The would-be migrant: post-socialist primitive accumulation, potential transnational mobility, and the displacement of the present in northeast China

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Abstract

This article argues that "would-be migrants"—people who prepare for migrating overseas to the extent that their present lives are significantly changed—should become a central figure in migration studies. There are many more would-be migrants than actual migrants, and they also have deeper impacts on migration processes and local societies. Instead of treating it as a derivative of the category of "migrant", this article establishes the would-be migrant as the primary figure, and argues that migration is a contingent outcome of being a would-be. In order to do so this article delves into the living conditions of would-be migrants in northeast China, with a focus on two aspects that concern them the most: the exorbitant intermediary fees and the high risks involved. The would-be migrants' experiences suggest that the prevalent pattern of unskilled outmigration since the 1990s should be understood as a result of developments inside of China, particularly a condition that I call the "displacement of the present". The figure of would-be migrant is not only methodologically revealing for migration studies, but also urges us to rethink how we may engage with rapid social changes.

Keywords

Would-be migrant; China; displacement of the present; risk; temporal anxiety; shame

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Outmigration (*chuguo* or *chuguo dagong*, literally going overseas to labour) was a common topic in daily conversations in northeast China[2], in both cities and the countryside, in the 2000s. Almost everyone I met in Liaoning province during my fieldwork from 2004 to 2008 had some opinions about *chuguo dagong*. In the discussion however there was no generic concept equivalent to "migrant" or "outmigrant". People talked about specific individuals only ("Zhang in Singapore working as a shop assistant"). The closest expression to "(out)migrant" was "those who have gone abroad". The phrase was seldom used and did not mean much more than such purely descriptive terms as "those who are lucky" or "those who are tall". In contrast, "those who wait to go abroad" (*dengzhe chugou de*) was often heard. It referred to a *category* of people who share certain characteristics. For instance, people would say "those who want to go abroad are ambitious" or "I don't want to do business with those who wait to go abroad". "Those who wait to go abroad" are "would be migrants" who were exploring possibilities of outmigration actively to the extent that their daily lives were significantly changed. The typical would-be migrants in the northeast were low-skilled workers who paid first instalment to migration intermediaries. The period of being a would-be lasted from a few months up to five or six years, with two or three years being typical. Most of them planned to migrate legally as illegal channels hardly existed in the northeast and were diminishing nationally.

The absence of the notion of "migrant" in daily conversations should not be seen as abnormal. "Migrant" as we use it today is a peculiar concept. For most people in most time

[1] I thank the anonymous reader for the valuable comments and Zhu Shaoshua, a M.A. student at Peking University, for her help with some statistical data used in the article.

[2] Northeast China, or Manchuria, consists of the three provinces of Helongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning.

of history, different mobile subjects-- sailors, soldiers, pilgrims, diplomats, students, beggars etc.--were treated qualitatively differently. It made no sense to lump them together under a single rubric of "migrants". As McKeown (2008; 2011) clearly documented, until the late nineteenth century the U.S. migration regulators focused on ships' captains, passenger brokers, innkeepers, the processes of recruitment and the conditions of transport, instead of migrants themselves. It was only after the Chinese exclusion act in the 1880s did migration regulation become fixated on *who* the migrant was and what *intentions* the migrant had, as opposed to *how* the migrant had travelled. In other words, the regulatory gaze shifted from the assemblages of activities that made the journey possible to the single individual—the "migrant". Apart from the intensification of border control, this shift was reinforced by the positivist approach in both academic research and bureaucratic reasoning. The positivist approach held that individual behaviour was the only real basis of social phenomenon and therefore policies must aim at intervening individual behaviours in order to be effective. The fixation on migrant was further compounded by the dominant liberal ideology, including the notion of human rights, which takes the essentialised free and rational individual as the central subject.

Thus, the commonsensical view that migration results from migrants' activities sounds commonsensical only when we stick to the positivist perspective and methodological individualism. "The migrant" is to a great extent a subject invented by modern researchers and regulators in order to understand migration from nation-states' point of view, particularly from the migrant-receiving countries' point of view. We really can't blame my informants for not talking about the "migrant".

But what is at stake is not only the divergence between the migrant-sending and -receiving contexts. In Chinese official vocabulary, labour outmigration was refereed to as "labour export" or "international labour cooperation", which was measured by the annual

number of exits (flow figure) or the total number of migrants working overseas at the end of the year (stock figure). The outmigrants were called *chuguo renyuan* or *waipai renyuan*—personnel who have gone overseas or who have been deployed overseas. The direct translation of "migrant", *yimin*, is almost exclusively used as a verb meaning settlement migration. *Huaqiao* or overseas Chinese is commonly used, but as an official term it normally means those who acquired permanent foreign residency. No would-be migrant whom I met associated him/herself with huaqiao in any sense. These Chinese terms are parallel to the notion of "migrant" in that they count only those who have actually crossed borders. The reified notion of migrant and the associated understanding about migration were primarily results of "seeing like a state".

In contrast to the migrant as a policy subject, the would-be migrant is a figure in daily life. "A figure is someone whom others recognize as standing out and who encourages reflexive contemplation about the world in which the figure lives." (Barker et al. 2013: 2-3) Figures, as opposed to ideal types, averages, norms, or roles, are real persons with distinct characteristics and can thus be commented on meaningfully. Would-be migrants are very busy. They have to navigate "possibilities and constraints, procedures and forms, brokers and payments, waiting time, training or legal regulations" (Belanger and Wang 2013: 49). Their activities are much more complex and consequential in shaping the migration project than the action of crossing borders is. Statistically there are many more would-be migrants than actual migrants. Less than 0.005 per cent of the total population in Liaoning province outmigrated as unskilled workers in 2011 (just over 20,000 out of 40 million. CHICA 2012: 13[3]), but almost everyone I met knew of at least one would-be migrant, though not always directly. Finally, the prolonged waiting and the high cost involved had significant impacts on the would-bes' family life and employment prospects. This was particularly so for those between

[3] This figure was based on reports from recruitment companies licensed by the ministry of commerce and might have missed a small number of workers migrated via recruitment companies licensed by the labour ministry.

twenty and thirty-five years old, as most would-be migrants were. Would-be migrants were the central link between transnational migration and local social changes, probably more so than both migrants and the left-behind.

Would-be migrants are not "aspiring" migrants. Carling (2002) and de Haas (2010) call attention to the aspiration to migrate, and identify the gap between the aspiration and the actual capability as the key cause of involuntary immobility, illegal migration and the associated social disruptions and emotional frustrations (see also Appadurai 1990). Aspiring migrants started with an aspiration about migration as "ideal-type projects" (Carling 2002: 17) or as "ready-made blueprints…in the store-house of culture" (Hagerstrand 1996: 653). The aspiration was then either fulfilled or frustrated. However, as Miyazaki's work on hope (2004) and Chu's on desire (2010) show, a mental status like aspiration needs to be constantly performed and reworked. Once we unpack "aspiration" ethnographically, as I shall do in this article, what appeared to be desire for migration turns out to be many different things, sometimes completely unrelated to migration.

Would-be migrants are not future migrants or migrants to be (c.f. Belanger and Wang 2013). Would-be migrants are not defined by their relationships to the imagined future migration, but are defined by their life histories and current living conditions. Instead of treating "migrant" as the primary category and the would-be as derivative, I turn it upside down and see migrants as contingent outgrowth of would-be migrants. How would-be migrants became actual migrants was largely a matter of luck (for similar phenomena in other contexts see Wenzel 2000; Salter 2006; Alpes 2011: chapter 3; especially Chu 2010), but what would-be migrants do have significant impacts on their later experiences as migrants (Belanger and Wang 2013).

The goal of this paper is two-fold. First, by foregrounding the figure of would-be migrant, I aim to advocate a research approach that conceptualizes migration as processes

embedded in broader societal transformations instead of individual migrants' behaviour. A focus on the would-be migrant suggests that outmigration from northeast China is to a great extent an outgrowth of the social transformation in China. This leads to the second goal of the article, namely to shed new light on more general social changes in China. Would-be migrants' experiences reveal a condition that I call the "displacement of the present." Would-be migrants were driven by the fear about the present, about being left behind in the fierce competition for resources in the post-socialist primitive accumulation. Migration and other similar projects were taken as instrumental means to jump to the future; and they did not have ethical values in themselves. Thus, would-be migrants are important not only for migration studies, but can be valuable for broader social inquiries and for rethinking critical engagement more broadly.

The case: would-be migrants in post-socialist northeast China

As a figure of the everyday life, the would-be migrant is always context-specific. This article portrays would-be migrants in northeast China of the late 2000s. I chose northeast China, particularly Liaoning province, as the main research site because of the sudden surge of outmigration in the region since the early 1990s. Liaoning sent out 20,798 migrants through 138 intermediaries that were licensed by the Ministry of Commerce in 2011, making it the fifth largest among all provinces in terms of outmigrants (CHICA 2012: 13) and the second largest in terms of number of intermediaries, far ahead traditional emigration provinces in the southeast (15 intermediaries in Guangdong, 30 in Zhejiang and 37 in Fujian; see CHICA 2011: 9-10, Table 1.3). My informants estimated that one third of all Chinese arrived in Japan in the 2000s were from the northeast. A college student from Shanghai in Japan was teased by friends when he visited home for acquiring the northeastern accent. Shanghainese are

known for their cultural sensitivity and local chauvinism, but what could the student do: “I [even] didn’t realize I was having the northeastern accent as I was mingling with northeasterners in the college, at work, and everywhere!”

The northeast had no tradition of outmigration or even internal migration. As the national base of heavy and military industries and referred to as “the eldest son of the People’s Republic”, the region lived through archetypical state socialism that was characterized by extremely low level of mobility. Nearly 90 per cent of all employees in Liaoning in 1995 were working in formal work units, including 62 per cent in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and 27 in collective enterprises (Yu Qiuhua and Yu Yi 2004: 44). The situation changed dramatically since the early 1990s when some SOEs were privatized, and in 1998 the government introduced large-scale layoff programmes. Liaoning planned to lay off 1.2 million workers between 1998 and 2000, nearly 1,700 every single day (Communist Party of China Liaoning Provincial Committee and Liaoning Provincial People's Government 1998), and the actual number of SOE employees decreased from nearly 7 million in 1995 (Liaoning Bureau of Statistics 1996: 410, Table 2-5) to just over 3 million in 2011 (Liaoning Bureau of Statistics 2012: 418, Table 2-3).

Privatization encouraged outmigration in two ways. First, working overseas was seen by both government and individuals as an alternative employment opportunity for the laid-off. Second and more important, privatization widened social inequality to an unprecedented level in a matter of years. State assets were turned into the private hands of those who had connections and this made them millionaires overnight, at the same time ordinary workers who spent all their lives in the factory suddenly became jobless. Everyone felt that they had to capture the moment to make a cut in the post-socialist primitive accumulation. Migration was an opportunity for the ordinary people who had no connections.

Some were pushed out because of the sense of social anomie created by privatization. A junior official working in Shenyang told me that his daughter had to go overseas because China is too "chaotic":

> Someone suddenly became rich like that. You have no idea how they got rich. Will they still be rich tomorrow? Then, do you want your children to become rich like that? Sometimes I feel sorry for the rich [because] they must be worried. But I also feel imbalanced in my heart [due to the inequality]. People like you living overseas have rules to follow. I think young people will know better what they should do and what they should don't by going overseas.

But it is important to stress that the Chinese primitive accumulation was different from that in the 18th century England and that in post-1990 East Europe. The Chinese privatization started from a relatively egalitarian basis. Most people had access to means of livelihood, and urban residents often had some savings as a result of years of stable wages, high levels of welfare provisions and artificially low living costs (Lee 2005). My field data suggests that about 80 per cent of would-be migrants were able to use their own or immediate family's savings to finance migration, only less than 10 per cent needed to borrow all the money, and the rest combined the two. As the saving rate among the general population was high (a net saving of RMB 36,500, or USD 6,000 per capita at the end of 2011 in Liaoning. Liaoning Bureau of Statistics 2012: 414, Table 1-1), borrow was relatively easy. People in city normally borrowed from relatives and friends without interest, and those in the countryside paid an annual interest rate between 1 and 2 per cent. Life-time security was gone for ever, but the laid-off did not become completely dispossessed proletarians (c.f. Harvey 2005; Solinger 2002; 2003)

The reform was enabling in other aspects as well. For instance, urban housing reform that started in 1998 encouraged citizens to purchase the state-owned housing that they rented at subsidized prices. As a result most Chinese citizens for the first time possessed property certificates, which were now widely used as security in dealing with recruitment agents, loan creditors and foreign embassies. In the countryside, house property certificates and certificates for contracts over land or forests were introduced in the 2000s. Regarding regulation of international migration, ordinary Chinese could for the first time apply for passports for private purposes in 1986.[4] The application procedure was gradually simplified since the 1990s. Nearly twenty administrative procedures were cut out, and by 2005 most urban residents were able to apply for a passport by presenting their ID cards. The Passport Law effective from January 2007 enshrined every citizen's legal entitlement to possess a passport.

Thus, the state-led, top-down, market-oriented economic reform was both drastic and carefully orchestrated, both dispossessing and enabling. Due to such double nature of privatization, the competition for opportunities in the post-socialist primitive accumulation was particularly fierce in intensity and massive in scale. Everyone had some resources, had some hope, and had a strong sense of entitlement to participate in the competition. The would-be migrants in the northeast, unlike their southeast counterparts, had a large population base instead of concentrated in a small number of villages. They were both more anxious and more hopeful.

What concerned the would-be migrants in the northeast the most were two things: money and risk. The average cost for going to Japan, Singapore and South Korea to work on 2-3 years' contract from the northeast was USD 8,000 in the late 2000s, including

[4] Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of the Exit and Entry of Citizens (Adopted at the 13th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Sixth National People's Congress, promulgated by Order No. 32 of the President of the People's Republic of China on November 22, 1985, and effective as of February 1, 1986).

intermarries fees and airfare. Why were the would-bes willing to pay so much for the low-wage jobs while the living standards in China were increasing fast? After paying the money, the would-be migrants feared the most that the intermediaries would vanish with the money. When this happened, the victim often became a laugh stock and felt ashamed. Why was this so? While the discussion about money is about the would-bes' actions and calculations, the analysis on shame is about how the would-be were perceived by the larger community. A figure becomes a figure only when he/she is seen by others. A figure is simultaneously an actor and a sign.

This article is based on my field research in Liaoning carried out between July 2004 and November 2007, and documentary studies that continue to date. More specifically the fieldwork was conducted in five places: Beijing, Shenyang (capital of Liaoning province), a prefecture, a county under the prefecture, and finally a few townships and villages in the county. I met most of the would-be migrants through recruitment intermediaries—private companies, individual and sometimes public institutions (for instance township government or vocational training schools) who recruited workers for overseas jobs for fees. In addition I visited Japan, South Korea and Singapore to interview migrants as well as recruiters, employers, government officials, and NGO activists. Some of the would-be migrants' experience was reconstructed based on my interviews with actual migrants and returnees. In total more than 200 informants were interviewed in the four countries. Each in-depth, unstructured interview lasted from thirty minutes to three hours.

The would-be in rush: The last bus for the first barrel of gold

Sun Dianjun, a 27-year old man from rural Liaoning, sold his house inherited from his parents for USD 5,000 and his wife's food stall in the city for USD 3,300 to pay for the fees to come to Singapore. It was only after arrival did he discover that the salary was USD 550 a

month, which meant that he would never be able to earn the cost back. In the end he decided to return to China well before the contract was due. Sun did ask the intermediary in China how much he could make in Singapore before he paid the fee. The answer: "You may well fish up the first barrel of gold in your life." This hit Sun. "First barrel of gold"— evoking the image of the 19th century California gold rush—was a popular metaphor in China since the early 2000s. It stands for the much desired first breakthrough in primitive accumulation. The exorbitant fee was thus seen as an investment. Only those who had the guts to make such risky investments, it was believed, deserved big rewards.

While the would-be migrants were highly entrepreneurial in pursuing migration, they were rather conservative in envisioning their lives after return. The most common aspiration for lives after return was to become a proprietor, or petty rentieer capitalist, who would live on fixed assets such as a shop place or a car rented out as a taxi. These assets would hopefully buy them security. "You work hard to earn the money [overseas], and now you should ask the money to earn for you", as a would-be put it. Most would-be migrants planned to return to China partly because strict government regulation at the destinations made overstay nearly impossible, but primarily because one would not need to work hard any more by returning. Once having the first barrel of gold in hand, it was believed, gold would yield gold in the growth frenzy. The would-be migrants took risks now to avoid future risks; they were ready to work hard overseas in order not to work in the future. The would-bes thus looked rather different from the "beacons of modernity (Niyri 2010: 105) or "pioneers of development" (Niyri 2010: 106) as how the Chinese state and western literature commonly portray migrants.

The would-bes held such contradictory attitudes because their migration projects were first and foremost driven by the fear about the present, rather than by visions about the future or by imaginations about foreign lands. They feared of being left out in the fierce competition

for resource. During the 1990s the Chinese reforms turned from being a project of "wealth creation" that benefited the majority to being a period in which wealth became concentrated among a few (Sun Liping 2003; 2004), which shift was decidedly entrenched by the large-scale SOE privatization. Li Qiang (2005) aptly depicted the structure of the Chinese society as an inverted "T" that consisted of a massive low-income population and a tiny minority who possess disproportionately large amounts of wealth on the top. Channels of upward mobility for ordinary people became ever narrower. Small household businesses, the pioneering forces of the urban economic reform in the 1980s, were marginalized and had to struggle hard in order to survive. The number of household enterprises in Liaoning remained stagnant (1.5 million) between 2000 and 2010, while private enterprises that hired eight or more employees increased by four fold during the same period and their share of GDP increased from 24 to 75.5 per cent! (Liaoning Bureau of Statistics 2011: 117). Capital-intensive, large-size private enterprises—many were privatized SOEs—were the dominant sector of growth. Many would-be migrants of the 2000s could have been household entrepreneurs of the 1980s. [5]

Would-be migrants decided to invest in migration for very diverse reasons, but they shared the perception that they would not be able to "make it"—to change their lives as they wished—by staying in China. One would-be wanted to go simply because he had a saving of RMB 50,000 (USD 8,300): "RMB 50,000 couldn't do anything in China. I could open a small business, but in China today, if you don't have a big capital outlet, you are doomed to fail. House? It is just enough to buy a bathroom. The interest rate is so low, it would be foolish to let the money lie in the bank. So, go overseas!"

[5] Huang Yasheng (2008) research on 20 volumes' original bank reports from China identified 1993 as the turning point when the small scale enterpreures were repressed, primarily through making it very difficult to access loans that was controlled by the state.
The labor share of GDP declined from 53 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 2005, making China one of the lowest in the world (Li Daokui, cited in Huang 2008: 283).
Fund transfer: from parents to offspring, from earlier off-farm activities or socialist savings that were liquidated.

The social closure of the 1990s and 2000s took place not only along the line of incomes, but also along the level of socioeconomic security. Most of the would-be migrants had jobs, and some had decent salaries, close to USD 165 a month. But their jobs were precarious. Of the new jobs created in the 2000s Liaoning, only 10 per cent were of formal employment, 20 percent were self-employed and, alarmingly, 70 percent were so-called "flexible employment," namely odd jobs without social benefits.[6] As a typical example of flexible employment, a freelance salesperson was paid USD 26 a month plus bonus determined by his/her sales performance. In contrast, the average annual wages at SOEs increased by nearly eight times from 1995 to 2011 (from USD 886 to USD 6665, according to 2014 exchange rate) (Liaoning Bureau of Statistics 2012:419, Table 2-6; 1996:422, Table 2-9). Secured jobs were valued so much that they were for sale at high prices. I met a college graduate who paid at least USD 5,000 (as bribery) for a formal job in a company in 2006. The going rate for a job as a high school teacher was USD 8,300, and a probational college lecturership USD 12,000. Indeed, intermediaries often cited these "prices" of the formal jobs to justify the fees for going overseas. What was lacking was not job opportunity per se, but long-term security.

Overseas jobs were appealing because they were supposed to be more predictable than those in China. Mr Mai, originally a factory worker, set up a small furniture repairing team that hired four workers in 1992, then run a laundry shop, followed by an adventure with a restaurant business, finally he decided to spend all his savings to go overseas. He explained: "The difference between working overseas and working in China is that, [while you are] overseas, as long as you work hard, you can always earn money." Migration was desirable not because it would create new entrepreneurial opportunities, but because it might render future entrepreneurism unnecessary.

[6] Interview with Mr Chen, deputy director of Shenyang Employment Bureau, January 27, 2005, Shenyang.

The fear about being left behind and about insecurity was experienced as fear about time, particularly an acute "last bus" mentality as the Chinese put it. It was feared that if one missed this bus now, one would miss out everything. The selling out of state assets created a strong perception that if one does not grab the first barrel of gold at this critical moment, there would be no chance to catch up later on. The gate to wealth accumulation and economic security was getting narrower day by day. Every passing bus was the last bus. One had to migrate now if one wanted to migrate at all, otherwise the cost would increase, the savings from overseas would value less because wages in China were increasing and Renminbi was to appreciate. One had to rush through the gate before it was shut. Many would-bes told me that they did not mind paying even more for a quicker placement. The USD 8,000 was not only for an overseas job, but was for snapping the opportunity quickly. The would-be were eager to work overseas not because China lagged behind the world, but because China was developing too fast.

The fear of missing the last bus was compounded by the fear about the one's age. The biological clock was ticking loud. A woman in her late twenties quit job in Shenyang and paid more than USD 6,500 for going to Singapore as a factory worker in 2006. She provided a telling analysis: "in China we are 'eating spring rice'[7]. You can find jobs when you are in your twenties. The thirties may be Okay. After thirty five, no one will give you good jobs unless you have skills." She felt compelled to take the risk to go overseas before her spring rice turned cold.

Migration was thus a temporal rather than spatial project. Migration was expected to change one's life not by bringing them to a new land, but by escalating their wealth accumulation and thus enabling them to join the rapid development in China. It was no longer about American or Japanese dreams. It was about *Chinese dreams*, Chinese dreams express.

[7] For discussions on the proverb "eating spring rice" (*chi qingchun fan*), see Hyde 2007; Wang Zheng 2000; Zhang Zhen 2001, Fong, 2011 Chapter 3.

The transnational migration projects were always China-rooted and China-oriented, and they enabled one to skip over the present.

"Just think of the three years as if I were in jail". Liu Lan, a woman in her late forties in Liaoning described to me how she felt about her plan of going to Italy to work as a domestic maid. It would be an agony to leave her only teenager daughter behind, but she had to go because the daughter was going to college soon and she needed the money to pay the tuition fee. Otherwise, as a laid-off worker from a state-owned factory and now a part-time cleaner in a small hotel, Liu saw little hope of improving the life of hers and especially her daughter's. For Liu, the meaning of life was entirely defined by the future. Migration did not have intrinsic value in itself; it was useful only as a fast way to rush through the present. The present was a burden, and migration displaced the present for the future.

The would-be stuck: victims became a laugh stock

The would-be migrants' worst nightmare was that unscrupulous intermediaries may take their money and disappear. They were not only worried about money; failed would-bes felt ashamed, or as my informants put it, "cannot raise the head" in front of neighbours. A Mr Wang paid nearly USD 8,300 to go to Singapore in 2007 but returned home two weeks later empty handed. The job that he was promised for didn't exist. The family was in a debt of USD 3,300. When Wang was talking to me in the bedroom, his wife, who was washing hair over the stove in the kitchen, shouted at him across the thin wood divide full of cleaves: "You even have the face (*lain*) to tell others about this!" Wang walked me out; a neighbour stared at us with a mischievous grin. The neighbour might have thought that I was a migrant agent; and he was eager to see what would happen the next. With this kind of eyes on the street I felt that I could not raise my head.

As Wang's wife made clear, failed would-bes lost *lain* instead of *mianzi*. *Lain* and *mianzi* both means "face", but have very different connotations. *Mianzi*, the rough equivalent of the English notion of face as Goffman (1955) elaborated, indicates appearance, impression, or status. In contrast *lian* stands for one's moral character. The loss of *lian* "makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community" (Hu 1944:45).[8] One can "earn" *mianzi* back after losing it, but can hardly do so with *lian*. *Lian* is associated with shame as opposed to embarrassment. The shame of the failed would-be migrants was obviously a shame without guilt. But this made the shame even more damaging. Guilt is caused by a particular action; shame indicates something wrong about the person.[9] Because of the acute sense of shame, fellow villager sometimes tried to hide failed would-bes from outsiders. When I talked to a distant relative of Wang's about Wang, the relative's wife scolded him: "Why do you always have to stir you tongue (gossiping or talking nonsenses) like this! People don't like you talking this kind of things!"

Why were the victims looked down on? Isn't it all too clear that the failure was caused by some else' fault? Villagers' explanation was straightforward: "why have others gone overseas successfully but you can't?" Something must be wrong about you. Failed would-be migrants were commonly associated with the lack of capability, having "a high heart" (*xinqi gao*, excessively ambitious), or "following the wind" (*genfeng*, susceptible to others' influence). The failure simply proved the victim's problematic personality that people already knew. This was particularly true in the case of women: even successful female migrants were sometimes profiled negatively, which almost never happened to men. Although women made up for less than 20 percent of all Chinese migrant workers (Centre for International Exchange

[8] Following this distinction, Huang Shuanfan clarified that "loss of *mianzi* is more definitely tied to failure to measure up to one's sense of self-esteem or to what is expected by others, whereas loss of *lian* is closely tied to transgression of social codes." (1987:73)

[9] Social psychologists have proposed neat contrast between shame and guilt. People experience shame when they attribute their transgressions to their global and stable self ("I can't believe *I* did that"), and people feel guilty when they attribute the transgressions to transient actions or states ("I can't believe *I* did that") (see Wong and Tsai 2007).

2005) and 30 percent among those from Liaoning (Liaoning Province Bureau of Labour and Social Security 2005), female migrants were so frequently mentioned that I had once thought that they could outnumber men. Women attracted much attention partly because a large part of them--up to 90 per cent as asserted by one informant--were divorcees. A typical line of reasoning went like this: these women divorced because they had "high hearts", for instance complaining that their husbands were earning too little, they then followed the wind, and some had to pay the price.

But not all losers were treated in this way. One would win genuine sympathy if falls ill or fails a harvest. In explaining the difference, a taxi driver from the neighbouring village of Wang's described how people saw international and internal migrations differently:

> If you go to work in a nearby city and had bad luck, people will be sympathetic. If you are bold, go all the way to Shanghai or Guangzhou, people feel less sympathetic… People may say, "You go to that kind of place to make money, you thought you are very capable, look at you now, perfect, now I wait to see how high you can jump!" When you plan to *go overseas*, people widens their eyes. If you can't go in the end after paying so much, people simmer joy in their bellies!

A former primary school teacher, who worked in Japan for three years, was rather philosophical in summarizing people's ambiguous attitude toward migration: "If you want extra [things], more than other people, and you fail, this means that you should have known that you are the same as most people, you should have been content. [If everyone is content] the ordinary people feel happier." Thus would-be migrants were problematic because they challenged the status quo. This explanation is similar to the classical anthropological studies

that interpreted shame as a cultural code that prevents transgression of norms.[10] But the trouble with this explanation is that successful outmigration—a disruption of the status quo—was celebrated in the community. Those who succeeded gave lavish banquets in pride, and fellow villagers may congratulate them with gifts and even money in red pockets. In a time of primitive accumulation, the discontent about the status quo and the desire for moving ahead of others was acceptable.

Both would-be migrants and others cited "red eyes"—envy—as a main reason for laughing at the victims. One villager articulated it in this way: "If you really manage to go overseas and make money, my eyes turn red in the heart but I have to praise and admire you on lips. If you fail now, ha, good, this is the chance for me to laugh at you." A retired village accountant echoed this interpretation: "If your luck struck this time, you would earn money and would turn around to look down at us. This time your luck didn't strike." He shrugged his shoulders.

Red eye is different from "evil eye"—the sorcerous expression of envious malice that must be deflected. The Chinese red eye is largely harmless, and is often associated with the notion of *bu fu*. Literally "refusal to obey", *bu fu* means resenting others' success or authority without being able to question it. Behind the red eye was a deep sense of ambiguity about migration in the late 2000s. On the one hand, migration was supposed to be valuable in itself because it brings about economic success. Economic success was by definition good. If one questions others' success, a third party simply shot back "why don't you do it if you had the capacity?" Actions are evaluated almost solely by their monetary outcomes. Effortless success was conspicuously celebrated—if would-be migrants somehow obtain visas unexpectedly smoothly, they would give out especially lavish banquets. In contrast, failures after serious attempts were particularly shameful. Not only that the efforts had no value in

[10] Well-known anthropological studies on honour and shame include Peristiany I965 and Wikan 1984 (on Mediterranean), Schneider (1971) on the Middle East, Benedict (1946) on Japan, and Fung et al (2003) on China.

themselves, but also they showed the losers' incapability. Present efforts were nothing but instruments to be discarded once one reaches the future. Only the less than capable were stuck to the present.

But on the other hand, migration as a means to pursue windfall fortune that was determined by luck challenged the causal relations between virtue and rewards. Outmigration attracted more red eyes in the 1990s. This was the period when the connection between intentions, actions and consequences were further undermined as more commercial intermediaries were involved and the procedure became more opaque. Migration as a somehow magical opportunity to rush through the present was both tantalizing and disturbing. Xiao Li, a woman in her early thirties, was adamant in ruling out the possibility of migration. She was afraid of unexpected consequences of success. A migrant was killed in a car accident soon after he returned from Japan, Xiao Li told me. That could not be a simple accident, she insisted: "He was so young, he was always good in sports. He died so young because he earned a life's money in three years. Thus his life *had to* be shortened. God knows this."

Thus, what the red eye was really about was the incapability of critiquing reality. Success based on luck was ethically questionable, but people could not question it. They lacked the vocabulary and also faced the social pressure against it. Shaming victims could be interpreted as a "revenge" for such subjugation. I can easily imagine villagers telling me that "as we have to admire you if you succeed, we shame you when you can't."[11] As the line between success and failure was profoundly blurred --today's loser could be tomorrow winner, such "revenges" makes more sense. Shaming victims was not only about the

[11] To illustrate this particular meaning of outmigration, we may compare it with other successes. If a young person becomes a high-earning professional and moves his/her family to the city, villagers will admire them sincerely and attribute it to capability and hard work. If other youths aspire to do the same but fail to enter universities, fellow villagers will feel for them. The failure is no way associated with shame. Businessmen may attract red eyes, especially if they do not take care of their relations with fellow villagers (see Zhang 2013), but losers are seldom humiliated, especially if they fall victims of others' wrongdoings. This is because in both education and business, the causal relation between efforts and outcomes is still discernible.

displacement of the present—the devaluation of current efforts—but more importantly it reflected people's awareness about such displacement. People felt compelled to skip over the present, but were at the same time anxious about their inability of critiquing the present.

Becoming and Being

The would-be migrant is by definition a figure of becoming. Becoming is of course not a predetermined trajectory—many would-be migrants did not become migrants. But becoming is not necessarily fluid, amorphous, contingent processes (c.f. Biehl and Locke 2010). The would-be migrants believed in the future, at the same time they knew all too well that their potentials were constrained and that their ability circumscribed. "If we had stable jobs in big companies, who would want to go overseas?" would-be migrants often asked. The would-be migrant embodied tensions between the heavy present and elusive futures, between the desire to skip over the present and the moral anxiety about such leap forward. While Walter Benjamin's angel of history struggled against the storm of progress in order to rescue the past and the present, the would-be migrant strove to lift themselves into the future while being stuck to the present. The shaming of victims was a twisted expression of the awareness about such contradiction.

"A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history" (Benjamin 1999: 254). Without holding the present still, we may either fall into the trap of historicism that "gives the 'eternal' image of the past" as Benjamin warned us (254), or being pushed by a blind futurism that removes the ground for ethical critiques and political actions. To hold the present still is not only methodologically necessary for writing history, but is also a political condition for making

history. Only by breaking into the present could the would-be migrants liberate themselves from fear and want, from desires for undefined futures.

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