

14. Workers and Peasants as Historical Subjects: The Formation of Working Class

Media Cultures in China

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Economic reforms, industrialisation, urbanisation and migration since the 1980s have given rise to what is now often described as the ‘new working class’ in China (Tong 2012; Qiu 2009; Qiu and Wang 2012: 159–192; Leung and So 2012: 84–104). But is there such a thing as a working class media culture, and if so, what shape and form does a working class media culture take? What are the political, social and economic contexts in which a working class media culture comes to exist? And finally, if there is such a thing as the working class media culture, then what is the relationship between class analysis and media studies in China, and indeed how should future research agendas be shaped by these concerns? This chapter addresses these questions: In the first part, I discuss the master-to-subaltern transformation in the cultural politics of identity construction and provide an outline of the main media and cultural forms and practices that are associated with the new working classes in contemporary China. In the second part, I consider the empirical, methodological and analytical implications of adopting a class analysis perspective, and in so doing, provide some thoughts on the shaping of media and communication studies as a field. I argue that, for the same reason that labour sociologists cannot agree on the level of class consciousness among China’s workers (Chan and Siu 2012: 105–132; Leung and So 2012: 84–104), it is difficult to generalise about the connection between new media and communication technologies and the level of workers’ class consciousness. At the same time, I suggest that although the development of a working class media culture is uneven and its contour somewhat unclear, its impact could be far reaching and its social-political implication is not to be dismissed.

This discussion cautions us against, on the one hand, an essentialist idea of a pure and authentic working class media culture, and on the other hand, a dismissive view about the long-term political, social and cultural impact of working class media practices.

From Proletarian to Subaltern: Working Class Media Practices

It is now widely agreed that three decades of economic reforms has transformed China from one of the most egalitarian societies in the world to one of the most unequal societies in Asia and the world (Sun and Guo 2013; Whyte 2010; Lee and Selden 2009; Zang 2008: 53–70; Davis and Wang 2009). The impact of socioeconomic stratification has been extensively documented in the work of sociologists, economists and political economists. The main beneficiaries and agents of the social economic growth in the decades of economic reforms since the early 1980s are ‘cadres, managers, and entrepreneurs’, or what have come to be described as China’s ‘new middle class’ (Goodman 2008: 24). In contrast, workers and peasants, once members of the ‘most progressive forces of history’, representing the ‘most advanced forces of production’, have lost their status as the most favoured social groups. ‘There is no denying that large sections of the working class have lost their privilege and joined the new poor since losing their “iron rice bowl” and becoming detached from the CCP’s historical mission’ (Guo 2008: 40). The consequences of this process of class restructuring are indeed far reaching. Workers and peasants are now described as members of the ‘disadvantaged groups’ (*ruoshi qunti*).

Profound social changes have forced the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to make necessary adjustments to its rhetoric on class discourses. Surveying the analyses of social restructuring

by China's social scientists, Yingjie Guo identifies two crucial processes by which social classes are categorised and explained. The first is the deliberate evasion of class struggle discourse. This strategy resorts to acknowledging the reality of socioeconomic stratification in reform-era China but proposes the doctrine of social harmony as a strategy of managing class conflict. The second is the process by which intellectual work circumvents rather than raises class consciousness. With the class struggle discourse made inoperable, the entire society is now urged to look up to the middle classes as exemplary of preferred values, lifestyles and behaviours (Guo 2008: 51).

The Chinese workers in the neoliberal era of capital accumulation are not a monolithic entity. Noticeable differences exist in terms of grievances, pattern of mobilisation and collective action, subjective identity, between rural migrant workers and state-enterprise workers, and between workers in private and joint venture factories in south China, and rust-belt state workers in north China (Lee 2007; Leung and So 2012: 84–104). However, across the board, in terms of media representations of the Chinese worker, we have witnessed dramatic shifts in narrative strategies, discursive positions and ideological agendas. The identity of the worker has changed, along with the political, social and economic meaning of work.

'Workers', which once denoted dignity and ownership of the means of production, are now widely described as *dagong* individuals, denoting casual labourers for hire in the capitalist labour market. In the socialist era, workers engaged in labour (*laodong*), which gave them dignity, pride and moral legitimacy; now they are rural migrant workers (*nong min gong*, meaning peasant worker), who exist as cheap labour, which is either in excess or short supply, and who are in constant need of self-improvement in order to make themselves qualified for capitalist production (Yan 2008; Pun 2005; Sun 2009). Whereas in the socialist era they were the proletariat vanguards in possession of supreme moral leadership, they have become the

object of urban and middle-class sympathy and compassion. We now are confronted with a most uncomfortable and, to the CCP, inconvenient truth: the workers and peasants may have become the masters of socialism, but are now occupying the bottom of the social hierarchy. Workers, particularly rural migrants, are now often described as people from *diceng* (literally meaning ‘the very bottom of the rung’) and this description evokes a spatial metaphor of a vertically arranged social hierarchy. Thus, in reality if not in rhetoric, and truer about some individuals than others, we can say that workers’ socioeconomic status has regressed to where it was before their historical *fanshen*.

Literally meaning ‘turning over the body’, the term *fanshen* evokes a corporeal metaphor to connote the complete change of political identity, whereby the downtrodden have finally stood up to become speaking subjects. *Fanshen* therefore has the ‘extended meaning of casting off economic and political oppression and assuming full citizenship’ (Hershatter 2007: 87). Made familiar to western scholars through William Hinton’s influential book of the same title, a documentary account of the revolution in a single Chinese village (Hinton 1997), the notion of *fanshen* draws on Mao’s famous logic that ‘where there is oppression, there will be rebellion’, and is essential to the successful mobilisation of class consciousness, a crucial dimension of the revolutionary cause (Cai 2010). What is noteworthy is that while the ‘position reversal’ (*fanshen*) discourse was widely resonant with and widely used by workers and peasants in the socialist era, *diceng*, in contrast, is a term mostly used by urban middle class academic and cultural elites to describe those below them. For instance, novels and poetry about rural migrants, often written by migrants themselves, are described as *diceng* writings (*diceng xiezu*) and *diceng* culture (*diceng wenhua*). In addition, those at the bottom rung are perceived to be morally inferior, lacking in civility, and ill equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary for China’s modernisation and integration into the global economy.

In the grand narrative of modernisation, the worker is no longer cast in the role of moral leadership; instead, he is often found wanting in ‘intellectual capability and personal quality’ (*suzhi*). In contrast to the discourse of dignity, the discourse of *suzhi* functions in the narrative of ‘elite modernist technologies’ (Jacka 2006: 56) as both an instrument of neoliberal governmentality and a technology of the self (Yan 2008; Anagnost 2004: 189–208).

Eschewing the Marxist notion of class in terms of the relations of production, *suzhi* codes the class-based difference between rural migrants and the urban middle class. Furthermore, *suzhi* ‘works ideologically as a regime of representation through which subjects recognise their positions within the larger social order’ (Anagnost 2004: **page number**). Given that migrants construct their identities and understand their experience in reaction to and within the framework of state and popular discourses (Jacka 2006; Sun 2009; Yan 2008), 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 dominant discourses, which have inevitably cast the rural migrant as being in need of *suzhi* development (Yan 2008). The worker is no longer a morally righteous proletariat; instead, he is a shadowy figure who moves across the increasingly ‘polysemic and hybrid’ discursive universe of 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). 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 tokenistic representation, market-driven urban tales inundating the popular culture sector, independent, alternative, or underground documentaries on the transnational art circuits, and various forms of cultural activism engaged in by Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) workers and their intellectual allies. In addition, all these ideological

sites must decide on the extent to which they draw on a socialist cultural politics of the working class.

Widespread socioeconomic stratification has not only led to the marginalisation of the workers in a material sense, it has also given rise to the ‘culture of inequality’ (Sun 2013a: [page number](#)), evidenced in the hegemonic language of the urban, consumer-oriented middle class, along with the marginalisation of workers’ and peasants’ voices. In other words, if the proletariat cultural practices shifted from the tactics of the resistance of the weak to assume the position of the powerful in the revolutionary narratives (Cai 2010), such power dynamics have largely been reversed in the reform era. However, this does not mean that workers and peasants in the revolutionary discourse spoke their own language; in fact, they were using the vocabulary provided by the state, and their proletariat speech acts were sponsored and organised by the state. Rather than seeing this state-people relationship as that of top-down indoctrination, Hershatter points to a mutually appropriative dynamic, whereby the people were able to borrow the official language to make sense of their own past experience of exploitation and subjugation. For Hershatter, as well as literary critic Xiang Cai, the real failure of a socialist proletariat culture is due not so much to the imposition of an official language of class domination and class struggle onto the people. Rather, it is the tendency of the official language, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, to become increasingly ‘homogenising’, ‘unilinear’, caricaturised, falsified and ‘overblown’ (Hershatter 1993: 108).

Nor does this mean that Chinese workers in the neoliberal labour regime are resigned to returning to their position prior to the revolution. In a wide range of ideological spaces and discursive sites, and in different shapes and forms, workers again assume the pre-revolutionary position of resistance and rebellion, albeit in a much more technologised and

mediatised form. Workers' media practices demonstrate wildly varied levels of agency and political consciousness. They range from opportunistic engagement with the mainstream media for purposes of protecting or defending workers' rights and interests, to active participation in media activism aimed at productive alternative, even oppositional discourses. For instance, staring at the hegemonic power of the mainstream media, aggrieved migrant workers often make the 'choiceless choice' of threatening to jump from tall buildings on construction sites in order to force management to pay wages owed to them. Workers' decisions to insert themselves into media spectacles by staging 'extreme actions' testifies to workers' understanding of how to exploit media logic, but at the same time they are acutely aware that the effectiveness of their tactics are subject to the vagaries of politics (Sun 2012a). These media spectacles, as well as workers' involvement in them, highlight the David-versus-Goliath power imbalance that marks worker versus state/capital relations, as well as the complexity of the structure-versus-agency dialectic.

Workers' media practice also takes the form of adopting new media and communication technologies to produce alternative materials as testimonials to work conditions, labour disputes, and the everyday reality of marginalisation (Xing 2012: 63–82). For instance, migrant workers have become increasingly savvy with the use of new media technologies to protect their rights and publicise individual experiences of injustice, including work-place injuries, failure to receive wages and unacceptable working and living standards (Tong 2012). Qiu (2009) refers to these incidents as 'new media events'. Contrasting them with televised events, rituals and ceremonies, which are sleek in presentation, grand in scale and often take place in important spaces, Qiu argues that these media practices, enabled by the internet and new media technologies, nevertheless have the capacity to raise public awareness and effect real social change, even though they are small in scale.

Worker activists also engage in various forms of creative practice, such as *dagong* poetry and fiction. Whereas one could be forgiven for thinking that *dagong* life in the industrial heartland, notorious for its low pay, high levels of alienation and punishing effects on the body and soul, is hardly the ideal stuff for poetry, the truth is that long work hours and lack of tertiary education has not stopped many literary minded workers from creating poetry for self expression. For many worker-poets, writing poems is no longer an idle pursuit. It is about finding meaning and purpose in an otherwise meaningless existence (Sun 2012b). Many lines from *dagong* poetry, for instance, have been transformed into lyrics by activist songwriters and performers, enabling them to be ‘read’ and performed in a variety of formats. Sun Heng, a well known worker-singer and songwriter from the New Worker Art and Cultural Festival in Picun, rural Beijing, regularly puts music to *dagong* poems and performs them for migrant worker audiences. Also, lines from *dagong* poetry are often chosen to accompany the visual presentations, installations and exhibitions showcasing the work and living conditions of workers, leading to a range of highly dispersed and unpredictable modes of distribution, available to both workers and urban consumers. Finally, most worker-poets utilise online spaces, particularly blogs, to publish their work and engage in dialogue with readers (Sun 2012c). This approach allows these writers to bypass the conventional institution of publishing. At the same time, the online reputation of some of these writers has led to book contracts with more traditional publishers (Sun 2013b).

Both *dagong* poetry and *dagong* literature seek to create alternative spaces where workers’ suffering and experiences with social and economic injustice and exploitation can be narrated. In doing so, they effectively create a new space — albeit much more mediatised and in many cases virtual — to act out the new proletariat speech act of ‘speaking bitterness’. The

noticeable difference with its socialist antecedent is that rather than ‘speaking bitterness of the past and savouring the current sweetness’ (*yiku sitian*), these new, mediated and technologically enabled genres of speaking bitterness are records of the bitterness and suffering *here and now*. Although many worker-poets and worker-novelists have left the assembly line in the factory to work in ‘white-collar’ jobs, some — especially those connected with labour NGOs — make a point of identifying themselves as *dagong* writers, and see it as their mission to advocate for workers’ interests and class positions.

Migrant workers write blogs on *dagong* lives, and activists and leaders from the worker community effectively use *weibo* (a microblogging platform similar to Twitter) to inform, mobilise, organise and coordinate collective actions against capitalist management (Qiu 2012: 173–189; also see Willnat, Wei and Martin in this volume). Other activists produce visual materials, including videos, documentaries and photography for the primary purpose of raising awareness among the wider community, as well as class consciousness among the workers. Although these grassroots media practices can hardly compete with mainstream media in terms of the scale of production and level of exposure, they nevertheless represent some nascent media forms and practices that have been made possible by the advent of digital visual technologies and online spaces (Sun 2012d: 83–100; Sun 2012e). It has been observed that with the exceptionally high level of uptake of mobile phones and social media platforms such as QQ (Chinese version of Skype) by rural migrant workers, engagement in new media practices has become an integral aspect of the very fabric of the everyday experience of the worker, especially workers that belong to the younger generation (Qiu 2009). In other words, workers’ media practices should no longer be considered as external to workers’ socioeconomic experience as industrial labourers. They are part of the same experience.

This account of the media practices favoured by workers is admittedly sketchy. Qiu and Wang's comparison (2012: 159–192) between the workers' cultural spaces of rural migrants in Beijing and state workers in Anshan points to divergence between rural migrant workers and state workers in terms of cultural practices and media strategies. At one end of the spectrum, witnessing media practices favoured by migrant workers which do not *prima facie* present themselves as active acts of opposition, one can be forgiven for thinking that mobile technologies, online technologies and social media function more as 'opium', diverting workers' attention to mundane pursuits instead of making commitments to political and social causes of 'liberation' (Tong 2012). In some cases, rather than a tool of empowerment, the mobile phones belonging to rural migrant workers can be used by their employers for purposes of control and micro-surveillance (Wallis 2013). Like their urban consumer counterparts, migrant workers spend much time in internet cafés and on their personal computers and mobile phones playing games and reading fantasy novels or 'how to succeed' self-help books. They also, like their urban counterparts, enthusiastically use camera phones to create a digital form of 'autobiography' and 'self-portraiture' (or 'selfie'), with meticulous attention to and reflection on the body (Gai 2009: 199–202). Rural migrant women working in the service sector in Beijing have been found to use their phone-cameras to produce images that make sense of their displacement and to document the transformations in their lives (Wallis 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, citing the examples of factory workers using mobile phones, blogging and social media in successful organisation of strikes, collective actions, and other interests-protecting activities, one is tempted to subscribe to a more hopeful view of empowerment of the worker afforded by new media technologies (Qiu 2012: 173–189).

Working Class Media Cultures: Implications for Future Research

So far, this discussion has traced the disappearance of the master-of-the-nation discourse and the subjectification of proletariat subjectivity in media and cultural expressions. It has also outlined a range of media and cultural forms, practices and content which bear the trademark of the oppressed, marginal and subaltern. It shows that workers, formerly the rulers and masters of the nation, have once again taken up the ‘weapons of the weak’. At the same time, the discussion also illuminates a number of themes that are worth bearing in mind in future research. First, working class media forms and practices exist only in response to and in juxtaposition with mainstream media, including both official and commercial media. Second, the cultural politics of identity construction engaged in by both the ideological mainstream and the working classes in contemporary China are necessarily played out by referencing — critically, appropriatively and even ironically — its socialist antecedents. Third, the media forms and practices favoured by the working classes in the state sanctioned neoliberal market economy are shaped by new media and communication technologies.

In so far as the construction of the worker’s identity is concerned, this is a shift from a proletarian to subaltern identity. While the former aims to reinforce the idea of workers as members of the most progressive social forces whose values, beliefs and behaviours are to be emulated by the less progressive social classes, such as the intellectuals, the technocrats and the bourgeoisie, the latter has the main purpose of resisting hegemony and creating alternative spaces to the mainstream, while simultaneously gaining voice, visibility and recognition. As Xinyu Lü, a Marxist scholar at Fudan University, Shanghai, observes sharply, Chinese workers and peasants, who used to be the political and moral backbone of socialist

China, so large in number and so indispensable to its revolutionary history, have well and truly become the ‘subaltern’ class in the Chinese contemporary polity (quoted in Zhao 2010a: [page number](#)).

This reallocation of discursive resources to accommodate the interests of the urban middle class is reflected in the media practices of the ideological mainstream, which in turn predetermines the research focus of media and communication studies. For instance, there is a surfeit of research interest in China’s transnational, urban middle class as producers, intended consumers, subject matter and beneficiaries of economic reform. These include, for instance, media’s role in perpetuating the values and lifestyles of urban, middle class consumers, discussions on the prospect of a bourgeois public sphere or civic society brought about by the use of digital, social media among the urban middle class and of course, China’s going-out ambitions and its soft power agenda. Furthermore, there seems to be a tendency to engage in research in these areas as if they were discrete and unconnected with the pressing issue of socioeconomic stratification in China.

Yet, to demonstrate the hidden connection between these lines of inquiry and the issue of class inequality is precisely what makes research in Chinese media studies empirically significant. As Chinese media and communication scholar Zhengrong Hu observes one has to wonder, as China goes full-steam ahead with its efforts to present its voice and image to the world, how this unified and positive voice and image — as a correction to the excessively western portrayals of China — can possibly incorporate the diverse interests of various social classes (Hu and Ji 2012: 32–37). Similarly, Yuezhi Zhao argues that class analysis is central to our understanding of the media and cultural sector, since this sector is not only the site of production and economic exchange, it is also the means of social organisation and the site of

subjectivity formation (Zhao 2008: 76). For this reason, she argues that media and communication scholars must explore the ways in which transnational capital and domestic forces intersect to shape China's communication sector (Zhao 2008: 18). At the same time, she also stresses the importance of studying how the media and communication sector shapes the subjectivity and class consciousness of China's highly segmented working class, arguing forcefully that the 'rise of China' cannot possibly be sustained in the long run without the rise of China's lower social classes (Zhao 2010b: 544–551).

Despite the fundamental difference in the ways in which workers and peasants are represented in the two historical eras, there is little attempt to show how a retrospective review of the socialist period can be productively informed by and benefit from the hindsight of the ensuing era, which has witnessed economic reforms, market liberalisation, the reappearance of class conflicts in social life, and the disappearance of the theme of class struggle in official discourses. Xiang Cai's groundbreaking book, *Revolution/Narrative* (2010), a deconstructive reading of major literary works in the period of 1949–1966, is a conspicuous exception. In this book, Cai examines in exceptionally fine-grained manner the discursive construction of the worker identity, the meaning of labour and purposes of the industrial modernisation in the socialist regime of truth. But such attempts have been limited to literature. In the field of media and communication studies, in comparison with the emerging body of work on the media's coverage of workers in the reform era and workers' activist media practices (both of which inform the discussion of this chapter so far), there is little work on the question of how workers, labour and industrial work are represented in mass media in the three decades prior to the start of the economic reforms. For instance, although we now have some knowledge of how urban commercial cinema constructs marginal social identities such as rural migrant workers (Sun 2012f), in comparison, we know

little of how films set in factories in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (and there are quite a few) negotiate the relationship between workers, party leaders, and technical experts. In addition, while we have witnessed a flourishing of scholarship on the New Documentary Movement in China which focuses on rural migrants, industrial workers, gays and lesbians and other marginal identities such as HIV victims (e.g. Berry et al. 2010; also see Cao in this volume), how its predecessor, the 'special topic' documentary (Lu 2003), constructs workers and the significance of their labour against the background of national self-reliance and socialist modernity is relatively unclear. Similarly, we know that some young technology-savvy workers, equipped with digital camera phones, have taken up amateur photography as a way to document their work and their lives, and in doing so generate an invaluable visual source from which to understand the class experience of this social group which is large in size yet seriously under-represented in mainstream visual culture (Sun 2012e). Interestingly, this research also indicates that in terms of aesthetics and style of representation, some of these self-representations seem either reminiscent of, or consciously evoking the visual idiom from the revolutionary representations. Yet to establish the historical continuity and disjuncture between the two eras calls for a more systematic analysis of news photos as a historically specific signifying practice. How, for instance, did news values in socialist journalism, including photojournalism, inform news media's coverage of workers' activities and achievements in publications such as the *People's Daily* and the *Worker's Daily*?

Knowing answers to these empirical questions is a matter of urgent intellectual and political concern for a number of reasons. Firstly, socialist media relied heavily on visual technologies, particularly in the form of news photos, propaganda documentaries and films for purposes of mass mobilisation, moral education and political propaganda. In comparison with literature, which required some levels of literacy, or art, which was accessible to only the more cultured

echelon of society, visual media representations such as the newspapers, special topic newsreels and films offered more direct ways of reaching mass audiences. Screening propaganda films, documentaries and special newsreels was a crucial means of political socialisation through the organisational mechanism of the workplace and the school. For this reason, leaving a vast discursive site largely unexamined means not knowing how visual media contributed to the socialist legacy of proletariat culture. Secondly, many of the contemporary cultural practices engaged in by subaltern groups adopt or appropriate the language of earlier socialist cultural forms and practices. They look to socialist cultural expressions as sources of political, moral and cultural repertoires (Xing 2012: 63–82). Hence in order to understand fully both the cultural politics of the workers' current cultural struggles and the prospect of their cultural struggle, it is important to revisit historical practices by situating them in their particular historical context, as well as through the retrospective lens of the radically transformed social, economic and political reality of today. It is precisely for this reason that Yuezhi Zhao issues a clarion call for media and communication scholars to 're-root the area in history', so that we become more 'mindful of China's revolutionary history and the ways this history casts a long shadow over today's reality' (Zhao 2009: 177).

Finally, but not least importantly, a long-range prospect of the working classes' social destiny is unlikely to emerge unless we consider the metamorphosis of the social construction of class experience from the socialist to the current neoliberal era of capital accumulation. In the introduction to his book *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams (1971) speaks of a 'cultural revolution' as the revolution of the third kind, following the democratic and industrial revolutions. The cultural revolution, argues Williams, is a particularly 'long revolution', and is the 'most difficult to interpret'. In the same way that, as Williams (1971: 12) argues, 'we cannot understand the process of change in which we are involved if we limit

ourselves to thinking of the democratic, industrial, and cultural revolutions are separate processes', we cannot understand the process of change in the long revolution if we limit ourselves to thinking of workers' media and cultural practices in historically discrete or isolated terms. Sociologists of labour also caution against taking an ahistorical perspective, given that the formation of class, the emergence of class consciousness, labour movements and social movements are believed to take a much longer time span than two or three decades to take full shape (Chan and Siu 2012: 105–132).

There are of course conceptual and methodological implications for pursuing this line of inquiry regarding the relationship between class analysis and media studies. It requires us to go beyond the framework of propaganda, which so far has dominated our understanding of the socialist mass media, with its preoccupation with the issue of political control, censorship and ideological indoctrination. Also, this requires us to reconsider the role of the Chinese state in the formation of proletariat cultural legacies. As Zhao (2009: 177) explains, this calls for a 'recognition of the Chinese state as one forged in the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist social revolution, with a historically grounded popular base of legitimacy, not as an absolutist state which the European bourgeois fought against historically'. It requires media scholars to take a cultural-political approach to address a specific concern with questions of media forms and media practices, including delving into the cultural politics of the proletariat worker identity, in a range of media forms whose discursive and visual mediation of the worker identity has so far largely eluded scholarship. It involves asking important questions, such as who has access to the means of producing, shaping and perpetuating the political lingua franca; what signifying practices are dominant in a given space and time; and what are the origins of the discursive power to name, label and define working class identities. It also explores the common narrative forms, tropes and strategies adopted to transform a group's

perspectives into common knowledge that 'we' all share, as well as the process by which private and personal longings, dreams and desires become 'public allegories', making certain social groups' desires and longings more legitimate than others (Rofel 2007).

Given the master-to-subaltern identity transformation of the working classes, the question of how media and communication research can productively engage with the notion of subalternity must be put on the agenda. Developed most prominently in Indian and Latin American societies, and mostly in the contexts of race and ethnicity, subaltern analysis is concerned with making the invisible visible and giving voice to subalterns 'who cannot speak'. It is becoming an increasingly attractive approach among those concerned with issues of agency, voice and identity in China, albeit in radically different social contexts (Pun 2005; Yan 2008). In her research on prostitution in Shanghai in the early twentieth century, China historian Gail Hershatter observes that the theorisation of subalternity, although developed in the colonial history of South Asia, can be productively engaged to explore relations of subjugation of the oppressed people at the intersection of gender, class and the Chinese state. Hershatter rightly cautions us, however, that any attempt to engage with the concept of subalternity must start by appreciating its 'multiple' and 'relational' nature. For the same reason that the Indian nationalist elites and subaltern politics were intertwined and hence the question of who is a 'subaltern' is relational (Guha and Spivak 1988), tracing the shift from what Paul Clark (2008: 142) calls the 'proletarian nobility' to subalternity in the Chinese context must also take into account a wide range of complicating factors, including the sometimes convergent and other times divergent interests of the state, NGOs, the urban middle class, transnational intellectuals and Chinese workers. Rather than take the presence or existence of subalternity as given, we must 'take seriously the categories through which

historical subjects make meaning of their own experience, the degree to which subalterns both legitimate and subvert hegemonic categories' (Hershatter 1993: 106).

In the case of the Chinese rural migrant worker as a subaltern figure, two things are particularly worthy of note and further inquiry. The first relates to the issue of subaltern position. Comparing various cohorts of factory workers in China convinces Rofel (1999: 98) that the identity of the subaltern selves is not 'intrinsic in the relations of production'. For this reason, rather than accepting claims of subalternity as given, we must ask questions about how subalternity is 'culturally produced, embraced, performed, challenged, and denied' (Rofel 1999: 98). This, argues Rofel, does not mean marginalised social groups such as China's workers and peasants stand outside of and against power. Instead, one must ask how subaltern practices are 'lodged within fields of power and knowledge' (p.168). This caution is particularly worth heeding, given that the migrant labouring body, useful to the market for its capacity to produce surplus value, has also become a field of intense symbolic struggle between various class positions. The state, capital, international NGOs and transnational cultural elites all want to speak on behalf of China's rural migrant workers. Yet, at the same time we cannot assume that all rural migrants identify with the position of subalternity. In fact, the issue of position in these diverse constructions is necessarily couched in ambiguous, complex and contradictory terms. Given this, it is essential to identify ways in which rural migrants position themselves in relation to state propaganda, middle class consumers, media professionals and cultural elites, as well as the ways migrant worker positions are expressed and managed in relation to one another within the worker cohort, including urban workers in state enterprises, currently laid-off factory workers now subsisting on welfare, and rural migrant workers as *dagong* individuals.

The second relates to the issue of subaltern movement and activism. As this discussion has delineated, the shift from the master to the subaltern position is by no means merely rhetorical and its impact cannot be overestimated. As the Marxist discourses of the proletarian class were abandoned in favour of neoliberal discourse of individual improvement, workers have been robbed of the power to effectively transform their own situation (Carrillo and Goodman 2012: 10–26). In other words, while some scholars and journalists outside China invest their hope for political change in China’s newly emerging working class, they may to some extent have overlooked the fact that this class has been so disempowered that their class position has more or less reverted back to the pre-revolutionary status quo. If this is a case of history repeating itself, we are indeed compelled to consider yet again the politics and the tactics of the weak, and subaltern’s strategies of ‘talking back’ to the ‘colonial master’. In the workers’ efforts to talk back to and negotiate relationships with such ‘colonial masters’, various types of media and cultural activism have arisen, and distinct working class media cultures are formed in this process of negotiation and struggle. To media studies scholars interested in the relationship between class and media, these no doubt present themselves as the most pertinent lines of inquiry.

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