

SUBALTERNITY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

RURAL MIGRANTS, CULTURAL ACTIVISM, AND DIGITAL VIDEO FILMMAKING

WANNING SUN

Abstract

Like the indigenous media activists elsewhere, rural migrant individuals in China are now using digital DV camera to produce work to document the lives and work of rural migrants in the Chinese city. In doing so, rural migrant filmmakers provide perspectives which may be alternative to, and critical of, dominant culture. So what kind of political and cultural socialisation is necessary in turning a rural migrant into a cultural activist? What kind of activist imaginary has emerged from this kind of cultural activism? What is the role of NGOs and cultural elites in the development of this cultural phenomenon, and, finally, what challenges and possibility lie ahead for this development? This paper seeks to address these broad questions through two extended case studies of activist initiatives: a rural migrant's journey of becoming an activist filmmaker, and the aspiration and frustrations of a domestic worker film project.

Wanning Sun is Professor of Chinese Media and Cultural Studies at China Research Centre, University of Technology Sydney; e-mail: wanning.sun@uts.edu.au.

Introduction

The 2010 Census in China indicates that there are 214 million internal migrants in China, constituting a quarter of the world's mobile population. Most of these migrants are of rural origin. Despite the steady and impressive growth of China's economy in terms of GDP, rural migrants, whose cheap labour has made such growth possible in the first place, have failed to prosper alongside their urban middle-class fellow citizens. In fact, despite this staggering size of the rural migrant population, and despite their contribution to the economic growth, rural migrant workers have well and truly become the subaltern in Chinese society in political, social, economic, and cultural terms (Zhao Y. Z. 2010). Workers and peasants, who were the political backbone of socialist China, have now been categorised as members of "weak and disadvantaged communities." Management of the social conflicts and discontent that result from this growing inequality and stratification has become a top priority in the state's efforts to maintain stability (*weiwen*). Since the mid-2000s, the discursive regime of "social harmony" has become the "main melody" in Chinese politics, forming an integral part of the co-ordinated and orchestrated machinery of stability-maintenance. In this discursive regime, rural migrant workers, regarded as one of the most destabilising factors, have become a perennial object of representation.

At the same time, in response to a systematic lack of political will as well as effective implementation of labour laws on the part of the Chinese government, labour NGOs have started to appear in various Chinese cities, with many of them concentrated in Beijing and Shenzhen. Many of them exist in the form of informal grassroots organisations, mostly funded by international donors who want to promote human rights in China. Official statistics on the scale of NGOs operation in China are hard to obtain, since while some register as companies, others are not even registered. Despite this, one estimate put the number of labour NGOs in the Pearl River Delta to be around a "few dozens," possibly around 50, with about 200 people working in them (Long 2007). Another estimation puts the number of registered labour NGOs to be around 30 to 50 in China, with usually three or four activists on average working for each of them (Franceschini 2012). Though not the focus of this paper, it suffices to mention that the relationship between the government and NGOs varies widely, with some receiving patronage – if not funding – from and working closely with government organisations, as in the case of the Rural Migrant Women's Home (Jacka 2006; Fu 2009; Franceschini 2012), to independent organisations which operate under the radar of state scrutiny. Dedicated to the defence of workers' rights, these grassroots organisations promote knowledge of labour law to workers, assist in their claims for wages, compensation, and organise activities, training, and cultural recreations for workers. However, despite their best intentions, it has been observed that NGOs' positions are not always consistent with that of workers, and that moreover, there exists a wide-spread lack of trust in the NGOs due to their lack of "official," out of the state status (Franceschini 2012).

Therefore, it is clear that as a social identity that is increasingly subject to myriad discursively and visually mediated configurations, the migrant worker exists in the contested and fraught space between the government's propaganda, market-driven urban tales inundating the popular culture sector, the so-called independent,

alternative, or underground documentaries on the transnational art circuits, and various forms of cultural activism engaged in by NGO workers and their intellectual allies. Needless to say, the imagining of China's rural migrant working-class identities takes place within the context of the political economy of production and consumption. In other words, the Party-state, media, and capital, with their respective roles, actions, and activities, all come into play in the final outcome of such identity construction. For this reason, the configuration and imagination of *nong min gong* (rural migrant worker) must be understood in the nexus of a range of factors, including ownership of the means of cultural production; patterns of marketing and the distribution of media products; media practitioners' understanding of professionalism; the regulation and control of media and cultural content; and funding and sponsorship arrangements. This is particularly the case in the post-Mao Chinese symbolic system, whose modes of production have proliferated (state, market, independent, and many others that blur the distinction); whose consumption has become increasingly stratified (upmarket versus tabloid tastes and sensibilities); and whose media and cultural forms and practices (journalism, film, television drama, cinema, photography, and literature, all of which have some kind of online presence) have proliferated, while remaining highly sensitive to both the vagaries of state control and regulation and the drive for profitability. In other words, the rural migrant moves across the increasingly "polysemic and hybrid" discursive universe in post-Mao China, where "official propaganda, middle-class social reformist sensibilities, and popular concerns for hot social issues all jostle to be heard" (Zhao 2008).

At the risk of over-simplification (which may be justified for reasons of space here), it may be useful to mention that while there is varying level of sympathy for the plight of migrant workers across the urban Chinese population, this group is mostly portrayed in popular representations as sources of urban anxiety, fascination, and fear. An underlying discourse of these representations is that rural migrants are a source of social instability and are therefore in need of control (Zhao 2002; Sun 2004, 2009). Similarly, over recent years a state-initiated policy has been promoting media coverage of rural themes and issues in news and current affairs, as part of the latest doctrine of promoting social harmony. As part of this ideological imperative, state media have consciously promoted positive stories featuring model migrant workers and endorsing their contribution to China's modernisation process. However, while state media and cultural expressions have readily given recognition to the enormous contribution made by rural migrants to China's economy, the dominant discourse, framing rural migrants as the raw material for civilising, education and self-development efforts, remains largely unchallenged (Dutton 1998; Jacka 1998; Sun 2004; Yan 2008; Fu 2009). For instance, the discourse of quality (*suzhi*), which still dominates state media's representations, functions to code the difference between rural migrants and the urban middle class, but also suggests strategies for social mobility for each. Furthermore, *suzhi* "works ideologically as a regime of representation through which subjects recognise their positions within the larger social order" (Anagnost 2004). A direct consequence of this is that most state-run and commercial media outlets targeting migrant population are caught in the space of ambivalence, ranging from top-down indoctrination in government-sponsored publications (Sun, 2004) to moral education and guidance in magazines which are published for, not by, migrant workers (Florence, 2009).

In their consumption of and engagement with mainstream cultural content, rural migrants assume differentiated positions vis-à-vis the grand narrative of urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation. Migrants construct their identities and understand their experience in reaction to and within the framework of state and popular discourses (Jacka 2006; Yan 2008, Sun 2009), and the experience of migrants and the formation of migrants' subject positions must be understood within the context of their differentiated levels of acceptance of and identification with "elite modernist technologies" (Jacka 2006, 56), which have inevitably cast the rural migrant as being in need of *suzhi* development (Yan 2008). For instance, research shows that migrants are reluctant to accept all aspects of the migrant subject positions assembled by the Migrant Women's Club (under the auspices of All China's Women's Federation and funded by the Ford Foundation) and the collective that publishes *Nongjianu Baishitong* (Jacka 1998).

Rural migrant workers have mostly been imagined as the targeted audiences for state propaganda, avid consumers of popular cultural products, and enthusiastic takers of low-end information and communication technologies. Although the migrant labouring body is useful to the market for its capacity to produce surplus value, and although the construction of social identity of *nong min gong* has become a field of intense symbolic struggle between various class positions, the question remains as to the actual level of input and participation of *nong min gong* individuals in these processes. To be sure, rural migrant population is a heterogeneous group, with diverse practices and patterns of cultural consumption. While a small percentage of them engage in self-expressive practices such as writing poetry and publishing online novels, as well as cultural activist experiments in photography and filmmaking for the purpose of documenting *dagong* (labouring) experience, a great majority of them engaged in daily practices which do not *prima facie* present themselves as active acts of resistance, such as the compulsive habits of buying "scratchies" (a form of gambling), playing computer games, or reading fantasy novels or "how to succeed" self-help books.

The figure of the *nong min gong* has also become a favourite subject matter in documentary films across a wide range of discursive spaces, including special topic programs on state television, transnational cinema, Chinese independent documentaries, and short films and videos made by NGO-supported rural migrant activists. However, since the arrival of digital media technologies, especially the increasingly widespread affordability of mini digital video (DV) camera, it has become increasingly possible for rural migrant individuals to become a "one-person filmmaker," thus opening up "new public spaces for discussion of social problems and dilemmas in post-socialist era" (Berry and Rofel 2010, 10). This new technological development in the late 1990s has to some extent enabled some rural migrant individuals to engage in what Faye Ginsburg calls "cultural activism," a process by which marginal social groups take up a range of media in order to "talk back to structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and realities" (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 7). Central to this form of cultural activism is an "activist imaginary," a term used by George Marcus (1996, 6) to describe both the objectives and politics of subaltern groups. The proliferation – online or otherwise – of poetry, fiction, blogs, photography, and other forms of creative practices engaged in by China's rural migrant workers themselves is

testimony to this kind of subaltern politics. Like the indigenous media activists elsewhere, rural migrant individuals in China use digital DV camera to produce work which is akin to what Ginsburg describes as “indigenous media ethnography,” which documents the lives and work of rural migrants in the Chinese city. Similarly, rural migrant filmmakers also see it their role to provide perspectives which are alternative to, and critical of, dominant culture (Ginsburg 2002, 212). Assisted by various social interests groups, such as NGOs, urban middle-class intelligentsia, and transnational labour support organisations, a small but growing number of migrant cultural activists are exploring effective ways to make creative use of digital media to participate in cultural politics of representation as well as in debates on social inequality and citizenship.

But dealing with subalternity with “Chinese characteristics” means being confronted with a number of questions. What kind of political and cultural socialisation is necessary in turning a rural migrant into a cultural activist? What kind of activist imaginary has emerged from this kind of cultural activism? What is the role of NGOs and cultural elites in the development of this cultural phenomenon, and, finally, what challenges and possibility lie ahead for this development? This paper seeks to address these broad questions but it does so through two extended case studies of two activist initiatives: a rural migrant’s journey of becoming an activist filmmaker, and the aspiration and frustrations of a domestic worker film project. The material which make up this ethnographic account was gathered in several fieldwork trips to Beijing, Suzhou, and Shenzhen from 2010 to 2012, during which I conducted extensive interviews and interactions with rural migrant activists, labour NGOs, and scholars who advocate for rural migrants, and of course, rural migrant individuals. Adopting a “multisited method” (Marcus 1998) approach and following an approach which is often used by anthropologists of media and visual culture (e.g. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002), I treat a wide range of “ephemeral encounters” with “mobile” people, video producers and images (Schein 2002, 231) as valid empirical fieldwork data. For instance, Wang Dezhi, the central figure in my account, is a rural migrant turned cultural activist, and knowing how he came to adopt his class position and activist sensibility may be instructive in our understanding of the political socialisation process experienced by cultural activists. In contrast to Wang, for another instance, rural migrant women domestic workers in the second case demonstrate a different level of digital-political literacy, and the film project they participated embodied a somewhat less oppositional relation to the state and dominant culture, and the NGO which instigated this project also assumed a more ambivalent relationship to state discourses. The two cases are presented in juxtaposition with a view of providing a nuanced, though not systematic or taxonomic, outline of the socialisation process of activists, the role of NGOs, and the variegation of rural migrant activist imaginary.

Class Position and Activist Imaginary: The Journey of a Worker-filmmaker

As a young man, Wang came to Beijing from rural Inner Mongolia, with dreams of becoming a cross-talk show star on television – cross-talk had been his passion, and he was inspired to see that performances of cross-talk featured prominently on CCTV’s annual Spring Festival Gala. But he soon realised upon arriving in Beijing

that despite his passion, he was just another rural migrant worker in the nation's capital. With no social and cultural resources and capital to speak of, performing cross-talks on Chinese TV was a mere pipe dream. Having "bummed around" in Beijing for many years, doing innumerable and sundry off jobs, Wang eventually met Sun Heng, a like-minded singer who felt just as strongly about giving voice to rural migrant workers. In May 2002, motivated by a desire to "give voice through songs, to defend rights through law," Sun Heng and Wang Dezhi set up the first *dagong* amateur art and performance troupe in China, and gave more than 100 concerts for migrant workers, free of charges. In the same year, they established Rural Migrants' Home in Picun (Pi Village), Chaoyang District, 40 kilometers outside Beijing, a community cultural centre with a mission to provide cultural facilities, organise art and performances, and run educational and professional training for rural migrant workers. Later, in consequent years, subsidised by funding from Hong Kong Oxfam and a number of other sources, and with the sustained support, assistance and consultancy from academics and translational intellectuals, the Centre has grown in both reputation and scale of activity. In August, 2005, the Centre set up an experimental school for the children of rural migrants in Picun, aiming to address the serious issue of inadequate care and education for the children of rural migrants. Now housing a permanent museum of the history of *dagong* community, the Centre is equipped with a cinema, a theatre, and number of cultural and recreational facilities, and is the hub of *dagong* cultural activities in Beijing. In conjunction with a number of scholars, university student volunteers, and migrant worker activists, the Centre hosts annual conferences on various aspects of *dagong* culture, and runs workshops and training courses for migrant worker volunteers. Picun Village, home to more than 10,000 rural migrants from elsewhere plus 1000 local residents, now host a hub of rural migrant community cultural activism, and is a hotbed for the politicisation and radicalisation of rural migrant workers. Although much of the Centre's activities are motivated by a mission to empower migrant worker by providing an alternative discursive space to the mainstream culture, it is not overtly oppositional to the government, and in fact sees the government's endorsement of the Centre – through its media reporting and accolades conferred on Sun Heng its main progenitor – as evidence of its achievement. Perhaps the considerable distance from the city and the peripheral location of the village ensures that the Centre can exist relatively under the radar of political scrutiny. Or perhaps the government does not see sufficient evidence to feel threatened or perturbed by a collective which seems to see its core activity as bringing culture to *dagong* community, in a relatively isolated location. As a result, a *dagong* cultural activist culture, described by some as "Picun culture" (Huang 2011), has flourished.

Wang Dezhi attributes his growth from a rural migrant youth to a filmmaker to exposure to cultural elites, academics, and film-makers in his capacity as an activist at the centre. He also mentioned that he had had opportunities to see many documentaries and documentary filmmakers in Songzhuang, a village on the outskirts of Beijing, now home to the Li Xianting Film Fund, a China-based NPO institution which supports independent filmmaking. Introduced to the techniques, style and aesthetics of the so-called independent documentary filmmakers, Wang intuited that the camera could be a viable weapon in the cultural resistance work

he wanted to do. Having cited Zhao Liang's film *Petition (Shangfang)* and Cong Feng's film *Dr Ma's Country Clinic (Ma daifu de zhensuo)* – both documentaries about the injustices and sufferings of disenfranchised individuals – as inspiring works, Wang nevertheless emphasised that he did not set out to imitate the style of any particular filmmaker. "I figured that I'd simply adopt whichever approach which seemed that would work for me."

In 2007, using a DV camera, Wang went around Picun, asking residents – shop owners, garbage collectors, construction workers, and local residents – about their memories of what the village looked like, the changes in the village they had witnessed since the arrival of rural migrants, and their own current lives in the village. Wang was a quick-witted interviewer who improvised questions as he went along, and the film was mostly in the form of questions by Wang holding a camera, and answers given by the person he interviewed. "I did not ask if I could film them, nor what I was filming them for. I simply went up and started chatting with them with a camera on. I lived in the village so some people had seen me before." Viewers learned from these conversations that a young lad on the construction work site had been trying to get the money owed to him from his boss, the owner of a shop selling second-hand clothes finds it difficult to cope with living separately from his wife, children and aging parents back at home, and a garbage collector who finds it increasingly difficult to find a place to store his stuff. Since he is "out the system," he does not have to worry about the ethical and legal aspects of media production including rights to privacy of his interviewees or seeking permission to film real people in public places.

Picun is one of the hundreds of the so-called "rural-urban interface zones" (*chengxiang jiehe bu*) between the fifth and the sixth ring road in Beijing, which, while now home to thousands of rural migrants from all over the country, are destined to disappear from the map due to the unstoppable tide of urban development. As a hungry, expansionist urban planning regime quickens its step, devours rural land, and pushes urban space progressively outwards, the unique cultural habitat the rural-urban interface zones engender are doomed to vanish, perhaps much to the pride of the forward-looking, future-oriented city planners and real-estate developers, to whom the residual rural was little more than an eyesore to the imaginary modern sublime. Not surprisingly, nobody wants to fund his filming project, and in fact few of the rural migrant residents interviewed in the film seem to share his acute sense of urgency and historical sense of mission to rescue this transient moment in history from disappearing. Yet Wang believed that it was his duty to document the things and people in these transient places. The sure fact that they were going to disappear sooner or later made this self-appointed task all the more urgent. For this reason, Wang is not perturbed by the fact that his films did not enjoy wide circulation nor did it engage the interest of rural migrants, including those he had filmed. "My objective is to leave a legacy for future generations. Unless I capture these places and people before they disappear with a camera, people in the future have no ways of finding out."

Apart from documenting places and things which have no place of pride in a modernist and urban narrative, Wang sees another task of films as to narrate workers' experience from an explicitly and unambiguously workers' point of view, and in doing so, raising the class consciousness of the marginal social groups. Unencumbered by the constraints deriving from considerations of funding, censorship,

ratings, and distribution network, Wang is free to employ his own aesthetic, style, mode of story-telling, pace of filming, and means of publishing his work. For him, making a film is part of his work as an activist; along with making films, he does a range of other things on daily basis, including training rural migrants for purposes of self-representation, assisting workers in their compensation claims, and promoting knowledge of rights and entitlements among migrant workers. "Film is part of my work, but it does not take priority over others. I do it when I get time and chances to do it." When I asked him in October 2011 about his current film project, he told me that he had quite a few projects running in parallel, and one of them involved filming a couple who ran a small business selling breakfast food.¹ "I saw this couple on my way to work every day; they were always busily making food, and never seemed to have missed a single day's work. I am interested in finding out what motivate them, and what keeps them going." He said that it was the ordinariness yet the resilience of people that intrigued him.

Unlike some so-called independent films, I don't go out of my way to capture the dark and grey side of life. I prefer to focus on the optimistic and positive side of human nature. Of course, this positive and optimistic focus is fundamentally different from that in the official discourse. The point of departure for my story-telling is that we live in an unjust and unequal society, and as a consequence of that, ordinary people's lives are down and out.

Although Wang acknowledged affinity with independent documentary filmmakers, and acknowledged that he shared with them a desire to critique and depart from the perspectives and aesthetics of the mainstream documentary films, he was careful in delineating the difference between himself and them. Much as he likes and understands Jia Zhangke's work, he thinks that Jia's portrayal of rural migrants is motivated by a general universal humanism, whereas his was driven by an agenda to raise workers' class consciousness. For this reason, he is somewhat impatient with certain aspects of the trademark techniques of independent documentary filmmaking. For instance, he found the excessively long-take of "fly-on-the-wall," cinema verité style of certain scenes in the films pretentious and irritating, and he thought that they tended to dwell on the dark side for the sake of doing so.

I suspect that these perspectives and techniques are considered to be associated with independent films in certain international circles. But if you are truly independent, you shouldn't just focus on marking yourself as different from dominant Chinese culture. You should also resist the pressure to cater to the taste of international film festival judges.

Following *Picun*, Wang made *A Fate-Determined Life* (minti rensheng), a fictionalised account of the true experience of two young rural migrants. One idealistic and the other one realistic, the lives of two migrants take a dramatic turn when one of them loses a mobile phone, gets into dispute, and ends up being badly beaten by the boss, and ends up in a hospital, unable to pay for his treatment. Despite the unflinching exposure of the injustices of the system, and the cruelty and hypocrisy of the wealthy people, Wang is more interested in showing the resilience of the small people. One thing leads to another, and the story, full of twists and turns, ends with one saying to another, "Our lives are not pre-determined by fate. We should be able to change it." To which the other says, "That's right. We *gemen* (brothers) should act now. There is no better time to change our destiny."

A Fate-Determined Life is not a typical documentary. Instead, it is described as a “quasi-documentary” (Vivanni 2011), and uses actors (played by rural migrant workers including Wang himself) to play fictional characters. Although the story and characters come from real life, Wang felt that the feature film (gushi pian) format would be more vivid in enacting the incident, and in capturing the drama and conflict between characters. At the same time, he felt that the film, intended for his gemen – rural migrant worker brothers – needed to be explicit with the messages it wanted to push, even those they may come across as being didactic. “We can’t wait for workers to awaken themselves from the state of political unconsciousness. We need to initiate them.” For this reason, the film is well furnished with advice for rural migrant viewers. One migrant youth says to his gemen,

We love to watch martial arts movies, and Hollywood blockbusters, but has it ever occurred to you that characters in these stories are always busy saving the world, and they never have to worry about where their next meal comes from. We, on the other hand, need to eat. That’s the reality we must not forget. We work very hard, become really tired, and get some relaxation from watching these films, and we identify ourselves with these heroes. You can read all these self-help books if you like, Carneige, Thick Black Theory, and The Wealth of Nations.² But these are all fictions, and serve to create illusions. Gemen, we must start reflecting on our lives, and think about why there are so many injustices!

Similarly, another film made by Wang in the following year, *Shunli Goes to the City* (Shunli Jingcheng 2009) is also about the experience of the first encounter with Beijing. Getting off the train, Shunli – whose name means “smooth-sailing” – soon finds that life in Beijing is anything but smooth-sailing. He, together with some other new arrivals, is first lured into an illegal hotel on false pretence, then conned by bogus job agencies, and ripped off by crooks selling counterfeit mobile phones. Young, inexperienced, and trustworthy, these rural youths soon learned that the city is filled of false promises and dangerous traps. It is clear that Wang wanted to invoke indignation among his viewers, and force them to ponder over the causes of injustices. Again, unable to make the real ruthless city con artists and crooks to act themselves, Wang took creative licence by getting rural migrants to “play” them, ostensibly untroubled by the principle of recording only real events and people in documentaries.

Having gone through a process of radicalisation himself, Wang firmly believes that class consciousness cannot be formed without external influences. For this reason, he is convinced that any attempt to empower workers through media must take a conscious effort of “guiding” (*ying dao*) and “initiating” (*qi fa*) them to a working-class sensibility, ethos and strategy. This is because, according to Wang, the mainstream culture’s influence is so strong and so successful in constructing a sense of false reality that the first task of cultural activist must be to do whatever it can to “drag”³ them from the mainstream ideological thought and style, and learn a new style of telling their own story, from their own point of view, in their own language. As a strategy, Wang and his colleagues at the Centre believe that they must, like Mao Zedong in the early years of his political career, form alliance with various social forces, including intellectual elites. In a tone which is reminiscent of Mao’s position on the same issue, Wang said more than once that “intellectuals may have their shortcomings, but they are useful alliances.”

Wang sees himself more as a cultural activist than a full-time filmmaker. He shoots footage wherever material presented itself to him, or whenever he could find time among other things. He has no prior plans in terms of the length, style, format, and plot development. The only principle of organising his material is how effectively it constructs an alternative account of rural migrants' experience, and in doing so, forcing viewers to reflect about the injustices. After he finishes a film, he would usually file it, or upload it online, and share it with trusted friends "in the circle."⁴ Wang is aware that his views may be typical of that of the proletariat vanguard rather than an ordinary rural migrant, and his interest in documenting social reality may not be shared by the greater *nong min gong* community. This, he says, is only understandable given that a structural inequality subjects rural migrants to an existence which can be described more accurately as surviving rather than living. "Cultural consumption has many levels. Most workers are still at the basic level of survival, so they prefer pornography, fantasies, and martial arts. If they have more energy left after work, and have more leisure time, they may want to go up to the next levels and engage with more serious stuff." Having gone through the process of induction and initiation, Wang now spends much time passing on his own skills and perspectives to other migrants, encouraging them to take up cam recorders and narrate their own lives. This perceived need to provide leadership in the production and consumption of culture, as articulated by Wang Dezhi, is widely resonant with many rural migrant advocacy NGO workers I have talked to in Beijing, Shenzhen, Suzhou.

The Absence of the Significant Other: The Unintended Consequence of a Domestic Worker Film Project

Among all types of labour taken up by rural migrants, domestic service represents a distinctive line of employment and attracts mostly rural, and to a less extent, urban unemployed women. Among all migrant groups, life and work of the domestic worker, or *baomu* (maid) is most intimately intertwined with the employer. The domestic worker can be live-in, part-time, or casual. She cooks, cleans and looks after children. In recent years, domestic work has undergone a profound process of specialisation in response to the market demand, including now, for instance, *yuesao*, who cares for the mother in her first month after childbirth, *hugong*, who nurses hospitalised patients, and maids whose sole responsibility is looking after household pets. Although there are some single young women domestic workers, many domestic workers are married, some with young children (most of whom left behind in the countryside). Domestic workers are recruited in a variety of ways, including through agency, or personal introduction through words of mouth. What sets the domestic worker apart from other migrant employment types is the intrinsic absence of boundary between work time-space and personal space-time, and between paid work and unpaid work. The domestic worker is an "intimate stranger," performing emotional as well as physical labour, and has to negotiate a very complex set of paradoxical relationship with her employer. Although the maid is expected to perform domestic duties of the most personal nature – taking care of the bodily needs of her charge and cooking the favourite food for the employer – the relationship is marked by a lack of trust and respect (Yan 2008; Sun 2009).

Despite the fact that domestic worker take up only a small percentage of the entire migrant workforce, the relationship between her and her employer has provided staple material in television narratives, including both television drama series and television documentaries about urban life. The intimate stranger is a central figure in many of these television narratives, which either promote the “main melody” of social harmony or help shaping new modes of sociality in the transformed social order following the logic of neoliberalism (Sun 2009; 2010). As previous studies (Yan 2008; Sun 2009) make clear, rural migrant women individuals have little, or no input, in the way in which they are constructed, and these popular narratives about the “humble” maid are mostly produced by the middle-class media professionals or cultural elites.

How to give visibility and voice to this marginalised social group has been a question which perennially concerns the staff at a number of NGOs including the Rural Migrant Women’s Home and Village Outside the City (*chengbiancun*). Always on the look out for opportunities to engage media, these organisations utilise, whenever they can, resources from a variety of partners, including All China Women’s Federation, feminist scholars, lawyers, and activists, in order to (1) give voice to rural migrant domestic workers; (2) raise public awareness of a range of serious issues regarding their rights, working conditions, and (3) cater to their cultural needs. A most often heard complaint from them, is, not surprisingly, that media representations of the rural migrant domestic workers are too often associated with criminality or sexuality, or having a didactic tendency towards rural migrants, expecting them to improve *suzhi* (personal quality) and self-reliance.

In recent years, a number of rural migrant advocacy NGOs have become increasingly cognisant of the potential usefulness of visual media to achieve their goals. A host of factors contribute to this new awareness, including the relatively easy access to technologies of visual production such as the camera, digital video (DV) recorder, and Internet, the expanded time-space of visual material as part of migrant (especially new generation) workers’ everyday cultural consumption, and finally but not the least importantly, the emergence of a few transnational scholarly and cultural elite bodies who play a pivotal leadership role in organising cultural activism, introducing the concept, politics, and the technical know-how, as well as practical support and resources, and working with NGOs.⁵

In 2011, funded by the Hong Kong Oxfam, and initiated and administered by CBC, the NGO also resourced by Hong Kong Oxfam, Rural Migrant Women’s Home undertook a media production project aiming to empower migrant women. The project leaders at the Rural Migrant Women’s Home floated the idea to some migrant women domestics who regularly visited the Home. Although it was usually difficult to access domestic workers, especially live-in, full-time domestic workers, and involve them in groups activities outside the employers household (Sun 2009), the Home, over the years, had managed to connect with and gained the trust of a dozen migrant women. These women came to the Home in their spare time, where they could freely exchange their experiences and enjoy a reprieve from the gaze of employers. After an initial workshop teaching a group of domestic workers, mostly middle-aged rural migrants, how to operate a DV camera, the Home handed three DV cameras over to three groups of women (each with three to four people), asking them to record their work and lives as a domestic worker in whatever way they like. The purposes of the project, as stated in the project

summary provided by Village Outside the City, are many-fold. Its objectives are firstly, to encourage domestic workers to tell their own stories, and express their own thoughts and feelings; secondly, produce visual material which would interest a wider audience, therefore raising public awareness of the domestic workers as a marginal social group; thirdly, to produce some first-hand material and data which may be useful for the efforts of NGOs in advocating and defending the rights of rural migrant workers.

The result, however, was rather “disappointing.” Two months later, migrant domestic workers came back to the Home having shot very little footage. Some women said that they had forgotten how to operate the cam recorder, and did not want to touch it for fear of damaging such an expensive piece of equipment. Others said that they did not know what to film, as their work consisted of little else than looking after employers’ children. Apart from a little footage showing a happy domestic worker cooking dishes, and another one playing happily with a child, there was little material which could be considered to be “in depth” and give an “intimate” account of a domestic worker’s sense of loneliness, isolation, and feeling of depression which were brought upon them by endless work, lack of boundary between personal and work space, between their own time and work time, and finally, by the relentless scrutiny, and often hectoring of employers, not to mention the uncommon incidents of sexual harassment. While domestic workers felt that they could freely express these feelings when they came to the Home, and meet other women in their spontaneous conversations, they did not know how to effectively convey the sense of depression, loneliness and isolation on the camera.

In other words, the employer, a significant player in the dynamic of the fraught power relations, is conspicuously absent. The use of camera in the management of employer-employees relationship has always been to the advantage of the employer, as evidenced in the growing use of surveillance camera at home. However, few employers would take it kindly if they realise that their employee, hired to perform household chores, is taking on additional role as a chronicler of her own work and life. Even more threateningly, she could potentially put the employers’ behaviour and words “on the record,” rendering it public, official testimonials which could, at best, put them in unflattering light, or at worst, incriminating. The “significant other” is bound to be absent in this project, and the original intention to capture the true feelings of domestic workers is inherently untenable. It is here we see the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of producing ethnography of work and life from the point of view of the subjugated class. Self-ethnography of class experience is limited to recording the self, but not so much how the self is living with and negotiating the tension with the other. The dominant class refused to be subject to the gaze, and has the power to act out this refusal. In other words, the production of self-ethnography through grassroots media production, be it videos, films, and documentaries, may have proved to be effective in empowering the racial and ethnical minority groups and indigenous peoples in their “struggles for self-determination” and in their “documentation of conflicts” with the dominant culture (Turner 2002, 76), and to preservation of their own cultural traditions, but its effectiveness in documenting the class experience seems more limited.

Somewhat surprised with the initial outcome, the Project collective decided to take a more prescriptive approach. It was suggested to these women that they could,

first, write a short script for a play, such as a fictionalised account of a nevertheless true event or incident. Then, they could perform in these plays as actors, and their performance would be filmed. To the project leaders' delight, this intervention worked to a certain extent. One group shot a short play (about 2 minutes) enacting a fight between a couple. In the play, a domestic woman has discovered that her husband (played by a woman) has slept with another woman in her absence, and she confronts him about his sexual misdemeanour. In another play, also lasting a couple of minutes, the domestic worker fronts up in the home of her ex-employer, demanding to receive payment owed to her. Though self-consciously gauche and less than convincing in the theatrical sense, the workers learn to operate the machine to tell a story of their own, in their own voice, which represents a significant step forward from the initial sense of inhibition in the presence of a machine.

In a stock-taking discussion of the project at Village Outside the City in October 2011, the question on the minds of project collective was whether its original goals have been achieved. To be sure, the project had succeeded in helping a few women overcome their initial fear and unfamiliarity with a DV, but the extent to which migrant individuals can be empowered by this visual and technological means of expressing oneself is unclear. Sitting at a post-production discussion, I felt that the project also raised some questions regarding the cultural politics of voice. It is obvious that migrant women domestic workers had numerous grievances to air, and they freely verbalised these grievances on camera during the training session, or when they talked to me during my ethnographic interaction with them.⁶ In fact, most of their grievances are caused by the fact that their employers feel free to behave and treat their employee in certain ways in the private and personal space of home, and the injustice and indignity suffered by the domestic worker are often experienced in isolation, without witness or means of being documented. Even if the employers allowed the domestic worker to bring a camera to his or her home, and even if they agree to appear on camera – none of them did in the footage produced by the Project – the presence of the camera would take away the private dimension of the interaction, thus defeating the original purpose of reflecting the real dynamics between the employer and the employee, thus uncovering the true circumstances of the domestic worker. On the other hand, fictionalised genres, such as television drama, comedy skits, reality TV, literary fiction or personal diaries, may be more effective. This seems to fly in the face of the truth-claim made on behalf of documentary as a genre which has a natural advantage of becoming more “true.”

A key participant of the film project is Liu Xianhua, a middle-aged domestic worker from northern China. Despite her all confident, and articulate demeanour, Liu was a victim of domestic violence prior escaping to Beijing to become a domestic worker. Through her association with the Rural Migrant Women's Home, Liu learned to express herself in creative ways, including writing poems. One of her poems, entitled “Purple Flowers” (*di ding hua*), with its short and simple lyrics, and the clear message of promoting self-respect, resilience, and dignity, was enthusiastically endorsed by the Home. Set to music by a NGO musician, the song came to be associated with humble domestic workers who nevertheless find value and dignity in labour. “You are strong and determined, though small and insignificant; you chase hope even though you are so common and ordinary. You are everywhere, by the road, and between rocks, in the wilderness, and in spring.”

When Liu was assigned a camera, she shot footage of many pretty purple and violent-coloured flowers. Accompanied by the song she had previously written, she effectively produced a visual/musical poem much akin to the genre of video clips one associates with community advertisement or motivational material. The short film is a happy fit with the message consistently promoted by the Rural Migrant Women's Home, and may have effectively articulated Liu's new-found sense of self-worth, dignity, and self-respect through her association with the Home as a volunteer. However, as has been discussed elsewhere (Jacka 1998; 2006; Yan 2008; Fu 2009), some subject positions offered by the Home, while aiming to empower women, sometimes reproduce, to some extent, the discourse of self-development often promoted by the state agencies, some of which rural migrant women do not easily identify with.

In the context of Liu's personal experience, her poem and film, though heart-felt, can be read as evidence of, as Yan Hairong (2008, 213) puts it, the migrant women's inability to "cohere as individual subjects of Development or as subjects of resistance." Since the fate of being a "common" and "ordinary," "small" and "insignificant" seems pre-destined, then one should do one's best to adapt and survive, and find dignity and meaning in doing menial work. In the case of Liu Xianhua, the Project's intention to produce alternative expression to mainstream discourse seems waylaid. Though the process of writing poems and producing a musical video may have been an edifying and self-affirming experience to Liu as an individual, Liu's self-expression seems to have the potential to reinforce rather than question the representation made on behalf of them. Here we are reminded of the often unintended consequence of cultural activism. While it is often motivated by the aim of giving support to self-representation of the marginalised, it may not have anticipated that not all acts of self-representation can take place independently of mainstream cultural expressions. Rural migrant domestic workers like Liu may seek meanings of dignity and self-worth from diverse, and often contradictory, sources, including those which cultural activism seeks to critique. Similarly, they may rely on a wide range of – again often contradictory – ways to express themselves, including using the language and signifying practices of the official idiom, which have become familiar and even natural to them.

Discussion and Conclusion

The theory of subalternity, developed most prominently in the Indian and Latin American contexts, has been mostly concerned with questions of voice, agency, power, and construction of racial and ethnic identities. Similarly, studies of various forms of cultural activism have mostly focused on how indigenous media activists in various national contexts – Australia and North America – use media for purposes of cultural preservation as well as to engage in contestation with hegemonic mainstream culture (Ginsburg 2002). By focusing on the subaltern position of the rural migrant workers and media, this paper draws on a wide range of perspectives from subaltern studies scholarship to inform critical media analysis. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a broader theoretical argument about the continued and expanded purchase of subalternity as an analytic perspective. However, by bringing subaltern studies perspectives to bear on the contemporary Chinese society, we must also take into account a number of complicating factors.

To start with, China's social polity is marked by a tension between "socialist legacies and neoliberal strategies" (Zhao 2008a), a tension created as well as mediated by the presence of a very strong party-state. Also, the growing inequalities and socio-economic stratification in China have given rise to a deepening subjugation which is class rather than racially and ethnically based.⁷

Understanding the "Chinese characteristics" of subalternity entails asking a number of questions regarding the political socialisation, the role of NGOs as they are wedged between a powerful state on the one hand and market forces on the other, and the ways in which this dynamics shape an activist sensibility. The increasingly widespread use of phone camera, social media like QQ, and digital video recorder camera, is being embraced by rural migrant activists keen to produce an alternative narrative of labour, migration and urbanisation, and their practice is sometimes cited as evidence of the formation of a distinct working class culture (Qiu 2009). On the other hand, there is also a popular view, particularly among political sciences, that political consciousness can only emerge from political socialisation, and shaped only by socio-economic structures. Consistent with this view is a tendency to see the embrace of digital technologies in everyday life as further evidence of the fragmentation of consumerist, post-ideological subjectivity. This discussion demonstrates that the level of rural migrants' class consciousness is not determined by the digital literacy per se. Nor is class consciousness formed solely through one's class experience as a socially marginalised and economically exploited individual. Instead, it shows that the level of consciousness of China's rural migrant workers is inextricably linked with the extent to which they are inducted and initiated into the technology-enabled process of politicisation and socialisation. In other words, the forging of a collective migrant working class identity is contingent on the acquisition of a techno-political literacy on the part of both individual workers and the worker advocacy groups.

The role of labour NGOs, often assisted by urban, middle-class and transnational cultural elites, is pivotal in this process. However, as this discussion shows, their work lies in initiating, instilling, and informing working-class activist practices and sensibility, but the outcomes of their initiatives are unpredictable and uncertain. This discussion reveals that within the labour NGO cohort, there exists a diverse range of perspectives and positions, a variety of *modus operandi* in its organisation of cultural activism, and varying level of digital-political literacy, and most importantly, a differentiated position in relation to the party-state. However, despite these internal difference, labour activists share an epistemological challenge: a strong sense of their historical mission to record and document social change from the perspective of the working-class experience, and the difficulty of making the camera an effective tool of capturing and witnessing social conflicts and class struggle as they unfold. Other genres, such as fiction, television dramas, and feature films would be more effective, but political economy and cultural politics of production rule them out as viable tools available to activism.

In his critique of the film-making practices of some independent documentary filmmakers in China, Yingjie Zhang observes that the relationship between rural migrants and the filmmakers is marked by various types of "subject exploitation." Raising troubling questions regarding whose agency, truth claims, and aesthetics are privileged in these works' proclaimed goal of bringing about democratisation

and equality, Zhang cautions us against the truth claims made on behalf of migrant workers. He argues that although these films may assume a disruptive role in relation to the mainstream media by dealing with “troubling” subject matter, they do not automatically validate the truth claims often made in them (Zhang 2007).

The aspirations and frustrations of the domestic worker film project collective, as well as the activist ethos and imaginary evidenced in migrant filmmaker Wang Dezhi’s practices, point to an equally strong faith in the capacity to record and document social change from the marginalised groups’ point of view, and to create an alternative space and perspective to contest dominant culture, and in doing so, giving voice, legitimacy, and authenticity to the narratives of class inequality from the point of view of the disenfranchised individuals. At the same time, however, the experience in both cases point to the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of representing the complete truth of conflicts, injustices and discrimination from the point of view of the rural migrants class experience, due to the refusal of the dominant class to act in front of the camera. The prospects of China’s working classes’ efforts at self-representation and self-empowerment remain unclear, unless we fully appreciate both the possibilities and challenges that lie ahead.

Notes:

1. I first met Wang in a conference in Picun in 2009. In October 2011, I spent a day with Wang in Beijing, talking about his films, documentary filmmaking, and his work of cultural activism.
2. These are best-selling books which purport to contain recipes for success. They are popular among rural migrant workers. Most migrant factory workers I talked to have either heard of the books, or know someone who mentions these books.
3. The actual word Wang used is *pao*, which means “unearth something from the ground.”
4. For instance, Wang gave me a password, with which I could access the material he uploads online.
5. One notable example is the Media and Empowerment of Rural Migrant Project funded by the Ford Foundation, which supports the cultural activism and research of a number of media scholars and postgraduate students. This collective has done considerable work in teaching skills, introducing political perspectives, as well as bringing a cultural activist sensibility to the NGO workers.
6. I conducted ethnographic work domestic workers in China from 2004–6. See Sun (2009).
7. This is not to diminish the struggles of ethnic minorities in China for cultural and political autonomy, nor is it to elide the fact that class, ethnicity, gender, and place often intersect rather than exclude one another to produce relations of domination and subjugation.

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