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**Governing the Body of the Peasant Worker in China's Cities:
Dangerous Sexual Desires of the "Other" in the Official Discourse**

Abstract

In China, the millions of peasants moving to the cities in order to find jobs are called peasant workers. Nearly one third of the peasant workers are unmarried men and women. In the official discourse, the sexual desires and behaviour of the rural migrants in the cities has become a matter of serious concern. First, this essay will demonstrate how the peasant workers in the cities are constructed as the uncivilized "Other". The "sex starving" peasant workers who are controlled by neither their families or by the state institutions are considered as a threat for the social and moral stability of the Chinese cities. With official handbooks for rural migrants, the Chinese government tries to guide their sexual lives and teach them control by self-cultivation. Second, this essay will analyze policies recommendations in the official discourse to govern the body of the peasant workers. This research is based on Foucault's theory that sexuality is a social construction and will focus on recent Chinese publications on the problems of the peasant workers since 2006. The essay will contribute to an understanding of how and why the Chinese state sees the peasant workers in the cities as a "dangerous class".

Between 140 and 200 Million Chinese peasants have left their soil and are moving into the cities in order to find jobs as so called peasant workers (*mingong*). In human history, this movement is unprecedented. Nearly one third of the rural workers are unmarried men and women. Their average age is 28 years (Liu 2006: 73). Furthermore, this movement is splitting married couples throughout the country so they only see each other during the annual Chinese spring festival. In 2006, the Chinese government began paying more attention to the social problems that rural migrant workers face such as: safe work practices, educating their children and unpaid wages.

While many official publications argue for the improvement of working and living conditions of the peasant workers; they also treat them as a "dangerous class." In the official discourse, the sexual desires and behaviour of the rural migrants in the cities have become a matter of serious concern. This essay will show how the migrant workers in the cities are constructed as the "Other" in the official discourse. It will question how the "dangerous sexual desires" of the male and female peasant workers are presented. The policy recommendations to govern the body of the migrant worker in China's cities will also be analyzed. This research is based on Foucault's theory that sexuality is a social construction (Foucault 1983) and will focus on recent Chinese publication on the problems of the peasant workers since 2006. The official discourse is defined in this context as texts which are produced by academic institutions and official organizations.

Overcoming the dual society and "civilizing" the migrant workers

The Chinese society is often described as a dual society (*eryuan shehu*) which is split through an indivisible wall between the cities and villages. During the Mao era (1949-1976), urban and rural society was divided by the household register system (*hukou zhidu*) which forced the peasants to stay in their villages (see Cheng / Selden 1999). Until today, every Chinese citizen is registered as a agriculture or non-agricultural citizen. The agriculture population has access to the state owned land which is distributed by the village government, but no right to settle in the cities permanently. Chinese sociologists call this system "economic integration, but social exclusion" (*jingjixing jiena, shehuixing paich*).

During the economic takeoff in the eighties and nineties, millions of peasants moved to the cities illegally and in doing so, were undermining the strict regulation of the household register system. Since the "Certain suggestions of the State Council

regarding the problems of the peasant workers" in 2006, many new books on these topic have been published. The State Council recognized that the rural migrant workers are important force of the economic development of China. Furthermore, the city administrations should provide service and training to the peasant workers. The central government also launched a campaign to win the rural workers as members of the official trade unions.

These new policies are not only a result of the concept of the "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) which the government of Hu Jintao promoted. According my view, increasing labour unrests during the last years, forced the central government to pay more attention to the social problems in the cities. Despite the fact that strikes are illegal in the PRC, the peasant workers using their high mobility to escape from insufferable working conditions. The "wave of rural peasant workers" (*mingong chao*) in the nineties followed a shortage of rural labour (*mingong huang*) during the last years, especially in the world market factories in Guangdong province. The Chinese scholar Yang Siyuan considers these phenomena as a special form of strike (Yang Siyuan 2005: 391). The rural workers have become more self-confident and choosing factories or regions such as the mega-cities Beijing and Shanghai where working conditions are better.

Is the stronger focus of the Chinese government on the rural migrants workers aimed to empower them? The approach towards rural workers is quite paternalistic. The official goal is to improve the "quality" (*suzhi*) of its citizens and transform the rural migrants into modern Chinese citizens (see Murphy 2004 and Kipnis 2006). In this top-down re-education process, migrants workers are considered as backward people without education (*mei you wenhua*). This Chinese term could also be translated literally into "without culture". This transformation into urban citizens does not include the right to vote or to found own grass root organisations. The document of the State Council emphasised the leadership of the Communist Party regarding the political education of the rural migrant workers and their efforts to improve their "quality" (Zheng Gongcheng, vol. 2, 2007: 697).

The term "civilizing" does not have a negative meaning in the Chinese context. The Chinese government is attempting to build up a Socialist Chinese Civilization (*wenming*) and civilizing its people in a social, moral and political way. Schein has argued that in China an internal "Orientalism" of the Han Chinese towards the ethnic minorities exists (see Schein, in: Brownell 2002). Tibetans or Uigurs are often presented as the uncivilized and exotic "Other". According to my view, internal "Orientalism"

also exists regarding the peasant workers. Against this background, millions of unmarried and young rural migrants in the Chinese cities are a matter of concern, because they either living under the direct control their families nor are they integrated in official organization of the state such as the work unites or the trade unions.

Construction the dangerous sexual desires of the rural workers

In 2002, the Chinese government acknowledged in that the country is challenged by a serious HIV/AIDS epidemic. Since then, sexuality and sexual education became an important issue in the official discourse. The governing the body is fundamentally important in a country with the most restrictive birth planning policy in the world. Consequently, some of the books regarding the peasant workers which have recently published in the PRC provide chapters on the sexual problems of the migrants.

The author Zhang Yuejin who is also a cadre of the Public Security argues that the majority of rural workers in the cities have had a very unsatisfying sexual life (Zhang Yuejin 2007: 136). Zhang quotes the Hygiene Ministry, stating that "80 percent of the peasant workers who be adults or already be married are sex starving (*xing jike*) and unable to get satisfaction by a normal sexual life" (Zhang Yuejin 2007: 136). This figure is also quoted in the "Handbook for [rural] jobbers" (2007). Zhang argues that while living in over crowded rooming houses of their companies, the migrant workers have no time and space for a "normal" sexual life. Zhang accepts sexual needs as "natural", but warns of the danger of this unsatisfied sexual pressure (*xing yai*) which is an unspoken male problem. As a result, extra-material sex is widespread. Approximately 11 percent of the male peasant workers visit prostitutes. Prostitution and pornography are officially illegal, but widespread in China's cities. Furthermore, many children of the rural migrant workers would be born illegitimate outside marriage. This behaviour would seriously harm the birth control policy of the state (Zhang Yuejin 2007: 125). To underline his warning of the dangerous sexual pressure, Zhang quotes statistics from the police in Hangzhou and Beijing that over fifty percent of the rape crimes would be committed by peasant workers. Picturing the peasant worker as a rapist is quite common in the official discourse.

The sociologist Zou Xinshu argues in the same direction. In his chapter on the sexual problems in Chinese cities, he begins with the story about the lack of interests of rural migrants to celebrate the Valentine's Day which has become popular among the

urban middle class in China. Rural migrants often feel alone in the cities and have no money for this kind of celebration. Because of the high mobility, it is difficult to find a partner and to maintain stable relationships (Zou Xinshu 2007: 302). Moreover, the urban environment would produce new kinds of material and emotional desires. These desires, in combination with the lack of knowledge and sexual education, would result in masturbation, premarital and extra-marital sex, the consuming of pornography and sex services, sexual harassment, peeing at female University students, rape or even murder. Zou considers all these issues as unmoral and dangerous for the stability of the society. For example, to emphasize the harm of pornography, he tells a story from Beijing of 2004 in which over 60 rural workers watched porn together. During a police raid a tumult broke out and caused the death of two workers (Zou Xinshu 2007: 314).

In contrast to Zhang Yuejin, Zou also talks about the female rural migrants. According to Zou, prostitution already has become a large problem. "Despite a small minority of women who have been forced or cheated, the large majority have only few education and working skills and is not willing to work hard in order to make money. At the same time, they see that prostitutes getting high salaries without hard work and wearing gorgeously dresses" (Zou Xinshu 2007: 316). Other female migrants would become a lover or "second wife" (*ernai*) in order to get rich and destroy family relations as the "third party" (*disanzhe*). Zou warns that prostitution would harm society because it spreads HIV/AIDS and other sexual diseases especially among the uneducated rural migrants (Zou Xinshu 2007: 318). This statement is very close to the view on prostitution of the official All China's Women Federation. It seems that Zou sees the cities as places where the rural women get morally corrupted.

In contrast, some western scholars note that Chinese prostitutes are often highly educated urban women (Jeffreys 2004: 116). Only the lowest sex workers in the social hierarchy which were called with the discrimination term "jobber hut" (*xiagongpeng*) selling their bodies to the migrant workers. Most rich businessmen would not take a peasant woman as a "second wife", because they are often involved into companies of the man. Furthermore, it cannot be proven that migrant workers consume more porn than members of the middle class, and students who have much better access to the internet. The reason why urban scholars construct the peasant workers as the dangerous "Other" might be that millions of them living and working outside of the control institutions of the party state and the family. According to the Confucian tradition, educated people are considered to meet higher

standards of morality than uneducated peasants. Elitist views on the uneducated masses get a revival in the concept of "harmonious society".

The solution that authors offer to the problem of sexual pressure is to raise the cultural spirit and "quality" of the peasant workers. Zhang Yuejin recommends that married couples are provided separate rooms in the housing rooms during family holidays (Zhang Yuejin 2007: 139). Better medical service should prevent the spread of sexual diseases. Liu Jianfeng suggests that the urban governments should build cheap family apartments in special peasant workers residence areas (Liu 2006: 75). These policy recommendations are only directed towards improving the sexual lives of married couples. The "sex starving" bachelor(ette) should learn to control his or her desires through a process of self-cultivation. It seems that an effective strategy to govern the body of the peasant worker is missing.

Guiding the sexual life of the rural migrants workers

In order to provide service to the rural migrants, many handbooks for the new arrivals in the cities have been published since 2006 (for an example see Li 2006). These handbooks instruct the peasant workers how they should behave, dress and talk in the cities. The reader will learn how to use a telephone card or a public bus and also will get advice in moral behaviour. In this context, I focus on sexual issues.

For example, the "Handbook for [rural] jobbers" provides a chapter on "Stay away from drugs, prevent sexual chaos, prevent AIDS" (Dadongzhe Shouce 2007: 250) This slogan already shows the official assumption that one vice will lead to the other. The information is a mixture of scientific facts and moral exhortation. On the one hand, the handbook explains how to use condoms and how to prevent AIDS. On the other hand, it warns the reader of premarital sex, because it is not safe, or protected by law (Dagong Shouce 2007: 255.) Instead of watching porn, the rural workers should have "healthy" hobbies such as reading good books, taking a walk or visiting friends and always getting a good sleep.

It is widely known that women migrant workers are frequently sexually harassed by their urban, male employers. It is the woman's job to prevent or cope with this situation. She should not be afraid to say "no" and also should not wear sexy outfits in front of morally bad supervisors or meet them outside the workplace. In the case that the women cannot stand the harassment anymore, she should contact the trade union, the women federation or sue the man (Dadongshouce 2007: 218). It seems

that it is the rural female employee who is responsible for preventing this harassment. The “sex starving” employer is not a topic of this literature about the migrant workers.

The construction of sex and the “dangerous class”

These authors who are part of the official discourse are constructing sexual pressure as a natural force. While the stronger sex drive of a man results in the dangerous consumption of pornography and sex service, women can be corrupted by selling their bodies for material desires. In this discourse, the peasant workers in the cities are considered as pitiful victims of modernization and the dangerous bachelors at the same time. The narrative of the dangerous bachelor has a long tradition in Chinese bandit and rebel stories (see Ownby, in: Brownell 2002). According to Foucault (1983), the concept of sexuality is a construction of modern times. He also argued that the ruling bourgeois elite in the 19th century Europe portrayed the “dangerous classes” such the proletariat as sexual digressive.

The parallel to China is obviously clear. In the Chinese case, the ruling elite tries to defend the “socialist” sexual Puritanism. Furthermore, the government is afraid to lose control over the highly mobile migrant labour force. The regulation of the body of the peasant worker is too important to delegate it the capitalist employers. The discourse of the “sex starving” peasant worker is a reaction to the sexual liberalisation which have taken place in the PRC in the last twenties years.

The construction of the “sex starving” peasant worker who talks about sex is not necessary sign of liberation, as Foucault pointed out. This discourse is producing hierarchies and discrimination by “Othering” the rural worker in the cities. Moreover, in this official discourse the subaltern can not speak. Despite of few exceptions (for example see Li 2005), the rural workers are just an object of research and policies of the state in China. As a result, time and space to created and enjoy sexual desires could only be archived by the struggle of the male and female peasant workers themselves.

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