

Urban aliens:

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

Brittney O'Neill

University of Victoria

PAAS 351

Dr. Helen Lansdowne

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)—of physically, socially, and economically alienated peasants cum proletariat. These migrant proletariats are vital to China’s capitalist development and are maintained and exploited by the complicit state.

Working from a Marxist Humanist perspective, informed by Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, it will shown that migrant workers are not only alienated from the product of labour and the activity of production, but also from their species being, and other members of mankind. Most importantly, it will also be shown that the state’s legislation to ease the working and living conditions of migrants is not so much a socialist function as an under-enforced gesture which serves primarily to alienate the workers from their struggle and invalidate their potential feelings of mistreatment while failing to create real, effective change.

Since Deng’s economic reforms began in 1978, China has striven to become “The World’s Workshop” (Pun & Chan, 2008), and in doing so has instigated what some call

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 international production areas of 10.36 million in under 30 years (ShenZhen Government Online, 2011), and cities like Beijing and Shanghai have been able to orchestrate internationally prominent events such as the Olympics (Broudeheux, 2007) and the World Expo (Zhuang, 2010). Poor working conditions, increasing numbers of strikes, and increasing international concern over exploitation has driven significant scholarship in the field, which will now be used to support an understanding of the migrant workers as a consciously maintained identity-less labour resource for the state's capitalist initiatives.

The two most basic forms of worker alienation are alienation from the product and alienation from the process of production (Marx, 2003). Since privatization allowed factories to be bought up by private firms and international investors, the Chinese working class has lost all sense of ownership over their workplace and their production, especially when they are employed at workplaces outside of their home communities. China's migrant workers frequently choose this path to support rural family members (Liu, 2007). For this purpose they often take unskilled, dangerous, dirty, and demeaning

labour positions (Shao et al., 2007) whereby their labour, though producing product, for the worker, leads only to a typically meagre salary that serves to maintain his life as well as the lives of his family members left at home. Thus, the worker, as a being, has no sense of creation. He is subject to the availability of work and the availability of pay for subsistence and ceases to be an agent outside of this cycle of work and survival. This detachment is compounded by factory work on assembly lines (Magistad, 2006) wherein the worker is utterly detached from any finished product. This detachment is also evident in the way that many workers view their present position in a temporary utilitarian sense as seen in Griffiths (2010) where the young workers he follows speak of their present employment as a stepping stone: “only by collecting enough experiences can I finally do some business I like” (Griffiths, 2010). As a result of frequent mobility between workplaces, with over 40% of all migrant workers in unstable employment in 2004 (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2005), workers are unable to create meaningful connections with their labour. What’s more, as position requirements including youth, specifically those in their teens or early twenties, and larger, stronger stature (Fan, 2004) attest, workers are used as an expendable resource. High annual turnover rates of 30-90% (Smith, 2003) ensure that employers hold no responsibility for the welfare of the worker and thus they transmute human work into faceless labour.

Workers are also alienated socially as they struggle to assimilate to new surroundings and social norms, and find themselves estranged from their own identity as a rural peasant, and the other workers and urban residents that surround them. Living in an environment physically and structurally distant from their origin, the workers typically fail to participate in social security initiatives and other community bodies. For example

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 migrant labourers (Li & Chui, 2011). This was the first time since the economic reforms of 1978 and Deng's departure from Maoist pro-proletariat rhetoric, that workers were protected as beings rather than just as means to a capitalist developmental end. Considered in light of the state's dedication to capital and the incongruence between state

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 plateau in the increased value curve became more alienated, their work no longer even possessed meaning in it's ability to help them improve their living conditions, and their right to indignation at mistreatment and underclass status was invalidated as the state officially improved their status. As the state is seen to be acting upon their wishes, the workers may lose their initiative to rise up and demand proper rights. This treatment is regularly echoed in the resolution of strikes. Employers have been reported to lie to workers about meetings and promise solutions to get them back in the factory only to close bankrupt and without worker settlement a few weeks later (Weil, 2006). These tactics often end strikes by making the workers seem unreasonable and rash if they continue to strike after an offer is tabled, but then, as with the state reforms, leaves them in minimally improved situations with no recourse and a loss of collective momentum.

Among the reforms undertaken by the state, the move to remedy wage arrears has probably been the most successful (Jian & Huang, 2007). This success, however, has little to do with cooperation from employers. The state admitted to having paid out many of the owed wages from its own coffers rather than the owners' pockets (Magistad, 2006). This, of course, is a prime example of the state's complicit role in the provision of an exploited workforce upon which capitalism can develop. The migrants lose their primary motivation to leave the urban work force, and yet the owners of capital remain unaffected and free to pursue profit at any cost.

Other reforms from the state have sought to improve the availability of social services, primarily insurance and education. However, since this motion was passed at the state level and the state is unwilling or unable to enforce decisions at the local level, little has been done to improve conditions. According to Jian & Huang (2007), only 26.2% of migrant workers participate in injury insurance, while 8% participate in pension insurance, 13% in medical, and 4.8% in unemployment. Because the state requires employers to contribute for employees insurance plans (Li & Chui, 2011; Shao et al., 2007) but does not enforce contribution for all employees, migrants are often classified as temporary or casual workers (Shao et al., 2007) and are not included in social security contributions. Here again, while offering a blanket statement to placate the working class, the state is reluctant to have any real impact upon forces contributing to economic development and so allows under-insurance of migrants to continue relatively unchecked.

Similarly, though the state has mandated that cities must provide a mandatory level of subsidized education for migrant children, on the ground level educational opportunity remains spotty (Dong, 2010). In a competitive academic setting, few schools are willing to risk their reputation to admit migrant children who are often behind in curricula and surrounded by negative social stigma. These schools often also contend that given the frequency with which these children switch residences, and therefore schools, it is a waste of their time and resources to admit them, on top of which, such mobility often impedes class planning which leads to imbalanced and therefore ineffective and uneconomical class numbers (Li & Chui, 2011). In response to these difficulties, some cities have created migrant only schools but these are often poorly built and staffed, making them both ineffective and sometimes even dangerous (Dong, 2010). Again, the

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, 2009). These model workers however, make up a tiny proportion of the migrants seeking permanent residence—only 200 out of an estimated one million workers in Haerbin between 2007 and 2009—and as such it is still little more than a gesture to keep the workers calm and working so as to prevent interruption in labour.

Lack of urban hukou also makes workers easier to exploit as they lack strong official ties to any one urban area and so are willing to move around the country for work, creating surpluses that drive down wages in areas where working opportunities open up. This dichotomy of tempting possibilities and realistic impossibilities serves the

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 Shenzhen in 2004 where workers struck until their wages were raised to the legal minimum (Chan & Pun, 2009). These conditions, despite offering migrants hopes of higher wages, contribute, not only to alienation through transmuting all labour into bare subsistence, but also create an urban underclass of former peasants.

Even as the state makes large sweeping generalizations to improve migrant worker conditions, the exploitative capitalist spirit is barely disguised beneath. It is not necessarily for the welfare of the people that these legislations pass but rather to alleviate the potential of migrant labour shortage as rural conditions improve, as was observed in the labour shortage of 2004 where workers' number were sufficiently diminished that

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 role in the wage gap and are accepting of this phenomenon (Li & Li, 2007) and so the

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.

References

- Archibald, W.P. (2009). Marx, globalization and alienation: received and underappreciated wisdoms. *Critical Sociology*, 35(151). doi: 10.1177/0896920508099190
- Boroza, D. (2010, April 19). Chinese suppliers to microsoft cited for labor violations. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/technology/20soft.html>
- Broudeheux, A. (2007). Spectacular Beijing. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 29(4), 383-399.
- Chan, C.K.C., Pun, N. (2009). The making of a new working class? A study of collective actions of migrant workers in South China. *The China Quarterly*, 198, 287-303. doi: 10.1017/S0305741009000319.
- Chen, A. (2002). Capitalist development, entrepreneurial class, and democratization in China. *Political science quarterly*, 117(3).
- Demurger, S., Gurgand, M., Li, S., Yue, X. (2009). Migrants as second-class workers in urban China? A decomposition analysis. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 37, 610-628.
- Dong, J. (2010). Neo-liberalism and the evolution of China's education policies on migrant children's schooling. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 8(1), 137-160.
- Fan, C.C. (2004). The state, the migrant labor regime, and maiden workers in China. *Political Geography*, 23, 283-305. doi: 10.1016.
- Fishman, T. (2005). *China, Inc.: How the rise of the next superpower challenges America and the world*. New York: Scribner.
- Griffiths, M.B. (2010) Lamb Buddha's migrant workers. *Journal of Chinese Current Affairs*, 39(2), 3-37.
- Jian, X. & Huang, K. (2007). Up-to-date investigation report on rural migrant workers in China. *China Population, Resources and Environment*, 17(6), 1-6.
- Li, P. & Li, W. (2007). Economic status and social attitudes of migrant workers in China. *China & World Economy*, 15(4), 1-16.

- Li, Y. & Chui, E. (2011). China's policy on rural-urban migrants and urban social harmony. *Asian Social Science*, 7(7). doi: 10.5539/ass.v7n7p12.
- Liu, K. (2007). Eye on migrant workers. *The Chinese Economy*, 40(3), 12-13.
- Loong-yu, A. & Shan, N. (2007). Chinese women migrants and the social apartheid. *Development*, 50(3), 76-82.
- Magistad, M.K. (2006). Chinese Migrants: Refreshing Reporting About a Longtime Trend. *The Nieman Reports*, Fall 2006. Retrieved from: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100324/Chinese-Migrants-Refreshing-Reporting-About-a-Longtime-Trend.aspx>
- Marx, K. (2003) Economic and philosophic Manuscripts 1844. In *The collected works of Marx and Engels. Electronic edition*. (Volume 3). Retrieved from <http://crkn.nlx.com/xtf/view?docId=marx/marx.03.xml;chunk.id=div.marx.engels.3.26;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.marx.engels.3.26;brand=default;query=Economic%20and%20Philosophical%20Manuscripts%20of%201844#Economic%20and%20Philosophical%20Manuscripts%20of%201844>
- Ministry of Labour and Social Security. (2005). Nongmingong Shehui Baozhang Zhuanti Baogao (Special report on the social security of migrant workers).
- Mitra, S. (2004). Chinese agricultural labourers and migrant workers face a lose-lose situation as China joins the WTO. *China Report*, 39(81).
- Mou, J., Cheng, J., Griffiths, S.M., Wong, S.Y.S., Hillier, S., Zhang, D. (2011). Internal migration and depressive symptoms among migrant factory workers in Shenzhen, China. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 39(2), 212-230.
- Myers, L. (2005, March 24). Report on China finds workers' rights violations, but also signs of hope. *Cornell Chronicle*. Retrieved from http://www.news.cornell.edu/chronicle/05/3.24.05/China_rights_study.html
- National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2009). Rural migrant workers amounted to 225.42 million nationwide at the end of 2008. *Beijing: National Bureau of Statistics of China*.
- Pan, A., Franco, O.H., Wang, Y.F., Yu, Z.J., Ye, X.W., & Lin, X. (2008). Prevalence and geographic disparity of depressive symptoms among middle-aged and elderly in China. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 105(1–3), 167–175.
- Pun, N. & Chan, C.K.C. (2008). The subsumption of class discourse in China. *Boundary 2*, 35(2).

- Pun, N. & Smith, C. (2007). Putting transnational labour process in its place: the dormitory labour regime in post-socialist China. *Work Employment Society*, 21(27).
- Robert, D., Engardio, P., Bernstein, A., Holmes, S., Xiang, J. (2006, November 27). Secrets, lies, and sweatshops. *Bloomberg Business Week*. Retrieved from http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_48/b4011001.htm
- Shao, S., Nielsen, I., Nyland, C., Smyth, R., Zhang, M., Zhu, C.J. (2007). Migrants as homo economicus. *China Information*, 21(7). doi: 10.1177/0920203X07075079
- ShenZhen Government Online: Overview. (2011). Retrieved from <http://english.sz.gov.cn/gi/>
- Smith, C. (2003) Living at work: management control and the Chinese dormitory labour system. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 20(3) 333–58.
- Weil, R. (2006). Conditions of the working classes in China. *Monthly Review*, 58(02).
- Yang, Y. & Zhu, C. (2007). Citizen participation and urban migrant workers. *Social Crossing*, 2007(6), 79–83.
- Wang, C. (2006). The changing situation of migrant labor. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 73(1), 185-196.
- Zhuang, P. (2010, March 6). Migrant workers pose headache in run-up to World Expo. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>
- Zhao, Z.Y. (2009). The 60 Thousands of rural migrants' children getting equal treatments with the local children in Haerbin. Retrieved from: http://www.china.com.cn/news/gongyi/2009-12/03/content_19003520.htm [in Chinese]