

Urban aliens:

The alienation of migrant workers in China and the complicit Chinese state.

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It is possible to defend the fact that modern China is a capitalist state from a purely numerical economic perspective whereby the massive increase in private enterprise, entrepreneurship, and profit emphasis in reform policy show capitalist behaviour. It is on this superficial basis that many authors (eg. Weil, 2006; Mitra, 2003; Chen, 2002; Loong-Yu & Shan, 2007) working on the problem of modern China and especially her migrant workers take that fact for granted. However, by bringing a human aspect into this economic equation we can more fully appreciate the insidiousness of state instituted capitalism driven by an approximately 147.35 million (Mou, et al, 2011) population—by some estimates, making up about 16.8% of China’s total population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009)—

the world's largest internal migration (Fishman, 2005) as under or unemployed peasants travel to the city to fill assembly lines and construction sites. As of 2007, Jian & Huang, found that 78.8% of migrant labourers surveyed worked in construction and manufacturing industries, typically on the frontlines. These workers are often underpaid, forced to work long over-time hours, and are housed in substandard dormitories, as were found in China Golden Garments (Pun & Smith, 2007). They are also typically undereducated with some suggesting that only 79.1% finish junior middle school (Jian & Huang, 2007). It is because of this cheap, disposable labour that Special Economic Zones (SEZ), like Shenzhen, have been able to expand from rural towns of 30,000 to huge



only 11% of migrants participate in community organizations and events in Wuhan (Yang & Zhu, 2007). Workers are also underrepresented in use of urban employment services. They tend strongly to draw employment from referrals and advice from social networks based out of their hometowns (Jian & Huang, 2007), and as such, in the city, remain comparatively isolated from the urban society whilst also having reduced connection to their hometown networks. These issues of minimal participation in the human social experience are also impacted by the tendency of migrants to move frequently reducing their capacity to build strong social nets with co-workers.

Social alienation has very real implications for the mental health of migrant workers. Mou et al (2011) found that 21.4% of migrants working in Shenzhen exhibit clinically significant depressive symptoms, while the national average occurrence is only 9.5% (Pan et al., 2008). These negative psychological figures are also supported by the recent increase in strikes from 10,000 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005 according to official statistics (Chan & Pun, 2009). Workers have also been found unusually prone to suicide and seem to use suicide threats as bargaining tools when dealing with uncooperative employers (Li & Chui, 2011). Suicide is significant as it indicates estrangement from one's own innate drive to live as a result of seemingly desperate situations. It is also an effective threat as it damages not only an employer's reputation but also destroys future capital by depriving employers of thousands of hours of future labour. Similarly, strikes also reduce productivity and to employers could be conceived of as a 'waste' of labour.

It is impossible to draw job satisfaction measures from an assessment of job-leaving behaviour as is sometimes done in the West (Archibald, 2009), as mobility is built into the Chinese migrant labour system with many labourers working without

contract or on insecure, short-term contracts (Wang, 2006; Shao et al., 2007; Demurger et al., 2009) and, thanks to the provision of dormitories in most all migrant seeking workplaces, migrants have very little motivation to remain in one location. Instability becomes a key aspect of the migrant lifestyle and thus relieves employers of health and safety measures—many high risk or toxic workplaces utilize high turnover rates to ensure that employees have moved on before symptoms appear (Shao et al., 2007)—and makes organization of grassroots labour organizations more challenging. In contrast to the raft of strikes, and the negative psychological experiences of migrants in Shenzhen (Mou et al., 2011; Chan & Pun, 2009), Li & Li (2007) found that many migrants, across 28 municipalities, provinces, and autonomous regions, viewed their employment and environment positively. They speculate that this positive assessment and seeming obliviousness to democracy and civil society is a function of a relatively strong increasing value curve and the low educational levels of many migrants. In light of China's explosive capitalist growth, including a cheap labour shortage which emerged in 2004 (Shao et al., 2007), the employers and the state may be seen to have vested interest in keeping the migrant population content in ignorance and relatively improved living standards so as to maintain these positive attitudes toward society.

In 2003, under the guise of maintaining social harmony, the state instituted the first in a number of legislations aiming to improve the living and working conditions of

policy and local application however, these reforms were little more than a gesture of appeasement. In making such gestures, the state performed an offence to the species being of the workers. With improvements on the table, peasants who had reached a





reform ultimately is little more than a gesture of placation, and so as to not impact economic factors, is so lightly enforced as to be pointless.

Another area of concern has been the transfer of household registration (hukou) from rural to urban status. As the economy opened up in the 1980s, the state made it possible for rural workers to get temporary residence and work permits to live and work in urban areas. These permits however remained expensive and authorities assaulted and/or detained any migrants found without such a permit before shipping them back to the countryside (Li & Chui, 2011). Since 2000, however, the state has suggested that cities ought to make acquisition of urban hukou more accessible, but again the state leaves these decisions to the cities and as such, the process remains out of reach for most migrant workers. In large cities like Tianjin and Beijing, for example, prospective applicants must purchase a comparatively large, expensive flat, or possess higher education before they are able to transfer their hukou from rural to urban (Li & Chui, 2011). For most migrant workers these criteria are financial impossible. There are also some cities, such as Haerbin, wherein model migrant workers are awarded urban hukou (Zhao, 2011)

state and its capitalist agenda by simultaneously offering promises of reduced social alienation whilst keeping the workers in a thoroughly alienating capitalist production relationship.

A final major move towards seeming equality for migrant workers has been provincial initiatives to raise the minimum legal wage. Across a range of regions including Guangzhou, Hebei, Hunan, Dongguan, and Wuhan the average wage rose from 659RMB in 2002 to 1305RMB in 2007, but the discrepancy between migrant and urban workers' wages remains significant (Jian & Huang, 2007). According to Demurger et al. (2009), urban residents, on average, make 1.3 times what migrant workers do. Interestingly, Li & Li (2007) found evidence that this wage discrepancy was more strongly correlated with education levels than origin, suggesting even greater motivation for city governments to keep their migrant workers under-educated and therefore inequitably employed. Nonetheless, the wage gap is real and is often exacerbated by owners illegally underpaying workers, as was the case at a Taiwanese factory in

they became 'homo economicus' with the power to select less exploitative and better paying jobs (Shao et al., 2007). China also faces regular international criticism over treatment of workers, labour law, and corporate social responsibility (eg. Boroza, 2010; Myers, 2005; Roberts et al., 2007). This criticism is a great threat to China's capitalist development in the global economy lest the conscious consumer elect to boycott firms deemed exploitative as organized by groups such as United Students Against Sweatshops, the International Labour Rights Forum, and many others. On this backdrop it makes sense for the Chinese State to make a gesture of improved conditions so as to maintain good social standing, while never actually interfering with enterprise so as to leave the capitalist market free to swell, grow, and devour the vulnerable underclass of migrant labour.

Local urbanites and urban governments, however, have less international pressure, and so, it is in their economic interest to make minimal, if any, effort to improve the lot of the migrants. Presently, as a result of Deng's "letting a few get rich first", the economic majority has the greatest lobbying power within the government and their greatest threat is from the people below. Egalitarianism could only possibly reduce the bourgeoisie and middle class wealth and so they have made no effort to create civil society (Chen, 2002). From their perspective, democracy and civil society would only lead to an unfavourable shift of power to the poor majority, undermining their earning potential. Urban citizens also tend to be better educated as compared to their migrant counterparts and as such are able to take higher jobs which the under educated migrants cannot apply for. As of 2006, many migrants were aware that their education plays a key

urban population serves its own capital accumulation needs best by keeping the migrant underclass under-educated, under-paid, and under-represented in local governments.

Hukou transfer conditions can help to stimulate housing markets (Li & Chui, 2011), and reduce the burden on urban social services making them more accessible to the locals. In light of this, it is hard for urban governments to take a humanitarian stance and demand equal treatment for all, when it is clear that capitalist economics favour blatant exploitation of the migrant working class.

Migrant workers are alienated by the simple fact of their employment in labour intensive, low wage, migratory labour. The most worrying indication of the worker's plight and subsequently the capitalization of China, however, is the state's complicit role in supplying this exploited labour force to private enterprise. The state's gestural appeasement of workers is offensive to the Marxist humanist as it invalidates the worker's feelings of ill treatment and forces him to feel positively about and 'blessed' to have work which degrades and diminishes his/her presence as a species being. This so called social harmony is not a positive aspect of Socialism with Chinese characteristics, so much as it is a control device for China with Capitalist Characteristics. Thus, China can be said to be a fully capitalist state, which, by exploitation of and cursory reforms for its migrant workers, is ensuring a compliant workforce to fuel a capitalist machine.

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