, women are less likely to fight as bravely as men. …that's why soldiers are men', Qiu Yun explained. Her accounts echoed the long-standing gender tensions within labour activism. Women workers and activists are belittled and have to subordinate themselves and their demands to those of their male comrades. These tensions and conflicts will be discussed further in later section and chapters.

6.1.2.2 Re-interpreting the socialist legacy

Underlying their prominent and cheerful practice of constructing the history of migrant workers is MWH's more complex and burdensome efforts to re-narrate and encourage a re-imagination of the Chinese socialist legacy. The official discourse of the past Socialist era has changed dramatically in the CCP's rhetoric since the market reforms. In order to justify the reforms, many aspects of the socialist era were criticised heavily in the new cultural hegemony of the market economy. Influenced by various so-called Chinese Maoist Left[27] (*mao zuo*) groups from the very beginning,

[27] For instance, the famous nationalist Maoist left website *Utopia (wuyou zhi xiang)*. See:

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the core members have a different attitude to the socialist past. As shown in the previous chapter, the process of re-narration started from their own learning of the Marxism and the Chinese history. Therefore their thoughts and narratives differ from the official ones. Within the organisation's discussion, alternative stories and interpretations were expressed and discussed during study groups and seminars.

There are many traces of the socialist historical legacy to be detected in their cultural practice (both representation and economic praxis). For instance, the subtle borrowing and linking of symbolic resources such as the reclaiming the socialist era slogan 'the most glorious thing is labour' (*laodong zui guangrong*) and in a rare case the explicit claim 'let the world see the hope of socialism'[28]. As discussed previously, Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks and the 'People's arts and literary thought' had been identified as important theoretical resources in the cultural practice of MWH. Moreover, the Worker's College[29] and the Tongxin Commune are also inspired by the socialist legacy of China.

These symbolic and ideological resources adopted from the previously hegemonic framework of the socialist past potentially provide a certain degree of legitimacy for the causes of MWH. This is a very effective method of employing and mobilising the historical and symbolic resources of CCP's past which displays the strategic agency of MWH. Afterall, no matter how they strive to dissolve and disavow the positive and progressive significance of the socialist period to give legitimacy for their current capitalist mode of production and marketisation, it is difficult for Chinese government officials to publicly condemn such praise of that era.

Furthermore, re-narrating the socialist past lends weight to the project of the imagined

http://www.wyzxwk.com

[28] A line from MWH drama *Our Dream, Our World*.

alternative. As aforementioned, they deliberately differentiate the social group from the old socialist working class for the reasons of the hukou status and the already doomed destiny of the old workers. However, that does not mean that they oppose the socialist working classes. Rather, they re-narrate this history to fit their own construction. The core members' discussion on what can be learnt from the deconstruction of socialist economy in China can best demonstrates this strategic recuperation of working-class history,

> *Dezhi: We've never experienced that [socialist] era, to be honest we actually have a lot of good [meihao] yearning and nostalgia about it. Like, the commune we are experimenting with at the moment. It is an alliance of the weak and poor. We are trying to 'take the same road' in another way.*

> *Sun Heng:… It is wrong to attribute the collapse of factories to the problems of the socialist system. To say it's not productive. Private companies may not be more productive. Even so, will the workers get more? No. Today, we are retaking the road [of socialism]. The road is not wrong. The collapse is due to the formation of internal interest groups, the bureaucracy. They made workers lose their sense of participation in production and lost their sense of ownership.*

> *Dezhi: That's what we want to avoid. It [the commune] is small now. It is consists of elites of the workers. We are initiating and promoting it, we are the vanguard. But if it gets better and bigger, then we only consider our level of people and ignoring the people under us [dixia de ren], it is not right. That's why Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution. The country was seized [Jiangshan da xialai le], the people in power only consider their own interests. We need to understand when it becomes bigger, we need to avoid to make it a game of our own. We need to absorb the more vulnerable to join.*

> *Sun Heng: That's why Dezhi is always talking about the importance of 'Angang*

Constitution', the democratic management to include workers into the
management. That's why we insist everyone should participate in the manual
labour, people's minds will change if they sitting in offices and out of manual
work for too long.

...

Dezhi: It is still, the collapse of the socialist (economy) is because the workers
did not unite to resist.

Sun Yuan: They did fight, there were a lot protests led by laid-off workers at that
time. ...

If they try to construct a new narrative of class struggle or to build an ideological
ground for the labour movement in contemporary China, they have to be able to
reflect on the socialist past, to build alternative narratives about it (to those of the
ruling party and the mainstream media), and to articulate their 'advanced' or 'revised'
plan of it.

Their accounts clearly illustrate the counter-narrative to resist the dominant
explanation of dramatic reform of the socialist economy. Sun Heng firstly
differentiated the socialist system to the low productivity of the factories to justify the
road of socialism in their practice. Then he reattributed it to the bureaucracy as the
reason for collapse. Therefore MWH's commune is articulated as an 'advanced' or
'revised' plan of the socialist past. The last points of failing to unite made by Dezhi
echoed MWH's stress on solidarity and collective mobilisation. Similar comments
reoccurred elsewhere to imply that the old working class had been deprived of status
and rights in post-Mao era, because their status and rights were given by the state.
When MWH's members emphasise the importance of the autonomy of the working
class, it is not really about the past, but about changing the present.

Yet, it is not easy to articulate and to disseminate alternative historical stories and

counter-narratives of the past socialist era that the younger generations of migrant workers are probably never going to be able to know about. For many people in China, who take the official narrative of the socialist past for granted, socialism has proved to be a failure, a dead-end after the Maoist-era. This kind of attitude towards the socialist past comes up again and again and is shared by informants across different social class and groups. Even Sun Heng admitted that he once took a negative attitude towards a collectivized economy when he was very young, 'it was the mainstream's voice' he explained. Also evidenced in my notes, some worker participants in Picun villages imagined the socialism and the socialist era of China exactly in this manner. Shi Ting, a young women migrant who routinely come for MWH music workshop's accounts exemplifies the delegitimisation of socialism when asked about how she thought of the idea of 'commune' and socialism:

> *...that is turning back the wheel of history [kai lishi daoche], ...you know that is backward, 'eating from the public cauldron' [chi daguofan] encourages laziness of workers. ...Isn't our nation thriving and powerful now because we abandoned that? Society needs development, that [socialism] will not do.*

'Eating from the public cauldron' is, of course, a metaphor for the egalitarian redistribution policy that existed during the socialist era. The term can be traced back to the 'People's Commune' in 1958. In the commune, communal dining was introduced to replace private cooking as every resource was owned and shared by the commune. The practice of compulsory communal dining was repealed in 1961 in the *Regulations on the Work of Rural People's Communes (Draft Amendment)*. Shi Ting's comments are not uncommon. The socialist past, once the hegemony in China became the 'backward' in some minds.

In response to such challenges, MWH adopted a pragmatic approach rather than direct confrontation. Although within the organisation, alternative stories and interpretations were constructed and shared among members, MWH want to avoid becoming

involved in such public debates about history or theory. As the core members agree that practice is much more important than arguing over concepts. Actually, socialism is rarely used explicitly in their cultural practice. In order to make a distinction between the 'socialist' past and the present, conscious strategies are adopted. For instance, they choose to use the term 'solidarity economy' to replace 'socialism' in explaining their economic mobilisation for their audience. 'Solidarity economy' is a set of concepts, arrangements from a global movement, that seek to reduce social injustice, transform exploitation under capitalist economy. Compromises are made in the terms used to avoid 'the negative association of ideas' as a pragmatic way to win more support, as Dezhi explained the rationale, 'the times are different. Then we have to dialectically and historically use socialism and materialism to explain today's society and the status quo of workers. We can't use it mechanically. If we do so, we are dead. No one will support you, that way.'

6.2 The complexity of the 'Glory of Labour'

The glory of labour is the core theme of MWH's New Worker's Culture. It is not only a universal cry for human dignity against multiple discriminations the migrant workers encounter in their everyday lives, but also a powerful political slogan in line with the organisation's political agenda to challenge the hegemonic mainstream culture. However, it is a site of contesting. For instance, in many cases the migrant workers found it difficult to identify with MWH's reclaiming of the glory of labour. In this section, I provide a detailed analysis of the 'glory of labour' and why it becomes a problematic slogan in MWH's cultural struggle.

6.2.1 One slogan, multiple ideologies

'We do not have nothing,
We have minds and our hands,

We built roads, bridges and buildings,

…

All our fortune and rights come from our own hard work,

Labouring created this world, the labourer is the most glorious!

From yesterday to today and forever.'

(lyric extract from 'Ode to the Labourer')

'Ode to the Labourer' is considered one of the most influential songs of MWH. Its tune is borrowed from the iconic protest song of the Korean 'March for the Beloved', which has been considered the anthem for the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement. The original song spread across Asia and was sung at protests to inspire solidarity. MWH rewrote the lyrics into a song, reclaiming the power of the labourer and the glory of labour as the lyrics suggest: 'labouring created this world, the labourer is the most glorious!' At almost every performance I observed, the art troupe sung it at the end to mark the performances. It is also the song that MWH keeps performing in their most famous cultural event *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala.

It firstly points out the value of labour as the roads, bridges and buildings (and the world) are created by laborers. Thus, it symbolically resists the dominant discourse usually constructing migrant workers as objects of urban residents' pity or as potentially troublesome outsiders, both tainted with negative and passive values among other images. Through reclaiming the glory of labour, it attempts to reverse the aforementioned negative attachments and increase their pride in their collective identity as 'labourers' that might promote the collective identification. Moreover, as previously discussed, reclaiming the value of labour is considered the core of the new culture under construction; as MWH has said, the New Workers' Culture is the culture of labour. For MWH, reclaiming the glory of labour is the most salient theme in their cultural practice. Other than the 'Ode to the Labourer', MWH members also use the slogan 'the most glorious thing is labour' as their slogan to reclaim the lost value of labour.

The discourse of the glory of labour is linked with their naming of 'labourer' as another self-referent for the social group. Though as previously discussed, the 'labourer' has been employed by MWH as a more inclusive naming to build alliance for mobilisation and to hail broader social groups into their imagined alternative. They deliberately keep the question of who is the 'labourer' open, but migrant workers are definitely the main body of labourers. Thus, the glory of labour is also the glory of migrant workers. To reinterpret the glory of labour is to reclaim the power of the labourer. As Lv Tu reflects on her experience of working in factory floor: 'What I know is that if we all recognize that labour creates value, and other production inputs do not create value by itself, then what is reasonable should be determined by the subject of value creation - the labourer' (Lv, 2014, p35).

The discourse of the 'glory of labour' is not completely new in the Chinese context. Sun Heng recalls the slogan from childhood, 'we have been educated since childhood that the most glorious thing is labour. Labour created this world, and labour has created wealth. So, we should sing the praises of our labourer (*laodong zhe*)'. In the socialist era, it is an official discourse promoted by the CCP to affirm the value of the 'master of the nation' and to encourage and mobilise them to devote themselves to the industrialisation and modernisation of the P.R.C. The official discourse was supported by a series of institutional arrangements to guarantee the rights and welfare of the urban working class (for instance, the 'iron rice bowl') in the socialist system as discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis. MWH have adopted it from the socialist era and reinterpreted it into their own political imagination of a fairer society. For MWH, it is a requirement inherent in their interpretation of the ideology of Marxism. Sun Heng made reference to Marx and Engels, 'labour create human, value and the world, the value of labour must be reclaimed.' By adopting the historical discourse of the glory of labour, they aim not only to resist discrimination, but more importantly, to invite workers to recall the institutional arrangements for the working classes in the socialist era. 'The glory of labour' is not just symbolic resistance to cultural domination, for MWH, it is actually a demand for the

legitimate economic and political rights of the working class, and a call for a fairer structure of society.

MWH is, however, not the only group actively using the slogan of 'glory of labour' in China. Different social actors employ the slogan for different purposes, sometimes representing conflicting ideologies. First of all, though many other political slogans have faded away in the post-Mao era, 'the glory of labour' has never been abandoned by the CCP. On every May Day Labour Day, the state also comes forward to commend the national model worker (*laomo*) and to reaffirm the slogan of labour's gloriousness. For example, Xi Jinpin's speech before the 2013 May Day also reiterated: 'We must firmly establish the idea that labour is most glorious, most noble and greatest. Let all the people further coruscate their enthusiasm for labour, release their creative potential, and create a better life through labour'30. The official media *People's Daily*31 also published an article stating that 'the labouring people (*laodong renmin*) is the source of our party's strength, respect for labour is the consistent tradition of our party'. In the article, this is then reframed in neoliberal ways via a further emphasis on 'work hard for wealth' (*qinlao zhifu*), as 'work hard for wealth has greatly mobilised people's labour enthusiasm in the early days of Reform and Opening up and strongly promoted the process…'. Although it also links the glory of labour to the improvement of productivity and the state's development goals, this reaffirmation is different from that of the socialist era and is embedded in the discourse of 'work hard for wealth' which is part and parcel of China's marketisation process. This crucial ideological change in the framing of the slogan is called forth by the changing social conditions and the needs of political expediency.

Moreover, as the social-economic structure of China changed dramatically after the

30 'xin jinping's speech during meeting with representatives of national model workers', 2013,04,29
http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0429/c64094-21323712.html9
31 'why reclaiming 'labour is glorious' today?', people's daily, 2013,02.20
http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0220/c40531-20535783.html

Reform and Opening up, the socialist institutional arrangements which support the symbolic glory of the working class are no longer applicable to the majority of the new working class. Thus, the discourse and the slogan of glory of labour has been reduced to only symbolic meaning. Therefore, dominant capitalist culture sometimes also requisitions the slogan 'the most glorious thing is labour' to rationalize their own interests and their exploitation of workers. To affirm and praise the glory of labour, and to encourage hard works, does not entail an increase in actual remuneration or an increase in benefits for the employees, therefore for those in power it becomes a 'reward without paying a price'. For instance, Jack Ma[32], the tech tycoon and one of the wealthiest persons in China, personally endorsed the '996'[33] working culture and has stated that workers should consider it 'a huge blessing' to 'achieve success'[34].

To sum up, the slogan of 'the most glorious thing is labour' and its extension of the glory of labour discourse was a dominant official discourse in socialist China, at which time it was also supported by its economic and social systems. It has become empty words and completely rings hollow for many as it has lost the institutional arrangements to realise the promise of glory. It has increasingly been requisitioned by different social actors other than the CCP in post-Mao era. The CCP, the capitalists and grass-roots labour organisations (such as MWH) re-interpret it differently with their own ideologies to different ends. It is only through careful ethnographic observation with MWH that I have been able to show how distant the ideological 'glory of labour' discourses of migrant workers' groups such as MWH and of government and mainstream media.

For MWH, to articulate '*laodong zhe*' (labourer) and 'the most glorious thing is

[32] The founder of Chinese e-commerce titan Alibaba.
[33] The number of 996 refers to working from 9am to 9pm six days a week. It is known to work practice among tech companies in China. When employees complained about the overtime working system of 996, many entrepreneurs endorsed the system.
[34] For media reports, see: https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/15/business/jack-ma-996-china/index.html

labour' together is certainly a very salient discourse in their construction of the New Worker's Culture. It is a claim to reverse the imposed negative images to the social group of migrant workers and to challenge further the status quo by keeping alive memories of the social and economic system which materially accompanied the glory of labour in socialist era. However, sadly, it is not commonly identified with by ordinary migrant workers. For MWH, using this historical slogan and discourse to position itself in the alternative imagination of society brings its own risk. Reclaiming this discourse, is a double-edged sword, so to speak.

6.2.2 Dislocated identifications and disidentifications

During fieldwork, I observed a dislocation of identification and disidentification from ordinary migrant worker informants to MWH's core discourse of glory of labour. The paradox has to be comprehended in their own experience as migrant workers, how they perceive their work and life, as well as how they perceive the discourse of the glory of labour.

Many of my informants expressed their feelings and thoughts about their work as migrant workers in different industries. The denial and suspicious attitudes are firstly linked with how migrant workers perceive their jobs. There is indeed a gender and age dimension that can be observed in how my informants respond to their perception of their jobs. Many of the young male informants are more likely to express a more demeaning sense of their jobs. When asked about his job as a courier before joining MWH, Xiao Yang told me that

> it is nothing to talk about, really. ... I know you might read some news about how couriers earn a lot of money but it is not true. At least my job is not paid well [zhuan de shao], it's very easy to be fined if something is not delivered on time or for something like complaints from customers. ...and it was very exhausting [lei

de hen]. ...and mainly, it had no skill involved at all [meiyou jishu hanliang], there is nothing you can learn at all, you know.

Some of the young women migrant workers share similar views about their jobs, as low waged, physically demanding and low skilled are the common points of devaluation of manual labour job in their accounts. Of course, it is very hard for the migrant workers to identify with the claim that 'labour is the most glorious thing' when they portray and experience their work as having so little value and meaning.

When asked how they understand 'the most glorious thing is labour', Qian Ge, one of my informants, who worked as a motor-driver in the Jiushuikeng industrial zone of Guangzhou, replied in a mocking tone: 'where is the glorious in my work? You tell me. It's almost ten [in the evening], I am still on the street to pick up the work (*jie huoer*). ...I have been out all night, what I earned is not enough to buy two packs of cigarettes'. The economic injustices experienced by migrant workers run counter to the claim of 'glory'. Their refusal to identify with a slogan such as 'labour is glorious' demonstrated that they were aware of their disadvantaged status in society and also stems from a refusal to echo what they perceive as the deceptive dominant ideologies within the discourse of the glory of labour.

Some of the married migrant workers in the PRD held a slightly different perception of their manual labour jobs and of the glory of labour. They also expressed the hardships of the demanding manual labour in the cities, but they stressed the ability to support their family. This is exemplified by one migrant workers couple's accounts. Han, the women migrant worker, born in 1975, who worked hard in an electronics factory to support her children to stay with them and to receive their education in Guangzhou said she was very proud of herself to '*dagong*' (work as a wage labourer) in the cities because 'not everyone can afford to keep their children around. ...I feel bad to send them back to laojiao [her husband's hometown]...we eat the bitterness for our children'. Similar accounts of married migrant women are also observed by other

scholars. Lee studied the lives of women migrant workers in the PRD and argues that 'they have invested a strong sense of feminine morality in this identity as matron workers whose hard lives they accept for the cause of their families' (1995, p.162).

On the contrary, some married male workers express different feelings: Han's husband, Chen Ge, said: 'Men are born to provide for their families, to stand upright between heaven and earth (*ding tian li di*). She works hard at factory, I also feel bad about it (*xin teng*). But delivering newspapers can only make so much [money], I can't help'. His words stressed a sense of overwhelming guilt brought by the low-wage which affects his ability to provide for his family. The social norm of 'man' as the 'breadwinner' of the family is still recognized and held by many male migrant workers in China. In Chen Ge's accounts, the low wage makes him fail in fulfilling the social norm and undermines his masculinity which is associated with the ability to be the breadwinner, causing him to experience feelings of doubt and inadequacy. Though their feelings are different and they are subjected to different social gender norms, both Han and Chen Ge perceive their '*dagong*' job primarily linked with their roles and status as mothers and 'bread-winners' of the family, making other factors such as *hukou* status, skill and reputation of the job, or the issue of its physically demanding nature, less significant. Nevertheless, wages are still of high relevance in affecting how they think about their work and life in *'dagong'* (laboring) as migrant workers.

For those workers who refuse to identify with the slogan of 'the most glorious thing is labour', it is because the claim contradicts their experiences and feelings. The denial rejection of the claim is connected with how they perceive their own social position, their job, their hukou status and their gender. As shown in workers' accounts, what they express is the economic marginalisation and deprivation experienced in their everyday lives. These economic injustices require a politics of redistribution rather than one of cultural affirmation. To me, in resisting the empty words of the dominant forces in using the historical discourse of glory of labour, the migrant workers

actually display a form of sceptical agency.

Certainly, MWH tries to provide an alternative interpretation to reclaim the dignity of labour and to challenge the unjust structure behind the inferior and subordinate position of migrant workers by promoting the slogan and the discourse. Their recurrent disidentification does not necessarily indicate that the workers are against the ideology or the political agenda behind MWH's advocacy of labour value in New Worker's Culture. However, as a slogan which has been used by multiple social actors with different ideologies, it is not easy for workers to distinguish between those who use it in good and bad faith. I frequently found that the worker informants made no distinction between different interpretations of the discourse from different social actors. A slogan is a strong claim in a very abstract form, and, without further explanation to link it to economic injustice and changes (it is not feasible to explain it in detail in performances for MWH due to many constraints, time, forms of performance and the censorship), it failed to distinguish itself from other sets of meanings attached to the glory of labour by the dominant forces. When shouted out in their performances, it lost many of the economic and political aspects in communication and was reduced to a strategy for reaffirmation in an apparent politics of recognition.

Nevertheless, there are some migrant workers who can identify with the phrase and claim pride in their work. The feeling of self-pride expressed as shown in Han and other worker informants' accounts does not suggest they identify with what MWH promoted in employing the discourse of glory of labour. Rather than questioning the dominant culture which misrecognized the migrant workers, and the structural inequality, it mainly associates such pride with the ability to feed their families and to support their children.

6.2.3 Individual improvement as 'illusional hope'

The aspiration for personal improvement in economic and social conditions, and the hope of personal 'success' is widespread amongst Chinese migrant workers and heavily criticised in MWH's culture practices. The politics of hope as a paradox in the rural migrant workers everyday life has been illustrated in Sun Wanning's *Subaltern China*: though the rural migrant workers lacks class mobility and suffer from structural exploitation, there is a fragile sense of 'hope' to their future. Sun suggests that this 'hope' of improvement in their conditions or their betterment of their children's generations is an important agency but also at the time a core element of neoliberal governmentality that fosters and shapes deeply individualized aspirations (2014, p.249).

In my conversations with migrant workers participating in MWH's community cultural workshops, the desire and will of start up a small business of their own is very common. Similarly, during my fieldwork in the Peral River Delta (PRD), the desire to be able to sustain their families, support children's education (especially for older generations of migrant workers in their 30s or 40s) came up again and again. It also suggests a will of gaining control over their own work process and the autonomy of taking decision in their lives. The wish of becoming a small business owner, in a very fundamental sense, is a wish to control over means of production and a reaction to the exploitative experience of their position in contemporary economy as wage labour, therefore, it is a way of regaining the human dignity that is associated with a life without split the production and reproduction processes.

Within this context, for the rural-urban migrant workers, the wish of becoming a small business owner means gaining control over their work , life and the process of social reproduction, which is considered to be a life with dignity. Notably, there is also a gender dimension within the context of unpacking the 'illusional' personal hope of migrant workers. As Li Jie, a woman migrant worker in her early 30s and has two

children in primary school in the industrial zone, puts it: 'If we have enough savings to start a small business, like open a grocery shop in the village, be a small boss of our own, we can be more flexible. I can take care of the children while working in our shop'. As child caring is largely considered a woman' job within family, women migrant workers often take more responsibility. As discussed in previous discussion, studies on migrant workers' social reproduction has suggests a 'split form of labour reproduction' model (Guo & Huang, 2014). The problem of this 'split form of labour reproduction' also re-constructed a traditional gender role in division of labour in family, 'man are breadwinners; women are homemakers' (*nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei)* return to the life of young migrant worker couples; nursing, housework and other family reproduction works are gendering into the 'motherhood' and responsibility for women migrant workers (Wang Ou, 2019). To be able to take care of children means a lot to married women migrant workers like Li Jie who considers child rearing and housework mainly married women's responsibility, but a hectic factory floor timetable becomes the obstacle to fulfil the duties of motherhood.

MWH acknowledges the 'hope' of self-improvement of the migrant workers but claimed such as 'illusional'. As Xu Duo often shout in the performance, 'we are going to break the illusion (*mi meng*) of the world'. Instead, they set the aims of their cultural practice as unpack this paradox of hope: to keep the shared experience of alienation and marginalisation of the migrant workers and the hope and will to improve the socio-economic conditions by advocating another approach to gain control over work and life, a collective one. Admittedly, the ideology of neoliberalism shapes the personal aspiration of migrant workers. MWH core member, Lv Tu shared a story of a young male migrant worker, who earn about 200 pounds per month, once told her that his dream is to have a BMW car (2014, p.154). Lv Tu used it as a case to suggest how deeply consumerism inflected and shaped the aspiration of workers. She continued to comment that 'he thinks that he can drive a BWM one day is almost entering a state of illusion' (ibid).

MWH's resistance to the dominant ideology is certainly not wrong. However, as illustrated in migrant worker's accounts, their expression of self-betterment or hope of becoming a small-business owner are actually displaying their agency (Though, not the kind of agency to mobilise collectively and challenge the status quo). It seems that while MWH are displaying their agency to formulate counter-hegemonic discourse and fostering collective identity and culture for the migrant workers, they sometimes fail to recognize the agency within those paradox hope of the migrant workers. The nuances of the experiences, the complex meaning of the migrant worker's pursuing of autonomy. Moreover, those gendered difficulties and worries do not seem to be reflected in MWH' interpretation of such hopes. (In fact, the gendered hardships of balancing work and family are sites of tension within MWH, which will be illustrated in later section.) The gendered feeling, difficulties and demands of the women migrant workers are reflected and addressed in SFW's practice in Guangzhou which I will come back to in chapter 8.

Those neglects and misrecognitions have consequences. Oft-times, the abstraction of the claim such as 'unveiling the illusion' become hard to grasp the lived experiences and the nuances of hope of migrant workers, and lead to confusion and disengagement of ordinary migrant workers. Moreover, it reveals a dilemma in the articulation of new worker's culture in MWH. On one hand, 'counter-capitalism' and 'counter neo-liberalism' become powerful slogans in MWH's cultural practice and endorsed by some Left-wing scholars. No doubt, it is remarkable. Indeed, they need to build alternative knowledge and construct powerful counter-discourses in order to resist. Though MWH actually did wonderful job in raising awareness of structural inequality in their cultural practice, when it comes to articulate and make sense of the imagined alternative to the migrant workers, it is often narrated in such an abstract and grand way. Either the ideal of 'live a life of dignity', 'the glory of labour' or the utopian of 'a community of freely associated individuals' are the best way to capture migrant worker's attention. Evidenced in my observation in performances and music seminars, always the songs and the talks directly related to the everyday life and

struggle of the workers get more responses.

The members of MWH claim they actually want to be accessible to ordinary workers. For instance, they put emphasis on the 'authenticity' and articulate their ideas in common language as shown in Chapter 5. Yet the gap between them and the ordinary workers still exist. The reasons behind can be traced and comprehend in MWH's interaction with other social actors (see Chapter 7). The necessity of developing methods to articulate and communicate with ordinary workers is also evidenced in my fieldwork in Guangzhou as will be discussed in length in Chapter 8.

6.2.4 The irony and the remedy

MWH is aware of workers' lack of identification with the slogan and their rejection of the discourse. Lv Tu stated in her book (2014) that although many workers failed to identify with the glory of labour, some others who have participated in cultural activities and have long been educated in MWH have the ability to resist such discrimination and to reaffirm themselves (p.2). Admittedly, some of the worker informants who regularly participated in MWH's workshops in Picun village said that they could appreciate the glory in their jobs when asked about how they think of the slogan. For instance, Xiu Cai, a 40 years old electric welder who participated in Xu Duo's weekly music seminar told me that he supported MWH's reclaiming of the glory of labour, 'why should we want to look down on ourselves? Our work is valuable. If society doesn't really need our work, it won't exist, right? Like, if there are no sanitation workers, the street will be stinky.' Xiu Cai's words indicate his agency in trying to reverse the misrecognition of migrant workers from the dominant culture by recognizing the value of their work and what they produce. More worker informants in Picun village who told me that they identify with the slogan explaining their identification with their ability to support themselves and aid their families. None of my worker informants mentioned the economic and political changes it

implied in terms of MWH's New Workers' Culture.

MWH is also aware of the contradictions within the discourse. In one of MWH study group meetings, a young MWH member, Xiao Liu, vividly exemplified their acknowledgment of competing ideologies and the hidden irony under the slogan and discourse shown on mass media:

> *I watched a TV program the other day, I found it very funny. There were two air stewardesses competing for one trophy. One of them accidentally broke the trophy cup. Then they were relegated to be cleaners. Their superior then said, 'labour is the most glorious'…I was wondering, 'labour is the most glorious' must mean something else in their minds. It's so funny.*
>
> *Dezhi: It means that the losers work the hardest. If you are a loser or you had bad luck, then you should do manual labour.*
>
> *Xiao Liu: Yes!*
>
> *Dezhi: It actually advocates 'labour as shameful'.*
>
> *Xiao Liu: That scene is, like, the two stewardesses are suddenly so different when they become cleaners. Like, you are the lowest class [zui di ceng] now, then you have to work, to clean the floor…*
>
> *Dezhi: It's an irony.*
>
> *Xiao Liu: Yes, that's it.*

Indeed, the characters in the scene of the TV program Xiao Liu mentioned were using the slogan 'labour is the most glorious' in an ironic sense. It illustrates the contradictions of the discourse in reality. The social-economic system underpins the slogan has changed. Therefore, it makes the symbolic reaffirmation of 'glory' become empty words and a painful contrast to the inequality in reality, an irony. As one of my worker informants in PRD suggests, 'labour is not glorious; being rich is glorious now'.

During one evening study group meeting, I asked the members of MWH the question: why do so many migrant workers not feel the 'glory' in their work while still advocating the glory of labour; In response, Dezhi explained:

...we should consider what Marx said, the economic base...for me, since the manual labour receives much less money than the so called 'white collar', it is natural to feel inferior. It is difficult if the hierarchy between manual labour and mental labour [naoli laodong] is not eliminated.

Researcher: Then if the wage is equal, it would be solved?

Dezhi: It will not be equal. Ask yourself, you are an intellectual, you studied hard for so many years to get a diploma. Will you feel it is fair to receive the same salary as someone working in factory? ...what I am saying is, there is a genuine dilemma. Workers will continue to feel discriminated against if the hierarchy of mental labour always exists, but mental labour workers [naoli laodongzhe] will feel it is unfair [if they earn the same as manual labour worker].

Although he emphasised that it was difficult to achieve, the ultimate remedy suggested here with regard to bringing the slogan's meaning closer to reality is the elimination of the divide between mental and manual labour. Dezhi's accounts on eliminating the pay differential between manual and mental labour has strong sources in the political ideologies in China. The difference between manual and mental labour is among the three differences (*sanda chabie*) identified by the CCP to eliminate in the process of constructing the socialist P.R.C. On 4th Feb 1966, the official newspaper Jiefang Daily firstly proposed to eliminate the three differences: the differences between workers and peasants, the differences between urban and rural, and the differences between mental and manual labour. The political discourse of eliminating the three differences has been advocated by the CCP during the Cultural Revolution and as a theoretical endorsement to the 'Down to the Countryside'

Movement[35]. The proposal to eliminate the differences between manual and mental labour comes from the CCP's ideology of Marxism-Leninism at the time and the interpretation of Marx's envisaging of a communist society in *Critique of the Gotha Program*:

> In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished. …only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs! (Marx, 1875)

Therefore, the remedy in Dezhi's accounts is actually in line with their utopian alternative imagination of society. In the more just society of 'a community of freely associated individuals', the migrant workers and other labourers can enjoy the glory of labour. When MWH propose a more inclusive naming of 'labourer' to build alliances and to provide a common basis for social change, they also make distinctions between and amongst the labourers. However, the distinction made between manual labour and mental labour in their accounts often lacks reference to the historical resources they have employed, and causes confusion even between the workers participating in their cultural activities, as exemplified in the extract below,

Extract from fieldnotes
In one of Xu Duo's music workshops, we had a discussion with the migrant worker participants. Li, Shi Ting, Hu Zi, Ma Jia are all migrant workers living in Picun village, Chen Chen and Xu Duo are members of MWH.
…
Li: I think this world is very hard for everyone.

[35] Also known as the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement (s*hang shan xia xiang*). It was a policy instituted in late 1960s in China to send urban youth to mountainous areas or farming villages to learn from the workers and farmers there.

Shi Ting: Pay and reward is equal.

Xu Duo: But the reward for manual and mental labour is not equal.

Shi Ting: Those who work with their brains rule [and those who work with their brawn are ruled]. [An old Chinese saying, lao xin zhe zhi ren, lao liz he zhi yu ren].

Xu Duo: Do you find it fair?

*Shi Ting: **Relatively fair. Mental labour creates more value than manual labour.***

Chen: Why so?

*Hu Zi: We all have **class positions**. You have to **stand in line and stand in the side of manual labour**.*

*Ma Jia: **Manual labourer should be governed by the mental labourer.** [As the old saying] An incapable soldier is just a soldier, but an incapable commander would bring out a team of incapable soldiers [bin xiong xiong yige, jiang xiong xiong yiwo].*

Chen: But no matter how good one man can be, it has to have someone to do the manual work.

*Hu Zi: [again] You have to **choose side, to have a class position**. We don't need to talk about those intellectuals or bourgeoisie.*

*Ma Jia: **Not all the mental laborers are intellectuals or bourgeois.** The line controller in the factory can also be a migrant worker, a poor person. That just means that person has more experience in his former practice as a manual laborer.*

...

Ma Jia: You haven't experienced it, you don't have the right to speak on this matter.

Chen: You can't say I have no right to speak. It is not equal [between manual and mental labuor]. She speaks in a loud voice and her face turns red.

Ma Jia: You don't understand it. The high rank white collar workers have much more stress than you. I experienced it. I am a wage labourer [dagong], I was an apprentice in the factory in the beginning, it was tough. I was also a vice manager with a team of 40 workers. I worked hard for it, from the bottom. Mental labourers are not bourgeois. What we [and the mental laborer] put in work is different.

*Hu Zi: **What is bourgeois? White collars are not?***

Shi Ting: Mental Labourers are not bourgeois. The inequality in income is decided by

the market. This is Marxism. In foreign countries, more people are doing mental

labour, that's why their manual labour are more expensive.

Hu Zi: We should speak for the proletariat manual labourers.

*Li: **The proletariat can be manual and mental labourers.***

Are mental labourer bourgeois? Who are the proletariat? Who are the labourer? The ordinary workers asked important and interesting questions in the conversations in the discussion. The ordinary migrant worker's confusions between the concepts MWH employed in their cultural practice and the worker's understanding that based on their own experience and perception of these words are revealed in the discussion. The workers who actively engaging in the cultural activities in MWH are passionate to discuss such questions. They want to make sense of their own identities, the social class and ideology in MWH's cultural practice. However, I found in my observation, such opportunity for ordinary workers are very limited in labour organisations (even in MWH). Ordinary workers lack the space to do so in the very limited political space of Chinese labour activism.

6.3 Collectivism and gender tensions revealed

Collectivism (jiti zhuyi) has been suggested as one of the core features of the new workers' culture in MWH's accounts. It is not only because they realise the importance of solidarity in resistance, but also because it is connoted in their imagination of the alternative society, a collective one. Though the emphasis on collectivism and the collective is powerful in unpacking the structural injustices of the whole social group of migrant workers, it has also been a major site of tension within the organisation as members were asked to conform to 'collectivism' to prove themselves as the deserving new subjects of the community. In this section, I will begin by demonstrating how MWH narrate the three folds of the importance of collective power and collectivism in their cultural practice, then I will analyse why it

is observed as a major site of tension and how, in practice, gender inequality it disguised in the construction.

6.3.1 Reclaiming collectivism

The discursive cry for collective power of the migrant workers for resistance in MWH's cultural practice can be traced back to a spate of suicides in Shenzhen's Foxconn in 2010[36]. The massive number of suicides of young migrant workers in 2010 triggered discussions in Chinese society, many suggesting that attention should be paid to the mental health and wellbeing of the young migrant workers (Liang, 2014). In academic discussion, the Foxconn suicides have now come to be considered as a way of protesting and resistance against the status quo of exploitation and the issue cannot be reduced to one around the mental health of the migrant workers, but actually reveals deep embedded structural injustices in labour relations in China.

Sun Heng recalled that he felt he could not continue his life normally after he heard about the 13th suicide incident that year. The tragic suicides of migrant workers, the individual protests known as 'fighting with death'(*yi si kangzheng*) had always stirred up feelings of Sun Heng and others in MWH. Chen Yan, a young member of the organisation, explained how the core members, like Sun Heng think about workplace suicides,

> *[He] is a person who is emotionally attached to the workers. His ideology may be developed from the process of performance. He is connected with workers and knows them. It's not a show and it can't be pretentious. When there are incidents of workers, like, the suicide of Zhou Jianrong [a senior female worker who jumped*

[36] In 2010, 18 young migrant workers attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities in and near Shenzhen, resulting in 14 deaths. See reports: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9006988/Mass-suicide-protest-at-Apple-manufacturer-Foxconn-factory.html

from the top of a building after she lost her job from a previous strike], his sadness is real, his hunger strike is real too.

On May 28th of 2010, MWH held a mourning event called 'Dignity of Life, Honoring Foxconn Workers' in Picun Village'. In the mourning event, they sang the 'Song of Life' to memorialize the victims. They tried to make sense of the suicides: 'why people gave up their lives? Despair, no hope. Life becomes meaningless, no future, no dignity, we think that they were protesting with their lives, for human dignity'. The Foxconn tragedy has become a reference point in MWH's narrative on calling for collective power and solidarity in resistance over tragic individual protests in their cultural practice. A whole narrative is built upon it and used in various performances:

We cannot keep silence, otherwise the next one will be us, we have to reflect on the true reasons behind all these [tragedy]. ...the CEO of Foxconn went to Wutai Mountain to ask for blessing from Buddha after the incidents, saying it happened because of the bad Feng Shui. Then they said they consulted experts from Tsinghua university to suggest it is a problem of the mental quality [xinli suzhi] of the workers, it's all personal problem, not Foxconn's problem. It's unfair to say all the problems are individual problems. He [Foxconn CEO] bought a lot of nets and fenced all the dormitories of workers to prevent suicides. This is ridiculous. ...We don't need this net, what we need is human relationship based on solidarity and mutual help. ...The power of one individual is weak, we must organise and establish various social support systems. ...

As shown in the accounts above, MWH unpacks how the workplace suicides of migrant workers has been reduced to either superstition or individual mental health problems by Foxconn. The shift of focus from challenging and questioning the structural inequality and the repressive factory culture behind the individual mental health of workers leads to different solutions. In MWH's accounts, the solution should not be mental health consultations for individual workers nor should it be more tragic

individual protests, as 'the power of one individual is weak'. The importance of solidarity and its extension of 'collectivism' in MWH's accounts is to avoid such tragedies. They rightly insist that it is too difficult for individuals to resist the oppression of the dominant social structure by themselves. Rather, workers should organise and resist collectively as a class, 'like the Nanhai Honda strikes organised by young migrant workers' following the call for collective action in their narrative.

A cry for collective power is the first layer of the collectivism MWH advocates in their cultural practice. Building on their acknowledgment on collective power and collective way out for the social group, the second layer is their wish to combat what they call 'individualistic heroism' (*geren yingxiong zhuyi*) in labour activism. The core members of MWH express their doubts about 'individualistic heroism' repeatedly when addressing the issue of collectivism and resistance. For example, in one of the meetings, a prominent labour activist Mr. D from the PRD came to visit MWH in Picun village and shared their experience of collective actions in Guangdong province. He shared the story of two heroic figures in the labour struggles in southern China, Wu Guijun[37] and Meng Han[38], stressing on how brave and militant they were acting as the workers' representatives (*gongren daibiao*) in strikes and protests.

Though impressed by the courage of the two workers' representatives, MWH members reflected afterwards on the risks of exaggerating the role of individuals. The core members discussed the desire of becoming a 'hero'. Guo Liang, the drummer of the art troupe, said everyone might have the desire of becoming 'hero' and to change the world, but he'd rather not become a hero as 'going it alone (*dan da du dou*) is not feasible'. Dezhi raised another reason for their opposition to individualist heroism in

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[37] Wu emerged as a labour rights activist in organising workers to go on strike against Diweixin factory's refusal to offer fair compensation and was seized by police in May 2013. For more background information, see: https://www.nchrd.org/2019/07/wu-guijun/

[38] Meng actively participated in a strike over contract disputes as the worker's representative and was detained by police in August 2013. For more background information, see: https://www.nchrd.org/2016/09/meng-han/

new workers' struggles, 'if someone dreams to bring heroic change to the world, it's very likely to be disappointed', without such desire, people can organise and fight collectively for the long revolution.

The third layer of their collectivism is closely linked to internal organisation solidarity and the practice of the 'commune'. In their imagination of the New Workers' Culture, it should be a counter-hegemonic alternative to resist the individualism in dominant culture. Collectivism has been understood as a method and a value for resistance. At an organisational level, their small-scale experiment in the Tongxin Commune, a collectively owned community, is their exploration of socialist utopia and requires an alternative organisational mechanism other than the current one. Both Sun Heng and Lv Tu talked about their wish to provide a different way to run the organisation other than the structure of an ordinary NGO. For them, adopting an enterprise management mechanism and performance evaluation system to run the organisation as a company like other NGOs is problematic. As culture is the whole way of life and struggle for them, they question how it is possible to ground the alternative in the same management logic of a capitalist company. They want to explore and provide an alternative to operate, a different way to live and work. The concept of the commune is adopted to guide the practice as the alternative path and the collectivism is the common value required to link individual to the organisation, to cooperate, to live and work together in the community.

According to the members, collective life (*jiti shenghuo*) was established long before the concept of the commune was proposed to theorise it. In Picun Village, MWH colleagues work together and live together. Their rooms are also their offices. The workplace and the living space are highly overlapping. According to informants, 'it's practical, you can save time and money to live and work together'. Most members live in two small compounds facing each other in the Picun Village. The young and single members live in dormitories. Couples have their separate rooms. Some moved out as it's crowded but still live somewhere close to the village. The senior members

are allowed to have their parents living with them here. In return, some parents of members also help as volunteers. Sometimes, MWH even provides them jobs.

MWH always has this 'we are a big family' feeling as they constantly refer the organisation as the 'big family'. 'Family' is really a broadly used word in cooperative culture, and, admittedly, most of the time it is an empty word. But to some degree, MWH really mean it. For example, when a young member hurt her leg, everyone in the living compound come to her aid. When I worked for the museum to edit the film we made, we did it in one member's living room (only his computer could run the editing software). His wife came back home from working in the migrant children's school and made dinner for all of us. Another young member, Jia Jia, who worked in the office next door joined us. Because the smell of the dishes was so good, the smell made her not want to eat the food from the staff canteen. It is not a scene happening in my ordinary urban life but recalls some childhood memories of me living in last days of socialist factory family quarter compound.

The collectivism advocated as the core value of the commune and the alternative new culture practiced in their collective community life was approved of by many members. During my fieldwork, I heard comments like, 'I like to live collectively, living in a big compound like ours. …I felt children grow up this way will not be selfish'. The benefits of collective life is obvious for MWH and to sustain the collective life, the put forward collectivism, which advocates that individuals prioritize collective interests and goals over themselves, to live and work through mutual help and solidarity, and to subscribe to a common ideology and identity. In their discussion of the commune charter, a regulative document for the Tongxin Commune, there were debates about who should be able to join the commune.

In addition to rigid requirement (such as worked for the organisation more than two years), whether a person identifies with the core values of MWH is considered very important. Such identification has been interpreted as the core of culture. For instance,

Sun Heng emphasised that culture was a way of life, a way of work and a way of struggle, within which collective life, collectivism and solidarity economy were the cores, 'the way of life of our organisation is basically a collective one for the past twelve years, and we place great emphasis on our culture.' In other words, to be qualified as a communal member is different from working in MWH, one needs to prove his/her identification with the values, worldview and culture of the commune, 'some people are not willing to live a collective life, they only care about their own small days (*guo xiao rizi*); they are not suitable.'

Admittedly, other than the political and cultural meaning attached, the economic mobilisation attempts, such as the 'social enterprise' of second-hand stores and the organic agricultural gardens also aimed to support the financial autonomy of MWH, so they could be rid of the uncertainty of project funding and the uncertain control or influence of the potential sponsors. According to Lv Tu, more than 60% of the funding for MWH is self-raised, 'we don't want to be led by the project. Because if you depend on project funding, you will be over as soon as the project is due. We need to be autonomous.'; as Wang Dezhi suggested, 'It is our approach/method to survive in the capitalist economy and to fulfil our social responsibilities'.

Collectivism as the core value of the new worker's culture to resist individualism and to build cohesion within the organisation is indeed important for MWH. However, not everyone agrees with the collectivism advocated by MWH. For instance, May, the women worker activist who left MWH after her training in the worker's college and went back to Guangzhou to set a new organisation to keep on fighting against injustices shared her feeling about the collectivism MWH advocated:

> *…I think I don't like the collectivism, you know, like everything is for the collective. I think I can't endure it. (I) feel many things of my own are submerged [yanmo]. So I don't particularly like that kind of collectivism, the atmosphere. …and some people are so horrible [kongbu], so harsh. W, I am not*

scared of him, but I know he is harsh. I saw him scolding Z (another young women activist) into tears. ... really small things, so I think what's the matter? ...And J39, I don't like him, very weird. ...

As someone who mobilises workers into collective action, certainly it is neither solidarity nor collective strength that May opposes. It took me sometime to comprehend what May and some others felt about the collectivism promoted within organisation. A refusal to recognize uniqueness and difference (because of the dangers of individualism) is experienced as a form of oppression, the feeling she described as 'many things of my own are submerged' is an expression of her sense of suppression by a more powerful force. Additionally, the way in which certain male individuals in the collective can exercise power by criticising others, even bringing them to tears, suggests the hidden gendered inequalities that have not been addressed, as well as the individual personality traits that thrive under cover of the collective work. Thus, there remains a power inequality hidden behind the practice of 'collectivism' which at the very least needs to be critiqued, and not romanticized.

6.3.2 Small family, big family and women's issues

When women activists expressed their complex sentiments towards the core value of 'collectivism' in MWH's cultural practice, they were actually opposing the internal unequal power relations and the sense of oppression they experienced. Indeed, this prompts me to ask, how is 'collectivism' constructed to disguise these power relations? I think the scene from fieldwork below can be a good example to illustrate the tensions and conflicts under 'collectivism' and the ideal narrated by MWH core

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[39] J joined MWH from the very beginning and had great influence on other core members. According to informants, he taught Marxism within the organisation and been considered as a theoretical tutor. When I started my fieldwork in 2013, he had already been removed from the core circle due to allegations of sexual harassments. I didn't have chance to interview him. But Dezhi and some other young male members, like Meng Zi spoke highly of him, praised his contribution to the organisation. Though young female members like CY and May have different ideas.

members.

Extract from fieldnotes

Today is the day for the annual summary meeting of MWH. Most of the staff in the organisation were gathered in Pingu to summarise their work for the past year and discuss their workplan for the coming year. One of the meeting agendas was to form discussion group based on gender so that male and female staff can discuss their concerns separately and more freely. Then two groups can exchange their ideas and further discuss the issues together. As a woman, of course I stayed with the female group. Lv Tu chaired the discussion, the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed. Some suggested maybe the organisation can pay more attention to gender issues in the future. Lv Tu wrote it down on the blackboard on the wall. Jinhua, the principal of the Tongxin migrant children school put forward the issue on balance of organisation work tasks and family life. As a mother-to-be, she hoped to draw a clear line between work hours and private hours in the future. Many female members agreed with her and expressed similar ideas.

After a short break, two gender based groups were together again to exchange the outcomes of their group discussion. The male member group first shared their discussion points. Many are personal summaries of individual members, how they motivated themselves to improve their work in the coming year. Lv Tu and other female members praised their summarise and encouraged them. Everything seemed smooth until Lv Tu, as the chair of female discussion group shared the first advice of paying more attention to women's issues in future work agenda, and the male core members who hold the power of the organisation clearly stated their disagreement.

Wang Dezhi directly rejected the proposal to increase the significance of women's issues in MWH practice. 'We are a worker's organisation, neither a women's organisation nor a women workers' organisation. A worker's organisation serves the

*vast majority of workers', he continued to claim that every organisation needs to define its own tasks and focus of work content, '**if you want to work on gender issues, you should go to feminist organisations**, if you want to engage with women workers' issues, there is Mulan Huakai [a female workers organisation based in Beijing]'.*

Though I did not actively participate in the discussion, this made me feel uneasy. It didn't feel like an exchange of ideas. Rather it felt as if the female members had turned in their proposal and the leader in charge exercised his one-vote veto.

In the strained silence following this exchange, Jinhua started to talk: 'no need to say it is women or workers' issues, we only hope to balance work and family. For instance, really small things, like, trying not to schedule meeting or work-related activities after work hours. Let everyone get home after work and accompany their family, care for their children'.

Dezhi replied that he believed that there are not too many meetings arranged after work. Most of the after-work activities are study groups and workshops, or cultural events. In many cases, there were only sudden incidents that have to be temporarily notified. As Jinhua is the principal and core of the organisation, she will be called in such. He continued to suggest that couples both work in MWH understand the nature of work and suggest to persuade partners to be more supportive.

Jinhua countered him and gave examples of the cases where she received meeting notice in short notice after work, and the cases that the content of the meeting is not relevant to her work. She said that her husband was already very supportive, but they needed time to care for their family.

Sun Heng, standing beside Dezhi became a bit agitated. He said that the organisation was not a company of nine to five working hours, everyone were fighting for common ideal, everyone sacrificed. The more he talked the more upset he was, his eyes became

*watery. Everyone else seemed at a loss. He then continued, 'I am too disappointed, MWH [developed] to now, **everyone still only thinks about their own small family [xiaojia], thinking about their own small days [guo xiaorizi], rather than fighting for the collective big family [jiti da jiating], there is no way out**.*

The conflicts revealed in this incident from the annual meeting outline the long-lasting gender tensions covered beneath the discourse of collectivism. Firstly, a hegemonic binary is perpetuated through the process of this discussion. This narrative of setting binary rhetoric of 'small family versus big family' is another formation of the binary of 'individualism' versus 'collectivism'. The 'big family' certainly refers to MWH, which apparently represents the common goals and ideals of the collective. Thus, these who ask for more clear lines between work and family life to allow them to have time for caring for their families end up being accused of putting individual interests above collective goals. Those who 'only think about their own small family' and 'their own small days' are apparently not qualified themselves as the deserving new subject of the new culture for the fairer and more just society that MWH is fighting towards and promoting in their experiment. Through constructing the binary rhetoric of 'small family' versus 'big family', several male worker speakers build up a discursive mechanism to exclude those female dissenters or critics as the selfish and individualist 'other' in the process of social transformation.

Moreover, the extract above reveals a conflict between different identities. In reality, identities are always intersecting: a woman migrant worker is at the same time one of the working class, a woman and a rural hukou holder. The intersecting of identities leads to overlapping forms of oppressions. What Jinhua and other women members expressed regarding the work-life balance in the organisation actually reveals their gendered experience. The 'small family' is the place where women (activists and workers) experience even further oppression from patriarchy. Whatever the calls for more 'understanding' from male partners, domestic tasks, childcare and housework are deeply embedded in hierarchies of class and gender. Gendered norms of domestic

work 'naturalize' the tasks of childcare and housework as women's responsibility. Through the binary rhetoric, male workers who seem to control MWH's vision and direction actually exclude and devalue the common experience of gendered oppression of women activists and migrant workers.

Indeed, in many cases, activists who did not feel included would then leave or marginalise themselves from the organisation. Yin observed, the female migrant singer Duan Yu left because of the gender inequality she experienced in MWH (2019). It is also evidenced in my fieldwork that some female activists reflect on their experience and their decision to leave as exemplified in May's accounts. However, the exclusion that women activists experience in the process is not merely an organisational practice problem which undermines the participation of women activists but it has profound and significant effects on the cultural practices of MWH. For example, Yin found out that there are only three songs specifically about female workers in the massive cultural repertoire of MWH, and suggests that the 'downplaying of gender in MWH's advocacy leads to an overall neglect of female migrant workers' (2019, p.15). Other than the lack of representation in works of art (songs, dramas, etc), the disguised gender tensions under collectivism lead to the exclusion of so called 'women's issues' and their failure of articulating gender and class in the formation of basis for social change.

Last but not least, the tensions and conflicts revealed are inherent in MWH's imagination of the New Worker's Culture. As analysed in last chapter, MWH imagined it as a counter-hegemonic culture to raise the class consciousness of the new working class of migrant workers in China. As it is defined solely by class and made class the sole axe of collective identity, it neglected other axes of identities and subjugated gender subjectivity to class struggle. Therefore, in their understanding, as Dezhi claimed, MWH is a worker's organisation, the task is to resist class oppression. Patriarchy is only something to oppose in the abstract sense. In practice, patriarchy is not the enemy for MWH as they define themselves as a worker's organisation, which

prioritizes the class struggle of the 'big family'.

6.3.3 Subordination to the ideal

In the counter-hegemonic cultural practices of MWH, we see the reproduction of another hegemonic force, patriarchy. As 'the supposedly neutral set of difference-blind principles of the politics of equal dignity is in fact a reflection of one hegemonic culture' (Taylor, 1992, p.43). In the name of the working class or of migrant workers, the particularity of the gendered culture/demands/needs are oppressed and forced into a 'greater good' of the migrant workers, a homogenous unity. Culture as a whole way of life and struggle as they claim and promote began to feel like different forms of exploitation and oppression through a gendered perspective.

But why did MWH take this path? Admittedly, all the co-founders of MWH are male, they may not necessarily acknowledge and actively reflect on gender inequality. But just having female core members in the organisation does not automatically solve the problem. Lv Tu, the intellectual of the organisation and wife of Sun Heng, and Jinhua, the principal of Tongxin school are both qualified female core members of the organisation, but the voices of the women activists were still silenced under the apparent claims and value of 'collectivism'. A short extract from another discussion of internal democracy and freedom during fieldwork can shed light on how and why the male leaders conceive class and gender, culture and revolution and political change in such a way:

Excerpt from fieldnotes

At the end of today's discussion of democracy and freedom, Miao, a female member of MWH, raised some interesting questions. She said that you guys talked a lot about democracy in general, but I wondered if there was democracy within the family? Is that possible to ask for democracy in the family? Though Miao didn't mention MWH

directly, Sun Heng replied to the question addressing the organisation, 'I think we need democracy in the family, in small family, for example, three people you might not need it, but for a big family, like our MWH, we need it, ...democracy is a combination of power and responsibility.'

Lv Tu interjected the conversation and shared her reading of Ding Ling, one of the most celebrated 20th century Chinese authors who joined the CCP in 1932. Lv Tu briefly described Ding Ling's early experience of resisting gender oppression from her conservative patriarchal family, pursuit for personal freedom and gender equality and finally joined the communist revolution in Yan'an, then she talked about Ding Ling's famous article Thoughts on 8 March [Women's Day]40 which triggered interesting discussion from MWH male leaders on class and gender in revolution,

'...she criticised the so called 'ni tui zi' [filthy legs, referring to the peasant origin] in Yan'an, such as how they abandoned their wives and married young college girls who joined the revolution, anyway, she criticised the phenomenon of gender inequalities and the false women's liberation in Yan'an. You can see the process of her, she went to Yan'an for her pursuit of democracy and freedom, but when she were at Yan'an, her actions for democracy and freedom pushed her into hell. ...because of the article, she had been criticised for so many years. ...I don't want to comment on it politically, I lament her process as a woman to fight against the feudalism and purist for liberty...' she signed and paused.

In the short silence, Dezhi commented, 'In Maoist era, she could never get over this kind of petit bourgeoisie thoughts'. Lv Tu echoed, 'yes, her Miss Sophia's Diary41 ...'

Sun Heng entered the discussion, 'I think we should consider it in its historical and

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40 A translation of the article, see: https://libcom.org/library/thoughts-8-march-women's-day
41 Written in 1927 and firstly published in 'Fiction Monthly' (xiaoshuo yuebao), it is a short story about a young woman's personal thoughts and feelings through diary entries, regarding identity, sexuality and relationship.

political context. I don't know Ding Ling's work very well, I think her ideas of gender equality should be fine today. ...But in that specific time [in] Yan'an, I can understand [the criticism]. You see, it's like war time, this kind of speech is shaking the heart of the army, or it is like disrupting the CCP from the inside, it's not good for revolution ...this kind of behavior is to be beheaded.'

Dezhi: 'yes, what's her problem? Other people were in charge in a war, (she) was just shaking other people's mind.'

Miao: 'Huh, your words prove what I said before, democracy and freedom are given by others.'

Sun Heng sighed and explained himself to Miao, 'for example, we can have meetings to discuss matters in organisation, everyone can participate and express their ideas, but it has pre-conditions. Like, it cannot be after discussion, we found out that we conclude with something strayed or against our positions or our goals, then we stopped doing our work, then why we need this fucking democracy? We need to remember why we are together, we bunch of people coming to together to do what...'

Lv Tu interrupted him and said, 'come back to Ding Ling, so that is to say, if her pursuit for personal freedom, or this women's democracy and freedom, disrupted the army to fight against the warlords or the Chinese Nationalist Party, then it is [not legitimate]?...'

Ding Ling's article *Thoughts on 8 March (Women's Day)* was first published in 1942 at the very beginning of the Yan'an Rectification Movement. In her article, she questioned women's subordination during the revolution. She revealed the dilemma: because 'not married is more sinful' for women in Yan'an, it will lead to more rumors and slander. Marriage is inevitable, then who cares for the children? In the end, the

women in Yan'an were ridiculed as 'Nora returning to the family'[42] as they were no longer standing on the road of revolution with other comrades, and could be exempted from the fate of 'lagging behind'. As the first sentence of her article suggests, '(w)hen will it no longer be necessary to attach special weight to the word 'women' and to raise it specially?' Only when true gender equality has been realised, the word 'women' will be equal to 'men'. Three months later, Mao Zedong published the famous 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Arts and Literature', stressing the creation of ideological unity within the CCP, which is constantly being referenced to by the core members of MWH. During the Yan'an Forum, Ding Ling's article was condemned by Mao Zedong and the CCP leadership, and she was forced to disown her views and to undergo a public self-confession.

The gender issues revealed in Ding Ling's article are still relevant and inspiring today. Women joined the revolution of class and national liberation, but were eventually reduced to fulfilling traditional gender roles by the oppressions of patriarchy: marriage, birth, unpaid household duties, and then being condemned by their male counterparts as 'Nora returning to the family' and 'lagging behind'. Does the scenario look familiar? Is it not similar to what the 'small family' versus 'big family' discourse suggests? The discussion of Ding Ling tells a lot about how the core members of MWH, men and even women, perceive the relationship between class and gender within the labour struggle/ revolution. Although it is mentioned that Ding's appeal of gender equality is valid in a contemporary social context, her questioning of gender oppression within the revolution ends up being interpreted as the 'pursuit of individual democracy and freedom' which aims to undermine the revolutionary army's determination to fight the civil war in the above discussion in MWH. By viewing Ding Ling's attempt to challenge the patriarchy in revolution as the pursuit of 'individual democracy and freedom', the male worker speaking implies that her claims lacks a sense of the 'big picture' and disregards collective and class interests, it

[42] As a reference to the heroine of Ibsen's A Doll's House, Nora left home to achieve her freedom.

is exactly the same logic in the rhetoric of 'big family' versus 'small family'. Once again, collectivism as a trope is used to disguise and even to make excuses for the continuation of patriarchal oppression.

This whole discussion also reveals how MWH understands the relationship between culture and politics or revolution. Mao's 'Yan'an Talks' have clearly had a profound influence in MWH's cultural practice as discussed in chapter 5 about how they reclaimed the 'people's arts and literary view'. In addition to the principle that literature and arts are for the workers, peasants and soldiers, as reviewed in historical chapter, another important principle in Mao's Yan'an Talks is to establish culture's subordination to politics as it requires 'arts and literature to become part of the whole revolutionary machine'. From the core members' accounts, it suggests that they have a similar understanding, as Ding Ling's demands for gender liberation is apparently *not wrong in today*, but it should not have been allowed to 'disrupt' the CCP from inside and the revolutionary cause of class and national liberation at the time she wrote the article. The language used to delegitimise her critique (*it's not good for revolution ...this kind of behavior is to be beheaded*) indicates the inner logic of MWH's overall conception of gender, culture and politics (also evidenced in how Sun Heng emphasises that democracy within an organisation should not be allowed to overshadow the initial goals of the organisation in the first place). In a false but common binary opposition, culture as a whole way of life and struggle since the new workers' culture aims for class struggle is opposed to the struggle for gender equality and other experiences of oppression should be subordinated to the cause.

As analysed previously, how flexible and adaptable MWH can be in their cultural practice, from adopting CCP official discourse to building potential alliances via their construction and interpretation of 'new worker' and 'laborer', MWH does not lack the capacity and willingness to be more inclusive as they understand the importance of alliance building. Rather, their understanding of women's subordination to class is the root of their unwillingness to address gender as an issue. It reveals their unwillingness

in articulating different intersecting identities in their cultural practice. The New Workers' Culture, solely stresses the class identities of the new subject 'new worker' ignoring other factors of power, such as the oppression of patriarchy. If the claim of responding to the 'real needs' of the migrant workers is to be taken seriously, and their attempt to construct a new culture, and an alternative imagination for collective mobilisation to change society for a better version is to succeed, then the women workers and the women activists' demands and needs should not be ignored and muted in the counter-hegemonic cultural practice of MWH. As a matter of fact, these conflicts should not be understood as merely organisational gender inequality problems. It symbolises the gendered tensions within the broader labour movement in China, deeply rooted in the patriarchy and embedded in the history of labour struggles.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of three major themes in the cultural practice of MWH, the collective identity construction, the reclaiming of glory of labour, and the collectivism. In the first section, I demonstrated how MWH constructs a collective identity for their social group to fulfil their political agenda embedded in their cultural practice of new worker's culture. I firstly analysed the re-naming of the social group from the imposed '*nongmin gong*' to 'new worker' by MWH. When the Chinese migrant workers were called '*nongmin gong*' (peasant worker) by the mass media, the government and themselves, they are 'hailed' into subjects that are trapped in an ambivalent social position. Thus, MWH unpacked '*nongmin gong*' to justify their naming of 'new worker'. I revealed the three-folded meaning under the re-naming of 'new worker' as triple denial to three different identities, namely, the '*nongmin gong*', the old working class and the 'new citizen'. Language plays a crucial role in ideologies about the social world as it influences what one wants to change about the world by (re)naming it. It enables subjects to rupture ideological assumptions about

themselves and their world, and by doing so potentially reconstitute their ideological commitments. The renaming of new worker is supplemented by a more inclusive naming of 'labourer' (*laodong zhe*). The naming of 'labourer' serves to link the naming of the social group to the discourse of glory of labour and potentially build alliance as it is a broader term than 'new worker'.

The collective identity construction process also included a re-narration of collective memory. There are two layers of constructing the alternative history and collective memory in MWH's cultural practice. First, they actively construct and mobilise the collective memory of the rural-urban migrant workers. Furthermore, they also try to construct an alternative narrative of the socialist past of China. A collective memory of migrant workers was constructed and communicated in the media displays of the museum. The new workers' culture as a socialist alternative to capitalism requires a reflection on the socialist legacy. Indeed, the past has an influence on how activist speak, write and even think about the future. The core members tell alternative stories and interpretations of the socialist era to contest the dominant to justify their own practice. However, it is also worth noting they adopt a pragmatic and flexible approach to avoid confrontation when communicate with broader audience in terms of interpreting the past.

The second section addressed the core theme of glory of labour in the cultural practice of MWH. I demonstrate the complexity of the 'glory of labour' as the contesting site of ideologies, the dislocated disidentification and identification of the ordinary workers, and the conflicts between workers and MWH labour activists' perception on the aspiration of hope.

In the third section, I illustrated the rationale behind the reclaiming of collectivism in the cultural practice of MWH and how the discourse of collectivism has been used to disguise the gender oppression. First, collectivism is a cry for strength and solidarity to resist the oppression and exploitation faced by the social group as individual

protests often ended in tragedy. It has also been used to oppose the 'individualist heroism' identified as a risk in labour activism by MWH. Moreover, it has been considered the core value of the commune which directly link to the alternative imagination of society. Developed in the process of their practice and employed as a method to maintain internal cohesion, was set up as the common value of the commune; individuals have to identify with it to prove they are the desirable subject of the new alternative.

Yet, tensions were detected in the process. Individuals belong to multiple overlapping groups and identities. For instance, one can be a women, a worker and an activist at the same time. As shown in chapter 5, imagining and basing a collective identity solely on class is a powerful political and economic claim in their struggle for a more just society. However, it does cause tensions within the organisation. Through the binary rhetoric of small family versus big family, gendered subjectivities were obliterated in the name of the collective in MWH. The gender tensions disguised in the discourse of collectivism not only inflect how MWH perceive women workers and activists in labour activism, but also inflect their ability of mobilise women and build alliances with other progressive forces (such as feminism).

The tension between class and gender is not new in labour movements and revolutions. In a similar vein and in the broader context, gender has been suggested as a method to divide the class struggle as observed in southern China labour activism. It potentially sets a binary separation between the labour organisation and feminist/women workers' organisation. Admittedly, the tasks and work focus of different organisations vary. However, as MWH sets its goal as that of constructing collective identity and culture for the counter-hegemonic struggle, the separation and subordination of women's experience and demands indicate at least a partial failure to articulate different identities and interests within the social group that they claim to represent. For instance, if labour is glory for MWH, does unpaid domestic labour retain this glory as well? More importantly, within labour activism, failing to

understand and acknowledge the repression from patriarchy, another hegemony in society inflects their capacity to formulate a sound collective basis for resistance. This kind of artificial separation makes it difficult for the two to cooperate in solidarity, resulting in a more dispersed force in the already scattered labour activism in China. If MWH, as they claimed, want to create a truly inclusive collective identity as the foundation of labour politics and even broader social change, then they must recognize the needs and situation of women workers who make up more than a third of the population.

However, it does not suggest that the female activists are powerless or the tension between class and gender are insoluble. On the contrary, they keep resisting the patriarchal oppression and exploring ways to formulate a gender sensitive basis for class resistance based on the intersectional experiences of gender, class and hukou status in their everyday struggle (see chapter 8).

Tension and conflicts within working class movements have been analysed in this chapter. But as a grassroots labour organisation, how does MWH interact with other social actors? What are the dynamics in the interactions? I will explore the conflicts, resistance and compromises in the interaction between MWH and other social actors in next chapter.

Chapter 7 The *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala: Power relations, Agency and Resistance

7.0 Introduction

Using the extended process of 2014 *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala (SFG) as a case, in this chapter, I explore the complex interaction between Migrant Worker's Home (MWH) and other important social actors, namely, the mainstream media, the academia, the government and other labour organisations. Via this focus on the experience of hosting the most important culture event of MWH, the *Dagong* SFG, I aim to illuminate how MWH exert different agency in negotiating a range of tensions and hierarchies in the dynamic process.

This chapter start with a brief introduction about the *Dagong* SFG, its historical, political and social background as well as my role in the process of preparing it. Then I move to investigate the power struggle between MWH and the mainstream media. I reveal how the migrant worker labour activists imagine different media platforms, how they intend to use different media, and the problems faced by MWH in the process. Section 7.3 illustrate how MWH interact with the government and the academia. Section 7.4 addresses how MWH attempt to communicate and mobilise with other labour organisations via the process of hosting the culture event and the various tensions observed within it.

The intention of this chapter is not to provide a case study about the *Dagong* SFG *per se*. Rather, as this cultural event provides a precious opportunity to open up investigation of MWH's external interactions with other social actors, it serves as an excellent starting point to elucidate the rationale, perceptions, actions and ideas in the process and to further comprehend the migrant workers' experiences of cultural

practice in contemporary China.

7.1 The *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala

The first *Dagong* SFG was held in the New Worker's Theatre in Picun village on
January 8th, 2012. Wang Dezhi finally realised his dream of performing crosstalk
(*xiangsheng*) on stage of Spring Festival Gala, though not on the stage of a national
television station, but the one that was organised by themselves and performed for
their fellow migrant workers. More than performing for the workers, Dezhi was also
the general director of their own *Dagong* SFG. According to my informants, the 2012
Dagong SFG of MWH was hosted in Picun villages as a celebration party for the
local community as the core members are so sick and tired of the official Spring
Festival Gala. However, with the famous Chinese TV personality Cui Yongyuan[43]
volunteering as the host, this local workers' venture soon attracted huge media
attention. It has, of course, been pointed out that Cui Yongyuan, the famous TV host
became the focus of most media reports[44]. Nevertheless, the core members considered
the publicity of the 2012 *Dagong* SFG a good opportunity to promote the New
Worker's Culture to a broader audience. Thus, MWH has continued to organise it
annually ever since.

The significance and meanings of the *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala should be
understood in the context of the national Spring Festival Gala of Chinese Central
Television Station (CCTV). CCTV's Spring Festival Gala was first conceived in 1983
and it has been institutionalised over the following years into an indispensable part of
the celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year. Despite much criticism and falling
audience ratings in recent years, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala remains a tradition and

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[43] Cui was a TV host of CCTV and rose to fame by hosting the news show *Tell It Like It Is* (shi hua shi shuo).
[44] See commentary from media scholar Bu Wei (in Chinese):
http://culture.ifeng.com/1/detail_2012_01/21/12111810_0.shtml

habit in Chinese people's life during the lunar new year. Moreover, with the high presence of political propaganda and social education content, the CCTV Spring Festival Gala had been institutionalized over the years to be a platform to fulfill the Chinese Communist Party's ideological tasks as a national media event in the post-Mao era (Zhao, 1998; Wang, 2010).

Sun Heng once expressed his disapproval of the CCTV Gala when asked by others whether MWH want to perform on the stage of the state television station, '…but many times, I feel the CCTV is a place to 'brainwash' the audience' (Lv, 2014, p.262). This kind of perception on the state tv station is recurring in the working meetings of *Dagong* SFG and shared by many other members. For MWH, the CCTV Spring Festival Gala represents the dominant ideology from the party-state and it doesn't serve the interest of the migrant workers. However, the image of migrant workers are also shown in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. For instance, in 2011, a band called 'Xu ri yang gang' formed by two male migrant workers sang a song (not original, but from another pop singer) on the stage of the national Spring Festival Gala.

It has been suggested that since CCTV's annual Spring Festival Gala, as the most viewed/watched media event in China, is considered to convene the 'official ideological guidelines', the appearance of migrant workers on the stage in 2011 'can only be interpreted as the result of a perceived pollical need for inclusion and recognition' (Sun, 2014, p.5). However, for MWH, such an appearance of migrant workers struck them as more of a tokenistic gesture rather than as genuine inclusion and recognition as exemplified in his comment: '[CCTV SFG] is not only completely detached from the reality of our lives, but also shamefully misrepresents us and demonises (*yao mo hua*) us'. Their perception of the CCTV and its Spring Festival Gala is in line with their understanding of the cultural hegemony discussed in chapter 5. Faye Ginsburg use the term 'Cultural activism' to call the kind of work that the marginalised people 'take up a range of media in order to 'talk back' to structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and realities' and to 'underscore the

sense of both political agency and cultural intervention' within the process (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, 2002, pp.7-8). Therefore, by adopting the term 'spring festival gala' and adding the prefix '*dagong*' as an indicator of the social group of migrant workers, the practice of hosting their own spring festival gala displays a strong sense of resistant agency and is a direct way to challenge the cultural hegemony. The *Dagong* SFG is a form of resistance to the mainstream or the hegemony via the construction of a New Worker's Culture and its presentation at the gala to confront the distorted image, stereotypes and interests of the social group of migrant workers on the stage set by the state television station. The counter-hegemonic feature has also been noticed by some scholars (Sun, 2014; Wang Hongzhe, 2015; Bu, 2017).

As a counter-hegemonic cultural practice, the programs of the *Dagong* SFG should be considered a way of articulating and communicating the ideology of the marginalised to the broader audience of common migrant workers and people of other social classes. Indeed, the selection process of program observed in my fieldwork reveals how MWH perceive the *Dagong* SFG and its relation to the New Worker's Culture and broader labour struggle. According to Wang Dezhi, '..that is to say, in fact, we can't look at the *DaGong* SFG in isolation. It is the cultural aspect in the process of China's new working class formation. You have to put it [the gala] in the whole picture. You can't look at it in isolation'. Bu Wei, the media scholar who actively supported MWH for many years, analysed the contents of the 111 programs of the *Dagong* SFG and suggested that there were three major themes: the first one is to show the 'real' life and promote the value of labour (38% of the programs), the second theme is 'home sick' which express the emotions and feelings of migrant workers (24%), the last major theme is 'social development and the social group of workers' (29%) which aims at revealing the social injustice and pursuit for social equality (Bu, 2017). The overwhelming part of the content on promoting 'the value of labour' and social injustice clearly shows the ideological message convened in the programs. As Hershatter points out, 'speaking bitterness' is a form of subaltern speech

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which 'recognises their suffering, glorifies their resistance, and effaces any aspect of their history that does clearly fall into these two categories (1993, p.108).

Notably, MWH is aware that their views are not always shared by the ordinary migrant workers. As discussed in chapter 5, MWH deliberately makes distinction between the alternative culture they constructed and promoted to the so-called popular culture of workers in Chinese society. As the general director of *Dagong* SFG, Wang Dezhi's words during a discussion reveals how the labour activists perceive the gap between ordinary workers and themselves:

> *I was a worker, I know exactly what workers like ...It has something to do with their knowledge structure and individual experiences. Speaking frankly, workers even prefer 'dirty jokes' [huang duanzi] with swear words. ...but we cannot do this because most workers like these vulgar things. If we attempt to meet such [vulgar] demands, we cannot move forward, [we] cannot take the lead [for workers]. Comparing to most workers, us, as MWH, have to be more advanced [xian jin], be 'positive'[ji ji].*

The above remarks shows how the labour activists understand themselves and their intention in cultural practice, as well as how they perceive ordinary workers. First, promoting the 'positive' New Worker's Culture, MWH consider itself as the vanguard of the proletarian in China (as discussed in chapter 5 and 6). Second, as Dezhi suggest, the activists perceive the imagined differences between themselves and the ordinary workers as an outcome of structural inequality (education and everyday experience). Therefore, as the vanguard, or the intellectual of the working class, they should be 'more advanced' and 'take the lead', rather than be 'vulgar'.

I always ask ordinary workers I encountered during fieldwork about if they watched the *Dagong* SFG and how they think of it. Admittedly, due to the constraints in terms of communication channels, many workers (especially in southern China) know

nothing about the gala. But at the same time, many expressed their appreciation for the *Dagong* SFG. As one male worker in Guangzhou said to me, '…It's like seeing myself on TV. I feel very happy. Maybe one day I or someone I know from factory can perform on it.' His comments echo with what MWH attempted in hosting the gala and their cultural practice. As Sun Heng said, 'it is a gala of our own, truly belongs to us and represent us'.

As briefly mentioned in chapter 4, I joined the preparation committee of the 2014 *Dagong* SFG as a volunteer in November 2013. The general director is still Wang Dezhi who have already directed the first two SFG of MWH. As the one who is responsible for many actions undertaken by MWH such as the social enterprise, Dezhi is very busy already. They need someone to assist the process. After I expressed my interest on following the whole process of the 2014 *Dagong* SFG, I have been accepted as a member of the preparation committee. The 2014 *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala is the third one that MWH has organised, and it represents a huge investment of energy, time and resources. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the process of preparing and organising is not straightforward the way it might be for a students' festival or show in the UK or US: for the workers it is a complex game full of struggle and compromise. Participating in this process has led me to understand how difficult it is for MWH, one of the most prominent labour organisations in China to make something happen in the real world of Chinese politics and labour politics in particular. As a participant observer, I was confronted by their hopes, their ambitions, their frustrations, their joy and notably: the resistances and the compromises involved in every single aspect of their work.

Chinese worker's culture and in particular migrant workers' culture, the culture that MWH is construing and promoting, is one of resistance, struggle and mobilisation. It consists of competition between different political forces in the field of contemporary Chinese workers' ideology. But the struggle is not constrained to the realm of symbolic resistance. It presents itself in the most material ways, as shown in the

process of preparing the 2014 Spring Festival Gala, the manner of achieving funding, the channel, the technology, the content, the venue, etc. There are lots of literature discussing the symbolic perspective of MWH's practice, it's important. A close observation provides me a chance to examine the complex dynamics under the symbolic struggle or the superstructure, to recognize the interaction between the collective identity construction, alternative imagination and the most practical resource mobilisation. I think this exploration is also important, especially in contemporary Chinese context.

7.2 Working with mainstream media: conflicts, 'bargaining' and dilemma

7.2.1 'Bargaining' with Agroforestry Satellite TV and the new media platforms

After the unexpected success of the first *Dagong* SFG, a provincial satellite television station contacted Sun Heng and Dezhi to co-host the second one with MWH. In hope of gain more media visibility and more resources, MWH accept the offer. Different from other satellite TV in China, the Agroforestry TV45 set its aim to serve the 'three rural issues'46 (*san nong*) and its target audiences are the peasants and migrant workers in China. In a media interview, the director from Agroforestry TV said, 'there is a dream in our hearts, to sing and to praise for the social group of Chinese migrant worker (*dagong qunti*), to depict the most beautiful dream for them'47. Clearly, the Agroforestry TV needs the *Dagong* SFG to fulfill its ideological function on the 'three rural issues' and this is grasped by the core members. Therefore it opens up possibility for the labour activities in MWH to re-negotiate their position in this co-host cooperation, or in their own word, 'to 'bargain' (*tao jia huan jia*) with the

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45 See the website of Shanxi Agroforestry TV: http://www.sxtvs.com/nltv/
46 The '*san nong*' refers to the three issues (agriculture, rural area, peasants) relating to rural development in China. It was highlighted at the 2006 National People's Congress throughout the premier Wen Jiabao's speech and remains as a major concern of the government.
47 The media report: Nonglin Tv and Cui yongyuan host the 2013 dagong spring festival gala', ifeng. See (in Chinese): http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2013_01/07/20913414_0.shtml

mainstream'. Moreover, MWH attempt to use various online media platforms to balance the unequal power relation with the satellite TV.

7.2.1.1 Conflicts

In the first preparatory meeting, MWH members discussed about whether they should continue their cooperation with the Agroforestry TV. The main reason behind this discussion can trace back to their previous experience of co-operating with it. MWH members in the preparation committee revealed the major conflicts between the two organisations. Control over content is the most prominent issue in the cooperation. The members of MWH recall there were a lot of conflicts within the previous cooperation that pushed MWH to make the compromise on the content of the *Dagong* SFG. According to Dezhi, censorship is not a significant factor here, but the *localization* of the Agroforestry TV is a problem. He puts it as:

> *The Agroforestry TV is a Shanxi province local TV station. They want to add some local features into the Dagong SFG. In the previous one, they add some Shanxi local program there, interspersed in the SFG. This makes it looks chaotic and affects the delivering of the core value of the SFG. Making it [the core value] very vague.*

Vagueness and chaos are two of the markers, alongside localness, that appear to affect the meaning and core value MWH intended to communicate in the SFG in Dezhi's account. Afterall, as the major culture event of MWH, they consider it a precious chance to promote the New Worker's Culture.

Another issue is the hosts of the SFG. Besides Cui Yongyuan, the famous Chinese host who volunteered as the host of the 2012/2013 SFG and the woman host Jin Hua, the headmistress of *Tongxin* Migrant Children's School; the Agroforestry TV put one of their TV presenters into the gala. When I asked MWH members what's wrong of

the Agroforestry TV host, Dezhi just said: 'He is not one of our own.' This sense of a distinction between one who belongs and one who does not pervade the accounts of MHW members. When I probed further, I understand that 'not one of our own' not only means the TV presenter is not from MWH, but also indicate the member's concern on the detachment from their own social group. As shown in Guo Liang, the drummer of the art troupe's comments, 'they are professional, they don't look like us or workers'.

The autonomy over film editing is another problem in the cooperation. According to Dezhi, MWH didn't receive the original video on time to make their own cut. This made MWH didn't upload their own cut of the 2013 SFG online during the spring festival vocation. MWH members believe that due to the limit influence of the Agroforestry TV, the 2013 SFG didn't receive enough attention and it didn't reach its target audience, the migrant workers as Xu Duo points out, '…the fellow workers (gong you) don't watch TV, most of them watch online content.'

7.2.1.2 Baseline

In the preparation meeting, the leaders of MWH were hesitated to continue the cooperation with Agroforestry TV due to the previously mentioned reasons. However, they are subjected to restrictions on funding and filming technology, and they need to seek resources. After ruling out the possibility of looking for Corporate sponsorship as it brings more potential risks in terms of the identity and role of MWH, the core members finally set two baselines to negotiate with the Agroforestry TV for the cooperation of 2014 SFG. The first is the control over the content on the stage and the online distribution right of the full recording. Summarised by Sun Heng as 'control over the autonomy of content'.

Setting 'baseline' for the cooperation with the potential cooperation partner in the

2014 *Dagong* SFG means a compromise on the editing power over the TV's cut. Some members worried about the Agroforestry TV edited version broadcast on TV will not convey the meanings and messages they want to communicate to the broader audience. However, they cannot come up with better solutions as they are struggling with funding and professional media technology. Although MWH members want to have absolute control over their own cultural product, they acknowledge the fact that they need the mainstream media. 'We will talk to the Agroforestry TV, if they agree with our baseline demands, we can co-host it [2014 SFG] with them', the preparation committee reached their consensus after considering their ideal and the actual difficulties on resources and broadcasting channels.

The Agroforestry TV agreed to let MWH take charge over the programs but insist on having their own TV presenter to co-host. According to informants, the Agroforestry TV also agreed to share their recording to MWH for them to edit and upload online. But after the recording of the 2014 *Dagong* SFG, Dezhi told me that he didn't get the copy of recording from the Agroforestry TV, 'leave them alone, they have many excuses, fortunately we asked our friends to record one for us in advance. We will edit on our own copy first.'

7.2.1.3 New media as bargaining power?

MWH frequently developed strategies to regain 'control' in the process of dealing with Agroforestry TV by using the online platforms. The flourishing streaming sites in China provide an alternative channel for MWH to spread their own version of the *Dagong* SFG. MWH considers the new media platforms as further bargaining power in negotiating their position in the cooperation. Besides, it's also about their imagination or their own perception on different media. Based on this, they developed strategies on how to use different platforms. The members of MWH are not naïve about their relationship with new media platforms. As one informant said, 'it's not like we are asking for funding or material supports from them. We are providing [media content, here means 2014 SFG] for them. It should not be difficult'. MWH

actively sought cooperation with online media in China. The table below is the plan made in one of the 2014 SFG preparation meeting.

The main websites of cooperation and plans

Type	Name	Plan
Stream media/video sites	Youku Iqiyi	Youku：(1) full 2014 SFG upload (2) documentary Iqiyi：(1) full 2014 SFG upload (2) channel promotion
Integrated website	Tencent	(1) set SFG section (2) short video upload
News website	Ifeng	(1) news updating (2) short video upload
Social media	weibo	(1) updating progress every day (2) ask the VIP to retweet (3) ask the labour NGO circle to retweet to gain publicity in workers

MWH tries to use online media to balance an unequal power-relations. However, the streaming media have their own agendas, it's still all about compromises. The members of MWH consider the online publicity of 2014 *Dagong* SFG is good. The documentary of SFG was showed on the Home page of Youku (Chinese streaming platform for media, akin to Youtube) and generated high click rates. Sun Heng thinks that the main reason that the video of SFG finds itself on the Home Page of Youku is that it's shot by the Youku's own content producing team. 'They want to promote their original video', Sun Heng thinks that inviting them to make their own production is a good way to cooperate with the video streaming sites. As he talks a lot about losing control over content when the cooperate with other media, I ask him whether he himself had thought about making a documentary video about the SFG. Sun replies that he'd like to make a documentary in the organisation by themselves, but that no one has the time or the requisite skills to do it. The cultural and labour related organising work for the SFG already makes everyone in the organisation completely exhausted. Besides, he is convinced that if they were to make the documentary themselves, Youku would be far less likely to put it on their Home Page. The result would be that fewer people would view it, since the click rate is the indicator of

impact, it's impact would be far lower.

In the above exchange I observed another example of the persistent compromises between *agency* and *effectiveness* that the activists in MWH have to make in order to perpetuate their work and ideas. By giving up control over how they are represented and the content of this video, they manage to ensure some wider publicity for their aims and struggles, or at least the aspects of these aims captured by outside documentaritts, with intellectual and technical training and skills.

7.2.2 The SFG press conference: Media attention versus the voice of workers

The Press conference for the 2014 *Dagong* SFG was held in picun village on 1st December 2013. The process of hosting the press conference demonstrate the labour activists' perception on how they perceive themselves, mainstream media and their ideas on how to attract media attention, as well as the frustration and confusion during the interaction. Through a detailed analysis on the process of interaction with different mainstream media, I found that MWH displayed a mixed agency of conformity and resistant due to their vulnerable position.

7.2.2.1 Conformist agency in attracting media attention

To be sure, MWH want to attract media attention. After all, to gain visibility and access to more migrant workers is their rationale for hosting the press conference and even the SFG. The members discussed on how to attract media attention on the press conference and the SFG. They agreed that certain arrangements have to be made. First, the members want to create 'scenes' (*chang mian*) for the journalist to report on. The children from *Tongxin* Migrant Children's School prepared a dance, and a worker singer who is quite popular even online came to perform at the press conference in Picun Village. Xu Duo explained why the rationale for arranging performances: 'so they can take photos, and our audience can have an idea on what our SFG will look like'.

Moreover, inspired by the huge media attention brought by Cui Yongyuan, the national famous TV personality who host the first two *Dagong* SFG, the members of MWH came up with a plan on having celebrities in the press conference. They tagged @ and messaged many celebrities on social media weibo to ask for their supports. Some celebrities, such as another Chinese TV personality, Yang Lan agreed to do a short promotion clip for MWH. These promotion clips have been reported by mainstream media and spread online. But members of MWH thought that was not enough, they need someone famous to be there with them at the press conference site. 'So the media will be interested to come'. Eventually, a beauty pageant, Yu Weiwei was willing to come to the press conference as host. To have Yu as host attract controversial within the organisation as she is not one of the social groups and obviously not as famous as Cui Yongyuan. But Dezhi considered it a compromise MWH have to make, 'we need celebrity to feed the mainstream media. Besides, she [Ms. Yu] is not bad.'

The members were quite confident about their own plan on attracting media. One member in the preparation committee said MWH maintained good media relations as many journalists did reports on them throughout the years. Yet, the media attendance was poor on the day of the press conference. Some members were disappointed given the efforts they made. MWH tried their best to attract mainstream media's attention, but why it ends up as a frustration to the labour activists?

7.2.2.2 'Not willing to cooperate'?

Mian, a cultural journalist with The Beijing News (*xin jing bao)*, told the following me that provide some explanations:

> I think that they [MWH] are hostile to the mainstream media. Maybe hostile is too extreme a word, well, but they are not willing to cooperate with them. This is not good, not to their benefit….Like the press conference for SFG, I don't get why

they [MWH] want to do it in Picun village and to pick a weekend to host it. It's
too far from the city center. I don't live in Picun village; no reporters live here. It
took me two and half hours to come here. It's a work of charity! MWH won't give
me any 'che ma fei' 48. Of course, and not many people will come. ... I've known
MWH for many years. I know why they don't like the media, I have heard stories
of them being mistreated by some TV stations. But not all the media and
journalists are like that.

In Mian's accounts, the distance and the lack of economic profit are the main reasons
for the poor media attendance. He Xin, a reporter from *Beijing Daily* who attended
the press conference also confirmed Mian's resentful on the location. Though He Xin
notes that his reasons for coming to a little publicized press conference by workers on
the outskirts of Beijing is actually personal rather than professional. His father is a
laid-off worker of a state-owned enterprise, and he himself is interested in workers.

The journalists' words indicate some tensions here. Indeed, labour activist's efforts
are based on their understanding of the mainstream media, how it works, what is
interesting to media (i.e celebrity). Yet, from my observation, the members actually
acknowledged some tensions. For instance, MWH insist on the press conference
should be held in Picun village as the migrant worker's community shows who they
are and who the organisation represent. To MWH members, that is something they
were not willing to give up after many compromises. Moreover, the members know
about the '*che ma fei*', but they never provided such. The members stress on the good
cause of their cultural practice and the morality of the journalists. MWH's refusal to
further compromises was interpreted by Mian as 'hostile' or lack of willingness to
cooperate with mainstream media.

The mutual and perhaps justified suspicion between migrant workers organisations

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48 To give journalists who attend even with the so-called '*che ma fei*' (transportation fee) is considered an
unspoken rule in China. The standard amount is usually around 200 to 400 RMB, but it can go up to 1,000.

and mainstream media showed in Mian's accounts point out the vulnerability of MWH (as one the most resourceful labour organisations in China). The 'hostile' sensed by Mian is actually their resistance on fully incorporation to the mainstream.

7.2.3 Resistance and a dilemma

7.2.3.1 Keeping the boundary as resistance

Although MWH tried to conform with the mainstream media in order to gain visibility and access to more audience, they also insist on keep the boundary with the mainstream media as there are certain things they considered un-negotiable. To some extent, the journalist's remarks are not wrong, MWH members are critical about the mainstream media as they are actually trying to construct the alternative.

For instance, Xu Duo mentioned that the CCTV has invited the art troupe to perform their song but MWH turned the offer down: 'Sun Heng said no to them. The director of CCTV asked us to change the lyric, to make a feeling of 'returning home after getting fame or money' (*yi jing huan xiang*). It is ridiculous. …we should insist on keeping our own principles'. To change the lyric and pretend to be someone else is unacceptable for MWH. Despite they want the media visibility, they also understand the importance of not losing their identity and position. As Sun Heng constantly mentioned that MWH should not detached from the labouring people to pursue fame or higher publicity, 'we have to stick to our principles, to sing for the labourers. …If we are detached form the migrant workers, what's the point to perform on CCTV? Our fellow migrant workers will not be listening to our songs anymore'.

Sun Heng's accounts are in line with MWH's emphasis on the 'authenticity' of their cultural practice, and how MWH perceive their cultural practice and their imagination of the alternative New Worker's Culture (see chapter 5). MWH's emphasis on 'keeping boundaries' or 'keeping principles' in interaction with mainstream media is also evidenced in Sun Wanning's observation on the cultural activism of migrant

workers (2014, p.141).

To keep a boundary between themselves and the mainstream media is actually their most powerful resistance in the process. To maintain this boundary, a baseline in the process means to reject misrepresentation. MWH cannot always comply with the mainstream media, after all, they are trying to construct something alternative. Thus 'control over content' was essential for a counter-hegemonic cultural event like *Dagong* SFG. For instance, after the recording of the *Dagong* SFG, the director from Agroforestry TV told Dezhi that they would cut some parts of the program in the editing. Like, the song *This year is tough* of Heavy D Tone worker's band from Shenzhen, as the lyrics were too 'sharp' in criticising social inequality. Dezhi told us that he didn't care about their editing - as-as soon as he gets the recording, he will edit one version himself this time, and we would 'upload this version, the version of MWH to the streaming media with whom we discussed to cooperate previously'. This time, he finally regained the power of film editing, the power over content and representation.

7.2.3.2 'Who are the diaosi?' and 'uncontrollable factors'

However, it doesn't mean MWH have absolute control on the SFG. For example, when a famous TV host offers to work for free, MWH do not have any bargaining power on how his work should be done. Yet, it caused problems in the SFG.

Some informants expressed their disappointment about the recording of the 2014 Dagong SFG, as the celebrity co-host Yang Jinlin made many mistakes on stage, 'I don't like the host of this year. He asked many times about the information of the performers and still can't remember. He even called their names wrong…. I think it's a matter of respect. If he claims that he admires MWH and the migrant workers, he should pay more attention to them'. Yang Jinlin (a TV presenter from *Phoenix TV*),

and the co-host of the 2014 *Dagong* SFG is new to it as Cui Yongyuan, the host of the previous two spring festival galas turns out to be busy with another documentary in the United States. Yang visited Picun village before and agreed to host the 2014 SFG. Yang didn't come to the rehearsals earlier as he had had to work the previous day. In these circumstances, I think that his mistakes were therefore foreseeable. This does not prevent Lin Miao, a fellow journalist from expressing her surprise and displeasure at what she views as a lack of professionalism and perhaps even direct insult on the part of the acting host: 'I don't think he [Yang] treat them [workers] as equals'.

Lin's observation echoed with other audience (workers) during the recording. Yang, as the celebrity brought by MWH to co-host the 2014 *Dagong* SFG called one act of the migrant workers as the 'counter back of the *diaosi*'. It cooled down the cheerful audience for a second as I noticed. *Diaosi* is a derogatory internet buzz word in China, literally translating as 'dick strings' and roughly meaning 'losers'. Such comment need to be placed within the context of contemporary class relation (see chapter 2). The Chinese internet buzzword '*diaosi*' initially referred to some sense of an underprivileged identity (Huang, 2018).

However, the members of the young working and lower middle-class urban population often use the word '*diaosi*' in a self-deprecating way to showcase their own lack of efficacy and ability to fulfil their aspirations in newly neoliberal China. If used by people to characterize themselves in those situations, this is not an offensive term, but a marker of wry solidarity. But when the powerful use the word '*diaosi*' with reference to other people, especially those from lower social classes than themselves, it loses the sense of self-deprecating humour and becomes simply insulting. Precisely for these reasons, and because on the night of the recording, most of the audience consist of actual migrant workers in Beijing *no one laughs at it*. Calling someone of their group on stage as '*diaosi*' is not funny to them. Rather it states an offensive reality, and becomes the action of othering the workers by labelling them as losers. After all, the origin of the word '*diaosi*' is to use the pictogram

character of the Chinese word of '*diao*' (屌) to suggest one has nothing but his body which indicated the poorness of the proletariat.

The labour activists sensed the offense in the comments and the displeasure of the audience. However, for MWH, such comments from celebrity host are 'uncontrollable factors' as Xu Duo commented. MWH's vulnerability to chance and patronage in any given circumstances because of their lack of economic and social power, all of which lead to compromises and even to them having to accept disrespect (even not intentional).

7.3 Concealed resistance of migrant workers

This section address through examining the interaction between MWH and other two important and powerful social actors, namely, the government and academia. Different from the agency MWH displayed in the process of fighting over various issues with different mainstream media while securing resources and platform for broadcasting their cultural events, I found they showed different ways to express their agency and subjectivity in the process of interacting with government and academia. James C. Scott's concept of 'hidden transcripts' is particularly useful to illuminate the subtle and concealed resistance of MWH in process of the Spring Festival Gala. Based on my observations, I found that MWH members were less likely to directly challenge the government or the academia. As I discussed in chapter 3, Scott argues that the appearance of consent of those in positions of subordination is produced by the practical and material pressure of 'speaking truth to power' (1990, p.i). Instead, these 'subordinates', the migrant workers in question, analyse their situation and employ different 'tactics' to express their subjectivity and to exercise their agency that do not pose a direct challenge to the powerful actors. In turn, the dynamic revealed in the interaction inflect their cultural practice in a more subtle manner from the somewhat straightforward intervention from the mainstream media.

7.3.1 Endorsement, contempt and reflections: dynamics with intellectuals

Academia and left-wing intellectuals are important allies of MWH. From the very start of their cultural practice, MWH gained support from many scholars. The importance of building alliance with academia I observed is also detected by scholars (Koo, 2017; Yin, 2019). Yet, how does it actually work out in reality remains rather unnoticed in previous literature. For MWH members, progressive intellectuals in China are their important allies, providing them both symbolic and material resources. MWH acknowledge the unequal power between them and academia. For instance, Sun Heng invited many progressive scholars in China to write and comment on the *Dagong* SFG and asked me to put the intellectual's remarks into MWH's press releases. When I asked why giving so much space to intellectuals, Sun Heng explained that the scholars can better articulate the meanings of their cultural practice, and 'they have the discursive power (*hua yu quan*), their words can endorse us'.

Sun's statement discloses multiple layers of meanings on the dynamic power relation underneath. First, it demonstrates the acknowledgement of the privilege of the intellectuals/scholars on symbolic power and cultural capital. Therefore, such privileged position on the ideological domain can be used to the benefit of the migrant worker's cultural practice as an endorsement. For instance, when Professor L from Party School of CCP Central Committee told the members of MWH that she wrote their cultural practice in '*nei can*'[49], the members consider it a way to use the scholar's symbolic influence to ensure support from government. Moreover, as the labour activists think the meanings of their cultural practice can be spoken of in a refined and intellectual manner to the broader audience, they not only use it as endorsement but also forms a mutual intertextual relation to scholarly comments by adopting the concepts, words and narratives in their own speeches. For instance, the progressive scholars and long-term supporter of MWH, Bu Wei put emphasis on the

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[49] 'nei can' refers to the internal reference reports of limited circulation prepared for the high-ranking CCP officials.

'subjectivity' of workers when addressing the social meaning of *Dagong* SFG to media,

> *'...it [SFG] is very different from the CCTV, MWH's SFG advocates the value of labour as the main melody of it, and it purses social equality and justice. ...it shows stronger subjectivity. This is a process of constructing the subjectivity and shaping of worker's culture.'*

Bu's comments were used again and again by Sun Heng, Xu Duo and others to demonstrate the distinction and meaningfulness of their cultural practices. The voice of the migrant workers and labour activists are re-framed and interpreted by scholars, and in turn, been adopted by the labour activists to endorse their own practice and causes. Yet, this process is not necessarily a distortion of the 'subaltern voice' in the perception of the labour activist as shown in Sun Heng's explanation.

However, not all the interactions are considered mutual beneficial to MWH. In the process of participating in the 2014 *Dagong* SFG, I started to notice the mixed relationship between MWH and the academia, and the covert or inexplicit way of expressing their disagreements with the intellectuals/ scholars which can be seen as concealed resistance. The extract below vividly documented the subtle dynamics in their interaction with intellectuals.

Extract from fieldnotes

Sun Heng and Dezhi were invited to an academic conference about spring festival gala (CCTV and others) in a top university of China. We enter the campus together, but the university security stops the workers to make them register. Dezhi points at me and asks the security person: 'She is also a visitor here, why don't you stop her to register? Only us?' Seeing the overt distinction made between myself and the workers, I understand Dezhi's upset reaction to the security person. Markers of working

classness are ingrained and distinctive, and cue particular securitised or patronising responses. During the conference, one presenter compared the CCTV SFG with the Dagong SFG and questioned the quality of the performance of Dagong SFG. For the presenter, though acknowledged the social meaning of migrant workers to have their own gala, the programs remain 'raw' and lack of 'aesthetic sense' to her. Dezhi responded to her comments by explaining the programs of Dagong SFG are all performed by the workers themselves, therefore it cannot be compared to the professional performers. He accepted the criticism and suggested there were spaces for improvement. They speak very little during the conference.

After the conference, again in response to the unspoken sense of the workers being outsiders on the campus, we didn't stay to have dinner with other scholars in the university. I asked how the members of MWH felt about the discussion at the conference. Both Sun Heng and Dezhi shook their heads as disapproval. Significantly, suggesting a gap between how academic events theorise and how migrant workers events embody action, Sun Heng comments: 'It's all empty, not down to earth.' Dezhi said the programs were not professional because the workers are too busy and have no time to talk about 'empty words' (jiang konghua), and he told me that he made a joke about the famous water tower of the university to satirize the scholars gathered there by suggesting they are not full of knowledge, but 'full of water'.

James Scott's concept of 'hidden transcripts'(see chapter 3), is useful to explain MWH members' jokes and comments here (1990). The 'crying out' of social injustices in the programs of SFG and other cultural practice of MWH is a visible form of resistance, as well as the members' efforts and decisiveness on keeping boundaries and baseline to mainstream media. However, the jokes of contempt, the subtly uncooperative attitude of the members, and the change of attitude to scholar's comments on 'aesthetic sense' can be considered as the 'hidden transcript' and a way of concealed resistance of the powerless. The jokes of 'full of water' and the remarks of 'empty' reveal the discontent of the labour activists. Besides this kind of banter,

Dezhi usually jokingly call the intellectuals 'stinking old ninth' (*chou lao jiu*), a term used during the Cultural Revolution to refer to intellectuals, with strong derogatory connotations. Such remarks of contempt to the intellectual never publicly expressed in front of the senior scholars during my fieldwork, but in more private occasions. It suggest the member's psychic resistance to the oppressed feeling under the criticism of the powerful (symbolic and cultural sense).

Such concealed resistance reveals the tensions beneath the cooperative relationship between grass-roots labour organisations and the academia. The concealed resistance, the 'hidden transcripts' reflected here should not be over-interpreted as it does not necessarily change the power relation in MWH's interaction with the powerful social actors, compromises are always made even unintentionally. For instance, although Dezhi defended the SFG in a concealed way to show his disapproval of elites' view. I found he also comply with the logic of 'quality' and 'aesthetic' to his selection of ordinary worker's performances. However, my understanding is that such psychic and concealed resistance in the hidden transcripts help MWH members to re-position themselves in the structure, their identities and to reflect on their relation to intellectual and scholarly theorisation as well as their practice

> '...the logic of the intellectuals are starting from theories, concepts. But we start from the real problems, our practice is [like], do it first, bravely express our ideas.' (Sun Heng)

> '...I don't know well about these things, but I think, no matter how much theories they talk about, but when it comes to practice, for example, when the workers face difficulties, they are indifferent. Their theories and practices are separated...'(Xu Duo)

> '...we used to think left-wing, right-wing are important. We thought the left-wing intellectuals were on our side. But many things made us reflect on it. For

instance, we found out that sometimes, the liberal leaning or so called right-wing people are more likely to offer help. Of course, I don't know if there are any purposes of their own. At least, they helped. ...Then we started to know those big left-wing figures are not reliable.'(Chen Yan)

The reflections shown in the members' statements illustrate how they re-position themselves in the relationship to their important alliance, the intellectuals, and how MWH reconsider their practice in relation to scholarly theorisation. Such reflections demonstrate stronger and productive resistant agency of the labour activists of MWH. Different from the concealed resistances in the jokes and contempt remarks, the members can express their reflections overtly. For instance, Sun Heng often quotes words of Marx in his music seminars, 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world but the point, however, is to change it'. By doing so, it actually reclaims their identities as migrant worker activists and their emphasis on practice. Therefore, it not only reaffirmed the meaning of their own cultural practice under the observation and sometimes judgement gaze of the academia, but also serves as an invitation for more supports from intellectuals to 'change it'.

Moreover, although they are influenced by many intellectuals and scholars, they tried to be cautious about the scholarly interpretations of their practice. For instance, when I asked about how he thought about the scholarly comments on the counter-hegemonic feature of the SFG and their cultural practice, Wang Dezhi said it was too high a comment:

> *'...what is certain, is that, we do not dare to say it is a confrontation [dui kang]. We only say, you play yours, we play ours [ge wan ge de]. It's not confrontation because the power [li liang] [between MWH and hegemonic forces] is not the same at all, not at one level. In fact, when we are doing this [cultural practice], we also make some compromises. [We] are not entirely antagonistic, there are many compromises. ...even accept [the dominant] values, then do what we want to do, this is our tactics [ce lue].'*

Dezhi's words show how labour activists reflect on the interpretation of intellectuals and demonstrates clear acknowledgement of their situation. In next subsection, I illustrate how MWH interact with government agency which resonates with Dezhi's words.

7.3.2 How to speak to power? Dynamics with government agency

As reviewed in chapter 2, the old working-class culture led by the party-state was dismantled in the Reform and Opening Ups. The symbolic cultural space and institutions such as Workers' Culture Palace in the socialist era faded out from the lives of urban working class in post-reform China. The migrant workers emerged alongside the dismantling process of the socialist working class had never enjoyed the CCP-led ideological/cultural project. In fact, the migrant workers were almost invisible in the mainstream cultural front for decades. But as the CCTV SFG started to invite migrant worker singers on stage in 2011, it indeed shows the party-state's political needs for inclusion and recognition of the massive social group of migrant workers (Sun, 2014, p.5). In this context, MWH received offer to co-host the *Dagong* SFG from the Chaoyang District Culture Center (CDCC).

Under the administration of Beijing Municipal Government and Chaoyang District Government, the CDCC is also the pilot unit of the cultural system reform of the Central Propaganda Department. According the director of CDCC[50], the function of it is to govern the community with culture. The CDCC want to incorporate the 2014 *Dagong* SFG as part of its ongoing project aims at providing cultural activities and entertainment to the migrant workers in Beijing[51]. The CDCC provided their theatre for MWH to hold the 2014 *Dagong* SFG and other resources. MWH accepted the offer. Wang Dezhi, the director of the 2014 *Dagong* SFG's words shows their

[50] See interview of the director of CDCC (in Chinese): http://m.xinhuanet.com/bj/2017-09/10/c_1121638846.htm
[51] The project is called 'shoulder to shoulder migrant worker volunteer project'.

rationale behind,

> 'The SFG, [we] hope that this form can be accepted by everyone, even be acceptable to government and other sectors [of society]. Because it [spring festival] is such a happy thing that is joyful and merry, people will not reject it and will be willing to accept it. Then we also hope that through it [SFG], we can let everyone know more and accept the workers at the same time. Then, let the workers use this platform to make a sound, have a voice of their own.'

In Dezhi's accounts, MWH attempts to dilute the potential resistant features to the official cultural hegemony (as in CCTV SFG), and deliberately emphasise the feature of 'joy' and 'merry' as a festival celebration to the workers. Such efforts to cover the resistance feature in their cultural practice also evidenced in the understanding of culture. For government agency, the *Dagong* SFG and the performances of the art troupe are considered as part of the cultural service and entertainment provided to the migrant worker as shown in their project. By incorporated the SFG into the official ideological/cultural project, the CDCC reduced the cultural practice of MWH as 'arts and literature' (*wenyi*). Although as discussed in chapter 5, the core members conceptualise culture as whole way of life and struggle, I found MWH deliberately acquiesced the government agency's reduction of their cultural practice. As Dezhi said, the SFG is a celebration of the Chinese New Year, 'workers worked hard for the whole year, they should have a cultural feast of their own. From this point, *Dagong* SFG should be joyful, entertaining, …and to let the workers see that the working class has its own culture.' In other words, celebration rather than resistance are considered more important to reach out broader audience and circulation.

MWH has been commented by some of my labour activists informants (especially in southern China) as flexible and strategical in addressing the relationship with government agency. In the process of co-hosting the 2014 SFG with the CDCC, I found MWH employ current state discourses when communicating with government

agency and attempt to bring more legitimacy to their demands. For instance, after securing control over content from 'bargaining' with the Agroforestry TV, MWH needs to discuss the setting up of the SFG recording venue with the CDCC. 'Space setting' has been revealed as a site of tension between MWH and their cooperation with the government agency.

MWH's insist on the 'space setting' of the 2014 SFG is considered as a response to the comments of ordinary workers. Wang Dezhi mentioned during the selection of programme for the 2014 *Dagong* SFG, two workers from Shandong province told him that they and their fellow workers think the first one is better than the 2013 SFG. Dezhi shared their comments in one working meeting:

> *...last year, we were very premier, grand and feel high-end [gao, da, shang]. I think our workers deserve the splendid stage rather than a small one like our own community theatre because we workers are the builder of the cities. But the workers think differently, they like the first one because it was more rustic [zhi pu] and feels closer to themselves.*

Space can be understood as one element of culture as it 'concerns particular, temporally fixed patterns of collective meaning-making' (Daphi, 2014, p.172). The spatial meaning making process is an interactive one which emphasise the proximity. Due to the media attention attracted by the first SFG, MWH were invited to hold the recording of the 2013 SFG at the grand auditorium of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League52 (CCCYL). However, the core members decided to discontinue their cooperation with the CCCYL and turned to seek smaller, more casual space setting for the 2014 *Dagong* SFG. Sun Heng explained why 'space' of performance is important: '…migrant workers feel very relaxed and comfortable when we perform in the construction sites or migrant communities.' As Massey

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52 The youth wing of the CCP that is responsible for guiding the young pioneers (children below the age of 15).

suggests, space is 'one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualise the world' (1984, p.251). Therefore, MWH want to create a 'rustic' setting for the recording of 2014 *Dagong* SFG, to have all the audience sitting on the floor like they were at home or their community/village.

MWH brought this idea to the CDCC and explained as a response to comply with the CCP's new advocation on following the 'mass-line' (*qunzhong luxian*) under Xi Jinpin. The 'mass-line' is an ideology to handle the relation between state and society as it seeks to incorporate extensive mass mobilisation and a strong participatory role of the populace with the CCP's vanguard role (Chen, 2012, p.98). It was developed by Mao Zedong during revolution era and re-emphasise by Xi Jinping. For the grass-roots labour activists, this opens up opportunity for them to build (temporary) alliance with some officials. '…having workers setting on the floor is very relax and close to the people, …we need to follow the mass-line, to be close to the people', Xu Duo explained to the staff of CDCC. At the end, the CDCC agreed and made changes to the theatre setting.

The employment of the state discourses in their own narratives and expression highlights how they attempt to reclaim the discourse of the CCP for their own purpose and benefits. However, this tactic of 'speaking their language' does not always work. For instance, in another communication with the local government of Pigu district for another cultural event sponsorship, MWH applied the same tactic of employing state discourse of 'mass-line'. But the local government turned them down. Although the members were quite disappointed on our way back to Picun village, Sun Heng said it was not too bad as at least they knew the local government was not against them organising the event. Sun's words can be understood as a way to comfort other disappointed members, but it also clearly illustrate how powerful and important a role the state-power (even in local level) played in grass-roots labour activists' minds.

Considering the limited political space for practice, self-censorship is observed to

avoid troubles, coercion or repression. As aforementioned, MWH put emphasis on the entertaining aspects rather than the resistant in the SFG. According to informants, MWH also cautiously avoid some political sensitive issues. Chen Yan, the young member who in charge of the website of MWH gave the example of the editing rule on reporting strikes in China,

> ' we don't take the initiative to report on strikes or write about strikes. ...the key factor is the censorship. What we can do is to repost such news or comments from others.'

Chen Yan understand the risk of shut down is too high to 'touch' the sensitive issues (i.e strikes), and explains the rationale and tactics behind,

> 'being a labour organisation, it [MWH] has certain risks, especially from the government. ...the organisation has its own principle and reasons generated from many years of practicing. It also analyses issues according to specific contexts to avoid being paranoid. It will choose its own path according to the actual situation.

Such self-censorship attracts controversial among labour activists and been criticised by some people. But as Chen explains, such decisions and choices were made according to the core member's judgements based on their past experience. To be fair, MWH members do care and support the collective actions of workers and they tried to inexplicitly show their supports. For instance, Xu Duo sometimes improvise an speech on southern strikes during the art troupe performance. Or in the case of 2014 SFG, MWH tried to circulate their own concerns (i.e social justice, inequality, solidarity of workers) in news release. However, such attempts were detected by the CDCC and they replaced MWH news release draft with their own which completely reduced MWH as mere performer of migrant workers and stress the role of project of government agency in inclusion and recognition.

Moreover, many interventions from local government agency come as mandatory that left the labour activists almost no choice but to comply if they want to maintain the organisation running. In such circumstances, 'mock' and 'satire' privately once again detected as their way of physic resistance to the hegemonic power. For example, during one construction site performance for workers, the local sub-district office arranged urban residents from local community to perform in the performance. After a dance show, the senior urban resident women said on stage: 'we urban residents also cares about our *nongmingong* (migrant worker) brothers, we are glad to dance for you…' One member of MWH who sat next to me grunted and said, 'don't lie, she cares nothing about our workers, she just likes to dance and perform.' Such sneering comments display agency of sceptical to the meaning convened in the programs arranged by the local government agency. The structural inequality remains untouched between the urban residents and migrant workers, dancing for workers will not resolve the problems.

7.4 Solidarity, tensions, and cautions

MWH plays an important role as an organiser of networking labour organisations in China (Kuo, 2017). The *Dagong* SFG is one of the platforms to effectively network labour organisations across China without attracting too much attention from the state. In previous sections, I illustrated how MWH interact with other social actors (mainstream media, intellectuals, and government agency). To some extent, the former ones can be viewed as the 'powerful' to MWH. In this section, the power relation reversed as I focus on the dynamics between MWH and other labour organisations and ordinary workers detected in the process of 2014 *Dagong* SFG.

7.4.1 Solidarity, differences and exclusion

When the preparation of 2014 SFG started, Sun Heng proudly said during meeting that one major advantages of MWH is the nationwide network of labour organisations

which will help with the selection of programs and promotion of the event among local workers. Admittedly, during the whole process of preparation of SFG, many other labour organisations shows solidarity and support for MWH. Despite the selection of programs among workers, other labour organisations respond to MWH's request to shot videos of workers as material for online publicity of SFG.

Moreover, according to MWH, as the recording of the event requires spatial co-presence, it creates an opportunity for the geographically separated labour organisations to get together. Indeed, after the recording of 2014 SFG, labour activists from different parts of China (who participated in the event) had a day long working meeting together to share experiences, analysing political environment, discuss the common difficulties, and trying to find a common way out. Further, as Ding, a labour activist mentioned, such get togethers of activists serves as 'emotional supports (*qinggan zhiyuan*)' for her and others. 'Sometimes I felt so frustrated, so many years of work, but it seems nothing has really changed.' Inn her accounts, to share emotions and feelings with other activists is meaningful for sense of belonging to a community (of activists) and solidarity.

Although these organisations participated in the SFG are more likely to recognize the meanings and significance of MWH's cultural activism. Not all the labour organisations and activists identify with MWH, its focus on culture and ideology, and its cultural event like SFG. As Chen Yang, who worked with southern labour organisations shared, 'the southern labour NGOs think only organising collective bargaining or directly helping workers for their interests are important. Other things are nothing but 'flower fist and embroidered legs' (*Hua quan xiu tui*, describing something not useful but only powder-puff).' All of this belies the doubts and accusations from the Southern labour organisations not true of 'indulging in empty talk and do nothing practical' (*wu xu bu wushi*). In one exchange with Lv Tu on social media, she shared similar comments from southern labour activists question the role of culture and ideology in labour activism with me. She strongly disagrees with such

comments, as for MWH, culture is essential for the struggle and besides, MWH was doing practical work for the labour activism, it just disguised this work in a skilful way. In fact, all the cultural activities of the workers can be seen and understood from this perspective. This is also, in a certain sense, a refutation of the South institutions' assertions on their so-called 'surrender'. As Kuo also acknowledges, the cultural forms of activism are more tolerable by the government as it appears less contentious than collective actions such as strikes or protests (2017). Utilizing the mantle of culture and through drama, media and other forms of culture, MWH are carrying out their activities in a very covert and skilful way. Through the lens of 'disguised networking', the culture practice of MWH transcends from symbolic to a new form of the labour politics in contemporary China.

Yet, the voices from the southern labour activists who knew well about MWH and understand the significance of their cultural practice reveal another reason of their reluctance to engage with MWH as shown in the 'heads down' or 'hands off' metaphor in May's accounts below.

> *'You can't do it and say it at the same time. If you mobilise and organise workers for collective actions, you better keep your heads down, keep low-file, don't attract unnecessary attention, if you want to advocate worker' culture, that's fine, then speak it loud, but better keep your hands off from the collective actions'.*

This quote from May tells a lot about the structured barriers that deeply undermining the possibility of a united labour movement in China. From the experience of collective action led struggles and their assessment of the political risks, they came up with a practical principle which can be summarised as 'heads down or hands off'. It has been suggested by many labour activist informants in the PRD when we discussing their ideas and thoughts on MWH's promotion of New Worker's Culture and the grand alternative of socialism advocated. Ya Zhen, a young labour activist who also worked with MWH before started a new labour organisation in Dongguan

shared his judgements,

> '...Let me put it this way, if it is demanding wage raise or other (economic issues), it draws lower risk. But if we say 'class struggle'(jieji douzhen), it means you want a new kind of society, then it becomes political. They (the local government) will be nervous. To be honest, even requesting for an independent factory trade union is hard enough, you want to tell the government you want to change the world (gaitian huandi)? It's suicidal. ...you will be on the black list as soon as possible.'

'Being cautions' has been stressed and shared by many of my informants in the PRD. Fan Juan, another labour activist in Dongguan said the cultural and ideological battlefield and the collective action (i.e strikes, protests, collective bargaining) are like the traditional Chinese saying of 'fish and bear's foot': '…though you want both, you can't have them at the same time as the risk of repression is too high'.

Yet, gender, again revealed itself as another major tension detected in my observation of the 2014 *Dagong* SFG. Although showed their supports to the online publicity of SFG and solidarity with MWH, the women worker of Mulan's program was not selected. The migrant women wrote a song called *I am a woman* and want to perform it on the SFG stage. They used most of their leisure time to rehearse it, so of course, when the women workers knew about the selection result, they were very upset. A informant told me that the reason the song was not selected is that the general director Dezhi held disdain it. But when the women workers asked about the reason, the informant said she can't tell them that it's because the director thinks it's a lame song as her sisters were looking forward to the opportunity to perform. Instead, she told them that it was not selected because they submit it too late. Therefore, it is worth taking a closer look at the lyrics.

> 'I am woman,

To be a happy woman,

Do not make life like a snail,

Caring a home wherever you go.

I am woman,

Also, want to have a piece of my sky,

Do not like the kite,

Cannot decide their own direction.

I am a blooming flower that is not afraid of wind and rain,

Still singing in front of the hardships of life,

Singing my dreams of flying,

Singing my heart of freedom,

I am a sweet river that will never dry,

Flowing between the hometown and the city,

Flowing out love and hope,

I keep running into the sea in my heart.'

The song wrote by the women workers are actually a very beautiful one, with lyrics that capture many gender-specific issues of women workers: the burden of family duties, their restricted choices in life, and much more. Despite its resonant verses with their connections to a Chinese workers struggle of bygone years as well as to the dignity of women workers, MWH decided to go without it. When I probed further, Dezhi, the general director, has a different explanation about this, saying:

I want more language programs, like cross talk and short act. We have too many songs and dance here. Language programs are more popular among the audience, and also we can express our issues and our views in them. Besides, the song needs more work on the artistic quality.

Sadly Dezhi's use of we and our here subsumes the women worker's subjectivities under those of the male workers, and reflects a similar derogatory attitude towards the women workers that he had earlier objected to when subjected to it by intellectuals and students. Dezhi took note of the criticisms regarding the quality of program and intends to improve it because, as he puts it, 'Artistic quality needs to be given priority, as firstly (we) need people to like watching it. If people don't like watching it, no one will see whatever meaning you want to express.'

The unequal representation of women workers has also been only been noticed by some audience. When been questioned about why there were so little content about women workers, Wang Dezhi explains,

> ...it [the gender related content] is relatively weak, it is a fact, but we always trying to represent [women workers]. If we are an organisation advocating feminism, we can host a feminism gala. But we are not. We are a worker's organisation.

Such a response is not a surprise. Similar emphasis on the class identity of the organisation has been revealed in chapter 6. The rigid conception of identities, solely structured by class and the embedded patriarchy within the organisation lead to their refusal to give equal voice to women workers and ignorance of the pains, the oppressional experience expressed in women worker's self-representation as shown in the song. Such exclusion triggered discontent from some women labour activists. Yet when I asked Sun Heng about it, he said,

> ...they [Mulan] performed for the first two, but was not selected for the third one. They seems upset, like [we] offend [de zui] them. But it shows how passionate people are for this event[SFG].

The passion and expectation of workers are true, but such gendered tensions have been re-interpreted as a mere disappointment and even been used as an example to show how popular the *Dagong* SFG among workers. Without proper reflection, the gender tension remains.

7.4.2 Workers, activists, mainstream audience

The mime 'tan te' (perturbed) in SFG is an interesting case to show the dynamics and differences of interpretation and perception of different people. The three actors from Wuhan Xingchen labour organisation are all frontline workers. They are long-time volunteers of the Xingchen. Two of them are a couple working in an electronic factory, the woman worker Lei is a welder. Lei tells me about the process of creating the mime '*tan te*': Inspired by the unusually fast pace of the popular song '*tan te*', the workers felt it fits into their feelings of anxiety in factory floor, so they want to create something to tell the story in Wuhan. In the workshop of their own labour organisation, everyone helped by telling their own feelings in work and life. Then they gathered everything and create the mime. The workers in '*tan te*' shared with me that this is their first time in Beijing and be on TV, they are very excited. Ruan, boyfriend of Lei and actor of '*tan te*' told me how significant for him to perform on stage in the *Dagong* SFG, 'the director [Dezhi] told us don't to coming to Beijing if we cannot take time off from factory. But it's a lifetime opportunity, we'd come to perform even if we lose our jobs.' Ruan's feelings of excitement are shared by other ordinary workers perform for *Dagong* SFG.

Wang Dezhi of MWH add the popular song 'the hottest ethnic trend'(*zui xian minzu feng*) in the beginning as a metaphor of the expectations and the fantasy of cities when the young migrant workers first come to the city. Dezhi speak highly about the mime '*tan te*', 'it's a bit like Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, young people came to cities

with dreams and fantasy but soon alienated by the mechanical assembly line. They captured the feeling of that.' For MWH, the workers' mime resonates with MWH's criticism on capitalism as discussed in chapter 5, presenting the pains and anxiety experienced by workers.

Yet, the students and the media have very different responses to the mime. The celebrity co-host Yang told the members of MWH that the two actors (workers) of the mime 'tan te' are sloppily dressed and sweating, he worried it would damage the image of the working class. The same concern was shared by some student audiences. Two university students who volunteer for MWH's migrant school expressed doubts about it, 'they look like hooligans to me', one commented. In fact, the worker-actors dressed only their ordinary outfits. These worries about 'damaging the image of workers' from audiences of other social groups is a direct denial of ordinary workers' everyday lives, as it suggests that they have a presumed 'positive' image of workers and a contrasting so-called 'bad' or 'hooligan' or 'negative' imagining. This binary fits into the representation of migrant workers in the mainstream media. Both the 'positive' workers who are happy, tidy and well-dressed in uniform from the CCTV SFG, and the 'negative', 'hooligan' image from the reports in the newspapers about low 'suzhi' (quality) peasant workers are very common. But Dezhi insisted on keeping the mime in the edited product and made no changes to show the 'true' life of workers. When doubts are expressed by mainstream audiences, MWH still have a choice to reject these outsider perspectives and keep the workers' performances that resonate with their ideology and sense of identity.

7.5 Conclusion

Through the process of hosting *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala, the major culture event of MWH, I illustrated how MWH interact with different social actors. The *Dagong* SFG is a form of counter-hegemonic practice that directly challenges the cultural hegemony of CCTV's SFG. In 7.2, I illustrated how MWH interact with the

mainstream media. It's a relationship of great complexity: on the one hand, MWH know that they need the mainstream media, whether old or new, print or online to generate visibility and material resources such as technological support and funding. MWH tried to conform with the media's requirements based on the members' imagining and perception about how to attract media attentions. Many compromises were made in the process.

Yet, MWH also tried to resist overall influence from the mainstream media. For instance, they tried to balance unequal power relations between themselves and the provincial TV station by seeking cooperation with online media platforms. However, such cooperation also required that they compromise over content control. In the end, the labour activists had to make choices about what to concede and what was too much to give away. The strongest sense of resistance is shown in MWH's insistence on keeping boundaries with the mainstream media and setting the baseline in interactions.

Intellectuals are an important alliance for MWH in terms of support from both symbolic and material resources; yet there are certainly unequal power relations between the two social groups. I observed that as the members acknowledged their need for intellectuals or scholars, they seldom confronted these intellectuals during conflicts. Rather, they inclined to deploy concealed resistance in the process. The jokes, the contemptuous remarks, and so on, demonstrate the worker members' agency and concealed resistance. Moreover, although such concealed resistance did not change their situations directly, it pushed other members to reflect constantly on their relationship with intellectuals and to make adjustments.

When the labour activists of MWH deal with the political authorities (even at the local level of government), they are very pragmatic and cautious. They opt to use the discourse of the CCP to maximise their opportunities for sponsorship, endorsement and to avoid immediate repression. They calculate and reflect on the relations

between official discourse and themselves, and try to incorporate their cultural practice within/ in line with the official ideology to disguise their resistance and sanitise the rebellious features of their work.

In the last section, I examined how MWH interacted with other labour organisations and workers. Despite the solidarity and the disguised networks revealed in the process, two major tensions were unveiled. The first concerns the role of culture and ideology in labour activism, which suggests a lack of consensus in Chinese labour activism. The second is with regards to gender, and the lack of gender awareness that allowed many core members to fail to acknowledge the meanings constructed in women workers' performances and resulted in the exclusion of their experience. As discussed in chapter 6, without proper intervention and reflection, such gender tensions backfire on the solidarity and collective power that MWH promoted in their own cultural practice, and might make the already scattered and marginalised labour activism in China even weaker.

Chapter 8 Articulating gender and class in labour activism: Gendered subjectivity, agency and collective struggles

8.0 Introduction

In Chapters 5 and 6, I discussed how Migrant Workers' Home (MWH) understands culture and imagines the new worker's culture, as well as the tensions and conflicts within the formation process in the cultural practice of MWH. I mentioned the confrontation between female activists and male core members of MWH regarding gender issues in Chapter 6. As has been discussed previously, MWH has been reluctant to respond to the concerns of its female members, and although it has tried to avoid apparent breaches of gender equality, it has in fact continued to reinforce traditional assumptions, pitting it against women's progress in labour and gender struggles. In this chapter, I move the stage from Beijing to Guangzhou to explore two questions: how do women migrant worker activists, educated through MWH-formulated gendered subjectivity in labour activism, rearticulate both gender and class struggle in practice? And why is this rearticulation important for mobilising collective power in class struggle?

This chapter starts by addressing the formulation of gendered subjectivity and identity in resistance. Following the guidance of my two key informants, May and June, I explore how women migrant-workers-turned-labour-activists experience the triple-oppression of gender, class and *hukou* status in their everyday lives and how they struggle against it. I argue that their personal experience of oppression and resistance together shapes their understanding of the intersecting identities of women and migrant workers in labour activism. I then illustrate in detail how gender and class have been incorporated in the practice of Sun Flower Women (SFW) to mobilise women workers to resist multiple oppressions. I argue that the gendered practices of SFW actually explore ways to liberate women workers' agency from the dominant patriarchal oppression to participate in collective class struggles against capitalist

exploitation and broader social changes.

In turn, to further understanding of the previous discussion of MWH, I consider how important it is to form a truly inclusive and flexible collective identity to encompass the interests of the heterogeneous social group of migrant workers to hail them as agents, and the importance of addressing patriarchy alongside capital in the class struggle to liberate the agency of women migrant workers.

8.1 Formulating gendered subjectivity in resistance: The story of two women migrant labour activists

> *I am scared from my childhood village from an early age. I was afraid to continue the fate of village women. I was afraid that when I grew up, I would spend my life in pregnancy, miscarriage, giving birth until I had a boy. I have been wishing for a different world beyond the village since I was young. I don't want to live in my childhood village. I am afraid, I am fearful… I can't change the village… I chose to escape from the control of the village.* (June, WeChat exchange, SFW labour activist)

June is a tall and slender woman with a healthy complexion. Although her daughter is already in elementary school, she always gave me the impression of being a college girl – wearing glasses, jeans and pigtails; and indeed, she said she'd never had the chance to go to college. In 2012, based in the industrial zone in Guangzhou, she and May, another women worker, started SFW, a grassroots labour organisation focused on women migrant workers. May is a petite woman, with an oval face framed by a bob haircut, who loves to wear colourful dresses. May and June are considered to be a perfect match in work by some other friends in the Guangzhou labour activism circle, as Qian, one colleague in SFW, once commented: 'they are the same age and from the same province. June is very empathetic and brave, May optimistic and a bit stubborn

[*zhou*]. Maybe that's why they can persist through such difficulties.' Before founding SFW, they both worked in another labour organisation. When asked why they decided to set up SWF, they shared their life stories with me.

These life stories illustrate how the overlapping identities as rural-urban migrant workers, women and labour activists together shape their subjectivities in their experience as rural village girls, migrant workers, and labour activists.

8.1.1 Village childhood and factory work

June was born in 1986, in a small village in Hengyang, Hunan province of China. Her parents went out to *dagong* when she was very little, leaving her with her grandparents. 'I am a first-generation migrant child', I often heard her telling others in a self-deprecating tone. In her memory, her village childhood was full of pain and fear. June recalled that she had the idea of escaping village life from a very young age:

> *When I was little, I asked myself, why am I a girl? … I think being a woman is so hard. When I was at home, I saw men going out to work, like rice hulling [da daogu]. Women went out together, doing the same work. But when they came back, women were also responsible for cooking. Not for one. Like if a few people in your family go out to work, you have to cook for everyone. If it's not tasty, you will get blamed, 'this dish is so bad'. Some men are concerned about the matter of face [ai mianzi], they will blame their women if the dishes are not expensive [chide bugou hao]… I was thinking, a woman's life is so exhausting…*

> *Another is about children. I have an aunt; she is very unlucky. She was pregnant multiple times, all the children were female. She gave birth to the first three. Then they got fined,[53] her husband beat her for the damage she cost the family. Then*

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[53] China introduced the one-child policy in 1979 to control the size of its rapidly growing population. The policy was enforced through a financial penalty in the form of the 'social child-raising fee', which was normally collected as a fraction of the annual cash income of peasants in rural areas.

they found someone who can do b-ultrasound examination54 for them [identify
the sex of the foetus], so they took her to get rid of the rest [female foetuses]… It's
terrible, when she finally had a male foetus and gave birth to my cousin, she was
in her forties… you have to have a son, otherwise you can't lift your head [tai
buqi tou].

June is not an only child – she has a younger brother, and she noticed her parents'
preference for him: 'food, like steamed bread often locked in cupboards. I dared not
say that I wanted something to eat as I knew I would not get it. I always told my
brother to ask for food, so I could share his portions.'

In traditional Chinese society, women obtain their status from men (father, husband,
sons), as such, women are considered inferior and subordinate to men (Wolf, 1972).
The traditional patriarchal Chinese family values sons over daughters and the
preference in rural Chinese society to give birth to a son has persisted long after the
introduction of the one child policy and of the beginning of migration.

June told me that she asked herself, 'is it like this, my life? I am a girl; I can't see
hope in my life in the village. I think my life is doomed. I will be working, cooking,
doing laundry and giving birth year after year…' To cope with the fear of this future,
she imagined a life outside the village: 'I was wondering what it is like in other
places, like that in other countries. I was even thinking that if there are grass on the
land of other countries, or it is the same, like the [crops] growing in the fields.' She
laughed at herself and continued, 'maybe in other places, women do not need to do so
much work, men can do it as well. At that time, I was thinking, I really want to see
what the outside world looks like.' June left her school and village when she turned
15 and went to live with her parents and younger brother in Guangzhou.

June started to *dagong* as soon as she dropped out of school. As she had not reached

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54 Pre-natal sex determination (including b-ultrasound examination) is illegal in China due to the high
risk of sex-selective abortion.

the legal working age, she bought a fake national identity card that changed her age to 18. At that time, there was no labour shortage problem in Guangdong. Big electronic factories had very strict recruitment policies. Without work experience, June could only get into a small leather factory to brush glue on leather goods: 'There were no gloves. The glue was very sticky and very hard to wash off. My hands were always black and sticky.' June recounts how she was bullied in the leather factory, so she left and found another job in a garment factory.

> *I still remember, it was 28th May 2002, when I first worked at [the garment] factory. The first night I worked until 11pm, the second night until 12pm, and 2am the third day… Every time, I saw from the glass window that it was getting dark outside, I wanted to cry…I asked myself, 'why? It was so dark outside, but I still had to work'.*

June's job was to pack clothes into plastic bags and she was paid on a piecework basis: the more she packed, the more she earned. In order to earn more, June remembered picking up a lot of overtime, and long hours of repeated work hurt her fingers:

> *Every time my fingertips touched the clothes, it felt like being scratched by blade. I'd never known before that so soft a thing [clothes] can cause you such intense pain… There was one day before my birthday, I overworked the whole night. The next evening, my mum boiled some eggs for me. It's true, to celebrate. I was happy then. Because I finally could rest.*

These emotions and feelings in her memories of working in factories led to their later emphasis on women workers telling their own stories in the labour struggle.

June said she felt inferior (*zibei*) when she first came out of the village to *dagong*. Looking back, she thought this was related to her everyday experiences at home:

> *I felt that everything I did was wrong and always been rejected [xian qi]… like at*

our place, my dad thinks me 'dirty', women are 'dirty', actually my mum is the same. Like, he [dad] must be the first to use the hot water for cleaning. My mum and I can only use the water after he finishes washing. There was one time, he came back and found his towel was wet. He scolded and questioned me if I used his towel. My mum questioned me too. I was so afraid that he would beat me. I admitted nothing. Then he told me, it was okay if I used it, he would just use a new one. My mum gave him a new towel afterwards. The fact is, I didn't use his towel, but I accidently dropped it, so it was wet. But even if I did, was that so dirty that he needed to change?

The misogyny, the feeling of contempt experienced in her everyday life, made her feel inferior. At the same time, it evoked a desire for agency, resistance, and control of her personal life: 'I told myself, I would not take a man like that. Making me do all the work, beat me, and must give birth to a son. I don't want that. This is my standard when I look for a boyfriend.' June's 'boyfriend standard' indicates an aspect of her agency in challenging the gendered social norms in personal life. However, it was not so easy in the beginning. June recalled the pressure from parental authority:

When I came to Guangzhou, my dad gave me a strict order. You know what it was? 'You must not look for a boyfriend outside [the village]'... at first, I was very repulsed by people from other places. There were boys from other places pursuing me at the time. I always told them that it was impossible. I was not able to tell them why but... Even when I started [the relationship] with my husband, I told him that it [marriage] was not possible.

Despite the fact that after the introduction of the new Marriage Law in 1950, free-choice marriage 'became the main formal expression' of the CCP's commitment to 'women's struggle for sexual equality' (Evans, 1997, p. 5), arranged matches are still common in rural China.

June, however, displayed a strong sense of resistant agency in her attitude to

marriage: 'When I first met my husband, I didn't think he was good-looking. But I felt that he would not treat me with contempt, like thinking I am dirty. Besides, he is very diligent. He does everything, even domestic work. So, I don't care anymore. I stole the *hukou* book from my mum to register… They had to allow it [the marriage].'

May too spent her childhood in a village in Hunan province and left home to *dagong* when she was 17 years old. In many ways, her account echoes June's, although she claimed that she was an optimistic person by nature, 'she [June] felt more, I think. I think I am a cheerful person from a very young age.' May said she had noticed gender inequality from very young age, but said she had never deeply questioned the gender injustice in her everyday life when she was a child in the village: 'I felt puzzled about those things, old sayings, differentiated treatment, opportunities and resources and so on. But I was like 'in a mist' [*yun li wu li*] then.'

Similar to June and many other migrant workers, May said she immediately felt a deep sense of inferiority when she first came out to *dagong*: 'you won't believe it, in the first two years, I never travelled on the public buses. I thought the buses were only for locals. We [May and her co-workers] were too afraid of leaving the factory dormitory.' Her feelings of inferiority and confusion about being a stranger in the city were shared by many other rural-urban migrant workers. These initial feelings provided her with a very personal understanding of how a structural and interpersonal lack of support contributes to maintaining the subordination of migrant workers in the cities.

8.1.2 Learning to be women labour activists

May said the turning point of her life came in 2008. She was working in a factory in Zhongshan, a prefecture-level city in the south of the PRD in Guangdong province, when she was injured when operating a calendar machine. She was sent to hospital and diagnosed with thermal crush injury. Her left hand was completely crushed – all the first two joints of her fingers had to be amputated, leaving only one section of the

five fingers: 'all of a sudden, I was a disabled person.' May felt so desperate: 'I was not myself at that time, I thought everything was over.' Even worse, she found that she had no labour contract with the factory and that the factory had not purchased social insurance for her, which meant that it was difficult for her to get compensation. May and her husband could only live on credit. At that difficult time, May met activists from N-organization, a grassroots labour organisation dedicated to helping workers defend their rights related to on the job injuries. After going through a series of legal procedures, May won 190,000 yuan (roughly £19,000) compensation from the factory owner. May joined the N-organization to be a labour activist after her recovery, and it was during a workshop for women labour activists that she met June.

June's contact with labour organisation started in 2004. She explained to me that in the beginning she had the same dream as everyone else: 'I was 18 years old. My life was so boring, every single day was the same, work, off work, sleep. I told myself, there was no hope in factory, and I could not do this forever.' To cope with the factory regime, she told herself that she could save money and open a small barber's shop: 'I even calculated how much would it cost to be a hairdresser and rent a small storefront.' June said her dreams changed shortly after she met a labour activist from D-organization, a Guangzhou-based grassroots labour organisation. D-organization had an activity room to host cultural activities for local workers, such as singing competitions and parties. June described her feeling:

> *Like, I felt my eyes were shining [yanjing dou liang le]… I met a lot of people and they were so nice. You know? It was not like in the factory, feeling excluded and discriminated against. People there were willing to talk to you, to share their thoughts with you and discuss things with you… I also brought all the girls from my factory dormitory to D-organization… as I experienced myself there, I felt my ability improved, like how to talk and how to think. I think I was suddenly seeing hope [in life], then I killed those messy barber shop dreams. It's like, when a person has another road to go, there is no need to think about those. I felt*

particularly good.

June became a regular visitor, then a volunteer, and in 2005, to her surprise, the activists from DGZ invited her to join them.

May and June met in 2008 when they attended a gender equality training workshop for women labour activists. Both described the workshop as impressive and an 'enlightenment' in terms of gender awareness for them. May described her memory:

> *I have never been exposed to those [concepts and theories of feminism] before, they were completely new to me. But it gave me a feeling that many questions I pondered on, now have answers… for example, those traditional sayings like 'what is the use to have much education for a girl?' or 'wife meant to be beaten', when you grew up listening to such sayings, you have no idea there are other possibilities.*

The ideologies of second and third wave feminism provided them with a gendered lens through which to consider the patriarchal oppression in their everyday lives and the discourses embedded in those sayings that 'naturalise' the subordination of women. May recalled that she was so eager to practice what she had learned: 'When I returned to Zhongshan city, I found myself obsessed with those ideas… I think everything in my life can be seen from that perspective and then there are a lot of things I can do about it.' Those reflections had a great impact on both May and June from their personal lives to their collective labour struggles. May instigated a lot of group discussion with local women migrant workers, 'looking back, I actually only knew very little about it… But I enjoyed those discussions, obsessed, yes… there were a lot of things I wanted to do for them. Then I found that I had no money or resources.'

It was on the horns of this dilemma between the idealism of social change and the reality of a lack of resources that May discovered MWH. MWH was there to communicate and exchange experience with the southern labour organisations. They

introduced their cultural practice to other labour activists. May said she was particularly interested in the idea and practice of social enterprise introduced by MWH members: 'I want to know how to get resources so I can do things. Then I went to Beijing with them.' May enrolled in MWH's Worker's College afterwards, and her memory of her life in MWH is mixed. Personally, she liked some of core members, Sun Heng, Lv Tu and others, and loved their songs and performances. The cultural mobilisation method such as music workshops also inspired her later practice. May also said that her Beijing days at MWH gave her a new understanding of the sense of belonging and identity.

However she was not satisfied with her original intention:

> *I found it difficult to learn from their social enterprises, the second-hand store and others… They didn't count the cost of volunteers' labour in it. I think if [they] count the labour costs of the volunteers and the labour of the students of worker's college, it's actually not working. I mean, if you needed to pay for their labour, it will even not be break-even… Others won't be able to have so many free labour volunteers [like MWH], so it's not helpful to me.*

Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 6, she expressed her disapproval of the value of collectivism promoted by MWH in their cultural practice. She decided not to stay in Beijing.

May came back to Guangdong province to work as a labour activist but still worked closely with MWH and its activists network in southern China. Sun Heng invited May to work at an education summer camp with others in Guangdong in 2011, but May 'just felt wrong as soon as I was there. The atmosphere was similar to MWH… meetings every night, talking about our grand future plans. Like, we will have land here or there to build this and that in the future… and also funding is a problem.' Disappointed by the progress, May quit the summer camp after two weeks. It happened that senior labour activist Mr Z from the DGZ told her that they managed to

secure some funding for women workers-related projects at that time. May was interested in the opportunity to do what she had wanted for a long time.

8.1.3 Gendered conflicts in labour activism

After the gender equality training workshop, June continued to work with DGZ. Like May, she was also passionate about promoting gender awareness in labour activism. Not constrained by a lack of resources, June encountered gendered conflicts within grassroots labour organisations:

> *I told them [male colleagues] that I want to organise activities to raise gender awareness [of workers]. I guess Mr Z might understand the reason for wishing to promote it, but other colleagues did not. They refuted my proposal and questioned my intentions in doing such things. It was very hostile; I think they were very hostile to my proposal for having gender awareness training… For example, someone told me 'why are you doing this? There is no need of such, men always devote more time and pay more'. When I tried to argue back, he mocked me and said something like 'the situation of male workers was worse than women workers. At least women can sell their bodies for living [mai shen] or look for a sugar daddy [bao yang]'. I think I didn't explain my intension well since I was inexperienced, but those words broke my heart.*

Without support from male colleagues, it was hard for June to organise activities: 'it's too difficult… Like, I have to solve their problems before getting to work with workers.' June gave another example of fierce opposition when she tried to work on issues of workplace sexual harassment: 'They would say that women might want to be harassed.' The hostile attitude from some male labour activists towards her wish to advocate gender equality in labour activism also affected her self-evaluation: 'I felt that didn't have the ability to change their minds, I didn't have enough theoretical knowledge.' June understood it as 'some kind of inequality. They probably thought very little of me, like, how dare you lecture us? They would tease you on purpose…

my ability is limited; I don't think I can change them.' June found it difficult to gain a foothold in DGZ. After discussions with May, they decided to establish a new organisation with the funding provided for a women workers-related project. They formed their own team, considered the work content, wrote project applications and chose a location to set up their office, 'all done by ourselves' – May was very proud of it. Thus, in 2012, the SFW women worker's organisation was officially founded.

The trauma, struggle and joy shared by May and June provide a chance to understand how multiple aspects of structural oppression were experienced in their personal lives and how they perceived these experiences in the process of learning to be feminist labour activists. Their identity and subjectivity were formulated in the process of resisting multiple oppressions. Accessing different labour organisations was identified as a key change in their personal lives and provided them multiple sources of knowledge to counter different types of oppression. As shown in their personal accounts of their experiences, the intersecting oppressions of gender, class and *hukou* status shaped the ways in which May and June understood the necessity of addressing class and gender together in labour activism. In the next section, I will analyse how they attempted to reclaim the importance of incorporating gender in class struggle.

8.2 Articulating gender and class in the struggles of women workers

May and June's life stories suggest women worker's growing awareness of patriarchal oppression and capitalist exploitation in existing relations of power and their intention to change it. Because of their experiences with injustice, they knew first-hand of the lack of assistance for aggrieved migrant workers and the need for such support to counter the injustices from the triple-pronged oppression. They set their goals as: 'defending women worker's rights, promoting women worker's development'. SFW started their practice in organising cultural activities for local workers.[55]

[55] Though SWF is a gender-specific labour organisation focused on women migrant workers, the members said they had never rejected the participation of male workers.

8.2.1 Unpacking the patriarchy and promoting collective identity in cultural activities

SFW's activity centre provides free access to various entertainment for off-work workers, including language (Cantonese dialect) classes, dance and singing classes, movie nights, a weekend women workers forum, and community art performances. May explained the reason for starting with cultural activities as: 'we were exploring our way and we thought those activities would attract workers to come. Another reason is we hope to exert a subtle influence on women workers through cultural activities. Like, make them reflect on their situations and also their identities.' Her words suggest her acknowledgement of the role of culture in resistance and also implies their connection with MWH.

8.2.1.1 'Women and workers at the same time'

Collective identity construction was also considered important in their practice: according to May, 'what the new generation of women workers need most is their identity, that is, affirming the value of labour… so we will organise various community activities to facilitate the sense of belonging.' Her account demonstrates high level intertextuality with the core values of the New Worker's Culture promoted by MWH. Indeed, there was a close tie between the two organisations. MWH visited SFW multiple times to provide art performances for local migrant workers and to host music seminars (*chang tan hui*) for workers and activists alike to communicate their counter-hegemonic cultural practice. Even before I started my fieldwork in Guangzhou, I came to visit SFW during the performance tour of MWH Art Troupe. The emphasis May put on collective identity suggested her identification with MWH. However, rather than directly using what MWH had constructed, May explained that they wanted to stress gender alongside class in collective identity: 'we take the word '*nv gong*' [women worker] apart and together, one is a woman and a worker at the

same time.' This account suggests the equal weight given to both axes of identities and also implies their intention to address both in their practice.

Moreover, they understand identity in a very fluidity sense that never separates the work (production) and family (reproduction) of women workers. As May observed:

> *[identity] is originally very extensive, right? You cannot define a woman worker in a fixed way, frame her in a certain role or character… Like, her work is a very important aspect of her identity, but her personal life is also important. That's why I think we should treat her as a whole person, right? I think it is too utilitarian [gong li]. Like for the purpose of a movement or what else, then she can only be this rather than that… Moreover, it doesn't necessarily mean women workers are weak or powerless when speaking of family lives. Actually, you can see women's strength there as well.*

Their understanding of their collective identity guides their practice. 'Family', the realm of reproduction, is also considered a very important aspect in mobilising women workers.

As with MWH, SFW also emphasise the 'authenticity' in their cultural practices. Their understanding of 'authenticity' is less linked to the revolutionary legacy but more associated with how they perceive identity. The 'authenticity' of representation of women workers is also described in a flexible and inclusive sense. In one of our discussions, the members of SFW stressed the importance of 'being oneself' in representation: 'I don't think it is necessary for us to have a standard mode of women workers. One can be serious, funny, speaking with loud voice or soft spoken; those things don't matter… as long as she is herself.' Acknowledging the individual differences within the social group, their accounts suggest no intention to build a role model to fix the image of women workers in their practice.

8.2.1.2 Unveiling patriarchal ideology

Though during my fieldwork, colleagues in SFW never adopted the grand narratives of class conflicts of MWH's cultural construction in their own practice, they spoke highly of the art performance and the skills shown in the music seminars integrating subjects of social injustice into cultural activities. SFW also tried to develop their own hybrid form of infusing entertainment with education: 'we used to screen movies or news clips for workers to view and discuss.' Using mainstream media content as discussion material, the women worker activists tend to lead the discussions with women workers about their experiences of the patriarchy in their everyday lives.

> *The key is, you have to be very specific. If you only talk about a concept or something abstract, they may not notice the differences. But via a lot of small things in their everyday lives, they can reflect on what actually happened… like their roles in family and in factories. Never be abstract [kong de]… if you ask directly, like do you feel your family have a patriarchal tradition, like value sons and belittle daughters? Many people might not agree, unless it's a particularly serious situation. However, if you discuss details, people will notice there is a difference between family attitudes to sons and daughters. Like why are most management are male dominated in their factories? It's easy for them to observe the sex ratio of technicians and managers in factories. Is that because women are less capable? Then it leads to education. Why do most of our families only send boys to get higher education? Why have people kept telling us it is useless for girls to get more education? Why do we have to have a son in our families?… and why can't women be included in the pedigree of clan [zu pu]?… if we don't discuss those issues in everyday lives, it will be taken for granted, 'feels pretty normal', like it needs no explanation. Or 'this is the way it is, the society is like this'. Then we discuss in detail; it often brings some reflection.*

The examples of how discussions are guided illustrate the ways in which they unpack the patriarchal ideology and raise gender awareness among women workers. Rather

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than lecturing grand and abstract theories, they have developed their own hybrid form of communicating gender with women workers. As shown in the previous section, many points of discussion were derived from their own experiences as rural girls and migrant workers. Moreover, they never exclude male workers from participating in discussions. Though they admit sometimes that some women workers might feel uneasy in such group discussions, they still consider having both men and women workers together beneficial:

> *You can't put a woman in a particularly ideal environment or vacuum, then discuss matters. Because her life is not a vacuum, it is the actual environment she is in. So, if male workers disagree, we can have a debate all together. This kind of debate will lead her to further reflection [on those topics]. Also, it might change the thoughts of some male workers; of course, that's very difficult, but still sometimes there were some kind of effects on male workers as well.*

The self-confidence of women workers is constantly emphasised in SFW's practice and has a profound link with members' own personal experiences, as shown previously. The feelings of inferiority, similar to what MWH core member Xu Duo called a 'feeling of humiliation', has consistently been identified as something to overcome in SWF's accounts. However, as they understood their identity to be intersectional regarding gender, class and *hukou* status, their solutions for resistance are also multi-layered. For SFW, encouraging debates in group discussion is also considered to be a way of helping women workers develop their skills of oral expression. It also has been suggested by May that debates can build up self-confidence: 'when they out-argue [*chao ying*] the male workers in debate, they become willing to say more next time.'

8.2.2 Shifting positions to facilitate collective action

Situated in the industrial zone of Guangzhou, SFW gradually found that many workers came to ask for help or advice on labour rights-related issues, such as social

security. They found that these problems were commonly faced by a group of workers and required solidarity of workers in a collective force to bargain with capital. In response to the needs of the local workers, SFW decided to change the focus of their work to facilitate the collective bargaining of workers. There were also another reasons behind their opting to facilitate collective actions. According to May, there was a wave of advocating 'worker-led collective bargaining' among labour organisations during that time. In response to the wave of strikes sparked by Nanhui Honda workers in 2010, the Chinese government and ACFTU staged reforms around legalizing democratic trade union elections and workplace collective bargaining (Chan & Hui, 2014). Around 2011, some labour organisations (such as Laowei[56] and CLB[57]) in PRD were experimenting with 'worker-led collective bargaining' as a potential strategy for worker's collective actions. The SFW adopted their strategy to identify demands, nurture solidarity and mobilise collective power among workers to negotiate with capital.

June explained another reason for the change: the popularity of the internet and mobile phones among the social group. As Qiu (2008) observed, the design of inexpensive mobile phone targeted at the newly emergent working class in China enabled young workers to enjoy a high level of ICT connectivity. June observed:

> we found workers' need were changed. I remember before 2010, when we hosted evening parties for workers, it was so popular. But now we found they were less interested in those activities, like dancing and singing. They have smartphones, they can easily get entertainment… When I first met DGZ, after-work entertainment was so important during that time. I even felt very happy just because I found someone to chat with.

The rapid development of ICTs in recent years has had a significant impact on

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[56] Laowei refers to Guangdong Laowei Law Firm. Established in 2005 by Lawyer Duan, Laowei specialized in providing legal assistance for workers in labour disputes.
[57] CLB refers to China Labour Bulletin, a Hongkong based organisation that actively engages with workers' movement in China.

migrant workers' lives. Although some workers still regularly came to SFW to participate in cultural activities, the organisation realised that providing cultural activities alone was not enough.

SFW shifted the focus from community-based cultural activities to providing counselling workshops to workers in early 2013. SFW also altered their methods of accessing local workers. Interpersonal networks were the first way to organise collective power as the SFW asked workers who came to the organisation to bring their co-workers who encountered the same problems. Self-printed newspapers,[58] flyers and posters were used in the process to communicate information about legal provisions, collective strategies and gender equality as June said: 'It's all about getting workers to know what they can do to protect their own rights and what we can assist.' Posters were considered to be the 'stepping stone' (*qiaomen zhuan*): placing posters at the gate of factories during off time was an easy way to attract workers. However, it also attracted attention from the factories: 'The security guys came to ask us to leave, sometimes even kick our posters [to destroy them].' Then SFW found newspapers and flyers worked best to spread information among workers and were harder for the factory security to stop. June recalled that she once printed 1,000 copies one night: 'it's not just us, workers came to help with delivering as well. They were excited to participate.'

However, the delivery of free publications attracted attention from the local government when the SFW started to engage in collective actions: 'once they [local government] got our newspaper from the printing house. We don't know how they did it. The local Civil Affairs Bureau talked to us and accused us of doing stuff out of the permitted operation range.' The risk became higher and higher in late 2013 and they were forced to suspend printing.

58 Due to suppression from the local government from late 2013 to 2014, most of the publications of the SFW were destroyed or captured by the local government. The content and topics of their publications stated in the thesis were based on the members' accounts.

The shift from providing cultural and recreational services to facilitating collective struggle brought SFW greater political risks, and also changed their relationships with institutions such as local women's federations, the Communist Youth League and official trade unions. It became harder to gain support and resources from official institutions. However, SFW continued their own goals and successfully assisted four collective cases (Q jewellery factory, Y toy factory, H Metals, and S electronic factory) with compensation, relocation, housing funds and pension disputes. Though the collective bargaining cases per se are beyond the scope of the thesis, how the SFW actively articulated gender and class in their practice will continue to be the focus of analysis.

8.3 Contesting patriarchy and advocating women's issues in labour activism

I have divided this section into four subsections: each will address one aspect of the gender tension encountered in the process of facilitating collective actions of women workers and how the SFW perceive those tensions and exert agency and subjectivity. The women labour activists of the SFW have demonstrated a strong sense of resistance to contesting patriarchal oppression, from symbolic hierarchy constructed through misrepresentation to the ignorance of gender-specific demands and the issue of workplace sexual harassment.

8.3.1 Gendered demands in the labour struggle

In the process of facilitating collective actions of workers (mainly women workers), the SFW has consciously integrated gendered appeals and demands into negotiations. As facilitators in collective actions, labour activists mainly assist workers in framing their claims and advising them on contention tactics and strategies for struggles. SFW informants describe the ways they practice gendered subjectivity in the discussion to frame collective claims: 'when we discuss demands together, we advise some gender

specific demands, such as maternity leave, paid menstrual leave, holiday on International Women's Day, or no time limit for going to the toilet59 on the factory floor' – SFW members consider such demands can significantly improve women workers' wellbeing. For instance, according to the All-China Women's Federation survey report (2006), the proportion of rural-urban migrant women workers without paid maternity leave was 64.5%, and only 13.3% of rural-urban migrant women workers had maternity insurance (Li Jianfei, 2010, p.160), many companies refuse to buy maternity insurance for women workers. Without support and income, women workers have to go back to their hometowns. Many of my worker informants quit their jobs multiple times and went home to give birth and nurse new-borns.

Although those gendered demands are viewed as righteous and necessary for the benefit of women workers by the SFW members, they have experienced difficulties in practice. 'Some workers, both men and women, thought those demands are ridiculous', said Huang, a jewellery factory worker turned activist who joined SFW. May explained that, 'it is sad that some people don't think those are not right, or they just get used to it and don't think those are problematic anymore.' Even if women workers agree with the gendered demands, they often consider them to be secondary to their main economic demands. SFW usually advises workers to put these demands in the package for negotiations as a strategic move. Therefore, the gendered demands were often used as 'disposable chips' in the package of demands for negotiation with capital in workers' collective actions.

No matter how marginalised the gendered demands were in the process, SFW members insisted on advocating these demands every time and explaining them to the workers. 'Bringing it up, then gradually some people accept and demand these rights', Xiao Kai shared, 'for example, holiday on International Women's Day; the women

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59 According to my informants, in order to ensure the production efficiency of the assembly line, workers (both men and women) on the assembly line need to apply to use the toilet in many factories. Workers need to get a 'leave card' (*li gang zheng*) to go to the toilet, otherwise they will be fined. Some factories even regulate the number and time of workers applying toilet visits every day. This harsh factory regulation is particularly painful for women workers, especially during menstruation. See media reports (in Chinese) here: http://society.people.com.cn/n/2013/0925/c1008-23025428.html

workers in S factory [the case SFW was working on during my fieldwork] care about it. Because they found that female workers had a half-day holiday on March 8th in another nearby factory. They think it's feasible, they can get the same too.' May agreed with Xiao Kai and summarised their rationale for advocating for gendered demands: 'they need this kind of impression or influence from the surrounding environment. Then they will ask for it and fight for it. They won't necessarily come up with this kind of idea, like this is a right, a statutory holiday that we are entitled to have. The influence from the social surroundings are very important. That is what we do.' As May and Xiao Kai suggest, the rationale behind advocating gendered demands in the labour struggle is an attempt to adjust worker's perceptions of their identities and their rights.

Through the process of proposing, discussing and explaining these gender specific demands, the SFW has actually attempted to change women workers' perceptions. Using their personal experiences (see section 8.1) as reference points, May and June both acknowledge the importance of raising gender awareness, as May said:

> *to be honest, I understand those are novel things to them. People will change. Like Huang, she also thought things like limited toilet times are normal, menstrual leave is ridiculous, when she first came to ask for advice on collective bargaining. But now she agrees those things need to be changed for good and she advocate those things to women workers.*

8.3.2 Fighting against sexual harassment

In August 2013, in cooperation with other organisations, SFW conducted a survey on workplace sexual harassment of women workers in Guangzhou.[60] According to the survey, around 70% of respondents had at some point encountered some forms of sexual harassment in the workplace, including leering, offensive jokes and abusive

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[60] A brief summary of the survey can be viewed (in Chinese) at: https://clb.org.hk/schi/content/调查称广州七成女工曾遭性骚扰

remarks, touching without consent, displaying genitalia, and asking for sex. The report showed that 43% of respondents said they had 'submitted' (*yin ren*) to the sexual harassment, 47% tried to 'resist' it, and 15% said they quit their jobs due to the harassment without reporting it or complaining to supervisors in their workplace.

The report attracted attention from the media. Major newspaper such as Southern Metropolis Daily (*nanfang dushi bao*) and international media such as the New York Times reported on it. 'They found the results quite shocking', said May, 'but I told them [the journalists] that we felt the number in the report still might be lower than in reality.' Xiao Kai, the young member of SFW who worked on the survey project, said it was very difficult to get women workers to participate in the survey: 'some people think it's embarrassing, something that should not be discussed publicly.' They welcomed the media attention as breaking the silence is considered the first step in fighting back for SFW. For May and other members, workplace sexual harassment should not be considered as something unspeakable.

According to their report, none of the respondents thought about seeking help from the Women's Federation or calling the police: 'Zero', May continued, 'some people said they felt 'numbed' (*ma mu le*) to it. Some others said it simply because the person who harassed them is 'sick', 'pervert'.' Workplace sexual harassment has hierarchical power relations at its core. What SFW can do is limited, but they believe at least their report and other practices can help women workers by changing their perceptions of workplace sexual harassment and letting them 'know what they can do, like gathering evidence, and who they can seek help from.'

Moreover, SFW also fights fearlessly against the sexual harassments within labour activism. May shared the case of a labour scholar, W, who visited SFW to give lectures to migrant workers representatives and activists. The first workshop ended late at night in the industrial zone of the city. One of the SFW's young female volunteers was in charge of sending the labour scholar back to hotel in the commercial centre of Panyu district. On the taxi back to the hotel, W put his hands on

the young volunteer's body. The volunteer called May and June after sending him back and told them about her experience. May said they were very angry about it and wanted to condemn his behaviour. But the young volunteer was not sure about it, since W was there to help workers. May expressed her disagreement and the necessity of addressing it:

> *I told her that I don't think so. Yes, he did good thing for us, workers, but it didn't give him the right to sexually harass others... of course we fought back. If we do nothing, he might do it again to others. We wrote 'Take away your salty pig hand [xian zhu shou] and 'No to sexual harassment' on coloured paper and posted them on the wall of the activity room the next day. We wanted to use this way to send him the message and to others. It is not right to do it... He was so embarrassed; I think it gave him a lesson. [She smiled with a proud look on her face] Who does he think we are? We are the women worker activists.*

In the most general sense, the case May shared demonstrated how SFW perceived the relation between class and gender in the labour movement (or any similar struggles). In contrast to some other organisations, they refuse to make women subordinate to class in any given struggles. Rather, both should be addressed at the same time. Sexual harassment and other forms of gendered oppression should not be dismissed or disguised in the name of class struggle.

Moreover, addressing sexual harassment has become a point of intersection with feminist activism in China. Because women workers and activists experience dual oppression from capital and patriarchy, they have managed to build an alliance with feminist activism. Members of SFW also maintain close contact with feminist activists in China and actively cooperate in resistance to gendered oppression such as sexual harassment issues encountered by workers and activists.

8.3.3 Uncovering the misrepresentation of women workers

Contesting the misrepresentation and opposing the imposed image of women workers are both important aspects of resistance in SFW's practice. SFW members gave an example of a performance of an industrial workers' exchange conference organised by a Shenzhen-based labour organisation. The women workers gave a performance of belly dance for the attendees at the reception. The audience included their fellow workers, some technicians, and labour activists. May's comments exemplified how SFW members perceived the gendered stereotype:

> *When I saw it, I had this question hovering in my head, what do you want to express? What did you want to represent in the belly dance? I am not against belly dancing, but I mean, it was an exchange conference for industrial workers. Of course, you can arrange performances, but is it okay to cater to the mainstream kind of tone [diao diao]?... if you arrange women workers according to mainstream standards, it really weaken the girls, how to say, their strength/ power [li liang]. Because one is not representing oneself anymore. These girls were also the women industrial workers.*

May's feelings were supported by other members:

> *It's not about the belly dance itself. It's the occasion. It's an exchange conference of industrial workers. People discussed topics related to production and so on. These girls are also workers, but they were only invited to perform belly dance?*

> *It's like, are women workers only there to entertain?*

These comments demonstrate SFW members' high sensitivity to gendered stereotypes in representing women workers. The dissemination of gendered oppression can often be subtle. The informants' reactions display their agency of resistance to such arrangements that undermine the women workers in labour activism. Their comments have two layers of meaning. Firstly, the women workers are also the industrial

workers in China; by only performing belly dance rather than participating in discussion, their agency as subjects in the class struggle was denied and their strength and power as agents was undermined.

Because they were only allowed them to represent women workers via a connotatively sexualised dance performance, the women workers were reduced to gendered entertainers for the attendees rather than revealed as the active subjects of labour activism. Moreover, by suggesting the belly dance as a way of 'catering for the mainstream', it implies the image of women workers in such performances were twisted to fit into the dominant gender image of women. The belly dance in this context was considered to be a response to the male gaze that subjugated women workers primarily as objects of desire rather than as fellow fighters. It reinforces the gender power differences that put women workers into a disadvantaged position.

SFW members' interpretations of the performance are closely linked with their intersectional understanding of class and gender in the collective identity of women workers. By pointing out that 'one is not representing oneself anymore' in the comments, they were reclaiming the importance of 'authenticity' in representing women workers. As aforementioned, SFW accept the diversity of women workers in their representations as long as it is not imposed. In this regard, 'authenticity' is also viewed as a way of resisting the gendered stereotypes that maintain the peripheral roles of women workers in labour activism.

The tendency to weaken or victimise migrant women workers is common in mainstream media and as well as in labour organisations (as shown in Chapter 6, even in the interpretation of the women section of the 'Dagong museum' of MWH, women workers were said to be weak compared to their male counterparts). Some of SFW's ideas were formed through interactions with other social actors, such as foundations, sponsors and other labour organisations. May shared a story of attending a conference hosted by a prominent Hongkong based foundation and the provincial Women's Federation, and expressed her feeling of revulsion and disapproval of some of the

imposed stereotypes of women workers:

> *It was not very comfortable, listening to their discussion. I really understand they want to help us. But I don't think people should be labelled, like women workers are weak, vulnerable, ignorant or something like that. No one should consider themselves as some kind of savours high above… I think women workers are really awesome [li hai], you know Lao Zhao, Hai Xia and others, they are very powerful inside. To be honest, I don't think they [the conference discussants] can do better than women workers if they swap situations… The reason, why women workers are considered 'weak', is because we have too little resources, opportunities and platforms.*

Her comments reveal the hierarchy in the discourse that constructs women workers as 'weak', 'vulnerable' and 'ignorant' denying their agency and fixing them in a position to be 'saved' by others. Certainly, May and other colleagues of SFW disagree with such a condescending discourse. The courage and solidarity the women workers have demonstrated in collective struggle is considerable and certainly comparable to that of all their male comrades. In the case of S factory, women worker representatives such as Lao Zhao not only faced pressure from the factory's management, but also continued their appeals to the local labour inspection department under repeated intervention from local police. SFW overtly challenges the discourses that devalue women workers by constructed them as 'weak'.

SFW acknowledges the subordination of women workers but refuses the tendency to victimize the women workers. Rather, May pointed out that the subordination of women workers should not be attributed to them personally, but to the structural injustices that constrain their development. As women migrant workers themselves, fighting against injustices alongside other women workers, the members of SFW apprehend the difficulties in their everyday lives. To change the status quo, as facilitators they put emphasis on promoting women worker representatives in the labour struggle.

8.3.4 Gendered oppression and agency in 'nurturing the backbones'

In the process of mobilising workers to participate in collective actions, SFW attaches great importance to giving workers' representatives as many resources and opportunities as possible. They have collected related information for workers, and invited lawyers, labour specialists and senior labour activists to answer questions and given suggestions during tactic and strategy meetings. Other than providing information and sharing knowledge, SFW also wants to provide a voice for women workers.

For instance, in the heat of the S factory struggle over social insurance and pensions, May was invited to share SFW's experience in collective actions with some senior activists from other labour organisations. She insisted on inviting the women worker representatives of S factory: 'it's not fair, they should be given the chance to tell others how they fought in the struggle… they need to have more contacts with the society outside of their factory and apartments.' According to SFW, training on leadership skills was shared among labour organisations engaged in collective bargaining. In Li Chunyun's study of labour movement NGOs, the majority of collective bargaining cases were facilitated using a nurturing approach that aims to develop leadership capabilities in workers (2016, pp.128-130).

Women worker informants' accounts reveal how their interaction with SFW influences them. Lao Zhao, the women worker representative from S factory, found the information and contention strategies and tactics provided by labour activists useful: 'after all, we are 'locked' in the factory all day. We don't understand these things and I don't have time to find out. So only when they [SFW] come to help us, do we know these things. Like the trade union and collective petition.' The empowering feeling in the process of learning knowledge about legal rights and resistance tactics are the most common points mentioned in worker informants' accounts. Hai Xia, a women worker representative from H Metals described how her self-confidence increased more explicitly:

I am not a timid person, but I don't think I dare to argue with the managers and even the factory director before. What should I say to those people then? But May, Xiao Kai and others explained well to us, gave us copies of labour laws, then I felt our demands make sense [zhan li]. I felt, why not? Why not argue with them [factory management]?

Moreover, another factory worker's account illustrates another layer of meaning in the 'nurturing process':

sometimes I have the feeling of being vexed and useless [wo nang]. The other day, on our way back from the experience exchange meeting, I was thinking, I have been in Guangzhou for more than ten years, but I had never visited [the location of meeting] before. Actually, I rarely left Jiushuikeng [the industrial zone] before [joining the collective bargaining]. [She paused and looked at her husband] We went to the Xinghai park [the nearest park to the industrial zone] the other day, it was so nice. I don't regret [the collective action], even now I got the 'eight hours and weekends work schedule',[61] I have no regrets.

The above quotation from Zhen Xian, a women worker representative from S factory, indicates how the process of 'nurturing the backbone' in SFW expanded her life experience in the city and urged her to reflect on how limited her life in the industrial zone was. Due to the rural-urban divide, migrant workers' lives in the cities are often very limited. Many of my informants live in dormitories or '*nong min fang*' (villager rental rooms) in the urban suburbs. Zhen Xian's feeling of being 'vexed and useless' and her repetitive claims of 'no regrets' in a rather subtle way reveals her desire to explore the city she had actually worked and lived in since 2003. Visiting the local Xinghai park may not be a typical labour struggle action, but in this context, it is

[61] Factory management will forbid worker activists from working overtime. Working eight hours per day with two day weekends are considered to be punishment for workers who have participated in collective actions as it usually reduces their income significantly. For instance, Liang said that, without overtime, her monthly income has been cut by almost half (from an average of 5,000 to 2,700 yuan) and made it very hard for the family to make ends meet.

political in the way that it symbolises the hope of migrant women workers like Zhen Xian to integrate into the city.

Secondly, while 'nurturing the backbone' of collective action, SFW identifies gendered tensions within the process of rendering women's capability/agency in class struggle. SFW members expressed their doubts and concerns about the 'role model' of the worker's representative set by some other (male-dominated) labour organisations. June gave an example to explain their concerns to me. At a celebratory dinner party after a successful collective bargaining case, one of the women worker representatives was praised by some others as being 'very manly' (*hen nanren*) since she fought bravely in the struggle. June said she immediately felt uncomfortable: 'maybe I think too much, but is it a bit unfair? The best words they come up to praise her are 'very manly'?' June's comments echo the gendered language of male labour activists I observed in fieldwork: '*ye mener*' and '*hen nanren*' (both meaning 'very manly' or 'masculinity') are often used to comment on actions or personalities of people. 'Being a man' connotes the good, the brave and the powerful, therefore the display of masculinity is desirable and valued in labour movements. Such language is important as it constitutes the construction of agreed culture and has material and psychic consequences.

After one exchange meeting with other labour organisations in PRD, May was very upset about another's comments on women worker representatives and shared her thoughts:

> *Some male worker representatives are very eloquent and passionate, that's remarkable. I admire Wu Guijun [a prominent male worker representative and labour activist] as well… I admit that Lao Zhao, Zhen Xian and Zhen Mei sometimes are not clear and fluent in their expressions. But that does not mean they are less capable. Lao Zhao and Zhen Xian are very easy going and sociable persons [renyuan hao], that made them very easy to spread information among worker in the factory… I just don't think it is right to have only one type of*

worker leader [gongren lingxiu].

When I probed further, May said she was upset because she worried these comments might hurt the sprits (*jiji xing*) of the women workers in participating in further mobilisations.

Central to these 'role models' is an assumption about what kind of worker representatives are valuable to the class struggle. The 'role model', the hero, is typically found in the form of a militant male worker. In the process of taking them as a role model for labour activism, resistance and class identity, the actions, the personalities and the language of male workers and activists are set as the standard for others to follow. Consequently, it subjects the women worker representatives to a comparison with the 'role model' in the labour struggle. Therefore, certain (male) subjects are privileged and their actions are seen as worthy and devalue the ones that fall outside the mould. Even those who fit in the mould, like the women worker representative in June's example, end up been praised as 'very manly'.

Moreover, the 'role model' suggested in May's accounts that is promoted by male labour activists is also not necessarily related to the success of collective mobilisation. For instance, Juan, member of SFW and former worker representative in the famous Nanhai Honda Strike, said, 'Of course, one need to be determined [in collective actions] but worker representative does not have to appear as aggressive or militant. To be honest, it's not that effective and might get you in trouble… tactics are more important.' In other words, the gendered languages and the 'role model' of the worker representative are both ideological and consequently undermine women's agency and potential for participation in class struggle as worthy leaders and representatives.

Thirdly, though the nurturing approach in the labour struggle can bring many positive outcomes and changes to women worker's lives, at the same time it might become a burden to the already hectic lives of women workers. Many worker informants mentioned that in order to participate in collective actions and related activities, they

needed to take time off or change shifts with other workers. Married women workers also mentioned that they faced pressure from their families. In response to the difficulties in women workers' everyday lives that limit their opportunities to participate in collective actions, SFW expanded their practice into the domestic lives of women workers and the realm of social reproduction.

8.4 Expanding the practice to social reproduction

To evoke resistant agency and to mobilise collective power, women migrant workers have to consider the specificity of their conditions. Thus, in order to instigate processes of class struggle and formation, SFW substantially has enlarged the scope of their practice to include those realms of social reproduction that reproduce the oppression and subordination of women workers.

8.4.1 Home visits: Endorsing the women workers and collecting sisters' stories

As discussed previously (Chapters 2 and 6), although migrant women workers left their rural villages and became new working subjects (Pun, 2005) after Reform and Opening Up, the social norms of domestic work being women's responsibility has largely remained unchanged. Working overtime in the factories and coming back home for 'the second shifts' (Hochschild, 1990) of domestic work to fulfil traditional gender roles remain the life pattern for many migrant women workers. Therefore, participating in collective actions generates tensions within families. Many married women workers encounter pressure from their partners and other family members during participation in collective struggle. Accounts from women worker informants demonstrate the tensions within families:

> *some people are forced to withdraw [from the collective struggle] because their*
> *husbands do not support them… I understand [their difficulties]. There are so*
> *many things we need to study, to discuss [for collective action] but we have so*

little time. You cannot starve your husband and your children at home. But you only have two hands, one body, no matter how hard you try. (Hai Xia, H metals)

I was not very satisfied with my husband because he didn't support me [in collective action]. There was one night, I came back home around midnight [after meetings with workers and labour activists], he scolded me about being inconsiderate to our family. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried. But when I heard someone was locked in her room because her husband forbade her to go to meetings, I thought my husband was not so bad. (Mei, H metals)

what broke my heart is, I don't have time to take care of my son. He is about to take the high school entrance examination; I should cook to ensure that he does not lack nutrition. (Hui Lan, S factory worker)

he called me a fool. Because I devoted too much. He said I should not be so active. Let others do it. I think he just wants me to have more time with the family. (Zhen Xian, S factory worker)

The marital tensions revealed in women workers who participated in collective labour struggles indicate the collision of class and patriarchy in exercising their agency. Women workers have carried the burden of domestic work when they try to participate in collective class struggles. SFW members realised that they have to address the difficulties affecting women workers' participation, and this requires them to have access to the worker' family members. SFW members understand that home and family life are considered private to most people. They developed a hybrid method called 'home visits' to expand their practice from the realm of production to that of social reproduction. The 'home visit' is a hybrid of interview and seminar in the private everyday life settings of women workers. The labour activists will firstly ask whether the woman worker is willing to accept home visits and, if possible, hope that their spouse and family members are present. During my fieldwork in Guangzhou, 28 women workers accepted such home visits.

SFW puts an emphasis on communicating two messages to the women workers and their family members during these home visits: 'We want the women workers to know, we have their back. And we want to let their family members know, your wife or your mum's fight is important and meaningful.' The home visits are normally very casual, started with a brief introduction to the labour activists and what they do. Then the SFW discuss the women workers' experience of participating in collective actions, followed by discussion with their family members about their concerns. The women workers who accepted home visits usually provided homemade food during the interview and seminar. Most of the family members (spouses) I visited were quite willing to discuss their concerns. Though other colleagues of SFW had different experiences.

However, May admits that the impact of home visits in changing gender norms is very limited, 'it is not easy to change people's minds. Just because we visited them tonight and they said they agreed with us, their lives will not change. We cannot interfere in their family lives.' After we completed a home visit, May explained to me:

> *But we think that what we can do is to show their family members that their participation [in collective actions] is meaningful, like in S factory case, they can gain pension for themselves and that means economic gains [jingji baozhang] for their family, and also bring changes to their fellow workers and the society. Also, I think they value us, they think we are people with knowledge and strategies [you zhishi, you banfa], it's a bit like an endorsement for them.*

May's accounts reveal the subtle power relations between the labour activists and the ordinary workers. No matter how marginalised the labour activists think they are in society and how many of them were workers before joining labour organisations, the ordinary workers still think the activists are very different from themselves. Lao Zhao and Zhen Xian both told me that they thought May and June were special and powerful women. It also shows in how they treat the labour activists who visit them. For instance, Zhen Mei, a woman worker from S factory asked for a half day off to

clean her rented room and prepare some food for us, although SFW told her not to. Labour activists acknowledge the hierarchy in how ordinary workers perceive them and intend to use it as a potential influence to endorse the woman worker's position.

Additionally, home visits are not only aimed at addressing the tensions within women worker's family lives. Another rationale is associated with SFW's aim to have the women workers' voices heard in labour activism and mainstream society; as the work notes of SFW 'home visit' state that they should: 'collect the stories of women workers participating in collective struggles, to have women workers' voices heard, to contest the labels imposed on women worker's from the mainstream society and construct the subjectivity of women workers.'

SFW members are undoubtedly seeking the possibility of resistance based on gender and class experience. To give voice to ordinary women workers participating in collective actions, they first aim to challenge the mis- and under-representations of women workers in labour activism and the mainstream media. They also stress the necessity of revealing the complex and multifaceted difficulties in women workers everyday lives. Other than repression from the capital and state power, the women workers have to deal with the tensions in their family brought about by the gendered division of labour and social norms. May said in one working meeting regarding the home visits: 'We cannot solve all the problems, but other people need to know how hard it was and how brave they fought… but we can let women workers tell people why it was so hard. Maybe people from the media, academia can pay more attention to those issues.'

8.4.2 'Dagong mum's mutual help centre': Liberating women workers from domestic work through mutual aid

During my fieldwork in Guangzhou, I brought along some books to read, one of which was Emily Honig's *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (1986). When my colleagues in SFW found out about the book, they

were all interested. In her book, Honig talks about the consciousness related to labour movement activity as well the sisterhoods of the workers, which 'developed out of the patterns of daily life, residence, and work, and reflected women's need for mutual aid and protection' (1986, p.210). The SFW members were very interested in the 'sisterhood' described in Honig's book about the Shanghai cotton mill women workers in the past. The SFW women worker activists understand the importance and meaning of mutual aid networks providing protection against various forms of repression and difficulties. In fact, they also have their own practice of mutual aid and sisterhood.

SFW established the 'Dagong mum's mutual help centre' in 2013 to provide after-school childcare for migrant children by mutual help. June said the original idea was based on her own experience as a 'dagong mum' (wage labour mothers). After having her daughter, she found it was hard to manage work and childcare:

> *Many of our activities and strategy meetings are organised in the evenings to suit the workers, but the children are out of school at 4pm… I thought about sending her [daughter] to private after-school child-care centre, there were two in the industrial zone, but the price was too high. We can barely afford it. Then I did some research, I found there are more than 4,000 migrant children living with their parents in the urban village. That is to say, we all face the same kind of problem.*

June's account reveals the difficulties encountered by many married migrant women workers and also a class division in domestic work. Admittedly, migrant women working as wage labourers in the cities have gained more influence and power over family matters, as well as some degree of personal freedom. However, they are still expected to play out their traditional family roles as homemakers. In other words, they are still responsible for childcare. Second, even though domestic work like childcare is mainly considered a woman's duty, there is a way for so-called middle-class women to outsource it (domestic helpers and private childcare). However, working-

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class women like June and others in the industrial zone, usually find marketized domestic work is out of reach.

According to Juliet, a young long-term volunteer at the 'dagong mum's mutual help centre', the migrant children usually leave school at 4pm, but *dagong* mothers are still at work. Some children can only sit at the door and wait for their parents to come back. And mothers must go home immediately after work to take care of their children, there is no time for self-development and participation in social affairs. Unable to afford the high cost of private childcare service, some *dagong* mothers have to quit their jobs and take care of the family full-time. It not only increases the financial burden on the family, but also further marginalises the migrant women.

June and Juliet wrote the following words in the project document for fundraising,

> *Engels said, women's liberation is only possible when women can participate in production on a large and social scale, and domestic work only takes up very little of their time. So we were thinking about a way of mutual aid and help in childcare. In this way, it does not only solve the problem of childcare of the working mums, but also allow the mothers to have some income.*

'Sisterhood' in the form of mutual aid and help is their attempt to collectively counter the double oppression in their everyday lives. For SFW, the 'dagong mum's centre' is also seen as a way to temporarily liberate women workers from motherhood and give them back their time and opportunities for engaging in social affairs, like participating in collective actions.

8.5 Conclusion

Bitterness and pain in everyday life are closely associated with the structural oppression and exploitation of migrant women workers, and with poverty, domestic

duties and various forms of discrimination related to gender and class. Resistance is developed in response to repression and exploitation experienced in everyday life. For women labour activists who personally experience multiple oppressions, like May and June, class and gender, as well as *hukou* status are thoroughly imbricated. They do not put gender in a subordinate position to class struggle, rather, they insist on addressing them together.

Influenced by MWH, the women labour activists also emphasise collective identity and the role of culture. However, they formulate a more flexible/fluid and inclusive understanding of collective identities with an intersectionality of class and gender. They challenge the collective identity of the 'new worker' advocated by MWH that rigidly defines the subject based on the axis of class that ignores other axes of identities. For them, such rigid political construction of identity ignores important aspects of people's experiences. Closely linked with MWH, SFW members also developed hybrid forms of communication to raise the gender awareness of workers (mainly women but not excluding men) in cultural activities.

SFW later refocused their work on facilitating collective actions due to changing factors in the PRD. But it is precisely because the women labour activists actively engaged in the collective actions that they further realised the necessity of addressing the patriarchal oppression as they also want to mobilise collective power to resist class exploitation. Migrant women workers are also the agents in class struggle. The ideology of the patriarchy affects women workers and activists' participation in the collective struggle. SFW women labour activists identified the various mechanisms (mis- and under-representation of women workers, workplace sexual harassment, masculinity 'role model' of labour leaders) that devalue women workers and undermine them exerting their resistant agency in class struggle.

Moreover, SFW labour activists identified 'family'/'home' as a major site of tension for married women workers in participating in collective struggle. The existing social ethos still emphasises that the primary role for married women is to provide domestic

care for the family. Most women workers complied to play the subordinated roles in the family. The so-called 'family issues', the gendered oppression in the realm of social reproduction, limits women workers' participation in labour struggles. To mobilise the collective power, to evoke the agency of women workers, women labour activists realise that they have to address the difficulties encountered by workers in the realm of social reproduction. Their experience and their practice vividly explained why the 'small family' that MWH constructed as private and individualistic in their advocation of collectivism has to be valued and addressed to truly mobilise collective power for social change without reinforcing the existing hegemony.

SFW members developed two methods to expand their struggle to the realm of social reproduction to endorse the women workers, and to partially reduce the burden of domestic duties: the 'home visits' and 'mutual aid childcare'. Admittedly, the patriarchal system, the gender norms and gendered division of labour remain unchanged. In practice, it is beyond the capacity of one single labour organisation to shatter the hegemony of the patriarchy in a short period of time. However, their exploration manifested embryonic forms of articulating gender and class together in labour struggle to liberate women's agency in mobilising collective power.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

9.0 Introduction

This thesis sought to understand the cultural practices of Chinese rural-urban migrant workers in historical context and in connection to collective political struggles and labour unrest in the ongoing process of working class formation in China. In developing the case for paying attention to the cultural-ideological struggles of migrant workers, I have attempted to trace how the key advocate of migrant workers' culture, Migrant Worker's Home (MWH), developed and deployed their understanding of identity and culture. I furthermore explored how MWH understands the relationship between culture and collective struggle as shown in their cultural practices. I have also attempted to show the various tensions and conflicts within the cultural practice of MWH and the complex interactions with other social factors, as well as how these interactions and factors (the mainstream media, government agencies, academia, intellectuals and other labour organisations) combine to shape their cultural practices.

In this final chapter, I firstly review the main findings of the thesis and provide a synthesis of the empirical chapters to indicate how ideology, culture and collective identity are contested in relation to gender, class and workers' resistance in contemporary Chinese labour activism. In the final section, I discuss the contributions and limitations of this thesis and the potential for future research.

9.1 Synthesis of main findings

9.1.1 New workers, alternative culture and class struggle

The data generated and presented and the findings discussed in this thesis sustain the hypothesis that migrant labour activists in China have devised a new version of collective identity and culture for themselves as migrant workers. The new collective

identity of the 'New Worker' and the alternative 'New Worker's Culture' constructed and advocated in the cultural practice of the organisation MWH, aim to contest the cultural hegemony of the Chinese ruling class, to raise class consciousness, to build alliances and, potentially, to collectively mobilise class struggle.

I found that MWH's understanding of both identity and culture are part of a dynamic process rather than fixed or static. Post-structuralist approaches had an influence on my understanding of the concept of identity for many years, and it was, therefore, to this approach that I looked at the beginning of this thesis. In many ways, the cultural practices of MWH are a construction of collective identity and post-structuralist accounts are helpful in the investigation of it. However, as soon as I encountered the migrant workers and labour activists with whom I would spend months researching, I started to realise the importance and accuracy of structuralist accounts of identity and class for Chinese workers; and I began to reflect on the tensions between the structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of working class identity. I found that many migrant workers had never imagined that they could choose or even inflect their own identities. This does not necessarily imply that they do not have some choice, rather, it suggests that they might not realise that there is a choice and hence would be deprived of the significance of meaning which accompanies an understanding of such choices.

According to members of MWH, the process of identifying with the social group of migrant workers is part of the same process of gradually *acknowledging their own position in society* as migrant workers. It is almost like a re-discovery of their individual and collective structurally assigned position as manifested in the core members' accounts of how they identified with the social group. This is best exemplified in Xu Duo's account of how he gave up identifying as a 'musician' or an 'artist' and began, instead, to identify as a 'migrant worker' and then a 'labour activist' (Chapter 5). When MWH members acknowledge that they are not as free as they imagined, they come to reflect on the structural inequality and lack of

justice they experience as migrant workers. However, as shown in Chapter 5, there is room for multiple kinds of resistant agency, however ephemeral (Banaji, 2017) and for critical interventions. To resist the exploitative system, the discriminatory discourses of the social group and to change the status quo, MWH displays a strong sense of resistant agency in constructing a new collective identity that stresses the class axis.

MWH's conceptualisation of culture and its role in labour activism is closely associated with their self-identification. It is part of a dynamic process. Although beginning from a narrow definition of culture as 'arts and literature', MWH has broadened their conceptualisation of culture as 'a whole way of life and struggle' to emphasise the potential of raising political agency for collective struggle. For MWH, culture and ideology are considered to be essential in labour activism in order to form the baseline of solidarity that goes beyond scattered strikes and protests related to economic demands.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in Gramsci's framing, hegemony lives or dies by the 'common sense' of society, which consists of values, worldviews, norms and institutions that are so internalised by all that they are viewed as 'natural' and organise the daily lives of people without direct coercion. Therefore, to challenge any hegemonic formation, and in particular one with such reigning legitimacy and such a powerful communication machine as the Chinese Communist Party, requires the diffusing of a counter-ideology or alternative knowledge of self and other and the development of an ability by migrant workers to reflect on the values, institutions and practices that structure their lives. Thus, in MWH and other organisations I observed, the alternative culture – the New Worker's Culture – has been imagined as a critique of neoliberal capitalism to counter cultural hegemony and an alternative image of a more just and fair society for the working class, a machinery to raise class consciousness, foster collective class identity and mobilize collective power for the struggle.

Contemporary Chinese labour activists' efforts echo the CCP's cultural mobilisation in the revolutionary era (Perry, 2012). I found that the CCP's revolutionary legacy and the socialist era were one of the major sites of reference for their understanding of the relationship between culture and collective political struggle. First, it inflects their understanding of the relation between culture and political struggle (Mao's Yan'an talks, Chapters 5 and 6). Moreover, as shown in Dezhi's account, MWH consider themselves to be the 'vanguard' of the migrant workers. Following Gramsci's thoughts on intellectuals and ideological struggle, the role of MWH, in many ways, is that of a collective 'organic intellectual' in the labour unrest of the 'new' working class in China. As shown in Chapter 5, I found that labour activists like the core members of MWH (including Lv Tu and Sun Heng) are actively engaged in various forms of cultural and educational effort for migrant workers, students and labour activists, including knowledge production and educational events. They have developed hybrid forms (like music seminars) and fora (like the worker's college) to communicate their resistant ideologies to a broader community of migrant workers and cultivate a 'backbone' for labour activism.

9.1.2 An impossible challenge?

As discussed in Chapter 1, prevailing literature has grasped the counter-hegemonic features within the cultural practices of MWH. My findings concur that the cultural practices of MWH constitute a form of resistance to neoliberal CCP-identified cultural hegemony; and it does not lack the possibility of mobilising collective politics. However, my findings from analysing the various tensions and conflicts within the cultural practice process suggest that this process (of making and disseminating an alternative culture as part of a war of position) faces multiple dimensions of risk and counterforces that put constraints and limits on its potential.

MWH's cultural practice is also conditioned and shaped by structural power, in the prospect of control of resources and lack of political space. In the dynamic process of interaction with dominant social and political actors, MWH displays a mix of agency

of conformity and agency of resistance in different circumstances (Chapter 7). Compromises are always made to survive and to mobilize resources. However, MWH has also tried to resist in covert or overt ways, as shown in its 'bargaining' process with the mainstream media, in the various efforts the labour activists have made to balance the need to 'keep the baseline' of their own ideology and need for resources and platforms in communicating their culture to a broader audience.

I also found that MWH maintains a very high degree of contact with academic and intellectual circles for various reasons. My findings concur with Yin's (2019) observation about the ideological alliance building which is a striking part of the process of communicating a new identity; however, I also paid attention to the nuances and the power dynamics in the interactions between MWH and intellectuals behind the somewhat optimistic view implied in Yin's observation. Covert resistance in the form of jokes and reflections suggests that a gap remains between theoretical work and practice.

MWH took a very flexible and pragmatic approach in adapting to the inhospitable political environment during the years of my fieldwork. Admittedly, almost all labour organisations in China have tried to be strategic in dealing with local government and the party-state. Most labour organisations will not confront the political authorities directly, as they understand the high risks and dangers of repression (Liu, 2014). But, however hard they try to comply with the government in order to survive, in many cases, when facing the powerful, the powerless are disregarded, disaggregated, silenced, and twisted by the dominant forces through a variety of mechanisms.

The limited political space heavily constrains the cultural practice of MWH and of broader labour activism in China. When I argue that MWH has constructed a new form of migrant workers' culture that might be adopted as ideological grounds for other labour organisations or workers who fight in collective actions (strikes, collective bargaining) to position themselves, I see a different picture in the reality of the labour organizations in PRD. I found that despite the tensions in terms of the

approach in practice and ideological differences behind the labour movement, even those activists (SFW and others) who tended to identify with MWH's culture and ideology were deliberately disconnecting their practice from MWH's version of working class culture.

Indeed, as previous research suggests (Kuo, 2017), the party-state has a high tolerance for migrant workers' cultural activities, whether individual or collective. The need from the party-state to showcase the diversity of Chinese society, sometimes even entails that local government or local government-funded cultural institutions may openly support or sponsor MWH's cultural events, such as *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala. However, trying to mobilise migrant workers to form a single, cohesive ideological position for political action is another matter. The sense of 'caution' mentioned repeatedly, and the metaphor of 'head down' or 'hands off' suggested by labour activists (Chapter 7) reveal the true dilemma in incorporating ideological and cultural struggle within collective action.

In sum, although a new collective identity and a culture – even an alternative imaginary – has been crafted for collective struggle, bowing to various hegemonic forces and dynamics within the labour activism of the migrant workers, this identity and culture has been undermined.

9.1.3 Gender and class: Tensions and possibilities

Gender has revealed itself as one major site of tension in the cultural practices of MWH. Solely stressing the axis of class in the construction of the 'new worker' identity and the migrant worker's culture, older male worker activists have tended to ignore the gendered working-class experiences and cultural expression of rural women migrant workers and activists involved in labour activism. Consequently, even as they shave sought to counter the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism in China, the cultural practices of the migrant worker organisations which are run primarily by male worker-activists have rendered women as subjects of resistance and reinforced the

hegemony of patriarchy in Chinese society.

As shown in Chapters 2 and 8, patriarchal ideology from a range of historical periods is layered and embedded across the broader labour activism in China. Women workers' active participation in collective class struggles, whether focused on the cultural front or on strikes and protests, has failed to overturn, and in some cases even to soften, the gender hierarchies. I found that gender-linked issues of discrimination against girls and women have often been ignored, obscured and sacrificed (for the sake of solidarity in the broader workers movement), and are sometimes even considered to be the factor that has split the unity of the movement. However, according to my observations and interviews, this last fear is demonstrably untrue: it is because the women workers and activists want to exercise their resistant agency in the class struggle that they place so much weight on gender issues: they wish to break the chain of patriarchal exploitation that constrains their agency as workers.

Chinese women workers' double burden is not only evidenced in China's history of revolution, but also observed in labour movements elsewhere. Writing of other parts of Asia, such as India and Bangladesh, Hensman has observed that women workers face "difficulty participating actively in the union, due to a combination of domestic labour commitments, objections from husbands, and prejudice in the workplace, thus posing obstacles to united struggles" (2011, pp.232-233). These entrenched gender and class dilemmas were challenged by the women labour activists in my study, and their vision opened up new possibilities for a more inclusive and truly liberated labour activism.

First, I found that the rigid understanding of class identity has been rejected by the women labour activists as it contradicts their own experience of the 'triple oppression' of class, gender and the rural-urban divide (Pun, 2015). An intersectional understanding of collective identities is proposed in their practice. Therefore, in response to the triple oppression and exploitation, the SFW insist on incorporating gendered subjectivities into the labour struggle to fully address gendered difficulties

of the working class. In order to liberate women workers' agency for participating in the class struggle, women labour activists also extend their practice to the realm of social reproduction and explore different methods of 'lifting' from women workers the 'double burdens' that constrain and exhaust their agency within the class struggle.

9.2 Contributions, limitations and potential for future research

This thesis makes a contribution to the knowledge bases of cultural studies, labour studies and contemporary China area studies. Theoretically, this thesis not only points the importance of reflecting on the importance of structuralist accounts of identity outside European and North American metropolitan contexts, as demonstrated in the analysis of Chinese migrant workers' experiences and perceptions as discussed in section 9.1, but also illustrates the need to refer back to those somewhat 'old-fashioned' thoughts and theories, such as class, alienation, ideology and hegemony in the Marxist tradition. My discussion of the empirical evidence generated through fieldwork and interviews in this thesis provides an encompassing and holistic view of the complex and dynamic interactions between labour activists, ordinary workers, and other social actors (media, academia, government and other organisations) and reveals various tensions and conflicts that are disguised or absent within the alternative worker communications and cultural texts produced.

Besides the theoretical implications, this thesis documents the practice of Chinese labour activists who are directly involved in class struggle as a war of position. Hopefully, the evidence and analysis of this thesis can be helpful for future women's activism and labour activism in China. For instance, the rigid reading of class identity as shown in MWH's cultural practice that hinders women workers and activists' ability to participate in collective struggles should be noted and critically addressed in practice.

However, I acknowledge that this thesis has certain limitations. Foremost, it is not my intention to generalise about the whole gamut of migrant workers' cultural practices in

this thesis. My observations and interpretations of the informants (activists and workers) are valuable and meaningful for the understanding of labour activism rather than of ordinary workers *per se*. The cultural practices of ordinary workers are often different from those engaged in labour activism and in the construction of coherent resistant identities, as shown in Sun's (2014) work on migrant workers' cultural practices in a more general sense. Moreover, as suggested previously, politically oriented cultural practice is an ongoing process, thus this thesis' analysis drew on a particular context and time as the empirical data was generated in a certain time frame. In short, the data may change over time, even if some of my insights hold good.

Moreover, following the first point, I do not claim that the ethnography of these particular labour organisations can be representative of all labour organisations (whether focused on culture or not) in China. The labour activist informants in this thesis were mainly involved in grassroots labour organising. The perceptions and actions of labour activists may vary depending on conditions and experience. For example, the experience and perception of someone from a migrant worker organisation with a government background (sponsored by a certain government agency through the purchase of service contracting, for example) will be different from grassroots ones and so on and so forth. As mentioned, there has been no consensus reached so far in terms of approach, ideology and future vision for workers and for society involved in Chinese labour activism. Existing diversity cannot be entirely captured in this thesis. Although I illustrated some key tensions by looking into how southern labour organisations perceive MWH's cultural practice, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to generalise to all labour activism across China.

Furthermore, my positionality has also constrained my access to certain informants and topics. For instance, as an urban woman researcher, I have more chance of obtaining information from female participants in a more private sense than male informants, and as a pro-labour activist in the process of conducting the fieldwork, it

inflected my access to informants in the government agency, as I discussed in Chapter 4. I was also unable to pursue other axes of oppression fully, for instance with regard to the overlaps between class, sexual identities and migrant worker struggles, or in paying more attention to the particularities of gendered discrimination and mobilisation around disability and sickness. These aspects were hinted at in accounts of workers who lost limbs, were deaf and came to a realisation of their class position in response to an industrial accident, for instance, but would have required a much longer period of fieldwork, and different research questions, to explore thoroughly and respectfully.

Some of the limitations I have outlined can be overcome by conducting further research. For example, a longitudinal study focusing on the cultural practice of MWH could be useful to gain a sense of how their cultural practices are changing under the impact of a different political environments (such as repression and further restricted control). Second, although my focus has been on organisation and activism, a further study on the interactions between politically charged cultural practices of labour organisations and ordinary workers could further highlight the complex interplay of collective identity, culture and ideology amongst Chinese migrant workers with no activist leanings. Moreover, a more general exploration of cultural practices in labour organisations would make comparative studies possible, although it may not be feasible at the moment due to the heavy clampdown on labour organisations in China. It would also be worthwhile further discovering the significance of the interplay of disability, sexuality, class and gender in labour activism in China.

In my thesis, I shed some light on how migrant worker labour activists employ the socialist ideological and cultural resources and the socialist legacy in their own construction of the politically charged New Workers' Culture and how they understand and re-interpret these symbolic resources and legacy in their own struggles. A full investigation of the interrelationship of different ideological resources and the labour organisations would prove interesting and could further our

understanding of contemporary labour activism.

Finally, I want to end my conclusion with a new song written by Xu Duo, 'The Guerrilla fighters in the winter':

> *Hey, friend, facing the winter,*
> *We can only be guerrilla fighters for now,*
> *Remember to bring your gun,*
> *Before being forced to leave.*
>
> *Oh, the past has almost been obliterated,*
> *The future is far from the horizon,*
> *Trapped now, in a long-lasting guerrilla war.*
>
> *Rushing into the waves of the world,*
> *The wildfire beneath never burnt out,*
> *It shoots up again with the spring breeze,*
> *Desperate, but live life passionately.*

Xu Duo sent me his new song in the winter of 2019 as a form of encouragement. It was released on their 2019 new album *Passing from the beginning (cong tou yue)*. He said that he started conceiving the song many years ago during the first national performance tour in 2012 but suspended it until he saw what happened in and after the Beijing Daxing Fire of 2017.[62] The tragedy inspired him to continue writing, and events that followed[63] in the south urged him to complete it. Its purpose here is to update the current situation.

The political environment is indeed a bleak 'winter' for MWH and other grassroots feminist and labour organisations in China. Many feminist and labour activists have

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[62] On 18th November 2017, a fire broke out in a housing block in the Daxing district of Beijing, killing 19 people. As the housing block was cramped, in poor condition, with relatively low rent, the majority of the victims were low-income migrant workers or their family members. It soon triggered a grand campaign of demolishing illegal constructions posing a potential fire hazard by the Beijing municipal government. While the campaign swept across Beijing, it turned into a mass forced eviction of migrant workers – the so-called 'low-end population' (*di duan renkou*). Many people were forced to leave their residence in the cold winter. The ruthless behaviour of the evictions prompted public outrage, but the campaign carried on. See media report: 'Beijing evicts migrant workers, thousands lost home in cold winter', 01/12/2017. https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20171201/china-beijing-migrants/
[63] In the past five years, grassroots labour organizations have been under huge pressure to clamp down following the 2015 surprise raid in Guangzhou. However, from mid-2018 onwards, another wave of massive clampdowns swept China. According to reports, since July 2018, over 130 labour activists have been detained, questioned or disappeared. For more information see: 'China labour crackdown concern group', https://laoquan18.github.io

been 'disappeared' or detained, and many grassroots labour organisations have been shut down. Those that survived find themselves under unprecedented constraint. Some of my key informants in the Peral River Delta have had to cut themselves off from labour-related work and find another way to support their lives, to lie low until the wind blows over. As previously discussed, MWH has cautiously kept its distance from the collective action-orientated labour organisations. Despite this caution their educational camp for mobilisation, the Workers' College of MWH, was still forced to close and the government agency stopped sponsoring their cultural events; even the famous *Dagong* Spring Festival Gala was forbidden from being hosted offline. Once again, these are activists who rely primarily on their art performances in order to survive. "Facing the winter, we can only be guerrilla fighters for now", and indeed it is 'a long-lasting guerrilla war' of position, in the limited political space, but as shown in this thesis, the alternative image of the oppressed will not be silenced or burnt out – it is merely waiting for the spring to come.

Appendices

Appendix A. Timeline of the fieldwork

1st fieldwork
Time: October 2013 - June 2014
Location: Chaoyang district, Beijing
Host organization: Beijing NWH

Main Fieldwork Trips outside Beijing during this period:

Time: 5th-8th December 2013
Destination: Shanghai
Activity: Culture conference of Shanghai University and Student workshops

Time: 12th-16th December 2013
Destination: Guangzhou
Activity: Workshops with local labor organizations including SFW

Time: 1st May -5th May
Destination: Kunming
Activity: Workshops with local labor organizations

2nd fieldwork
Time: June 2014 - August 2014
Location: Panyu district, Guangzhou
Host organization: Guangzhou SFW

3rd fieldwork
Time: September 2014
Location: Chaoyang district, Beijing
Host organization: Beijing NWH

Appendix B. List of informants

Code	Name/ Pseudonym	Gender	Description	Place
BJMWH001	Sun Heng	male	Co-founder of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH002	Xu Duo	male	Co-founder of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH003	Wang Dezhi	male	Co-founder of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH004	Guo Liang	male	Core member of MWH Drummer of art troupe	Beijing
BJMWH005	Sun Yuan	male	Core member of MWH Keyboard of art troupe	Beijing
BJMWH006	Lv Tu	female	Core member of MWH The organization's own Intellectual	Beijing
BJMWH007	Jinhua	female	Core member of MWH Principal of Tongxin migrant children school	Beijing
BJMWH008	Qiu Yun	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH009	Jiajia	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH010	Chen Yan	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH011	Xiao Yang	male	Member of MWH	Beijing

BJMWH012	Meng Zi	male	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH013	Yan Zhen	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH014	Xiao Liu	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH015	Miao	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH016	Chen Chen	female	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH017	Zhi Yuan	male	Member of MWH	Beijing
BJMWH018	Qianli	male	Long term volunteer, MWH	Beijing
BJIF001	Xiu Cai	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF002	Hu Zi	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF003	Ma Jia	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF004	Li	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF005	Shi Ting	female	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF006	Yuan Wei	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF007	Lin Bo	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF008	Yu Ge	male	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing

BJIF009	Lu Na	female	Migrant worker in picun village, active in MWH	Beijing
BJIF010	Fen	female	Labour activist, Mulan	Beijing
BJIF011	Xia	female	Labour activist, Mulan	Beijing
BJIF012	Yin Yu	male	Program director, Oxfam (sponsor of MWH community projects)	Beijing
BJIF013	Xiao Qiang	male	Former migrant worker, labour activist and photographer	Beijing
BJIF014	Lei	female	Migrant worker, actor of SFG	Beijing
BJIF015	Ruan	male	Migrant worker, actor of SFG	Beijing
BJIF016	Xiong	male	Migrant worker, actor of SFG	Beijing
BJIF017	Cao	male	Labour activist, TJMWH	Beijing
BJMMJ001	Mian	female	Journalist, The Beijing News	Beijing
BJMMJ002	Lin Miao	female	Program director of Beijing TV Station	Beijing
BJMMJ003	Xiao Xiong	male	Program assistant, Beijing TV Station	Beijing
BJMMJ004	He Xin	male	Journalist, Beijing Daily	Beijing

BJACD001	Bu Wei	female	Media scholar of Chinese Academy of social sciences	Beijing
BJACD002	Professor L	female	Scholar of Party School of CCP Central Committee	Beijing
BJACD003	Dr. Z	female	PhD student of Chinese Academy of social sciences	Beijing
GZSFW001	May	female	Co-founder of SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW002	June	female	Co-founder of SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW003	Xiao Kai	female	Labour activist, SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW004	Huang	female	Former worker, Labour activist, SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW005	Juan	female	Former worker, Labour activist, SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW006	Juliet	female	Long term volunteer, SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW007	Xiao Xian	female	Student intern, SFW	Guangzhou
GZSFW008	Zhao	male	Student intern, SFW	Guangzhou
GZLAI001	Mr. Z	male	Labour activist, DGZ	Guangzhou
GZLAI002	Jia Yong	male	Labour activist, DGZ	Guangzhou

GZLAI003	Bei Guo	male	Labour activist, DGZ	Guangzhou
GZLAI004	Mei	female	Migrant worker representative, labour activist, DGZ	Guangzhou
GZLAI005	Ya Zhen	male	Labour activist, BCO	Guangzhou /Dongguan
GZLAI006	Fan Juan	female	Labour activist, BCO	Guangzhou /Dongguan
GZLAI007	Lao Li	male	Labour activist, BCO	Guangzhou /Dongguan
GZLAI008	Hai Ge	male	Labour activist	Guangzhou
GZLAI009	Xiao Meng	female	Labour activist, former member of MWH	Guangzhou
GZLAI010	Ding	female	Labour activist, GRW	Guangzhou/ Beijing
GZIF001	Lao Zhao	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF002	Liang	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF003	Han	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF004	Chen Ge	male	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF005	Zhen Mei	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF006	Zhen Xian	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF007	Hai Xia	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF008	Qian Ge	male	Migrant worker	Guangzhou

GZIF009	Li Jie	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF010	Duan Ge	male	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
GZIF011	Hui Lan	female	Migrant worker	Guangzhou
NAIF001	Chen	male	Labour activist, TW-BNB	Beijing/ Kunming
NAIF002	Liu	male	Labour activist, TW-BNB	Beijing/ Kunming
NAIF003	Qianyi	female	Labour activist, TW-BNB	Beijing/ Kunming
NAIF004	Xiao Bai	female	Labour activist, YNLX	Kunming
NAIF005	Xiao Quan	male	Labour activist, SMWH	Suzhou

Appendix C. Sample of a coded transcript

Background Information

This is extracted from one of the in-depth interviews I conducted during the 3rd round of fieldwork in Beijing in 2014. The interview was transcribed and translated from Mandarin to English by myself. Thematic analysis was employed as the coding approach. I used track changes of the transcripts to indicate the themes that I coded. A coding framework is provided following the sample.

Excerpt from the transcripts

Date: 5th September 2014

Interviewer: Ziyan Wang

Venue: Informant's home, Picun Village, Beijing

Duration: 80 minutes

Informant: Wang Dezhi

Position: MWH co-founder, former director of Dagong Spring Festival Gala, in charge of social enterprise branches of MWH.

Q (Ziyan Wang): You had directed the previous two Dagong Spring Festival Gala. What do you think of it?

A (Dezhi): That is to say, in fact, we can't look at the DaGong Spring Festival Gala in isolation. It is the cultural part of the process of China's new working class formation. You have to put it (the gala) in the whole picture. You can't look at it in isolation.

> 批注 [zW1]: Theme2.2 Class consciousness

Now we must talk about the problems faced by new workers. The main problem of new workers is that there are huge numbers of people, but there are no organization and no culture of their own, and no platform or opportunity to unite their strength. The problems faced by them are the same, no matter in terms of rights, culture, politics or economy. Then, as a worker, as bottom class worker (底层工人, di ceng gong ren), is there a way or power to change this situation, and what can be done? This is the real problem.

> 批注 [zW2]: Theme2.2 Class consciousness
> Theme1.1 Constructing worker's culture

Q: I see, so what is the role of MWH in it?

A: Especially the MWH, our organization. Admittedly, it is a bit famous. It's not big, but we do have some reputation out there. We still have a bunch of people willing to do some stuff together. We have the condition to do things. Then, facing the problems I said, we start with culture. It may be that we still want to improve the worker's understanding, or to fight for the worker's right to speak. This maybe what we mainly do, to establish the subjectivity of the worker's. This is a key point of our work.

> 批注 [zW3]: Theme 1.1 Constructing worker's culture
> Identify the aim
> Theme 2.2 Class consciousness

Q: And the Spring Festival Gala?

A: The SFG, (we) hope that this form will be accepted by everyone, even acceptable to government and other sectors (of society). Because it is such a happy thing that is joyful and merry, people will not reject it and will be willing to accept it. Then we also hope that through this form, we can let everyone know more and accept the workers at the same time. Then, let the workers use this platform to make a sound, have a voice of their own. This is our original intention.

Q: Then what do you think of new worker's culture? What is it in your own words?

A: I feel that this issue is more specific. It should be defined from social status. I still hope to define it by class or social status. It is the culture of the working class and the worker's social group. What kind is the living state of the workers, then correspondingly forms the kind of form of employment, politics and culture. This is our real life. The reflection of our real life or the focus of real life may be a manifestation of our culture. It is this culture that can represent the status quo or a trend of the worker's group. I think this should be the culture of new workers. Of course, there are positive and negative ones, and we are leading the positive ones.

批注 [zW4]: Theme 1.1 Defining worker's culture

Q: What do you mean by 'positive' here?

A: Active things, or things that are able to let everyone see 'hope'. Or, the powerful ones that make people feel they are powerful and confident.

批注 [zW5]: Theme 1.1 Defining worker's culture

Q: What is 'negative' then? Anger?

A: Anger is not negative. Anger can be powerful.

Q: So, what do you mean by 'negative'? Any example?

A: Decadent and the compromised, as well as self-denial. Especially the self-denial and compromised.

批注 [zW6]: Theme 1.1 Defining worker's culture (defining the 'negative'/'opposite')
Theme 2.3 Boundary building

Q: Is the new worker's culture the MWH advocating is a resist to the 'negative' culture you mentioned?

A: I feel it is the big trend. Certainly, we are not dare to talk about 'confrontation' now. We only say, 'each person plays his own game' (各玩各的, ge wan ge de). We can't talk about confrontation. The power, it's not the same thing at all, not at the same level. Rather, 'we play our own game' (玩自己的, wan ziji de). In fact, when we are doing this, there is a certain degree of compromises. It cannot be said that it is completely opposite, and there are many compromises. Compromise, even accept the value of theirs and do our own thing. This is a strategy.

批注 [zW7]: Theme 3.1 Resistance

批注 [zW8]: Theme 3.2 Negotiation/strategic compromise

Q: Can you give an example?

A: For example, in order to let more people know and participate in the life of workers, we hope more people to support us. Then, those who support us do have different values and different positions. Then we have to make some compromises on this matter, we must let everyone seek common ground while reserving differences.

批注 [zW9]: Theme 1.3 Alliance building
Theme 3.2 Negotiation
Theme 3.3 Resources mobilization

But everyone has at least one commonality, that is, they are very concerned about the 'bottom class' (底层， di ceng). This commonality allows us to do things together. Then, we have to avoid a little bit on the (differences of) values and ideologies. We will not discuss or fight on this. Otherwise, we will fight each other.

批注 [zW10]: Theme 2.3 Boundary building

Q: Uh…I see the compromises. Then which ones must be adhered to? Is there a core or a base?

A: The core of us is actually the same as what the Communist Party advocated.

批注 [zW11]: Theme 1.2 Symbolic resources

Q: The CCP?

A: With the Communist Manifesto. It is the same as the ideal that Marx and Engels thought. But maybe the times are different. Then we have to dialectically and historically use socialism and materialism to explain today's society and the status quo of workers. We can't use it mechanically. If we do so, we are dead. No one will support you, that way.

批注 [zW12]: Theme 1.2 Symbolic resources

Q: How?

A: To put it bluntly, I hope that most of our poor people will let themselves live a life of dignity through unity. It is basically like this. We are doing small practice, experiment you can call it. It's our brothers and sisters who are poor and can't see the way out. We are doing things together and letting ourselves live a life of dignity. We are doing this practice ourselves, in business, in education.

批注 [zW13]: Theme 1.1 Worker's culture (defining the goal)

Q: You have mentioned there are a lot challenges in the practice.

A: Generally speaking, I am positive about it. But yes, the status quo is crude. It's not easy to make money. There are nearly a hundred people in the organization need to be fed, need a future in hope. It's not easy, making money is not easy. So, we have to do things that we are not willing to do. Like, the organic agriculture. In order to make money, we do the so-called organic agriculture. It is to serve these rich people. Honestly, I don't like it very much, but I have to do it because we need to make money, so we can say that this is a compromise. I don't really like this from my heart.

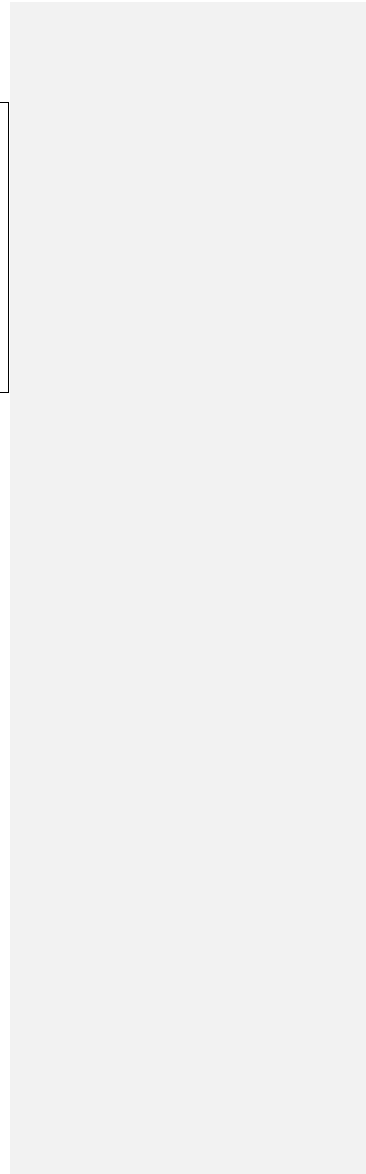批注 [zW14]: Theme 3.2 Strategic compromise/ negotiation

Q: To serve the rich people?

A: Yes, I think we should serve ourselves. But we are still serving them more, because we need money. For me, this compromise is very helpless. But we hope to try to make ourselves dignified. At the very least, we will not flatter. We don't want to be cheap or be hypocritical to make them buy more of our goods. There are many people in the organic agriculture pretend to be naïve and stupid, and act affectedly sweet. I dislike it. I am very repulsive of this. At least, we are doing an equal business deal. I think it feel better this way. It's like, you need this product and we can produce it. Then we trade under mutual respect. I found many people pretend to be cute or sweet to make people buy their products in organic agriculture circle. I am repulsive of them. For instance, like, editing a little bug on the vegetable saying that 'I am waiting for you' to prove the product is organic. This kind of stuff is frustrating. I think it is a kind of flattering. …I don't like the gesture of begging people to buy.

Coding Framework

Themes	Subthemes	Data extracts (partial)
Ideology/ Culture	1.1 Worker's culture (definition/construction) 1.2 Symbolic/ discursive resources 1.3 Alliance building	"It may be that we still want to improve the worker's understanding, or to fight for the worker's right to speak. This maybe what we mainly do, to establish the subjectivity of the worker's. This is a key point of our work." "To put it bluntly, I hope that most of our poor people will let themselves live a life of dignity through unity." "The core of us is actually the same as what the Communist Party advocated. … With the Communist Manifesto. It is the same as the ideal that Marx and Engels thought."
Identity	2.1 Naming 2.2 Class consciousness 2.3 Constructing 'other'/ boundary building	"It is the cultural part of the process of China's new working class formation. You have to put it (the gala) in the whole picture." "Now we must talk about the problems faced by new workers. The main problem of new workers is that there are huge numbers of people, but there are no organization and no culture of their own, and no platform or opportunity to unite their strength. The problems faced by them are the same, no matter in terms of rights, culture, politics or economy."
Agency	3.1 Resistance 3.2 Strategic compromise/ Negotiation 3.3 Resources mobilization	"…we are not dare to talk about 'confrontation' now. We only say, 'each person plays his own game' (各玩各的, ge wan ge de). We can't talk about confrontation. The power, it's not the same thing at all, not at the same level. Rather, 'we play our own game' (玩自己的, wan ziji de)

| | | "…we have to do things that we are not willing to do. … to serve these rich people."

"…in order to let more people know and participate in the life of workers, we hope more people to support us. Then, those who support us do have different values and different positions. Then we have to make some compromises on this matter, we must let everyone seek common ground while reserving differences." |
|---|---|---|

Appendix D. Consent Form

Information and Consent Form for Participants

Thank you for taking part in this research, which is one part of my PhD thesis. This research aims to investigate the use of media and communication in grass-root migrant workers organizations in China. This study is based on interviews and ethnographic research. Participants will be encouraged to narrative their experiences and perceptions regarding the use of media and communication. They will also be asked life and work experiences and some other background information (age, position, birth place etc.). Additional questions might be asked along the interview.

Interviewer: The interviews are conducted by Ziyan Wang, a PhD student at the Department of Media and Communication, London School of Economics and Political Science. If you have any queries concerning the interview please contact the interviewer by email or telephone:

● E-mail: z.wang22@lse.ac.uk Telephone: +86-18611732619

Procedure: Participation in the interview will take approximately one hour of your time. The interviewee is expected to narrative the life and work experience on the use of media and communication first. After that, some additional questions might be asked. You have right to refuse to answer some questions if you feel offended or uncomfortable.

Confidentiality: Any information obtained during this study will be kept strictly confidential. It will be made anonymous all through the research process if asked, including in the PhD thesis as well as other social scientific papers.

Consent to Recording: I would like to take an audio recording of the interview. This means that the interviewer does not have to write down what you say when conducting the interview, and can concentrate better on what you are telling her. The recording will then be transcribed, maintaining your anonymity. However, you have the right to refuse being recorded, or choose to withdraw at any stage of the research process, even the interview is transcribed, and your information will not be included in the research.

Feedback about the Research Findings: At the end of the research (hopefully Autumn 2015), I will prepare a summary of the main findings of the research. If you would like to know the findings, please leave your contact details.

Email: Telephone:

Follow up study: I would like to talk to you again in the future as I am interested in a follow up study to see how your life and work is progressing. If you agree to a follow up interview I will ask you for your contact details.

Consent: Thank you for granting your permission to participate in the research described above. Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Please indicate your consent below:

Yes, I agree.
No, I do not wish to participate

Signed Participant_____

Witnessed by Researcher_____

Date_____

References

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