

## Masculinity at Its Margins: Migrant Construction Work in China

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**Abstract:** Most ethnographic literature on migrant labor in China has addressed factory work, highlighting the role of manufacturing jobs in shaping new consumer desires and future expectations for the predominantly female migrant workforce. This paper contrasts manufacturing with construction, an industry where physical building labor is dominated by rural male migrant labor. For women in factories, urban work often serves as a tool for challenging traditional rural gender structures. By contrast, for young unmarried migrant men from marginal rural areas, urban wages tend to sustain, rather than disrupt, gendered expectations and desires for continuation of traditional family and community structures.

**Keywords:** gender, masculinity, China, construction, migrant workers

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The global circulation of factory-made commodities brings issues of Chinese production into the consciousness of people around the world. Indeed, in everywhere but China itself, the ubiquity of items “made in China” is the most proximate link between consumers and the conditions of China’s rural migrant labor force. When factories first opened in Shenzhen, Chinese labor was literally on display, as the city did double duty as both China’s “window to the world” and the “factory of the world” (Bach 2010). In the intervening decades, the material presence of Chinese production has been felt increasingly around the world through a stream of cheap exported goods. The power of this object-mediated contact is evident from high profile antisweatshop campaigns, where activists succeeded in tying foreign brands to the conditions of Chinese workers.

Domestically, within China, it was not primarily factory production but building construction that came to symbolize migrant labor. The di-

vergence of foreign and domestic concerns reflects relative social proximity to migrant workers. The massive scale of ongoing development projects provides urban China its own direct window on migrant labor. Unlike manufacturing, where work has been moved out of sight to city peripheries and factory conditions concealed behind company walls, conditions of construction work make building labor public. Migrant construction workers are conspicuously rural, working-class subjects interposed into central spaces of urban consumption.

In the ethnographic literature, studies of Chinese migrant labor have generally focused on factory workers (Lee 1998; Yan 2008). The first wave of migrant workers in late 1970s and early 1980s came from the countryside to work in foreign-owned factories of the Pearl River Delta with the limited reopening to foreign investment in China's Special Economic Zones (Ong 2006; Bach 2011). A central theme that emerged from these studies of factories and sweatshops was the highly feminized nature of production, as male bosses perceive women to be more docile and suited to factory work, leading to a workforce that is 60 to 70 percent female (Pun 1999; Rofel 1999). This focus on gender in manufacturing has been productive, revealing both gendered forms of labor exploitation and more positive revelations on the role that urban jobs play by expanding the migrant women's options and self-conceptions.

Meanwhile, in construction, there is an even more pronounced gender imbalance in the workforce composition, which is estimated 90 percent male. While construction has received considerably less ethnographic attention than manufacturing, there are several recent ethnographic explorations into the experience of construction workers (Pun, Lu, and Zhang 2013; Swider 2015). While these works acknowledge the evident gendered make-up of the migrant workforce in construction, they leave questions of masculinity and gender conspicuously unexplored. The lack of sustained analysis reflects a more general tendency in scholarship where gender remains optional in framing accounts of male experience (Connell 2005). Indeed, heterosexual male subjectivity may be said to be characterized precisely by the unmarked operation of gender, which likewise goes unremarked in analysis (Shapiro 1981). But to disregard the operation of gender yields an incomplete picture of how urban jobs in construction impact the lives of rural men. How is gender experienced across rural and urban space? How does the specific nature of the gendered workplace and industry affect lives of workers in construction?

This paper examines gender in terms of how expectations and ideologies of masculinity structure the decisions and work experiences for young, unmarried migrant men from marginal rural villages. In marginal conditions, ideologies of hegemonic masculinity entail propositions about gendered relations, but lack the conditions to realize traditional patriarchal positions of male domination. Rather than unequivocal masculine privilege, I argue that such ideologies of masculinity now function ambivalently in men's lives, particularly in the context of rural China, where demographic distortions have altered longstanding dynamics of marriage and reproduction. In this paper, I look at how traditional promises and privileges motivate men to take urban jobs and draw them further into efficient systems of their exploitation in low-prestige and precarious jobs in construction.

Ethnographic studies have demonstrated that factory work has increased the economic independence of and opened new vectors of agency and autonomy for rural women, even in low-paying jobs (Jacka 2005). The effect of wage-earning and exposure to city life has allowed women to experiment with new identities and urban consumption habits, offering young women avenues for escaping bleak rural destinies, or at the very least renegotiating their terms (Rofel 2007). While new forms of gender discrimination and control arise in the factory's dormitory labor regime, the centralization of workers also brings together migrant youth from different parts of the country, widening social networks and offering social horizons broader than in the villages (Pun 2005).

In my research on the lives of young men working in construction, the experience of urban labor was quite different. Few expressed any desire of becoming urban or hoped to make their lives in the city. For them, urban work provided a floor to rural masculinity. Urban wages supported projects for young men to build rural futures and to preserve conventional aspirations for rural community life. Rather than upend the gender hierarchies or transform traditional expectations, the experience of urban work allowed men to maintain dreams of family and future that were solidly rooted in traditional expectations and ideologies of gender relations. Nonetheless, in changing conditions, most rural men found themselves increasingly caught between contradictory demands of rural and urban value.

This paper draws on observations from twenty-two months of fieldwork research in China from 2010 to 2012, including a three-month pe-

riod actively working on a construction crew alongside rural workers. I came to the jobsite through a local labor recruiter. By the time I joined, work had slowed and the crew had dwindled from several dozen to a small core of five, anchored by Old Zheng, the most senior of the workers. Old Zheng's wife, Mei, cooked meals for the family and other remaining crew members. A large family by contemporary Chinese standards, the Zhengs had four children. The eldest and youngest sons, aged twenty-two and sixteen, worked with their father on the construction site. Another son and a daughter worked jobs elsewhere in the city, but lived adjacent to the dormitory room. Our crew's work was to install steel frames over the raw concrete structures. Working from a hanging scaffold, we looked out over seven identical towers in gray concrete that stood like mirrored shadows receding into the smog of city. Even before all the concrete was poured, real estate representatives had been busily advertising and preselling units. The high rises were part of a masterplan development for mixed-use lofts called "I-City" in a newly planned technology district on the outskirts of Xi'an. Like all large-scale developments in China, the site was managed by a state-owned construction contracting company, which subcontracted dozens of smaller firms. The I-City development was a project of the real estate investment company of Li Ka-shing, who, according to economic reports at the time, was Asia's richest person.

### **Urban Identities under Construction**

Construction work ranks among the lowest prestige jobs in contemporary China. Although industry pay has risen in recent years, workers take on unsafe conditions and unsustainably long hours to achieve those wages. With thousands of deaths per year, accident rates in construction come near or exceed those in the mining industry (Tam, Zeng, and Deng 2004) construction site safety records in China are poor. This paper aims to examine the status of safety management in the Chinese construction industry, explore the risk-prone activities on construction sites, and identify factors affecting construction site safety. The findings reveal that the behavior of contractors on safety management are of grave concern, including the lack of provision of personal protection equipment, regular safety meetings, and safety training. The main factors affecting safety performance include "poor safety awareness of top management," "lack of training," "poor safety awareness of project managers," "reluctance to input resources to safety"

and “reckless operations.” The study also proposes that the government should play a more critical role in stricter legal enforcement and organizing safety training programs. In response, building site managers often blame workers themselves, pointing to migrants’ low levels of education. One site inspector told me that the root of the safety problem was that rural people did not respect their own lives. Besides being physically risky, construction work could be financially precarious as well, with systemic problems of unpaid work and withheld wages.

The depleted figure of present-day migrant construction workers stands in stark contrast to the image of workers as the national heroes of mid-twentieth-century Chinese socialism. Following the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, physical labor was demoted as economic reformers shifted focus from state-controlled production to an economy based on privatized industry, service professions, and urban real estate markets (Perry and Selden 2010). In the early 1980s, the Household Responsibility System abolished the Peoples Communes, freeing rural people from obligations in collective agriculture and resulting in the migration of millions to the cities for work (Potter and Potter 1990). In 1984, the central government implemented a regulation, “Separation of Management from Field Operations,” instructing state-owned construction enterprises to shed their manual workforce. Instead they would operate as general contractors, retaining only highly specialized skilled technicians and managers (Lu and Fox 2001). Gradually, the construction industry moved to take advantage of this new labor pool of rural migrants, recruiting rural labor through labor brokers and contractors (Pun and Xu 2011).

The shift also eliminated structured systems of seniority and apprenticeship that had formally recognized skills and created opportunities for occupational advancement. Previously, construction workers’ information was recorded and officially stamped in a state-issued document that included photographic identification, class designation, specialized training, along with a worker’s *gongling*—the accrued years of work or seniority. Today, only a small percentage of workers in specialized jobs have any type of certification, usually in trades that pose safety hazards, such as soldering and electrical wiring.

Lacking individual credentials, rural skill became institutionally invisible. Recruited through rural networks, workers’ capability tends to be evaluated at the collective level of the crew, limiting an individual’s labor mobility (Pun and Lu 2010). The underestimation of skill in construction

work produces an apparent oversupply of labor, which in turn depresses wages by changing the terms of selection in the labor market “from skill or technical competition to bodily labor competition” (Pun, Lu, and Zhang 2010, 152). The undifferentiated designation of “unskilled” labor is less a technical description of ability than it is a social determination about rural capacity more generally. The industry requires experienced workers with distinct technical abilities. The paradox of extracting skilled work from unskilled workers is overcome through the intermediary work of a middleman in the construction industry, the *baogongtou*, who deal in the gray areas between formal job contracts and informal rural labor recruitment networks. These small independent labor contractors supply the majority of manual labor to Chinese construction sites while lacking formal employment contracts, an arrangement that shields official institutions from responsibility for rural workers (Pun and Xu 2011). The alienation entailed in the de facto deskilling of rural labor further extends to the dispossession of their own accumulated knowledge and occupational experience. Such conditions create a persistent underclass that Guy Standing has identified as the “precariat,” a group deskilled to the point that they “cannot be professionalized because they cannot specialize and they cannot construct a steady improvement in depth of competence or experience” (2011, 23)

Symbolic devaluation and deskilling rural labor is underwritten by the national system of residency registration, the *hukou*, which excludes migrants from obtaining the official urban residence needed to access many municipal benefits provided to local city residents, including education, health, and pensions (Solinger 1999; L. Zhang 2001; Fan 2008). The *hukou* registration ties each household to a single administrative hometown, a form of “local citizenship” (Smart and Smart 2001). Regardless of the length of time they work in cities, migrant families remain unable to receive services in those cities and must instead rely on poorly funded jurisdictions in the countryside for their health care or schooling.

### **Deferral, Displacement, and Sacrifice**

Treated as de facto unskilled labor, regardless of levels of experience, construction work was what rural men could do with their bodies for urban wages. The terms used by many migrant workers I spoke with reflected this, speaking of previous jobs in homogenous and vague ways. They would refer to “taking a job” here or there, often naming the location or

crew, but not specifying the nature of the job itself. Excluded from the urban residence and with wages that would not allow them to sustain long-term lives in the city, workers instead treated the period of urban work as an extended interval of sacrifice and saving for the future.

Li was a twenty-three-year-old crew leader on the I-City site. Now leading a crew of nearly thirty men from his hometown, he said he was making several times the average construction wage, a considerable income even by most urban standards. Despite his young age, he already had an extensive job history, having left school to begin work at fifteen. He said he had no choice but to leave his village to find work. At eighteen, he signed up on a long-haul fishing vessel, where he worked for two years out at sea. Of all the workers I had met, Li seemed like he could make a viable future in the city. He even told me that he doubted whether he would return over the New Year holiday, "It is boring there in the village." Li seemed to enjoy working in the city, but he could only imagine a future back in the village. When I asked if he had plans to move permanently to the city, he responded bluntly. "No, that is impossible. Of course, I will go back." He elaborated, "When you are old and you go outside, no one knows who you are." No matter how "boring" Li found day-to-day life there, all meaningful attachments led back to his village.

Old Zheng's second son, Bobo, was the first of his siblings to leave the village at age fifteen. Against his mother's wishes he quit school after the final day of junior high school. "She was so mad that she beat me when she found out," he remembered, laughing. Bobo recalled that he hated watching his father work bitterly in low-level jobs to support the large family of four children. When his older brother entered high school in the county seat, Bobo moved nearby, working to provide his brother's expenses. At the age of eighteen, Bobo moved to the provincial capital of Xi'an for better-paying work. There, he learned how to hang ceiling panels, techniques he later taught his father and brothers.

By living frugally in the cities, the Zheng family could instead invest their wages to establish a future back in their village. These jobs in the city were crucial to producing the rural home as the meaningful social location of their lives. For eleven months of their year, the Zheng family rented a room in an urban village across from the I-City construction site, paying around 250 yuan a month—under fifty U.S. dollars. With six workers to the room sharing three beds, the crowded living conditions were minimally adequate, but far from the basic level that most city residents would accept. The Zhengs rarely ate outside the home, even shunning the inex-

pensive food stands lining the main road of the urban village. Mei prepared lunch and dinner in the rented room for all the workers. The fare consisted mostly of potatoes or steamed bread accompanied with a small portion of vegetables. They minimized consumption, saving all their earnings to put toward collective family goals.

Among the key goals of the family was providing the young generation with the material prerequisites for marriage. Young men in China, and particularly those from the countryside, face strong pressures to marry. Typically, for men, the social difficulty of meeting a compatible mate was not the chief concern. Instead, their anxieties over marriage were chiefly economic. Since the beginning of the Reform Era in the 1980s, the cost of marriage for men's families has skyrocketed. Now, there is a widespread expectation that purchasing a house is the prerequisite before any woman will consider marriage. Marriage is also less a matter of individual concern—a son's marriage was approached as a collective project of reproduction for all immediate family members, including parents and grandparents. Although there are signs of changing attitudes among some urban families, widespread social stigma still applies to the unwed and childless.

Unmarried women confront similar family pressures to marry. Traditionally, the consequences of their match could be far greater. Attitudes have changed somewhat over recent years, but in traditional Chinese family structures, all formal power, property, and posterity circulates along the male axis of fathers and sons. The structure of customary kinship in China is patrilineal, patrilocal, and patrimonial. The family name and lineage were reckoned through the father's bloodline; married couples resided with the groom's family; and inheritance was passed to sons (Watson and Ebrey 1991; Choi and Peng 2016)—exploring the complex interplay between marriage and the social, political, economic, and gender inequalities that have so characterized Chinese society. In this system, daughters are devalued as temporary, destined to marry out of their natal villages to join another family's line. Meanwhile, when sons married, they would increase the family and continue the family line. Wives further took on the filial obligations of care of their husband's parents in their old age. Although current law is gender neutral in determining the transfer of hukou household registrations and inheritance, there are still strong expectations for women to join their husband's household and reside in his family's community.

Over the past three decades, the preference for sons has led to an extreme sex imbalance, with a birthrate estimated at a ratio of 120 males born for every 100 females (Jiang, Feldman, and Li 2014). China's millions of

“missing girls” and corresponding “surplus men” resulted from a combination of the availability of prenatal sex-selective abortion, coupled with the state restrictions on fertility, commonly known as the “One Child Policy.” At a national scale, there are an estimated twenty million more men than women born between 1980 and 2001 who are now approaching the marriage age and will not find female partners (Poston and Glover 2005).

Within this structural gender imbalance, women have a new degree of geographical and social mobility through marriage. Given the hardship and isolation of entering married life as a daughter-in-law, many rural women unsurprisingly seek to improve their circumstances through marriage. The birthrate imbalance has strengthened prior patterns of hypergamy and exogamy—that women will marry up and out. The possibility of migration, both for work and for marriage, may not eliminate a family’s low status and geographic discrimination, but “it does enable rural women to shift position within them and, significantly, to imagine that further, future change is possible” (Gaetano 2008, 629). Meanwhile, it is poor men in villages low in the geographic hierarchy who are “disproportionally losers in the competition for available wives” (Banister 2004, 23). The confluence of cultural, structural, gender, and demographic factors tend toward the increased isolation of such marginal communities and to the elimination of the family lines of poor men. The practice of marrying up the geographic hierarchy means that men from the marginal “sending communities” like Zheng’s village have decreasing prospects.

If privileges of rural masculinity were traditionally conferred through male-female gender relations, then what is the position of patriarchy in women’s absence? Increasingly, masculinity’s bundle of privileges—including patrilineal descent, patrilocal marriage, and even the prerogatives of land inheritance and ownership—operate counter to the benefit of marginal men. The promise of a continuation of community and familiar forms of social life inclines men to identify closely with the hometowns of their birth. The traditional patriarchal ideology of marriage promises local belonging as a birthright of masculinity, as an assured place in a stable community, but this is an inheritance that also entails the responsibility to remain. These privileges increasingly only appear to tie men socially, materially, and affectively to their natal villages, but decreasingly reward their investments or deliver on the traditional promises of rural masculine ideologies.

The benefits of land and status structure young men’s ambitions, desires, and investments in the rural hometowns of their birth, even as eco-

conomic necessities require them to leave. While traditional conceptions of masculine privilege and family structure remain the grounds for imagining their futures, the new conditions of contemporary life devalue their villages that are the sites of their investment. Increasingly, their sacrifices appear to offer only perpetual deferral.

### **Instantiating the Future at New Year**

In one of our early meetings, before I began living and working full-time with the crew on site, Old Zheng invited me to his family's home of Hong Village to celebrate Spring Festival with his family. While it was a warm gesture, the invitation left me somewhat confused. The holiday had just passed only a month earlier. Over my research, I later received similarly deferred invitations from migrant workers. Old Zheng's invitation attested to an enduring self-identification with home in the village and gestured to the cycle of work. The hometown was the meaningful context of life, the place where migrants had space and means for hospitality and a site where migrants projected their aspirations. The home village was their field of meaningful living, where births, deaths, and marriages were marked and ritually celebrated. Strenuous efforts in the city made possible this vision of a life back home, even if it was one they could only intermittently inhabit.

Close to a year after the original invitation, I did travel to Old Zheng's village where I spent three weeks over the Spring Festival. Villagers returned for the holiday to collectively renew their commitments to a shared vision of the future by instantiating a revitalized image of rural community, albeit one only made possible by their absence from it. The Zheng's hometown comprised a small cluster of newly modernized concrete and white-tile houses that were built right up to the edge of the road that ran through the narrow valley, separating the houses from a gorge and stream on the other side. Recent infrastructure investments had widened the road into a high-speed two-way highway. Historically, China's mountainous areas have been plagued by the constant threat of hunger and famine, as its marginal farmland was unable to grow wheat or rice. Generations had subsisted by growing corn and potatoes on tiny terraced plots on the hills that were now abandoned and overgrown. With urban jobs providing cash income, villagers bought most of their food, no longer relying on the land to provide.

In the village, all the recent improvements in the standard of living

came from outside wages, and almost all the young people left to the cities for work, leaving elderly people and children in the village for most of the year. Once a year at Spring Festival, the usually empty village comes back to life. Migrant workers scattered to various cities return to the empty streets and stage it again as a thriving community. During these three weeks of holiday, in contrast to life in the city, there is meat at every meal, toasting and drinking, and constant visits to houses of family and neighbors, a moment of rural plenty that is a direct result of the extended periods of austerity in the city. For the returning villagers, Spring Festival acts as a measure of progress made throughout the year. The holiday serves as a ritual ingathering of the migrants who spend their working year away.

The Zheng house stood out against others, unfinished and looking like a stalled construction site. The house exterior remained untiled with concrete exposed. The first-floor interior was mostly complete, but the second floor was open to the outside, without glass in the windows. When the family had first moved to Xi'an to work, they pooled their earnings to build the house for Old Zheng's aging father and mother. Both died before it was completed, and so now, several years later, the house remained unfinished. Instead, the family had directed the family's earnings to help their son open a business, which failed after six months. Next, they channeled their earnings to complete the family home in the village, seeing it as the minimum prerequisite for their eldest son to attract a wife.

On the first day of Spring Festival, the family rolled out strings of red firecrackers. Bobo hung *duilian*, matched couplets on red paper by the door. New Year's rituals were for good luck; they would ward off ill during the upcoming year. Meanwhile, at the rented apartment for the next months, there were no such rituals or adornments for luck. Another day, Bobo returned to the village from town with a new washing machine in the back of a motorized three-wheel cart as a "present for my mother, to help her." I asked if she would be staying in the village. No, and the machine was never hooked up. For the next year, it sat in the main hall of the house in their absence. Meanwhile, in the apartment in the city, Mei continued washing clothes by hand. The washing machine gestured to a deferred future. Buying it was a symbolic down payment on a better life to come.

### Marginal Masculinity

Ethnographies of manufacturing have emphasized gender at two scales: the level of the general social system and the level of proximate individu-

al experience. In writing on women's factory work, both gender and class suggest direct dynamics of disempowerment. The analysis of gender as a system that devalues women yields the same conclusions as empirical observations of individual disenfranchisement of women migrants. The function of masculinity in men's exploitation is inevitably less direct. The classic operation in R. W. Connell's (1987) theorization of hegemonic masculinity describes the subordination of women and the devaluation of alternate forms of male gender expression. In this way migrant masculinity could be understood as a subordinated form within a strict hierarchy of male subjectivities (Zhang 2008). However, the young men I describe do not experience their masculinity as a subordinated identity. Nonetheless, the patrimony that may appear as privilege takes on a different character, one in which the affective experience and material outcomes appear at odds. The privileges of traditional patriarchal society became tools of dis-possession of rural men at the margins.

For such altered dynamics that arise in the slow breakdown of systems, Lauren Berlant has suggested the term *cruel optimism*, which she describes as an unabated attachment, even when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." Berlant identifies this form of relations as especially relevant to situations in the "dissolution of optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy" (2011, 1) when prior forms of life prove increasingly precarious. Following Berlant, what makes men's relation to desires for traditional lives in their villages a cruelly optimistic attachment is the irony of how traditional gender models channel their affective and economic investments. The perpetual outsider positions of daughters in the family and village life push women into forced positions of flexibility through which they can pursue strategies for individual advancement. By contrast, rural patriarchal structures offer men the vision of familial positions of status, meaningful belonging in community, and inheritance of property. These inducements tie young men to investing affectively and materially in their natal villages, even as it drives them to work within a system of urban production that devalues rural lives and spaces.

Classic anthropology has understood masculine domination as both symbolic and material, implicated within an exchange of women and relation of domination over women (Rubin 2009). How do we then understand masculinity at the margins, where the key gender dynamic is that millions of women are missing? What is the nature of traditional hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in the absence of women to be dominat-

ed or exchanged? In these marginal circumstances, masculinity's privileges and expectations live on in a kind of afterlife of patriarchy in China's so-called bare branches for whom family and community reproduction is largely precluded. Migration sustains hope but at the same time impedes men's ability to adapt to changing social conditions. The privileges of traditional patriarchal society became tools of dispossession of rural men at the margins. They motivate work, channel investment, and sustain optimism. Urban work could provide a material basis for sustaining dreams of rural renewal, but it is increasingly unlikely to fulfill those promises. Given the contemporary Chinese economic and demographic context in which marriage operates, what had been previously accounted among the privileges in a patriarchal system serve now to further marginalize poor, unmarried rural men.

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