



Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Griffiths, Michael B. (2010),
Lamb Buddha's Migrant Workers: Self-Assertion on China's Urban Fringe, in:
Journal of Current Chinese Affairs, 39, 2, 3-37.
ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
<www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies
in cooperation with the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia
Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield and Hamburg University Press.

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German Institute of Global and Area Studies
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Lamb Buddha's Migrant Workers: Self-Assertion on China's Urban Fringe

Michael B. Griffiths

Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of the everyday practices of individuality among the migrant workers with whom I worked at “Lamb Buddha”, a hotpot restaurant in Anshan City, Liaoning Province, during the summer of 2007. The majority of the data comes from four young men, meaning that the analysis complements extant studies of Chinese female migrant workers by allowing male-gendered inflections of discourse prominence. The paper examines the internal structure of “symbolic boundaries” drawn and managed in judgements, positioning statements, and so forth, attempting to regress the modalities by which these migrants assert themselves, thus showing how individuality arises from a discursive environment structured by relation to similar peers and distinctly different others.

■ Manuscript received 11 April 2010; accepted 14 June 2010

Keywords: China, individuals, identity, rural population, migrant workers, consumption, boundary, distinction

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Introduction

Between 2005 and 2009, I conducted ethnographic research across a wide spectrum of society in Anshan, a “third-tier” city in China’s north-eastern Liaoning Province, employing a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; Weiss and Wodak 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2002) to the ways in which “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002) were drawn and managed through judgements, positioning statements and so on (Griffiths 2009). Drawing on post-structuralist social theory (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984), where acts of individuation are seen as not only expressions of individual agency, but also as expressions of ontologically prior discourses legitimating cultural practice (cf. Bourdieu 1984), the research sought to demonstrate the interaction of those discourses in their actual articulation, thus reconstructing the socio-cultural dynamics by which individual identity in this context took its genesis. This proved a challenge to literatures that:

- systematically deny Chinese individuals agency with essentialist approaches to culturalism (e.g. Hofstede 2001);
- document only how Chinese struggle to individuate themselves against other agencies, corporate and governmental (e.g. Hook 1996; White, Howell, and Shang 1996); or
- otherwise show how Chinese differentiate themselves in “simple” relation to other individual agencies (e.g. Kipnis 1997; Xin 2002), while similarly neglecting to show how individual agency in contemporary China is itself structured.

Data was collected by means of note-taking and voice-recording, and interpreted with the aid of NVivo 7, a qualitative data management program. This “text” was treated as a “synchronic system” (after Ferdinand de Saussure) and disaggregated into its most reducible categories, each of which were developed in their “internal” and situationally inflected logics. This demonstrated the almost limitless capacity for Chinese individual agents to take the discursive structures with which they must assert themselves and bend these to their will. A second stage of analysis then pursued the further “grammar” by which individuals make these categories their own, by juxtaposing their iteration across “fields” (Bourdieu 1977) of practice chosen as examples of the infinitely various situations where “consumption” (de Certeau 1984) – a metaphor for the synthetic and systematizing agency by which “individuals” uniquely appropriate

and reconcile themselves to the world – results in diverse but structurally unified outcomes.

This paper presents the regression of these categories across the rural migrant kitchen staff of an inner-city restaurant, Lamb Buddha, where I washed dishes and prepared vegetables during the summer of 2007. Most of the data comes from four young men, meaning that the analysis is able to complement extant analyses of female migrant workers by allowing male-gendered inflections of discourse primacy (c.f. Chang 2009; Pun 2005; Zhang 2001). The mode of interrogation is distinct from sociological studies of “individualization” (Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Yan 2009), where the emphasis is on the diachronic extent to which individual agents must handle increasingly personal risks and responsibilities as a result of China’s reforming collectivist infrastructure: These literatures make no attempt to show how individual agency is itself structured rather than just in various ways “simply” determined. The approach is distinct, too, from cultural sociologies which have examined practices of “social distinction” (Hanser 2008) in ways very similar to this research: This paper intends not in the first place to draw out “sociological” conclusions about gender and class and so on, but to simply to regress these migrants’ modalities of crystallizing the social and cultural framework that precedes them against themselves, thus showing how individuality arises from a discursive environment structured by relation to similar peers and distinctly different others. In this way, the research speaks innovatively towards earlier ethnographies of Chinese labour migration, such as *The Chinese Laundry Man* (Siu 1987) or *With Sweat and Abacus* (Fukuda 1995), which have analysed practices of individual and collective identity-formation and performance among migrant Chinese in quite different ways.

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

Lamb Buddha is a privately owned hotpot restaurant with approximately 20 kitchen staff, 20 serving staff and a further ten management and administrative personnel. My employment here followed from eating a meal at the restaurant with some relatives shortly after the restaurant opened, one of whom had apparently been instrumental in sourcing the premises. The owner, Lin Wei (all names are anonymised), was thus eager to please, and humoured me when I said that wanted to work in a service industry business to gather data for my Ph.D. He genuinely

thought I was joking when I replied “wash dishes” to his asking me what I could do, but this changed to comments about “foreigners being very interesting” (很有意思) and “foreigners being formidable” (厉害) when he saw I was serious about the idea. Some days later, I reported for duty, and the staff manager explained to the kitchen staff that I would juggle the demands of washing dishes with observing and conversing, “thus learning about Chinese culture and society”.

After several weeks in the kitchen, I found that I was able to gather more personal data in my colleagues’ dormitories, or squatting on the roof of the restaurant, away from the structures of authority that defined our initial relationship. My approach to my colleagues was open-ended and aimed to elicit spontaneous thoughts and reactions: Driven only by the focus on the deictic markers by which informants positioned themselves in relation to discourse, I did not pursue an interview schedule as such; rather, my role was to develop quality information by earning trust through dialogue, to listen and be informed, to react impartially but sensitively, taking every conversation as a valuable example of self-assertion (cf. Heimer and Thøgersen 2006). Wherever some further rationale to stimulate discourse was required, I would simply “cast a brick to attract jade” (抛砖引玉), a Chinese principle by which commonplace observations are thrown out to goad qualitative gems in reply. Things sometimes became complicated when colleagues focused our dialogue on my answers to questions about the research, but I simply hoped they would reveal something of interest to them before I got too far into my ramble about “consumption” and so on! This approach of course meant that reflexivity and rigor had to be my constant companions (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000), but this was just as it should be.

Throughout, at no time did I feel that my foreignness was an insurmountable hindrance to research. Quite the contrary – my agency and identity as a foreigner was precisely what made informants willing to inform me: I was unavoidably “outside” by virtue of my nationality, language, culture, and so on, virtues which in a sense meant that I was not at all a threat; yet in another sense I was unquestionably “inside” by virtue of my labour, which meant that I could be trusted with information. Quite simply, from the perspective of many of my informants, I was in need of being informed, and with time I found that I was able to balance my real ignorance with an affected ignorance, and my intense interest with a cultivated disinterest, making my ambiguous position suit the demands of data collection quite well. Of course, I found that being

a young, white, tall (relatively speaking), blond-haired, blue-eyed, British male, was a significant “incitement to discourse” (in Foucault’s terminology) in its own right, and one which provoked a particular set of meanings and power relationships in the China context. But once again, this was seen as an opportunity rather than a hindrance, a sort of reference point against which to evaluate all other contextual variables (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For example, some young female migrants refused to be interviewed one-on-one, stating that “Chinese cultural tradition” prevented them from conversing alone with a man to whom they were not married; this was excused as indicative of these women’s “backward rural background” by young male migrants trying to identify with the urban and the modern in conversation with me.

The Internalization of Externality

The other migrants who worked in Lamb Buddha came from rural homes all over China, often via a hop-scotch of similar jobs (see Table 1). Most worked in the kitchen performing menial and monotonous tasks twelve hours a day, seven days a week; indeed all but one of the kitchen staff were rural migrants. One or two females of reproductive age joined young women from poorer urban families serving customers on the restaurant floor. Notably, all of the serving staff were young women (cf. Hanser 2005). The clerical and administrative workers, and those involved in the purchasing and transportation of goods, were of urban-registered household status (戶口) without exception (cf. Wang 2005). All of the former were middle-aged women; all of the latter were middle-aged men. These staff would operate a clique by gravitating to the office-end of the premises, avoiding the hot and sweaty kitchen, and joked that the difference between them and the kitchen staff was the same as the distinction between cadre and worker from the state-owned-enterprise (SOE) era. Nevertheless, some lower-ranking urban men would occasionally come by the kitchen to “hang out”, perhaps reflecting the distinctly masculine flavour of the characteristics given to sociability in this Northeastern context (i.e. where masculinity is understood as meaning “bold”, “uninhibited” and “unaffected”), but perhaps only as a foil for cheating some leisure time on-the-job out of their employers (cf. de Certeau 1984: 24-28). This limited interaction was entirely harmonious, though the urban men would notably be louder, confident and laughing, and the migrants always quieter and more careful. Even those

urban staff working at the same wage-level as the migrants would occasionally make statements belittling the “peasants” (农民) when in conversation with me. Correspondingly, many of the migrants volunteered that they were of the “lowest level” (最底层) in this urban context. The categorical urban-versus-rural household-registration divide (Cheng and Selden 1994), as well as those of age and gender (cf. Jacka 2006), were therefore highly significant dimensions of difference here.

Table 1: Key Protagonists

Name	Age	Gender	Place of Origin	Time as Migrant Worker	Professional Role	Education Level
Zhang Jiali	20	Male	Liaoning	3 years	Doorman	1 year of High School
Lin Chuan	22	Male	Liaoning	5 years	Herb Preparation	Incomplete Middle School
Xue Liang	16	Male	Liaoning	6 months	Meat Cutter	Incomplete Middle School
Wang Cuihua	24	Male	Shan-dong	7 years	Kitchen Supervisor and Guardian of the “Secret Recipe”	Incomplete Middle School
Michael Griffiths	28	Male	Britain	3 months	Dishwasher and Vegetable Preparer	Doctoral Candidate University of Leeds

Source: Author's own compilation.

Most of the young men analysed here, named Zhang Jiali, Lin Chuan, Xue Liang and Wang Cuihua, characterized their rural familial origins as a source of authenticity, moral purity, and social belonging, positives that they felt the urban environment either was devoid of or had actively denied to them (cf. Hansen and Pang 2008). Consider Zhang Jiali, for example, twenty years old, who had moved with his family “out from” countryside climes elsewhere in Liaoning Province three years ago, where he “had a simple life, close to nature, working as the sun rose, and resting as it fell”: Whereas Zhang finds the people from his home “sincere (实在), plain, simple, and true (朴实)”, he finds city people “fake”, and “two-faced” (虚伪). “The city is competitive”, Zhang explained, “It follows the laws of the jungle: Whereas the countryside is relaxed, the

city is extremely tense (特别紧张); I must work hard or be eliminated through competition (淘汰)”.

Photo 1: Key Protagonists



Source: Michael Griffiths.

Other migrants made constructions almost identical to Zhang's. Lin Chuan, aged twenty-two, similarly found the city ambiguously moral, preferring the “simple, fun (玩儿) and free” countryside and the socially open and friendly people there too:

In the countryside, we set up a table in a big yard, start the barbeque, drink, take our clothes off, get bare-chested, and drink. Oh my, it's really good, enough to make people really envious! Our neighbours are all extremely exuberant (热情). We get everything together from around the village to eat, and everybody sits in the same place; it's extremely lively, buzzing with excitement and exhilaration (热闹), not like in the city. People in the city are complicated (杂). It's like we can't make head or tail of what they're thinking: What are they thinking in their hearts? Sometimes we're scared of losing things; if we put our things down, they'll take them and use them. We need to be really

guarded against this, not like in the countryside, where we don't even lock our doors when we go out. The neighbours can just come in, but they don't take anything, and nothing is lost. Here, in the city, we fear robbers at the door and thieves coming in; we have security bars. We've got to be really careful. In the countryside you don't need to be careful: If you want to go to someone else's house you just go in; if you want to watch T.V. you just switch it on, and when you've finished you go; it's really relaxed like that. Not like the city where it's really tense and everyone is different, and everyone needs to be really guarded (防着). When you put your things down you need to hide them. I feel it's really bad.

Thus, the urban sphere was constructed as a place of uncertainty and mistrust vis-à-vis opposing virtues that these migrants believed were embodied in themselves.

Xue Liang, the youngest migrant at sixteen, responded to my asking whether his family was from the city or the countryside, by stating "countryside" with a proud assertion. Xue left for the city because his family was "comparatively poor"; he didn't want to leave, but wanted to take responsibility for alleviating the burden on his overworked and aging parents (Xue has older siblings, who, the implication is, would have been responsible in the first instance, but he wanted to do his bit to contribute too). With Zhang and Lin (above), Xue maintained: "Generally speaking, city people are not as good as people in the countryside", then made further bold and somewhat naïve-sounding statements about the status of his family:

Yes, they've always been peasants. I like the countryside. I don't like the city, because I can play when I'm at home, and pick vegetables, kick a ball around and do as I please. I can go to the mountains and catch a chicken, catch a fish, fish with crude nets (捞鱼), and go fishing (钓鱼) in the reservoir!

Xue thus conjured a life of simple pleasures and simple gradations connected with nature and feeding the family (he was probably telling me that as well as fishing with nets he has also done the "even better" fishing with rods). "In the countryside", he went on,

you can play as and where you like, you can tread (踩) wherever you like, but you can't do this in the city. You can play, but if you make the city dirty, or break something, people will tell you off.

Thus, the city was spoken of as if it were an object that didn't belong to these migrants, one that bites with only limited provocation: City people

had sworn at Xue for preparing the wrong vegetables before, as the trend is to abuse “consumer rights” by bullying rural serving staff, who will have to pay for any mistakes or breakages from their own already meagre salaries (cf. Lei 2003).

The Externalization of Internality

Despite their underprivileged status, however, not one of these migrants made the slightest apology for the urban disdain for the countryside. Both Zhang and Lin volunteered the perception that the countryside was a place of natural tranquillity, quiet and with clean air, and contrasted this with the pollution and noise of the city. Zhang believes people live longer in the countryside too; and, in defence of his roots, Lin was eager to stress that the countryside is developing now, “with mobile phones, roads, and city people visiting in their cars”, thus walking a fine line between the different and competing constructions of the countryside. That is to say, although these migrants wanted the countryside to be pure, unspoilt, and fundamentally sustaining in contrast to the “inauthenticity” and “unnatural” façade of the city, they also wanted to project an image of a countryside that somehow conjoined the best of all possible worlds. Essentially, they took what little they had and found a way to put a positive spin on it in order to compete socially.

Indeed, though all these migrants were similarly loyal to their local roots and, thrown together, formed a temporary unity of identity around this shared basis, not all expressed an anti-urban configuration. Wang Cuihua, the fourth migrant, the oldest of the four and the one who has been the longest “out” of the countryside, didn’t complain about the urbanites at all; Wang rather likes the city and wants to develop himself here:

How can I say? In every respect, the environment is cleaner; the city is cleaner than the countryside. The conditions in the village are not good, and the city has parks. There are no leisure places, karaoke and discos in the village.

Lin Chuan, too, though he did not explicitly side with the city over the countryside, drew several distinctions between himself and members of his family who have never left the countryside, intending to elevate himself in my perception. Lin has grown used to the city, and finds that there’s “nothing to do when he goes home except sit around and watch television”. He is aware of having been changed by his exposure to the

urban sphere, an experience that has come with the need to acquire a taste for economic and symbolic intricacies. As he reminisces:

In the beginning, I couldn't understand why the clothes I wore in the countryside could be worn for many years, but here I needed to change clothes every quarter; and why I had to buy bottled mineral water, when the water in the countryside I could drink straight from the well: Everything in the city required money.

All these young migrants originate from the countryside; therefore, their identities are similarly characterized by a fundamental ambiguity arising from increasing integration into urban ways of life. Lin Chuan, indeed, already five years out of the countryside, has learnt to handle the complexity of consumption and has become fluent in the dynamics of identity; he is quite adept at making the best use he can of the range of goods and cultural products around him to compete socially, and is in many respects indistinguishable from urban-registered men of his age.

The fact that Lin buys “fake” branded products is more a source of pride than shame: Of course he is aware that his Nike training shoes are not the “real thing” and that he’s not in the same distinguished position he would be in if they were – everyone knows that only people with money buy the “real” product. What is more important to Lin, and the people around him of or near to his “level”, is that he has shown sufficient control of his environment to know what the top marks are, to have surveyed his available options, and to have had the ability to find himself a good quality counterfeit without getting ridiculously out of pocket. When Lin showcases his skill in the kitchen, his friends laugh openly along with him, admitting, boasting even, that their trainers and clothes are counterfeit too, positively revelling in a mutually recognized craftiness as the “unspoken” rules of the game are spelled out: In the city, *you must be competitive*, and so long as you do so in order to survive as a “player”, to remain on top, the “arts” of the “inauthentic” are entirely legitimate; indeed, it was precisely through the confessional acknowledgement of “inauthentic” tactics that a sense of authentic identity and belonging was evoked and shared (cf. de Certeau 1984: 24-28).

In exactly this way, too, the migrants were happy to gather to watch me do *taiji* in the kitchen, forging solidarity from our rapport and mutual insubordination of the system. These situations were about “us” in the kitchen versus the urban staff “out there” in the restaurant. While one or two urbanites would occasionally join in the mirth, others would skirt away to ensure that their participation was not seen by the manager. All

such jollies were immediately suspended at the slightest hint of her presence, just as I was once scolded for breaching the boundary by venturing across the restaurant floor without first removing my apron. In the end, it was of course only the manager who represented the system: Some of the urbanites would have happily joined in had they not been so afraid of her. But if she were to betray even an inkling of the delight in symbolic insubordination herself, the entire system would be lost. Her role was essentially to keep up the appearance of an “objective” system that existed only insofar as she had to respect the owner. Indeed, this might be a poignant (if somewhat exaggerated) metaphor for all of Chinese politics, with its transcendental signifier somehow beyond all accountability – currently called “Hu” – and over 1.3 billion individual subjects accountable to the system only insofar as they report to the “level” above.

Experience Is Everything

Lin Chuan, Wang Cuihua and Xue Liang all failed to complete the mandatory nine years of middle school education, all offering a combination of failing to study well and the costs of further education as reasons for dropping out. Zhang Jiali began the first year of high school before dropping out, he says, for similar reasons: “My father really didn’t want me to continue studying because he could see I was so tired.” Zhang nevertheless attempts to claw back some of the social capital an education would have granted him, a reflection of the deep regret he later admits to me: When he quit, he makes sure to add, his teacher and all the other students came over to his home to try to persuade him to stay on, “because at that time I was the one in the family with the brightest hopes of going to university”. Xue, the youngest, explicitly states that the decision to drop out was a sacrifice made for his family, against their wishes: He knew his parents needed him to earn a wage. Wang explains that he was “kicked out for fighting”, which is probably as much a glamourisation of his failure as it is true. I ask him straight: “You weren’t good at study?”, to which he replies affirmatively whilst trying to avoid being explicit; he later admits that he “couldn’t memorize the words” and “couldn’t handle physics and geometry class”. Zhang says exactly the same, indicating that these young men have worked out how to justify their predicaments through close negotiation with each other.

Since coming to Lamb Buddha, however, Lin and Xue have developed skills that distinguish them from many of the other kitchen work-

ers. Whereas most of the others merely sort and chop vegetables, or wash dishes, Lin has been trained to prepare herbs, and Xue to operate the meat cutter. But neither of these are really an “ability” (能力), they say, “Anyone can do it if they’ve been shown.” Zhang Jiali, too, knows enough Chinese *gongfu* (martial arts) to win him the doorman’s job, but his skills are only rudimentary. Even so, he clearly feels that his brief stint at a youth military training academy is a valuable form of symbolic capital, and wears military clothes with his jeans, consciously identifying himself with a particular sector of the lower reaches of society. Unprompted by me, Lin chides urban people for not knowing about the “local products” (土特产) that have recently begun to be sold around the city, quite missing the point that urbanites now reappraise these products as desirable precisely because these products are considered backward – that is, *tu* (cf. Griffiths, Christiansen, and Chapman forthcoming).

Acknowledging this lack of formal education, these migrants emphasize the value of practical knowledge, and of the experiences they have gained through travelling to many different places to work: Coming to the city, the process of self-transformation having been undergone, is asserted as a socially competitive asset in a way which provides an interesting counterpoint to scholarly types and those who invest everything in their children’s education. Zhang Jiali, for example, at twenty, has an age “suitable for accumulating experiences”:

From the North to the South, from Shenzhen to Liaoning, the restaurants are often very different; the style of management is different. From the North to the South all the people I see are different and all the things I have seen are different.

It emerges, however, that Zhang has never in fact been to the South himself; indeed he has never left Liaoning, only recently moving to Anshan from the countryside with his parents who work in a factory in the suburbs. When Zhang speaks of collecting experiences, therefore, he speaks collectively for the migrant workers as a group, as if this is their capital, as if this is the kind of person he is becoming:

Our ways of doing things are all different. I just diversify (多元化) more and more. For example, take a problem: Normally speaking, there’s only one way to solve it. But after you’ve travelled extensively, you’ve seen the same problem dealt with in different ways in different places: There are many ways to solve the problem.

Telling it just how it is, but with laudable optimism about the transferability of different kinds of capital assets, Zhang further wagers:

Urban people compete using a different kind of competition: They rely on their brains, but we only have the ability to work. They develop their knowledge to get from “white collar” to “gold collar” to “CEO”. We must hoard experiences: save, save, save (攒足, 攒足, 攒足). Only by collecting enough experiences can I finally do some business I like. These are the only choices I have: this or return to the countryside. We just do our work well; the “white collars” develop their minds after they’ve done their work. We very seldom use our minds. I’d really like to use my mind, but it’s not yet the time.

Of course, competing socially through strategic experience accumulation is a necessity, and acknowledged as such in its construction: These migrants admit they cannot compete on the same grounds as educated urbanites. And yet, this admission marks the beginning of the counter-tactics they surreptitiously hatch, for without this these young men have only their young bodies to offer in service to those who profit from their labour: Coming to the city is expressed in terms of a highly individualizing emphasis on self-cultivation (cf. Bauman 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Once again, Zhang Jiali is especially strong in these respects:

Because the city is so competitive, I must incessantly strengthen myself. I’m reading now; this is a kind of study. I’ll prove to them that I was right, I’ll start up a business, and that’s why I’m travelling around now collecting life experience. When I’ve accumulated enough experiences, I’ll go and do what I want to do. Because everyone has a dream in life and I’m running along in accordance with my dream, waiting for the day when I grab hold of and realize this dream, and then I’ll be really satisfied, and will have a rich life. I’m just not like some other people. In China, because of the depression over where their names are listed in the high school entrance exam results tables, great numbers of students commit suicide every year. In fact, if you add them all together, there are loads like this. The pressure is too great. And nowadays, there’s no guarantee they’ll be able to find a good job even when they do graduate. There are too many university students now. The population of China is increasing. There are more than ninety million graduates.”

The “depression” and “pressure” Zhang says graduates suffer from of course probably says as much about the dark undercurrent of his “dream” as it does about the overstretch Chinese students are widely

supposed to be subjected to. Zhang's pride in making his own path in life stands in tension with the gnawing certainty that having chosen to drop out of high-school all he can do now is graft it out as a labourer and cultivate the hope of one day starting a business. In just this way, all these men, except Xue, the youngest, articulated entrepreneurship as the paradigm of success. Lin Chuan aims to be able to arrive at work on a motorbike: He must "rely on himself [and] hard work" to get there. He aims "to have the things that other people have", and is "developing" towards this "target" now. He will soon leave his job and help his sister sell fruit in the city markets, a move which many peasants and migrants see as a step-up possibly within their reach; in the future, he will "do a little business, exercise the brain, and buy a car".

Self-made Makers

This entrepreneurial streak and all-round excellent grasp of the internal dynamics of self-cultivation makes these young migrants quite distinct from the older migrants in the kitchen who grew up in the planned economy. Whereas the younger migrants are "incessantly striving to develop" (不断的争取), and "learning from going to many different places" (走南创北) to work and so on, the older migrants at the restaurant see themselves as resigned to work hard in the city, but remain still essentially rural first and foremost. The younger migrants are highly competitive, in a sense a force to be reckoned with in the city, drawing strength from their youth, their mobility, and the strategic community of other migrants, factors which equally distinguish them from Anshan's many laid-off urban workers who scarcely evince positives of the self-cultivation imperative, and who offer instead a discourse characterized by, among other things, a distinct malaise (Griffiths 2009; cf. Hung and Chiu 2003).

The older migrants in the kitchen, mostly women a full generation older than the young men analysed here, encourage the younger migrants to learn some English from me, and emphasize the value of having a character that will "push on and up" (上进心) and never be satisfied; but these women nevertheless indicate the awareness of an age divide in these respects. They all say that they themselves are generally "satisfied" (满意) with the way things are now, and glad that things are no longer like the past, a vague gloss that masks the acceptance that they will never now transcend their lower working-class status, the promise of enterprising projects of individuality applying only to bright, young, productive

migrants (cf. Jacka 2006). Indeed, insofar as these younger migrants' narratives are characterized by this very strong dual emphasis on gathering experiential knowledge and on the importance of incessant striving as the means to success, these men trace a trajectory through the "discourse of distinction" (Hanser 2008) remarkably similar to many of Anshan's private entrepreneurs, who likewise defined themselves against people with formal, cultural knowledge, and tended to emphasize the value of their own enterprising initiatives vis-à-vis this perceived deficit (cf. Griffiths 2009).

There are further similarities, too, between the younger migrants' discourse and that of Anshan's entrepreneurs: In much the same way as his own boss, Lin Wei, who likes to tell the story of how he made his fortune "from nothing" on account of his own effort and personal control, Zhang Jiali defines himself against what he perceives as the laziness of those born to and spoiled by privileged parents:

In fact, the opportunities a person has are not fixed from birth. I can strive for my opportunities. If I'd been born into a family with lots of property, I reckon I'd be really spoiled by their indulgences; little by little I'd become lazy, because I could rely on my family, because they had a lot of money. But we have to rely on our own strivings. We strive for ourselves. And through this unceasing striving we can gain more experiences for ourselves, gain more strength, and understand another aspect of this society. But they do not understand this aspect; they are unable to go and compete: They only know that when their food is ready, they can come and eat, that they can just buy clothes whenever they like. They haven't a lot of social experience.

In this way, these migrants are considerably more independent than the pampered offspring of the new urban elites, who tend to be heavily reliant on their parents, and are often comparatively lacking in competitive edge. These migrants' lives may be bitter, but their narratives are their own. Zhang Jiali sets this independence strongly against those who exercise power through personal political connections, believing that if he relies on his own efforts he'll "always be stronger than those who rely on dodgy networks". Lin Chuan likewise connects a strong discourse about inequality with scorn for corrupt officials, and more generally links "laziness" and "avarice" with a lack of success. He dislikes those who "loaf about" and believes people should always "strive onwards and upwards". But wealth and luxury consumption are entirely validated for these young migrants if the wealth has been earned through individual skill as

opposed to corrupt means: If someone has earned their wealth, Zhang explains, “I will emulate his successes and aim to overtake him”.

Emulation, indeed, probably explains much of the similarity these migrants share with entrepreneur discourse: They do of course know that this is the “right” tune to be singing in the contemporary era. But more than that, these migrants cast themselves as actually extracting from their urbanite entrepreneur employers the means to become successful and to supersede them one day (cf. Hsu 2005). Even as they give themselves over to the extraction of surplus value, which is alone what legitimates them in the eyes of those who “see like a State” (Scott 1999), these migrants aim to usurp the alliance of State and capital interests that presently exploits them, but from the inside, a stealth tactic of “poaching” (de Certeau 1984) upon this discourse without being seen: Lin Chuan, for example, talks of “borrowing strength” (借力) from people he most admires, “people with knowledge”, but nevertheless concedes that he only rarely actually meets anyone like this.

The Play of Difference

Accordingly, the essentially improvisational nature of how these migrants insinuate themselves into the constraints of apparatus defined for them largely by others is also reflected in the balancing of this strong and rather serious emphasis on self-cultivation with an equally strong playful and leisurely dimension, and this in a way which seems quite genuine – that is, not simply as a ploy to mask the reality of their exploitation, but a highly self-realizing and self-actualizing inflection of discourse quite unusual in China, and not at all dissimilar to the way in which students in Europe “go travelling” (cf. Beck 1992; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). The term that Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan most use to refer to their incursion into the urban sphere is *chuangdang*, meaning “to charge about and loaf around”, a word which casts the experience as at once immidentally purposeful, but also as random, carefree and fun. Zhang explicitly talks about coming out to work as “play” (玩儿), making the point in his explanation that “We come from afar, walk around, go everywhere and turn around.” Though he must work hard for the privilege of this frivolousness, Zhang delights in his project of individuality-making, evidently believing that a unique value accrues in the process – a value quite distinct from the capital he generates for his boss.

Xue Liang, the youngest, and a newcomer to the city, explicitly does not share this latter inflection: Though he responds to my asking if he likes his job by saying he is “incessantly improving [his] abilities” every month, he also stresses that the experience of coming to the city is not about enjoying charging around and loafing about like it is for the others. Rather, this is a harsh exile he has imposed upon himself to contribute to supporting his family, an expressed function of his strong filial piety. It might be reasonably surmised from the fact that the other migrants also demonstrate a strong link back to the family (but to a much lesser extent than Xue) that Xue will become adjusted to enjoying charging around and loafing about with his colleagues, and become more independent from his family as his labour forces him to find his freedom within it: Self-cultivation is a logic which thrives on the necessary; if you don't work on the world to develop yourself, the world works on you. Indeed, a young lad new to the kitchen from Shaanxi Province tells me how he ran away from home to come to Anshan against his parents' wishes, quite to the contrary of the filial demands that all “good” Chinese are supposed to abide by: His “coming out” from the countryside was entirely to “play”. Thus, although these young migrants know the “rules” for proper practice, they aspire to redefine these as they take control of their lives, changing established orders as expressions of their individuality.

Once again, the individual most different in all of these respects is Wang Cuihua, the eldest of the “young” migrants and the longest out of the city. Wang is not only sad that he dropped out of school, but angry: “If I was a university graduate, maybe with a masters or Ph.D., I wouldn't be in this kitchen today; I'd be working for a firm, in management.” Wang's narratives, indeed, are characterised by an overwhelmingly strong sense of self-cultivation to which all his other constructions are subordinated, and this in much the same intensely vital way as was the case with some of Anshan's entrepreneurs interviewed. Had the gods rolled the dice differently for him, he no doubt would be in a very competitive position; and indeed the Gods yet might, for whereas the other migrants seem resigned to their fate, Wang seems to recognize that his is not written in stone. Wang will fight to get back into social contention, and no amount of “loafing about” about with his colleagues is going to get in the way, and in this respect he is sharply distinguished from Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan, both of whom make very strong self-cultivation constructions too, but both of whom allow this to be subordinated to an

emphasis on competing socially by having good social rapport with people of a similar social position: Zhang, for example, reads a bit to “improve himself”, but nowhere near as much as he invests in “loafing about” with his colleagues during and after work; Lin, too, seems to talk more about self-cultivation than he actually acts to cultivate himself, and what positive self-cultivation constructions he does make, though strong in themselves, are matched by an equally powerful sense of being resigned to a life of being poor and underprivileged, expressed in narratives of inequality of resources and opportunities – “If you have resources, you have the opportunity to develop more resources”. It is as if Zhang and Lin are just showing that they know what is required for them to succeed (indeed one wonders if they have Wang in mind as a role model for their ideas), but do not or cannot practice what they preach: “It’s not yet the time”, said Zhang about wanting to “use his mind” (above). Thus, the “aims” and “dreams” of “starting a business” and taking narrative control over their lives that these young migrants share remain in most cases somewhat ethereal. But this may of course also be what binds them so closely together (cf. Pun 2003: 486).

In It Together, for Themselves

These migrants also consciously lever the feeling of good social rapport and community shared between them as strategic asset. No doubt this, too, is brought on by necessity and consciousness of the lack of being able to succeed independently. Zhang Jiali’s investment in this form of competition is huge, his exuberance of social character somewhat accounting for the strength of his instantiations of other constructs. His discourse is littered with inclusive gestures and exclamations that “we” are “brothers”, a “team”, a “family”, and so on; and terms such as “harmony”, “peace” and “happiness” are also prolific in his repertoire:

We’re all working together. After work we play games, you know, computer games. We formed a team (团队), and this team is just like a big family. We’re like brothers. We all like each other. We’re really willing to buy these clothes, because we’re all together; in fact you could say that he is me, and I am him. We are all like this, so we all wear the same clothes. When we go out we’re all the same. We set up this team (组建这个队伍) and we all really like it. We’ve all come together from every place to Lamb Buddha; and at the same time we really like this game. Now, after we’ve got along with each other for a while, we really understand each other. And, after we understood one

another, we set up a team, and became brothers; really good brothers, just as if we were family. It's just like this. We, this band of buddies (哥们儿), so-called 'brothers' (兄弟), we've all left our homes; we've all only got one child at home. We're all single children. We've all left home, you know? China has a saying: 'Having one more friend is to have one more road' (多一个朋友, 多一条路). So we like to make friends, good friends; bad friends we don't like, so we've all made friends together. We go out and drink, drink together, we're happy and open-hearted (开心). Then we go singing, or playing. We also chat, and when we're together it's 'freedom of speech' (言论自由): Whatever you want to say, you can just say it; if you don't want to talk about a particular problem, and I ask you, there's no need to answer it. Everyone's really happy together; it's really good. If today we want to drink some wine, we'll go out drinking together, and everyone will play until late at night, drinking, happy, and free of constraint. These waitresses, we've got pretty good relations. For example, if we want to drink today, we'll go out and drink, and they'll come with us. But they only drink a little bit – us men drink loads – after all drinking's not too good for the body. As long as everyone's really happy together at that time, that's fine.

Note how Zhang's enthusiasm makes his talk of "work" immediately turn into talk of the "game" and the "team", spilling on from there into talk about the other kinds of "play" his band of "brothers" indulge in: Work and play, fiction and reality, are all blurred by the metaphor of sociability based on "innately" exuberant character. Note, too, that drinking is a huge part of Zhang's construction of good social rapport: He mentions alcohol twenty-five times during a two-hour interview, and nearly always in the context of friendship and belonging. Note also that the importance of social rapport is not just about being friendly or liked: There is a highly strategic nature to Zhang's competition that he does not attempt to disguise. The *duiwu* he uses for "team" can also mean "rank and file" as opposed to leaders (again reflecting his self-identification with the lower strata of the military). As with the conflation of experiential accumulation and incessant self-cultivation discussed above, Zhang sees it as necessary for him to compete through social rapport: This is the only way he can avoid being "bullied" (欺负) by those more powerful than him, he says, and if he has more friends he'll be "happier and won't be eliminated by the competition (淘汰)":

Although I have no money, I've got lots of friends, and they are true (真心) friends. For example, if I'm in real trouble, they'll help me out

of their own initiative, but he [the hypothetical privileged urbanite he is defining himself against] won't. And when the day comes when he's got no money, his friends will all leave him.

Xue Liang shares with Zhang the view that his colleagues are “like a family, brothers and sisters”, who protect him from being “bullied” (欺负) and help him get over the intense homesickness he feels at being separated from his family. Lin Chuan, too, frequently uses “we” as if speaking for a community of migrant workers, and likewise complains of urbanite bullying. Quite distinct from middle-class students in a university dormitory, who will of course form hierarchies almost immediately based on all manner of variables and dimensions (class background, social popularity, fashionability, etc.), these migrants would not allow hierarchy to form between them. But the sense of belonging they articulate is not at all altruistic (cf. Hansen and Pang 2008); there is little thought for the self-sacrifice and the “good of the people” common to the older, pre-reform morality. Though the “collectivity” (Pun 2003: 486) remains the source of moral integrity, the belonging asserted is a proximity bond defined against the urban sphere that surrounds them and ultimately a means of self-promotion. This is how solidarity is formed, and individuality is articulated as the free choice to identify with similar others.

Consuming Themselves

Material consumption plays an important role in binding these migrants together. In the large excerpt above, Zhang Jiali makes reference to the fact that all the young migrants from Lamb Buddha have bought the same T-shirt, a printed design from a store that trades without shame on the name of the successful Hollywood movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Every month, on the evening of the day they get paid, the kitchen and waiting staff go out eating and drinking together wearing these T-shirts. Some blow their entire salary in a single night. Some, Zhang says, borrow and blow so much that they have to hand over their wages to their creditor the day they get them. Lin Chuan, whose “sociable rapport” construction is strong, but not as strong as Zhang Jiali's, doesn't always want to go: He would like to save some money, but fears that if he doesn't go all the others will think him “stingy and ungenerous” (吝啬). When these migrants consume together they share the costs precisely between them, a practice they call “AA zhi”; there is no concern to outdo each other in

generosity because of “face” issues. The exception, for Lin Chuan, is when he consumes with his girlfriend, in which case it is expected that he will pay for everything, an expectation thrust upon him by the demands of “responsibility” (责任). As with all these four migrants, finding a girlfriend and his poor home condition are expressed as the two imperatives that drew Lin Chuan into the city to work in the first place. These two themes are importantly linked: Lin couldn't find a girlfriend in the countryside because he “hadn't developed”, had “no future”, and “no money” – “marriage and all that requires money” – yet the reason he can't save much money is because he has found a girlfriend (the daughter of an urban family struck down by the SOE lay-offs) and must spend so much to impress her.

It is significant, moreover, that these young men have “consumer behaviour” concomitant with their symbolic boundary management: Zhang Jiali, single, describes his consumption as “carefree” and “easy-going”, this “really suits my personality”, he says, “I'm not like those who plan and calculate what to do with their salary every month, whether to save or spend”. But then, as if Zhang is aware of how these statements elevate his primary competitive element, sociable character, over his also strongly espoused self-cultivation, he adds that although he can be impulsive, he will save for things he really likes, possibly with Wang Cuihua in mind as a comparator here again, who earns more and saves more. And this is also where Zhang and Lin most differ from the majority of the entrepreneurs analysed elsewhere in my research: Wang Cuihua has a sense of control and cultivation to his consumer behaviour that, without exception, my businessperson informants all say they had in their youth. Wang will only keep a little money in his pocket, but plan to buy larger purchases. From Zhang's strong “sociable rapport” perspective this is considered “tight” (紧). Zhang concedes that age may be a factor here, now referring to Wang Cuihua explicitly, who at twenty-four must “find a girl and buy a house”. Indeed, whereas Lin Chuan is motivated to earn and spend primarily because of his girlfriend, Wang is single, more focussed on developing himself and realizing long-term gratification, on the lookout for a girl he can grow with.

Almost needless to say, however, alongside the excesses of affable comradeship and “playful” self-actualisation that bind these migrants closely together, another major part of how these persons strategically “compete” is a firmly frugal inflection of discourse. Though an excess of exuberant consumption between friends is important to Zhang, he also

thinks that designer brands and “luxury” consumption are “wasteful”. I am to understand a reference to Zhang’s boss, here, who is known to have spent several thousand Chinese *yuan*, “even as much as ten thousand”, on T-shirts and shirts. Zhang professes to prefer substance to form: “In fact, I may have a shirt just the same, but with a brand that is not inferior, and mine will be longer lasting, more durable.” Defining himself against the excesses of the rich he asserts:

They haven’t learned how to manage the money, but we’ve learned how to fully bring the money into play, so that it’s not dead but alive, and will become a lot from a little, and enable me to live on – only then can I say I have the ability to create my own road. If you give them one hundred *yuan* and give me one hundred *yuan*, I may be able to live for a month on this one hundred *yuan*, but they can only live for a day.

But Zhang will not be pitied by any narrative of inequality, contending that his own competitive configuration levels the playing field. Indeed, it is not merely the value of economy that Zhang is keen to impress, but the moral purity and fibre that attends a frugal life, defined against the superficial emptiness of wealth. Of those who believe that their money makes them more powerful than him, he says:

There are some people with money who always think they’ve got money; if you’ve no money they’ll despise (鄙视) you. He thinks he can use his money to make you do anything. But he doesn’t know that money can’t do everything. There are some things that money can’t buy. He doesn’t understand these things. He’s always thinking: This money of mine can do anything; I can buy anything; I can have a woman, a car, a house; and everyone is embracing me.

Both Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan seem to settle for a life of “second best” in material terms, and find a kind of nobility in that: “If everyone else had a house worth several million *yuan* I’d be satisfied with a house worth several hundred thousand, and I wouldn’t draw invidious comparisons with them”. They draw comparisons, too, against another new kitchen-hand from Jiangsu province whose parents supplement his income allowing him to spend “every fen” he earns on fancy haircuts, clothes and arcade games. Zhang says the new arrival’s parents are also poor, ordinary workers, but don’t discipline their son like his own parents do.

Predictably, the most frugal of the group, Xue Liang, is also the one who invests most in the competing through constructions of moral char-

acter. This theme is not especially strong in any of the other young migrant workers, except where it is employed to derogate the city at the expense of the countryside, or to document filial piety by dutifully remitting part of their income to their families. But moral character does not form a major organizing principle in the narratives of any of these migrants except Xue. Xue's mother is old; he cannot allow her go out earning all the time (老挣钱), so he has "come out" from the countryside to work for her. His parents, like Zhang Jiali's, work in a factory, and save every single *fen* they earn: "not like me", says Xue, "wasting money". Xue feels guilty for the very little he spends, even though he is actually far more sparing than any of his colleagues. As soon as Xue saw the "bitter work" (辛苦) his family were putting in to help him through school, he dropped out and worked the land with them for a year before coming to the city. Of the 850 CNY Xue earns per month, he lives on 150 CNY and saves the rest for his parents. Xue says his parents save all their money for his future anyway, so he gives everything he can to them now. Thus, "moral" sacrifice repays "moral" sacrifice. Xue misses them terribly and is only very rarely in contact with them because they're always at work in the factory "where there are no phones". Like Zhang and Lin, Xue says he's not bothered by inequalities of wealth so long as he is cheerful, and so long as his parents have money to spend and are not worried about food and clothes.

Making It: Distinction within the Group

As maintained, the fourth migrant, Wang Cuihua, is different on nearly every account from his colleagues. A closer discussion of his trajectory through discourse sheds further light on those he is so different from. Having ardently worked his way up, acquiring new skills at restaurants around the city since first arriving from the countryside seven years ago, Wang is now the supervisor of the kitchen staff. At nearly 2,000 CNY per month, he earns more than twice what Zhang, Lin and Xue do, enough to launch him into more "middle class" levels of discretionary expenditure. Wang articulates his difference from the others very keenly, drawing upon his relations with his colleagues only in order to distance himself from them:

I have no way to talk with the others about the things I think about; they are mindless, playing and gaming. I am thinking about work, and moral things; how to be a person (怎们做人); how to earn people's re-

spect; how to improve my quality of life; how to give more significance to my life; and how to make my own ideals closer and closer every day. They only think about playing, eating, and drinking.

The main difference between him and the others, Wang says, is that whereas they waste time and talk about useless things, play on the net, play cards, and go drinking in their spare time, he cultivates himself. When he was younger, Wang used his spare time to research things on the internet that would improve his abilities, “never telling others about it”, strategically avoiding competitors who would trip him up. “I read and apply what I learn to my life”, he explains. His favourite book is the biography of Li Jiacheng, Asia’s richest man, whom he admires for his self-cultivation and control. Concomitantly with this emphasis, and quite the contrast of Zhang Jiali, Wang drinks when he goes out but only one or two bottles: It’s “sickening” to drink lots, and “bad for health”. Of course, this saves him money too. Though Wang lives in the same dim dormitory as the others, this is by no means a necessity for him, but a choice. Besides, Wang has been in the dormitory long enough to commandeer the best space, a room which he shares with his junior “apprentice” (徒弟), a recent migrant. The other migrants have to share at least four to a room. Wang “keeps” (养) a fish and a plant in his room. He likes to come from work and see the results of his cultivation swimming to and fro, and the plant sprouting leaves. Wang says that doing this “greatly improves [his] environment and moulds and shapes [his] character and taste (陶冶), instilling a great sense of achievement [in him]”. Wang is the only one of these migrants who uses any such cultivated lifestyle concept; in the others’ narratives, constructions of self-cultivation were limited to hard work, perseverance, and vague economic ambition. Wang also tries to improve his “personal quality” (素质) (cf. Murphy 2004), a term that the others don’t use at all.

I don’t want to be mediocre; I don’t want an ordinary life. If this year I don’t have enough money to realize my dreams I’ll just keep working on for another half year, a full year.

Wang’s future is just to “work, marry, and save money for this”, he says. But saving, and indeed buying expensive clothes, is an important part of this, because Wang has no girlfriend at present. Clothes are the only thing he spends on. Despite his earnest self-cultivation, Wang buys “leisurely” clothes, “like the Kappa brand”, as if to make it appear that distinction comes easily to him. But particular brands are not as important

to him as a “novel and original style” and whether or not “the product suits him” and “his outfit”. This form of consideration is entirely absent from the other migrants interviewed here. Lin Chuan may be proud of getting his knock-off Nikes for 45 CNY, but this is only about the mark itself rather than any sense of expressing his own style.

Wang admits that the sense of expressing his individuality through clothing has been an acquired taste:

My thinking has changed since I came out of the Shandong countryside. I used to only require that clothing was warm in the cold, but now I also want it to look good. Perhaps in another few years my requirements will change again, so that not only is it good-looking but that I also pursue the latest trends. That'd be even better.

When Wang goes to discos, he goes with other people, not his colleagues from Lamb Buddha. Wang has had these other friends for years, he says, before eventually admitting that they are migrant workers in other restaurants also. He didn't want to make this explicit at first, wanting me to think he was entirely integrated into the urban sphere. Realising I was aware of this, Wang added that he has urban mates from Anshan also: He goes to the clubs because these friends invite him there. Wang also gives the impression that these friends are older than him, and that he can learn from them.

But the consumption (消费) level is too high for Wang in the clubs, he says. I ask him if he goes to the clubs to find a girlfriend. He says “no” in a way that implies that the girls there wouldn't be interested in him because of his rural migrant status. He describes this situation as “chaotic” (乱), possibly to disguise this implicit admission. Somewhat contradicting himself, he then says that he doesn't often go to the clubs anyway, as if he has just been telling me he goes there only because doing so would cast him in the light of a higher status. He then betrays himself further, trying to “save face” as he ducks away from the charge I have drawn: The high level of consumption in the club has nothing to do with his not looking for a girlfriend there; it's just that he prefers to save his wages. None of the female waiting staff at Lamb Buddha have taken Wang's fancy; he has higher aspirations. He eventually volunteers that wealth and status are directly related to your chances of finding a girlfriend in China. “Players look for someone at approximately the same level; only the very rich can afford to take someone without thinking of whether they have money or not”.

But Wang is confident about his chances of finding a bride to match his self-perception; he has proved to himself that he can hit his self-imposed targets. He once promised himself he would buy himself a chunky gold necklace when he first earned 2,000 CNY a month. He saw others wearing them and envied them. At that time he only earned 600 to 700 CNY per month, so he saved. In fact, he had enough money saved years ago to buy one, he says, but he had set himself this target and wouldn't buy it until he earned 2,000 CNY per month. In this way, Wang describes how he climbed steadily up the ladder, target by target, constantly applying himself to learn new skills; he doesn't think it at all strange that some of the other migrants subordinate to him are twice his age but get paid only half of what he does. "What exactly is it that you have and the others don't?" I ask him directly. "They lack a heart for striving on and up", he answers: Wang must "lead them by example", "by not eating and smoking on duty, for example", thus documenting the awareness that personal development comes with social responsibilities. Thus, in Wang alone among these migrants are constructions of self-cultivation narrated retrospectively; the others, Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan, still speak as if they have yet to achieve.

Wang's emphasis on the importance of civil behaviour also sets him apart from his colleagues. Civility is not high among most of these men; Zhang Jiali always has filthy hands and fingernails, for example. But all these young migrants are much more cognizant of civility than many of the older migrants and indeed many urbanites: Working in an industrial kitchen that must be meticulously cleaned once a week for inspection no doubt raises civil consciousness; and Zhang, after all, works on the door. The fear of urban customers who will complain if anything is found dirty is also no doubt a factor here. But Wang is the only one who draws on civility as a major competitive construct. Again he confesses:

I'm not scared of you laughing, when I first came out from the countryside I didn't even know that I should wash my feet before I slept; I only washed them once a week. This was really dirty. Later, slowly, after a year, I realized that other people washed them every day, and so I tried it a couple of times. Ah! My feet felt so comfortable! After this I slowly began to change in other ways too.

Wang, apparently, also only infrequently washed his clothes before, and his skin would itch because they were dirty; later he began to change them every day or so. He also began to wash his socks and change his underwear every day. At this point, it seemed like Wang was going

through a mental list of all the hygienic things he does, unprompted by me, as if these behaviours were perhaps not quite as second nature to him as he intended to make out. Feeling the need to justify himself in this way had no doubt come from the exposure to his urbanite friends. Sure enough, in due course Wang began to moan about people throwing things out the windows without caring whether people were below or not, a typical urbanite civil grievances. Wang, moreover, was the only one of these four migrants who evinced awareness of the difference between the “spatial” sense of civility and the more aesthetic aspects of this discourse, indicating the extent of his appreciation of and allegiance with the gloss of urbanization:

Not only is this a kind of respect to other people, but also a kind of respect to yourself. If you go out with your friends when you're dirty, and see a friend, and your body is dirty, and your clothes are worn-out and shabby, this is disrespectful to others.

While Zhang Jiali, by contrast, expressed a concern to keep the restaurant peaceful, this was more about his duty, and ultimately masculinity, than it was about civility; and though Zhang was quite considerate in civil terms, and polite, he made no judgements of this civil form in his boundary management. Xue Liang mentioned in passing that he washes feet and body before sleeping, but otherwise, like Zhang and Lin, mentioned civility hardly at all.

Diachronic Discussion

Looking at the patterns of discourse and behaviour revealed across and between these young migrants, it might be supposed that there is a certain typical trajectory that migrants take through discourse over time. Those very young, naïve, and still strongly attached to the countryside home, like Xue Liang, in whom the familial inflection of discourses of “good moral character” was by far the most dominant, may likely become more like Zhang Jiali and Lin Chuan as the spatial, temporal and discursive distance from the family grows and they enter their early twenties. For those of Zhang and Lin's age, for whom such constructions were notably less significant, however, girlfriends evidently become a demanding reality, and the pressure of having to compete socially means that earnest application and experience accumulation, and the conflation of these asserted vis-à-vis persons with a formal education, emerge to take a significant place in these migrants' narratives. Even so,

insecurity and youthfulness mean that this conflation is subordinated to the importance of achieving good social rapport between colleagues and the other similar persons they have been thrust together with by the experience of migration, who effectively become the surrogate family. At this stage, material resources still prevent these migrants from breaking into competition in the urban sphere, though they do mix as more-or-less equals with lower-ranking urbanites and similarly youthful urbanites, blurring boundaries.

Wang Cuihua may be exemplary of a further stage of evolution where, several years on, and with several more years of maturity under the belt, the tension between the imperative to cultivate and maintain inter-collegial social rapport and personal achievement has been resolved to the considerable benefit of the latter, and these young migrant workers become single-mindedly focussed on their own achievements. Those who are unable to make this transition are faced with return to the countryside, or perpetuity in the kitchens, often alongside eventual sons and daughters as was the case here. Many, if not most migrants, eventually return to the countryside. For those who sense the promise of avoiding this trap, the preference for the countryside as the locus of morality, authenticity, and hope for the future evidently shifts towards the city too, as discourse and reality co-inform one another. At this stage, finding a mate, securing a higher income, saving money, thinking about owning your own house, caring for your material presentation and style, and so on, all become much more important in inverse proportion to the fading importance placed on collegial and even family relationships, though this cannot of course be openly professed in the China context for fear of the charge “selfishness” – Wang Cuihua says he will help his family if they need him, but strongly emphasizes that he must achieve his own success first before he can really be in a position to help others, a distinctly modern discourse that only other competitive, middle-class, urban Chinese seem to share (cf. Beck 1992; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). By now, cultural codes of civility are highly invested in as a marker of increasing urban belonging, acquired perhaps through alternative, inspirational, and openly strategic friendships sought with possibly older, wealthier and more powerful persons that these migrants can learn from and grow with (cf. Bourdieu 1984); while gross leaps on the social ladder remain prevented by social stigma and familial pressure to marry at approximately the same “level”, it is not entirely inconceivable to see that at this stage the fate of rural migrants may blend with those urban fami-

lies heavily affected by lay-offs from state-owned enterprises, through intermarriage and so on, as was the emerging case with Lin Chuan and his girlfriend.

In every case, these migrants will have undertaken an epic journey rich with raw material to consume as projects of individuality. As one rural migrant-turned-entrepreneur put it elsewhere in my research: “By moving you can live” (人挪能活). This may likely be the way of things to come in an “individualizing” China, for it is highly significant that for all the intensity of feeling and belonging shared by the young migrants, this was all to change almost overnight as they found their individual destinies. Within just a few months of the data for this analysis being collected, Wang Cuihua never returned from what was supposed to be a brief trip home to see his family in Shandong; He found his girl and stayed to get married; no-one in Anshan knows what he is doing now. Zhang Jiali moved on from Lamb Buddha even before I did – when the urbanite lad who had previously held his job on the door returned and took over again, it was understood that stepping down was the proper thing for Zhang to do. In time, Xue Liang and Lin Chuan had moved to different restaurants too, cashing in on their mobility and networking skills for a tiny raise in pay at jobs scouted for them by other migrants. Almost all of the older migrant kitchen staff, on the other hand, remain at Lamb Buddha to this very day, washing up dishes and peeling vegetables, day in, day out, with little hope of moving anywhere. Individuality, after all, requires that you differentiate yourself in relation to your environment, and it is so much easier to differentiate yourself against your own future than your own past.

Conclusion

This paper has broached a close textual analysis of the everyday practices of individuality amongst the rural-urban migrant workers from an inner-city restaurant in Anshan City, named Lamb Buddha. In giving primacy to practice as a theory of “consumption” (de Certeau 1984), the analysis sought to chart a unique “third way” between the omnipresent imperatives of the cultural collective, on the one hand, and the autonomous agency of individuals, on the other, by showing how individuality emerges from a discursive environment structured by relation to similar peers and distinctly different others. Though most of the data came from young men, meaning that the analysis was able to complement studies of

Chinese female migrant workers by allowing male-gendered inflections of discourse prominence, the analysis in fact finds striking structural similarity between these men's discourse and the narratives of the young migrant women that other scholars have analysed. This suggests that the gendering optics these scholars have applied to the problem of China's internal migration is somewhat exaggerated: Insofar as these men's discourse is gendered, it is simply a gendered inflection of the same discourse found in female rural migrants of similar age, the differences between migrants' narratives, at a structural level, being as much to do with age, generation and marital status (read: economic responsibility) as gender per se. Indeed, while this analysis broadly concurs with Tamara Jacka's (2006) exposition of a divide between the optimistic, enterprising discourse of younger, unmarried female migrants in the city, and the pessimistic, "powerless" discourse of older, married migrants (see also Hanser 2005), it does not concur with Pun Ngai's (2005) argument that young female rural migrants are bound by familial patriarchy in ways that young male migrants are not: The analysis has shown how young male migrants are just as pressured to conform to particular models of manhood and masculinity as migrant women are pressured by familial expectations pertaining to marriage, child-raising and so on.

These young men analyzed were shown to consume the cultural constructs bequeathed to them in different ways, but their narratives were highly unified, even though this structuring was also in another sense highly individualized (cf. Bauman 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002): Essentially, there was a strong emphasis on making one's own way through life, resourceful striving, independence of achievement and so on, but in ways which were nevertheless structurally shared across a fluid community of individuals and openly articulated as such in ways that brought such individuals together. The urban-rural status categorization was of course a major structuring factor here; but although these migrants saw their countryside origins as sources of purity that the city was devoid of or denied them, their identities were characterized by marked ambiguities attending increasing integration into the urban sphere: Though the lack of formal knowledge impinged heavily on their prospects, the "inauthentic" tactics for social competition these migrants employed in order to survive, and their resourcefulness in subverting prior prohibitive rules, were functions of a highly innovative discursive competency. This was most explicit in constructions that combined practical ability with a distinctly entrepreneurial grain of striving, the experi-

ence of travelling widely to work and these migrants' earnestness being levered in ways that demonstrated a remarkable capacity to improvise upon the necessary. These findings, paralleled in Carolyn Hsu's (2005) analyses of young female migrants working in a fast food restaurant in Harbin, challenge the intellectual disdain for the commercial agencies that impact upon material consumption still prominent in the China literature (e.g. Pun 2003; Chan 2001; Yan 2003; cf. Davis 2005): Insofar as Lamb Buddha represented an economy of power relations, the workplace itself was "consumed" as a project of personal development.

Still, a further way in which this configuration of discourse was emphasized was the way in which having little choice but to compete in these ways bound these migrants together in solidarity. These young men exhibited some of the strongest instantiations of competing as a function of "innate" sociable character found anywhere in my research, their youthful exuberance and strength drawn from each other to a large extent fuelling their trajectory through other discursive configurations. Bonds of intimacy more traditionally associated with China's "proximity-altruism" (Griffiths 2009) moral discourse – family, nation, and role, moreover, were shown to be weak in direct proportion to the extent to which the will to self-cultivate was strong across these individuals. This, and the balance between investing in personal cultivation and competing through sociable solidarity bonds was shown to be resolved in favour of the former, a much more individualized inflection, in those migrants who had been in the city longer. These findings resonate with Amy Hanser's discussion of *reqing* (cf. Hanser 2006: 477-482): Competing through "innately" sociable character is a distinctive configuration of discourse in China's Northeast with strongly Socialist overtones; the discourse is perhaps most prominent in middle-aged individuals of a "working-class" disposition, who nevertheless do not generally share the same highly individualized inflection of discourse that these young migrants do (cf. Griffiths 2009, Chapter 10). Though Hanser perhaps overplays the element of nostalgia to *reqing*, the discourse is indeed about the assertion of virtues such as "honesty", "sincerity", and voluminous quantities of "bold", "unaffected self-expression" (read: comradeship), against wealthier, more marketized and individualized people. And it is in these respects that these migrants' discourse is highly gendered: For where competing through "innately" sociable character is distinctly "masculine" in this context (though a great many women of the region pride themselves on being especially like this too), the opposite is a discourse of sophisti-

cation, refinement, and above all division, a distinctly “feminine” *cordon sanitaire* quite removed from the earthy and inclusive tones of the Socialist era and Communist revolution. Thus, when we observe that, at Lamb Buddha, promotion at work and increased income were factors tilting the entire configuration of discourse towards a more urbanized inflection, where civility and aesthetics emerged as structuring principles and future prospects were undergirded by a retrospective narrative of having already achieved, we saw how “horizontal” assertions of individuality became underscored by “vertical” assertions congruent with emerging constructions of “class”.

In this way, we see how discursive competency in the contemporary era arises as a highly individualized conflation of knowledge (education), civility, and the narrative logic of self-cultivation and control, the consumption of which is shown to be distinctly opposed to those more explicitly inclusive logics of moral character (family, proximity, etc.), and “innately” sociable characteristics, both of which are defined by reference to the Socialist past and the collectivized/ agricultural economy. Discursive axioms such as formal education, age/ generation, proximity to the land, and proximity to the SOE structure (or rather the non-proximity of these), crystallize to produce a more individualized, reflexive and existential subject, most immanent in those individuals who best adapt to the demands of state-market transition and the responsibilities this brings. This is perhaps somewhat obvious given the meta-narrative of market reform, but it is all the more significant that this research finds this diachronic emphasis from a synchronic study which in no way assumed this at the outset (cf. Griffiths 2009). As such, the analysis finds it cannot concur with Deborah Davis’ suggestion that differences between individuals in contemporary China are more to do with age and gender than “class” (Davis 2000: 19-20): Though age and gender were hugely important factors at Lamb Buddha, my analysis finds remarkable structural homogeneity across the genders, in spite of age, yet immense structural difference across “classes” of individuals, and this in spite of gender differences, though the gender homogeneity is much more significant at the “higher” end of the “class” spectrum (however loosely this might be defined) than at the “lower” end as was the case here (cf. Griffiths 2009). Gender was an important differential at Lamb Buddha, but primarily as a function of structures imposed upon these migrants by their employers, and in any case nowhere as important as “class” – itself a function of individuality.

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