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# The Autonomy of Chinese Migrants Despite Structural and Social Determinants

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Running Head: THE AUTONOMY OF CHINESE MIGRANTS DESPITE STRUCTURAL  
AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

**The Autonomy of Chinese Migrants Despite Structural and Social  
Determinants**

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# THE AUTONOMY OF CHINESE MIGRANTS DESPITE STRUCTURAL AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

## **Abstract**

China is currently undergoing one of the largest domestic migration movements in its history, as hundreds of millions of its citizens move out of their countryside homes into urban areas to seek work in the wake of the nation's rapid globalization. This paper examines the lives of these migrants – how much agency they have over their decisions and their destinies while simultaneously subject to overarching controls set onto them by economic circumstance, government laws, and cultural traditions. It explores how they subvert tradition and former government policies by leaving home, and how they respond when confronted with discrimination in the cities. It also examines how migrant workers of the Banli Electrical Appliance Factory in Yuyao, Zhejiang find ways to reconstruct their human identities and exercise independent decision-making despite being valued solely for their labor, using research conducted at this factory through guided conversation from six key informants and participative observation living in the factory and working on the assembly line from May 4 to May 20. Finally, it explores the connection that migrants have to their homes, through memories and money, and their decisions about returning.

*Keywords:* migration, cultural anthropology, individual and family studies

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All guided conversations and informal interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and have been translated here by the author. No real names have been included in this paper, including the name of the factory, to protect participants' identities.

## **Introduction**

Migrant workers are not powerless, passive figures, subject to the push and pull of larger systems that control them. It is true that when migrants leave home, they become integrated into new urban hierarchies, in which they, as outsiders, are often at the bottom. Not only do employers hold power over migrants, but the state itself also exercises control over what migrants are allowed to do and how they are perceived. Yet, despite these social and institutional controls, migrants have agency over their own actions, and exercise autonomy in numerous aspects of their lives. Their initial decision to leave home is, in itself, a manifestation of their own will.

Still, the level of autonomy that migrants enjoy remains ambiguous. While subject to control by the state, their employers, and larger underlying social structures, migrants also have the power to subvert traditions rooted for tens of centuries in Chinese culture, to switch their jobs, to express their individual identities, and ultimately to change their destinies. At the same time, it is these structures and authorities that limit the scope of their available options in the very aspects mentioned previously.

In this paper, I will analyze how migrant workers exercise their autonomy while under the controls of authorities and institutions much more powerful than they are. In an era in which almost one-fifth of China's population is comprised of migrants, it is their decisions that have rippling effects on the nation's urban and rural landscapes, its cultural identity, and its distribution of capital. Migrants are not a single, homogenous population acting as a whole; rather, they are individuals, with individual histories, feelings, and opinions which all influence the way they react to the nation's demand for labor in the midst of unprecedented globalization. Furthermore, they are the bridge between the

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nation's urban metropolises and its rural countryside; as they move back and forth exchanging information and capital, they help to narrow the economic and cultural gap between the two areas.

### ▪ *Migration Statistics*

Using the most recent data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, there were 245 million migrants, or members of the “floating population” – in the year 2013, which has more than doubled since the year 2000 (“Floating Population,” 2014). Since 1960, China's proportion of urban residents has steadily increased, with a complementary decrease in its proportion of rural residents. Since the government's more relaxed migration laws in 1985, the nation's urban population proportion has increased from 23.71% to 53.73%, and the rural population proportion has decreased from 76.29% to 46.27% —showing that the majority of China's population now lives in urban areas (NBS, “Population and Its Composition,” 2014). From 2000 to 2005, the most common provinces of migrant origin were Sichuan and Anhui, while the most common provinces of migrant destination were Guangdong and Zhejiang (Rush, 2011).

### **Methodology**

For my research, I stayed in a factory in Yuyao, a manufacturing county within the Zhejiang Province. As mentioned before, Zhejiang is one of the prime destination locations for migrant workers. Its migrant population of 18,300 was almost of equal size to its household registration-holding population of 26,392 in the year 2013 (NBS, “Population by Sex,” 2014). In Yuyao County, there are rows upon rows of almost

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identical-looking gray factory buildings, mostly for electrical appliances and plastic molding.

### ▪ *Location*

I lived and worked in Banli Electrical Appliances Co. for two and a half weeks. My uncle, who helps the company with its foreign trade clients, is very close to the factory boss. In China, relationships with people, called *guanxi*, are crucial in obtaining privileges and opportunities. Therefore, using my uncle's *guanxi*, I was able to have this rare and unique opportunity as an outsider, to access the factory environment.

Banli produces cosmetic care electronics: hair dryers, flat irons, hair curlers, ionic hairbrushes, and electrical toothbrushes. Most of the factory's products are made for foreign clients. It was established in 2006 and now exports to over forty nations worldwide (Boss Chen, 2016 May 5). Banli takes care of the design, manufacturing, and product testing of hair-care appliances, which it then sells the products to mostly American and European companies like Revlon, Remington, or Sassoon for product branding, marketing, and consumer sale. Since China only recently opened its doors to the global economy, Chinese brands do not have the solid, loyal consumer base that foreign brands have. Ninety-eight percent of the factory's resources are committed to foreign supplying. The remaining two percent is allotted to establishing its own product brand, of which Boss Chen is optimistic that over time, will develop more stably and become competitive with Western brands (2016 May 5).

### ▪ *Living and Working Conditions*

I lived in a dorm off to the side of the factory quad. There, I had my own room on the second floor. The actual factory dorms are located in the rear of the factory grounds,

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where workers are divided by gender and live eight to a room. Although I originally considered living with the workers in their dorms, I decided not to, for reasons such as personal space and privacy to write this paper. Of course, I have to wonder how more integrated my experience would have been if I had chosen to live in the dorms instead.

The work hours for assembly line workers are from 8am to 11pm, 12pm to 5pm with 5:30pm to 8pm as overtime. Informants have told me that overtime does not happen everyday, but during my stay, it did. They work six days of the week, with Sundays off, which is an average of sixty-six hours per week. Sometimes when the factory is rushing to fill an order, workers will be required to work Sundays as well. Lunch is served at 11pm, and dinner is served only when there is overtime, at 5pm. There is one cafeteria in which all the workers: assembly line workers, people in sales, and even the boss himself eats in.

### ▪ *Research Methods*

Most of my field research was done through informal interviews and guided conversations, while chatting in the office, on the assembly line, or in the cafeteria. As a result, I gained bits of information from a multitude of people. I decided conducting formal interviews would limit the depth of information I could obtain. Instead, I made friends with workers in both the offices and the assembly lines to understand migrant working life from a more organic perspective. In working alongside them, I was able to gain their trust, and together we shared jokes, stories, and political debates, many of which are not included in this paper.

I also learned through observation and hands-on experiences, working at the factory eight hours a day but not during overtime. Through this experience, I was able to

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witness the structure of everyday life for its workers. During my time on the assembly line, I did a multitude of jobs. Usually, people cycle through the same couple of jobs everyday, depending on which phase of the production cycle we are on. I was given a more diverse experience, as the line manager knew I was here for research.

### ▪ *Topic Selection*

Although I had originally planned to write about factory migrant women, my topic changed. This switch was due in part to my more casual research methods, which allowed me to befriend males and females, as well as the factory environment itself, which is quite equally divided based on gender in terms of population and job position.

### **I. Leaving Home: The First Step to Increased Autonomy**

The choice of migration opens up a plethora of possibilities for rural youth. As soon as they step outside, they have the opportunity to see the world outside and more importantly, to alter the fates previously set for them through tradition. Whereas before, rural youth were subject to the expectations of their parents, their moves into urban cities give them more agency over their own lives. Exposure to globalized economies and societies inevitably alter their perspectives and present them with new choices.

### ▪ *Reasons for Migration*

Migration around the globe usually happens for economic reasons. The first theory about migration states that it, “results from uneven geographical distribution of labour and capital” (Arango, 2000, p.285). Expectedly, most of the factory workers I questioned replied that they left their hometowns because they wanted to make money. Some traveled great distances because the job opportunities near home paid less, since

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tourism is the main economy in their hometown provinces. Meanwhile, Zhejiang's proximity to China's eastern coast, the destination for much of the nation's foreign investment, has given rise to its large manufacturing industry, thus providing more job opportunities with higher pay.

Still, money is not the only reason that people leave. Many of them also report more personally-driven motives instead of just economically-driven ones. For Lulu, a human resources manager from Guizhou, leaving home to see the outside world is "interesting and fun," and finding work is merely a means of supporting herself in her adventures (2016 May 5). She also reported gaining independence as a benefit of having had to establish a life for herself in the city. Such sentiments are not uncommon in migrants. Based on surveys and ethnographic research, migrants rank "seeing the world", "self-development", "learning new skills", and "escaping boredom" as reasons equally as important to their leaving of home, as increasing their financial abilities (Chang, 2009, p.13; Gaetano, 2015, p.30). For rural youth today, migration is a means for them to experience a world outside the ones their parents know.

### ▪ *Subverting Tradition*

Young females in particular use migration as a way to change their destinies and therefore subvert ideas of tradition. Due to Confucian and neo-Confucian doctrine, Chinese women for centuries have been confined to "inside" spaces of domesticity, in the roles of daughter, wife, or mother (Gaetano, 2015, p.36). Even into the 1980s and 1990s, parents worried about how migrating daughters would affect their family's reputation, as there was much shame attached to young females leaving home (Chang, 2009, p.105). Thus, by leaving the countryside home for work hundreds of miles away, young rural

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women overturn these cultural norms. Additionally, for young women in the countryside, marriage is an obligation that reaches them in their early twenties, after which they are inclined to become part of their husbands' families (Chang, 2009, p.57). Single young women are therefore caught in a liminal stage, "poised between carefree youth and responsible adulthood," where they are done with schooling but have not yet settled down in marriage (Gaetano, 2015, p.41). Lulu's decided to migrate during this liminal stage, when she was 22. Now, at the age of 25, she still does not feel ready yet to settle down (2016, May 5). The loss of autonomy that comes with marriage, birthing children, and living with the husband's family may intimidate rural women, causing them to prolong their senses of individuality by escaping to the cities, often despite traditional views held by their family members or neighbors.

For a long time, tradition has limited the options of rural youth in choosing their spouses. Marriage is a universal expectation in China, in both the countryside and the cities, while remaining single and childless is seen as both "impractical as well as culturally unacceptable" (Gaetano 2015, p.100). Rural youth traditionally have arranged marriages, relying on "intermediaries," which can be family, friends, or professional matchmakers, to set them up with potential partners (Gaetano 2015, p.105). However, these arranged marriages are not completely devoid of romance. Yaxi, a 26-year old assembly line worker from Guizhou wed through an arranged marriage. Her parents had set her up with multiple potential husbands before her current spouse, Shanlong, with whom she did not pursue marriage because she felt their personalities to be incompatible (2016, May 13). Parents typically expect their daughters to marry someone from their own village or county, so that they will not be relocated to a distant area when living with

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their husbands (Gaetano 2015, p.106). Married rural daughters have a responsibility to emotionally support and physically care for their own parents as well as their in-laws.

The four migrant couples I have gotten to know on the assembly line all hailed from the same province: two from Anhui, one from Guizhou, and one from Hubei.

However, after the rural youth leave home, they are able to exercise much more freedom in determining their own marriage fates and therefore undermine cultural tradition and parental authority. Away from parental expectations and control, migrants tend to marry at later ages, engage in extended relationships of courtship, and have higher standards for desirable partners (Gaetano, 2015, p.99-100). Now, marriage for migrants represents individual choice more than it does a union between two families (Gaetano, 2015, p.106). Migrant couples who have gotten together after leaving their respective homes, are “less likely to co-reside with the parents, preferring to establish a nuclear household of their own” – a preference that has undeniable effects on filial piety and the succeeding generation (Gaetano, 2015, p.106). Currently Lulu has a boyfriend whom she met during her time in Yuyao. He is from rural Hubei, a province over a thousand kilometers away from her hometown (Google Maps). Both of them, at 25 years old with older siblings who have already married, feel pressure from their parents to marry soon. Lulu’s parents know that her boyfriend is from a different province, but her boyfriend’s parents expect him to marry someone from close to home (2016, May 8). This couple is representative of changes in the marriage scene due to migration, subverting parental authority by choosing their own partners.

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## II. Push and Pull: Interactions between Migrants and the Government

In the mid- to late- 1900s, migration was heavily policed by the state. Despite these official sanctions, people still left for urban centers to seize opportunities unavailable to them in their rural homes. In response to such colossal resistance, the government realized that a better option was to control migration and capitalize on an available labor population. As a result, migration is now a legal and established route for rural youth seeking work.

### ▪ *Migrants' Claim to Power and Space*

In the past, the Chinese government has enacted policies to prevent or stop migration. The household registration, or *hukou*, policy of 1958 placed heavy restrictions on domestic migration, as one's place of residency controlled one's access to government-provided aid (Chang, 2009, p.12). Urban residents were provided with jobs, housing, and ration coupons whereas rural residents were not given any of these privileges, constricting them to their countryside homes. With little hope for social mobility, generations of farmers stayed as farmers. Then, in the 1970s, a dramatic increase in the efficiency of farming caused a surplus of farmers in the countryside by a figure of as high as 200 million (Zhang, 2001, p.26). Shortly afterwards, Deng Xiaoping's opening up and reform policies in 1979 created a need for cheap labor to build up urban infrastructure in order to support the cities' rapid economic development (Chang 2009, p.12; Zhang, 2001, p.27). The resulting surge of migration was nevertheless regarded as a stress on urban resources – a problem that the State controlled by detaining and repatriating migrants through the Public Security Bureau (Gaetano,

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2015, p.21). However, despite all these government actions, the state was still ineffective in stopping the tide of migrants.

Instead, rural residents continued migrating to urban centers, hiding from the police to avoid punishment by state law. Many lived illegally in cities because temporary residency permits were too expensive, involved a time-consuming application process, and required constant renewal (Zhang, 2001, p.35). Collectively, they eventually established relatively stable, unofficial migrant communities, hidden within the outskirts of major cities. Migrants tended to settle in areas according to their native provinces; for example, Beijing in the 1990s contained four large migrant villages: Zhejiangcun, Anhuicun, Hunancun, and Xinjiangcun (Zhang, 2001, p.14). As Foucault states, “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power”<sup>1</sup> (Zhang, 2001, p.14). Therefore, the establishment of these unofficial communities represents the migrants’ claim to power, despite the official laws that sought to prevent their settlement. Thus ensued constant battles between migrants and the state for spatial power. Some wealthier migrant groups were able to build up semi-permanent housing, community facilities and even marketplaces over time – social hubs that competed significantly with the spaces controlled by those of the formal, monopolizing state power (Zhang, 2001, p.4). The city government responded by periodically “cleaning out” such communities, deporting migrants without permits and sometimes even demolishing their housing settlements (Zhang, 2001, p.18). In some cases, their efforts were futile, as displaced migrants eventually revitalized their former communities, representing the vitality and continuity of migrant societies.

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<sup>1</sup>Foucault, 1984:252

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### ▪ *Changes in Government Strategy*

As the state realized that it could do little to stop the enormous tide of migrants, its strategy transformed from one of obstruction into one of regulation. It also recognized that urban development would require the simultaneous development of the service sector, which contained jobs that many urban residents were unwilling to do. Thus, in 1984 and 1985, the government passed laws that allowed farmers to settle into small market towns, therefore legalizing migration and relaxing previous attempts to block migrants from entering cities (Chang, 2009, p.12). However, it was not until 2003 that the State Council finally acknowledged the crucial role of migrant labor in regards to urban development, by issuing a policy that “banned job discrimination against migrants and advocated better working conditions for them and schooling for their children” (Chang, 2009, p.13). That same year, it also dismantled the Public Security Bureau’s system of migrant detention and repatriation (Gaetano, 2015, p.21).

After this change in strategy, upper-level government also acknowledged the importance of labor migration. Former President Hu Jintao saw migrants as essential to closing the rural-urban income gap, as migrants bring the money, knowledge, and skills they have acquired in cities back to their home communities (Gaetano, 2015, p.20). Current President Xi Jinping sees migrants as indispensable to the buildup of the nation’s middle class – a population that can foster continued economic growth for China (Gaetano, 2015, p.21). To make this “China Dream” a reality, he launched a plan in 2014 which aimed to increase the urban population by one hundred million by raising migrant worker wages and granting them more access to education and healthcare, thus allowing migrants full integration into urban societies (Gaetano, 2015, p.21).

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## III. Responses to Discrimination

Even despite the state's changed position on migration, migrant workers, as outsiders, are often confronted with discrimination from urban natives. Almost all of my informants in the factory have their own experiences of discrimination with me. Faced with this lack of acceptance, migrants bring themselves comfort by staying in social groups with others from their same provinces and eating foods from home. They also participate in urban consumer culture as a means of gaining urban membership and altering their perceptions of self.

### ▪ *Institutional and Social Discrimination*

While migration was still illegal in the 1980s and 1990s, local urban governments policed migrants heavily. Migrants at this time were associated with disorder, chaos, and immorality. Police would conduct nighttime household inspections in migrant neighborhoods without a search warrant, and street patrols would often target non-provincial-looking people for identification checks (Zhang, 2001, p.38). Furthermore, individual female migrant bodies, which were perceived to have higher fertility, were policed to uphold fertility limits set by the One Child Policy. Migrant women had to present government-issued "marriage and fertility certificates" from their hometowns when looking for jobs, and some were even compelled by urban officials to have an IUD implanted (Zhang, 2001, p.37).

The institutional attempts to deter migration affected how local residents perceived migrants. When interviewed on what they thought of migrants in the 1990s, Beijing natives often used the words: "dirty, silly, poor, aimless, uncivil, congregating, and money-driven" (Zhang, 2001, p.32). Migrants were also targets for blame in regards

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to crime such as robbery, prostitution, drug trafficking, and overall deterioration of public security, even though rising crime rates at this time were largely due to “instability and uncertainty brought about by market reforms,” and not specifically caused by migrants themselves (Zhang, 2001, p.29-33). Due to intense policing and discrimination from which urban dwellers were free, migrants remained second-class citizens within the cities.

Although migration is much more accepted by the state now, migrants still feel discriminated against in their urban environments. In the Zhejiang Province, people use the term *bendiren*(people of the land) to refer to provincial natives, and *waidiren*(people from outside) to refer to migrants. When Lulu was telling me of her experiences with discrimination, she exclaimed, “We are the black people of China!” (2016, May 8). Although she lacks knowledge of the history of slavery and the institutional oppression that black people face in America, her remark displayed how she feels mistrusted, misunderstood, and disrespected by provincial natives. She complained that *bendilandlords* have the power to kick migrants out of their houses for whatever reason, if they think anything about the migrant’s behavior is strange. Older *bendiren* especially, simply refuse to interact with her out of prejudice. She also explained that *bendiren* enjoy better opportunities for jobs than *waidiren*, even with the same qualifications (2016, May 8).

Migrants have commonly reported having urban dwellers look down on them: “It’s like we’re dirty; no one wants us near!” (Gaetano, 2015, p.81). Associating migrants with being “dirty” can be explained by an epistemology that defines the socially constructed concepts of cleanliness and dirtiness through polarization and “othering”

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(Douglas, 1996, p.35). In reality, migrants themselves are not dirty; inherently, they are not more attuned to crime, do not have higher fertility rates, or are not of lower culture. Instead, it is their rural culture that becomes stigmatized once they move into spaces of urban dominance, therefore rendering them as such. Urban residents posit migrants as having low *suzhi*(culture or quality) to define themselves as people who are of high *suzhi* and more deserving of the benefits of modernization. Based on accounts of migrants themselves, it is safe to conclude that many urban natives still do not see migrants as equals.

- *Finding the Comfort of Home*

Despite constantly being confronted with their identities as outsiders, migrants today find ways to feel more accepted by surrounding themselves with reminders of home. For most, the greatest reminder of home is to be with people from the same area, with whom one can speak in the same dialect and endure the unknown of the cities together. In the 1990s, unofficial migrantscommunitieswere established according to migrants' different provinces of origin (Zhang, 2001, p.14). Nowadays, migrants leave home either having prepared connections to help them in the city, or in the companionship of friends or family. Using connections and staying in groups not only helps migrants feel less lonely and more accepted in the face of discrimination, but it also reduces the risk of physical danger and vulnerability to scamming. Xiao Wang, an assembly line worker in Banli, left his rural village in Anhui with his fiancée (2016, May 20). Afterwards, he helped friends from a nearby village, Ling Ling and her husband, to get jobs at the factory as well.

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Once migrants settle down in the cities, their social groups tend to form along provincial lines. During lunch and dinner, Xiao Wang, Ling Ling, and her husband always eat together (Xiao Wang's fiancée works for the neighboring factory), speaking to each other in their regional tongue. Most of factory society is divided in this way: workers' closest friends in the factory – the ones they eat and joke with, are usually from the same province, work in the same departments, and are of the same approximate ages. Since most assembly line workers are from Anhui, Guizhou, and Hubei, these provincial dialects are heard the most frequently and loudly in the production floor. Hardly does one hear Mandarin being spoken, and when it is, it indicates that someone is speaking to an outsider.

Another reminder of home is food. At the factory cafeteria, all of the cooks are Zhejiang natives. Zhejiang cuisine is mostly seafood, and does not incorporate spicy flavors. Since most workers are from provinces in China that heavily spice their dishes, they often complained that the food is tasteless. In response, they bring their own jars of spicy sauce, *lajiang*, or packets of spicy pickled mustard, *zhacai*, to season their meals with. Additionally, Lulu's kitchen counter in her house is filled with jars of peppercorns and spicy powders from home, which she always uses to recreate the numbing-spicy *mala* flavor that is so distinct to China's southwestern provinces (2016, May 8). For the factory's migrant workers, speaking with others in their regional dialects and eating spicy food are ways of combating homesickness, of feeling more comfortable in an environment in which they are regarded as outsiders.

- *Buying Urban Membership*

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While the discrimination that migrants face becomes internalized, it also becomes converted into a desire for urban belonging, which is attempted through consumption. When I first asked Lulu where her hometown was, she was hesitant to reply, seemingly embarrassed of her rural origins (2016, May 5). Workers on the assembly line often joked to me that they were all countryside hicks, *turen*, with low status and no manners (2016, May 12). To shed this *turen* image, migrants (evidently the females but also the males) will alter their styles, donning urban fashions, cutting their hair, and using whitening skin creams to lighten their tanned skin from working in the fields (Gaetano, 2015, p.86). In a time when socio-economic status is determined by responses to commercialization instead of by one's *hukou* status, migrants are able to "reclaim urban membership," through the consumption of urban culture and commodities, thus granting them "consumer citizenship" (Zhang, 2001, p.44-45). For assembly line workers, commodities that signify higher status sold in malls are too expensive for their income level; instead, they choose to shop in the Yuyao's downtown district, getting knockoff and imitation products for a fraction of the price. In buying such products, migrants can emulate the predominant middle-class lifestyle image in cities and transform themselves into urban sophisticates.

### **IV. On the Assembly Line: More Than Just Cogs in the Machine**

In addition to social "othering," assembly line workers in Banli are subject to many rules – some of which they have no choice but to submit to, and others, which they find ways to bypass. They are also objectified for their ability to produce labor, causing them to work for long hours with little freedoms, and being constantly pushed to produce

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at a faster rate. Still, the workers I have met find ways to humanize themselves by expressing themselves through fashion and social media.

### ▪ *Bypassing Factory Rules*

There are many reasons why a worker would get docked from pay, most of which regard food, electronic usage, and housing. Assembly line workers are prohibited from wasting cafeteria food and from using their phones during work hours (Zhouping, 2016, May 13). The rules are not as strict for office workers. I have seen Lulu play games on her phone, take naps, and use social media at work. However, on the assembly line, the rules are strictly enforced. Some line managers will chastise workers openly if they see that the workers are distracted. Since sitting for hours a day without communicating with friends and family elsewhere is difficult, many workers will use their phones to call or message while taking short bathroom or smoke breaks. Since listening to music is also prohibited, workers will sing songs to pass the time (Zhouping, 2016, May 13).

In addition, the housing rules for living in factory dorms are also quite strict. Workers live eight to a room and are responsible for cleaning their own spaces as well as the bathrooms. They can get fined for having messy rooms or allowing guests inside (Zhouping, 2016, May 13). To avoid the hassle and monitoring of living in factory dorms, most of the assembly line workers live outside the factory, in rented apartments; only one person I have talked to, an eighteen-year old girl from Guizhou, lives in the dorms. Living outside of the factory gives workers the comfort of freedom in having their own space, a point that exemplifies Marx's theory that workers "feel at ease only outside work" (1964). The price for renting an apartment close to the factory is between one hundred to two hundred yuan a month (Xiao Wang, 2016, May 17). For apartments that

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are farther away from the factory and closer to the city, which have more access to entertainment and shopping streets, the rent is much higher. Lulu, who lives in such an area, pays over one thousand yuan per month to rent a three-room apartment (2016, May 16) – a price considered to be unaffordable for those on the assembly line. In taking their phones to the bathroom, singing songs, and renting their own apartments outside, assembly line workers find ways to exercise their individual freedom despite spending most of their waking hours under factory authority.

### ▪ *Alienated Labor*

In addition to multiple rules, assembly line workers are objectified, as they become valued solely for their labor. Every morning at exactly 7:50am, workers in the same assembly line, line in up in three rows and face the line manager, who gives a speech called *kaihui*:

“Yesterday, you made an average of 260 flat irons per hour. You’ve made these products before, there’s no reason to be so slow” (Huadeng, 2016, May 17).

“I’m not saying you’re not allowed to take water breaks, I’m just asking you to limit how long and how frequent these breaks are. If everyone is always taking breaks, it will take us forever to finish the order. I’m just asking everyone to pick up your pace” (Huadeng, 2016, May 10).

“There are guests from foreign companies coming this week, which means we need to be extra diligent. Less talking.” (Huadeng, 2016, May 16).

“Recently, people have been asking for time off. I want you all to really think about why you need time off... if they are good reasons. You know you are all here for the money. Remember that. You only earn money if you put your time in.

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When our assembly line is short a few people, it makes a big difference on how much everyone makes” (Huadeng, 2016, May 16).

“Are there ever any good *kaihui*’s?” I asked Yaxi, at lunch one day.

“No,” she replied. “They are always like this. We have never been praised.”  
(2016, May 17)

There is something about sitting on a backless stool, doing the same motions all day while constantly being urged to work more quickly, that makes one feel like a cog inside a machine – a mere piece of the manufacturing process instead of like a human being. Marx has contemplated this sentiment, stating that labor “produces itself and the worker as a commodity” (1964). The jobs are all broken down into the smallest motions for time maximization: one person puts insulators around wire, while the next attaches these wires to on/off switchboards. With piece-rate payment, which fixes the factory’s labor cost per unit, the assembly line workers become objects over which the products of their labor come to exercise power. Assembly line workers work eleven hours a day, six days a week, yet, their time spent working is only a means in which they can assemble more products; for it is the products themselves which determine their wages: the more products the assembly line as a whole produces, the more money they can make. By extension, the faster an assembly line works, the more that can be produced in a day.

This dynamic leads workers to objectify themselves and each other, and see natural human functions – going to the bathroom, drinking water, socializing – as detrimental to the group’s rate of production. One day, the worker next to me was gone for around ten minutes while the assembly line was moving at fast pace; when he returned, the line manager yelled that he had been gone for too long and had cost the

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entire team. It is not only the line manager who prompts them to work more quickly; assembly line workers themselves will also complain about the speed of production.

Workers towards the bottom of the line will urge workers at the top of the line to work faster, so that they have more things to assemble. By contrast, workers praise coworkers who consistently do their work extremely quickly. On my particular line, there were two such “star” workers: a young man in his late twenties and an older woman in her forties, who worked at paces that far surpassed others.

When necessary human functions are frowned upon during work time, they inevitably become included in what workers regard to be leisure. The result of having little time at all for rest, is that they “feel that they are acting freely only in their animal functions – eating, drinking, and procreating” (Marx, 1964). By the time assembly line workers are let out from work in the evening, they only have time to eat and sleep. During the hour-long lunch break in the afternoon, workers will eat in the cafeteria and then return to the production floor to sleep, listen to music, talk with each other, or use their phones to communicate with friends or play games. Consequently, they eat quickly to have more time to relax. People shovel their food down within ten minutes, reducing even eating down to a necessary function instead of an enjoyable activity due to the stringency of time. When they are finished eating, they leave the cafeteria, regardless of the paces of the people they are eating with at the same table. Never in my time at the factory have I seen an assembly line workers linger at the table to make conversation. On Sundays when the workers finally have the day off to rest, they mainly sleep in late, clean their houses, and do their laundry (Yaxi, 2016, May 19). When they have extra time, they

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will go out to the park or meet their friends. Also, when their true leisurely activities are not limited by time, they are limited by disposable income.

Working overtime, *jiaban*, is not a personal choice, but an economic one. Lulu has told me that overtime, which pays at a higher rate than regular hours, is not mandatory for the assembly line workers (2016, May 8). However, I have rarely seen workers forfeit overtime work to have more time to rest. To the workers themselves, overtime is crucial to their earnings and financial stability. They all make around three thousand yuan a month; two-thirds of which is from working overtime (Xiao Wang, 2016, May 14). In total, workers spend over 250 hours a month on the assembly lines. Assembly line workers consider working overtime to be absolutely necessary by financial circumstance.

- *Displays of Self Expression and Individualism*

Despite the conditions that abstract the assembly line workers from their labor and objectify them, they still find ways to express their individuality through fashion. Young female workers sport a variety of hairstyles: some curl the ends of their hair, some dye their hair red, some wear bangs, and some keep their hair up in ponytails with decorative hair ties. Their unique style makes them more easily identifiable: one girl always wears lacy tops with short skirts and wedges, another girl always wears white tops with black pants and street shoes, yet another girl always wears long cardigans over a dress shirt and tight jeans. Although fashion is less diverse across the men, they also express their interests through dress. One young man wore a shirt with the famed mask from *V for Vendetta*, one of his favorite movies, printed on the front. The line manager, a young man in his early twenties, often wears a black blazer over his shirt, giving him an air of

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professionalism and authority. Although I did not know many of the assembly line workers personally, I came to recognize some of them through their fashion.

Moreover, assembly line workers also express their personalities through social media. On WeChat, a predominant form of social media in China, workers are able to customize their profile pictures and usernames, which they often choose to be unrelated to their real names. For example, Yaxi's username means, "dancing in the snow while facing the moon" (2016, May 25). Her WeChat posts demonstrate her emotions, giving her identity a touch of humanity that is often suppressed on the production floor. One day, she posted a picture of herself frowning, and later that day, another picture of herself smiling with the caption, "Starting tomorrow, I will forget all the unhappiness and continue to smile through everything, even when I am tired," showing her decision to take responsibility for her own happiness (2016, May 23). She has also expressed longing for her children, who are left to the care of her parents back in her home village, posting, "For you, I endure" (2016, May 22). Yet another of my friends, whose username means "Buried!" posts selfies with captions calling herself beautiful, expressing her self-confidence while flaunting her fashion sense (Danielle, 2016, May 10, 22). The customizability of social media allows assembly line workers to develop more three-dimensional images of themselves outside of just their work. Through their WeChat posts, which can be viewed by all of their friends, they express their emotions and personalities.

### **V. Maneuvering Educational Requirements through Horizontal Mobility**

Generally, education is the best way of increasing one's job mobility, to acquire the skills and qualifications necessary to do higher-level work. However, for many rural youth, migration overtakes education as a route for increased opportunity. Their decisions

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to stop schooling are institutionalized, as the rigidity of the Chinese education system and its high demands of performance discourage rural youth in particular. Therefore, although migrant workers are able to acquire jobs fairly easily due to high labor demand, their lack of continued education makes them less able to compete with their educated urban counterparts for promotions and higher-paying jobs. However, migrant youth are still able to decide which jobs they work and for how long. Often, they will leave their current jobs for more attractive opportunities elsewhere. In this way, migrants exercise autonomy in terms of horizontal mobility.

- *Reasons for Dropping Out*

Now that migration has become an established option for rural youth, many choose it over education. For most of them, migration is the more pragmatic decision, since education involves high investments of money and time. In China, all children are required to have a nine-year compulsory education after which families must pay for schooling. Most Chinese students at this time are 15 years old. A large portion of the assembly line migrant workers I have spoken with left school immediately after they finished these nine mandatory years. Some continued into their senior secondary education, few were college educated, and none were college graduates. They told me that they did not perform well in school and saw no reason to continue. Most of all, they did not *like* it(2016, May 20).

Their attitudes towards school do not represent individual failures as much as they exemplify an institutional shortcoming. Chinese schools attempt to standardize their expectations of students across lifestyles that differ greatly by residency. This strategy fails because rural youth have more responsibilities than urban youth. “City kids go to

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school all day, and when they come home their only responsibility is to do their homework. Us rural kids, when we came home, we needed to help our parents with farm work and let the goats out. And *then* we would still need to finish our homework and study. We didn't have time for anything," Lulu expressed about her childhood (2016, May 19). With the state's expectation to perform well in school and their families' expectation to help with farm labor, rural youth hardly have the time to study, much less to pursue their hobbies or engage in enjoyable activities. I have heard many Chinese young adults, from both urban and rural origins, tell me that the education system is flawed and backwards. While both urban and rural youth have complaints about education, rural youth, unlike their urban counterparts, have the option to migrate. Their frustration with the lack of time they can invest into their studies or leisure, as well as with the rigidity of a system that seems only to value rote memorization, compels them to leave school early in search for individual freedom and new opportunities.

- *Effects of Education on Vertical Mobility*

However, because one's level of education directly correlates to one's job opportunities, forfeiting education limits the diversity of job options available to migrants, restricting them to lower-paying jobs. Young female migrants are usually funneled into the service and retail sectors, hotel and restaurant hospitality, and domestic work, while young male migrants are concentrated in construction and industry (Gaetano, 2015, p.22-23). Migrants working the lowest-level jobs in Chinese factories, on the assembly line, are forced to forego opportunities for continued education due to the lengthy time demands of their work. Working sixty-six hours a week, they have no time to enroll in part-time classes to learn English or other skills to improve their future job prospects.

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Consequently, little promotion in the factory happens internally. Production jobs and office jobs in the factory are clearly divided. Those on the assembly line may have the opportunity to be promoted to line manager or work in the production office, but their lack of education bars them from gaining higher-paying positions in office jobs like human resources, marketing, design, or sales (Lulu, 2016, May 7). The office jobs in the departments listed previously hire from outside instead. When I asked one assembly line worker what his previous work was, he responded that he had worked at a factory almost identical to this one because he had few other skills (2016, May 18). Lulu, who works in human resources, is more fortunate than the assembly line workers. She took a low-level factory office job shortly after leaving her home, and enrolled in school part-time (2016, May 7). As a result, her higher level of education has landed her, her current job, which leaves her with enough time and physical energy to continue her upwards mobility. In her spare time, she teaches herself English, in hopes of getting promoted or finding another job with even better pay.

### ▪ *Moving Horizontally Instead*

Even though a portion of migrant workers are hindered in their chances of increasing their job potential, they often still switch jobs if they find better opportunities elsewhere or decide that they are dissatisfied with their current working situations. One assembly line worker from Guizhou accepted a job at the factory after his attempt to establish his own hair salon in Zhejiang failed (2016, May 11). Another, also from Guizhou, transferred to factory work from construction because the sun had been too harsh on his skin (2016, May 6). At the end of this month, he plans to leave the factory to return to Guizhou to start his own barbershop with a friend (Lulu, 2016, May 19). By that

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time, he would have worked at Banli for less than fifty days. Some factory workers quit merely days after starting work (Lulu, 2016, May 7). Although seemingly powerless to authority in doing low-level work, migrants can also decide to “vote with their feet,” or quit, by walking out on jobs where the rules are too strict or their employers misunderstand them (Gaetano, 2015, p.76). Thus, migrant workers exercise a certain level of control over their working situations regardless of the unlikelihood of vertical job mobility.

### **VI. Connections to Home through Memories and Money**

Migrants, defined by their decision to leave for urban life, have complicated relationships to their hometowns. Most have fond memories of the countryside, but also know that greater opportunities lie in the cities. Most, only return once a year for Lunar New Year. The enormous number of migrants in China, as well as the money and information they send back home, has significantly altered rural landscapes throughout the nation. Although pulled into cities by economic motives, migrants still have the freedom to choose how long they stay there.

#### ▪ *Longing for Home*

Regardless of how urban locals may perceive rural villages, homesickness is not uncommon for migrants, even for those who have already spent years outside. The migrant workers that I have spoken with all express a deep sense of connection with their hometowns, especially when describing them to foreigners like me. Workers from Guizhou, Anhui, and Hubei all boast about their provinces’ beautiful natural landscapes and clean air – two things that are unavailable in a factory district like Yuyao (2016, May

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20). Xiao Wang told me that he misses his rural village in Anhui because there, life moves at a slower pace, allowing people to live in a relaxed way. There, he also has more time and greater access to leisure activities such as playing in the river next to his village, while all he can do for fun in Yuyao is go shopping and spend hard-earned money (2016, May 20). Additionally, all of Xiao Wang's closest friends are from his hometown; he claims that he has no close friends in the factory. Lulu has also expressed similar nostalgic sentiments of home, recalling memories of tending to her family's animals and having the freedom to walk into neighbors' kitchens with just a bowl to join them for dinner (2016, May 5).

One Sunday, I went fishing with Lulu and her friends in a nearby lake next to a rural village in Yuyao. While we were sitting on the dock, watching her male friends play around on the plastic orange boat, she remarked nostalgically, "This reminds me of home. At home, you have a lot of freedom to do whatever you please. Here, in the city, you have so many obligations to attend to" (2016, May 15). A week before, she had told me that after being out for three years, she has gotten used to the feeling of homesickness, that now it only hits her when she is undergoing times of hardship (2016, May 8). Many migrant workers feel the same way: that although they can become accustomed to the feeling of homesickness, it will never completely fade away.

It does not help that many migrants can only go home once a year for Lunar New Year. This rarity of visitation is due to their limited number of days off and the far distance between their workplaces and their hometowns. New Year is their only chance to quell their feelings of longing and reconnect with their families. During this time, the young migrants, their parents, and their grandparents – all three generations – celebrate

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together under the same roof. Lulu claims that the New Year is much more enjoyable in rural villages where people celebrate by setting off fireworks and dragon dancing, while these customs have mostly all disappeared from large cities now (2016, May 7). This holiday causes almost 250 million people pour out of the cities to return to their villages (NBS, “Floating Population,” 2014). Most migrants travel by train instead of by plane or car, as “the railway remains the dominion of the poor” (Chang, 2009, p.273). Surely enough, when I asked migrants about the locations of their hometowns, they would tell me the distance not in scientific measure, but in the time it usually took to get there by train. Lulu’s home village in Guizhou is over a day and a half away; Xiao Wang’s home in Anhui is eighteen hours away. Lunar New Year is not just an important holiday for Chinese culture, but also a meaningful and sometimes long-awaited sojourn for migrants in China’s large cities.

### ▪ *Changing the Rural Landscape*

Migration has had large effects on the nation’s rural demographic population and its economy. Since urban China’s demand for labor capitalizes on the vital power of rural youth, it has emptied the nation’s rural villages of their young adults (Gaetano, 2015, p.31). I have visited rural villages throughout Yunnan and seen them primarily occupied by two demographics: the elderly, and the young children of migrants. During my stay in a Shaxi village in northwestern Yunnan, I only saw two girls around my own age. Even my host parents there are out for most of the year; my host father travels the country doing electrical work, and my host mother commutes daily to the nearby tourist village to sell snacks (2016, April 20). They come back home for a couple weeks of the year during planting season, to tend to their crops. Their elder 20-year old son does construction in

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Ningbo, and their younger 16-year old son boards at school. For most of the days, it is only the 82-year old grandma who stays at home. Similarly, Yaxi's two children, ages four and six, are left to the care of their parents back in their home villages in Guizhou (2016, May 14).

As a result of migrants sending money home, wealth inequality is evident in rural villages today. Chang, a journalist for the *Wall Street Journal*, reports that, "money sent home by migrants is already the biggest source of wealth accumulation in rural China" (2009, p.13). Before migration, people's standards of living were relatively equal within villages, as families more or less planted the same crops during the same seasons of the year. Therefore, any income disparities are based on how much land individual families have; those with more land have more surplus harvest to sell. During my stay in the Shaxi Valley, I found that most families plant corn, beans, and tobacco in mid-April (2016, April 18). However, the wealth gap between families is more intense than surplus crops can account for. Some homes had hot water showers and wifi networks, while others did not have televisions or showers at all.

Migrants sending money home, aside from being the cause for economic booms in the countryside, is also, to the migrants themselves, a matter of balancing personal choice and family expectation. At the factory, Yaxi and her husband, Shanlong, have a duty to send money home since their children are living there. Their primary reason for working in the cities is to increase their family's standard of living (2016, May 14). Meanwhile, Lulu and Xiao Wang both said that they send money home when they have enough to do so. Lulu told me that although her parents are happy to receive any money she sends, they by no means expect or pressure her to (2016, May 16). Due to the

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gendered roles in the countryside, young female migrants, who are “relieving the natal household” of their expenses, are generally less pressured by their families to earn beyond the amount needed for their own sustenance, whereas the money a son makes is “seen as integral to the household economy” (Gaetano, 2015, p.38). In this aspect, young and single migrant women have more liberty to do with their earnings as they please.

### ▪ *To Stay or Not to Stay?*

Migrants have a choice when they leave home: to eventually go back and settle down, or to stay outside and live in the city. The option to return home is a privilege for Chinese migrants that may not be enjoyed by those in developing countries elsewhere:

The land is less an income source than an insurance policy – a guarantee that a person can live and will not starve. The continuing link to a family farm has stabilized China in an age of mass migration. Its cities have not spawned the shanty slums of so much of the developing world, because the migrant who fails in the city can always return home and find someone there... In the city, a migrant may look desperate, but almost every migrant has a farm to fall back on. (Chang, 2009,p.272)

However, for many, returning home is not just a safety net, but also a preferable option that brings them the comfort and stability they lack in urban areas. Ling Ling, a 22-year old girl from Anhui and Xiao Wang’s friend, joined the factory with her husband six months ago when I met her. She had initially left her village in search for better economic opportunities and a chance to see the outside world. However, during my time at the factory, the couple left, deciding that they wanted to return to the more relaxed environment of their rural homes to birth children and settle down (Xiao Wang, 2016,

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May 16). Xiao Wang told me of his plans to return home as well in September of this year, to work in house painting with eleven of his closest friends (2016, May 20). He has been outside for four years now, having migrated to Zhejiang when he was sixteen. Since then, he has rarely had the opportunity to go home and misses it very much, along with the close relationships with friends and family he has forged there.

On the contrary, Lulu does not plan to return home, choosing to settle down in the city instead (2016, May 5). Her dream is to be able to own her own house somewhere instead of renting one out – an aspiration that signifies her desire to live in a single place permanently and establish a more stable life (2016, May 19). Although Lulu has good memories of her home village, she knows that opportunity for social mobility ultimately lies in the more economically developed urban centers. Arguably, Lulu is more able than Ling Ling and Xiao Wang to make this choice due to her higher potential of holding jobs that pay well enough to adequately support an urban lifestyle. Other factors that may give her this option are her unmarried status and her position as the younger sister of her household. Her brother, who is already married with children, holds the responsibility of returning home and taking care of the farm (2016, May 7). Still, it is not unheard of for migrants all across the socio-economic spectrum to make either choice. In this way, as soon as they step outside their villages, migrant workers possess the autonomy to decide when and if they go back home.

### **Conclusion**

Despite being controlled by structural and social determinants, migrants do not feel hopeless in their situations; rather, they exercise independence and freedom in their choices, giving them a constant sense of hope and optimism.

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When migrants leave home, they are seizing the chance to develop themselves, satisfy their curiosities about modernization, and have more freedom in choosing their potential marriage partners. This desire to increase their life opportunities has pervaded even when migration was deemed illegal by the Chinese government, as migrants still managed to build up informal communities. Even when discriminated against by urban natives, they unapologetically diminish the effects of such discrimination by sticking with friends from their same provinces and speaking in their regional dialects, eating flavors that remind them of home, and adapting through urban consumer culture.

Similar skills of adaption and decision-making apply to Banlifactory assembly line workers, who are subjected to strict constraints not only by their employers, but also by the work itself. Under such severe control, the workers I have talked to find freedom in renting their own apartments away from the factory, and in making evident their unique individual identities through fashion and social media. While they are limited in their job prospects by their lack of education, they can still leave jobs they find dissatisfying or unattractive for other ones in different locations or in different sectors of the economy. Some even display entrepreneurial zeal by deciding to start their own businesses.

Inevitably, migrants' decisions are still tied very closely to their homelands. They can either choose to keep money for themselves or send money home, thus changing the infrastructure of their natal villages. Just as migrants exercised autonomy in deciding to leave home, they also ultimately have to make the decision by themselves, of whether or not to return for good.

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In making judgments for themselves when faced with additional available options, and in reconstructing their senses of self and home, migrants learn as much about the outside world as they learn about themselves. They learn about their abilities to endure hardship and adapt to new environments, to creatively subvert authority, and most of all, to make independent decisions. By developing these aspects, migrants become smarter, stronger, and more confident, thus transforming the fates of an entire generation of Chinese citizens.

The decisions that migrants make have lasting impacts on the nation. The current generation of migrants now heavily values the freedom of choice, which will likely continue into future generations. The influx of information and capital they bring into their rural homes inevitably narrow the gap between China's urban and rural regions, thus affecting the nation's wealth distribution and future economic developments. Conversely, they also bring with them a diversity of cultures into the nation's urban centers. One must wonder about the succeeding generation, how their views on marriage will change, how their level of education will increase, and how they will strive for social mobility.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The gendering of migrant work and job opportunities

What life is like for migrants who have returned home to settle down

Closing gaps between rural and urban lifestyles and economies as a result of migration

The children of migrants: social mobility, marriage options, education; are they more or less likely to leave home?

The Chinese education system: current discriminations and movements for change, if any

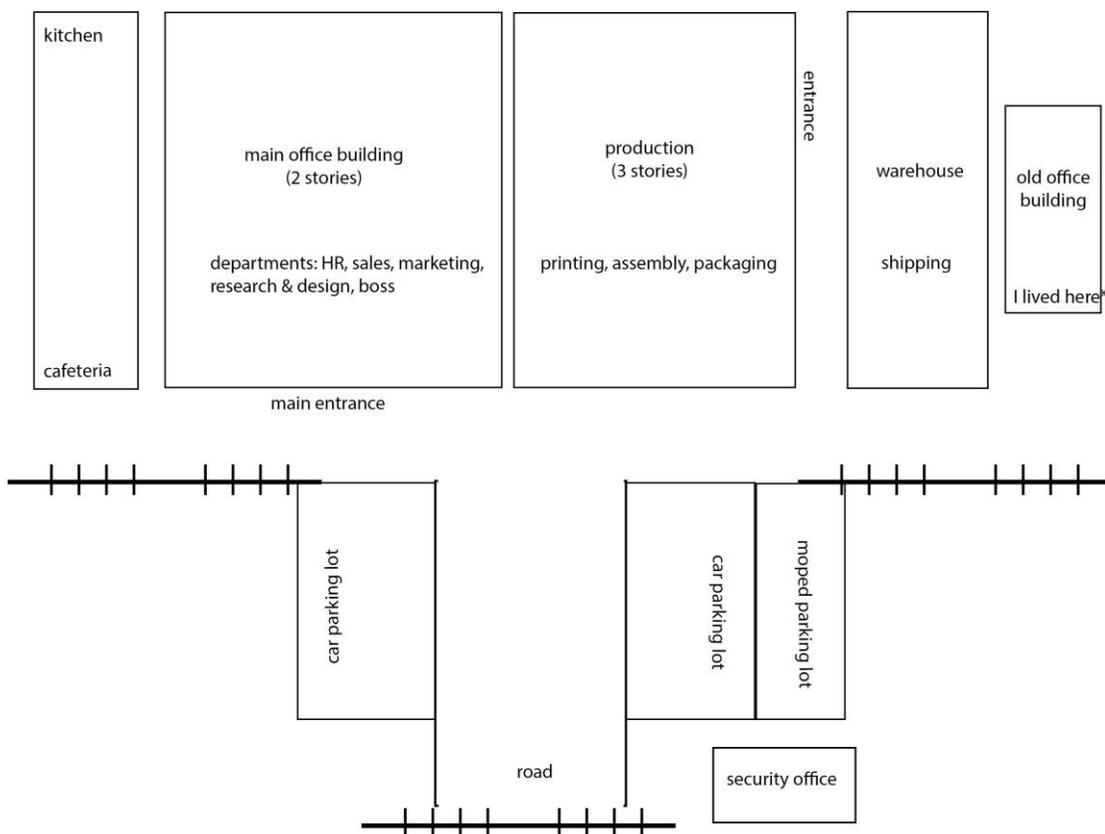
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Government efforts to integrate migrants into city life: their successes and failures, their mission.

Mental health issues among the migrant population

## Appendix

Map of Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd



### **Primary Resources**

A03 Assembly line workers, 36 total. (2016, May 5-20). Guided conversation. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., Yuyao, Zhejiang.

“Ayi.” (2016, April 17-21). Guided conversation and participant observation. Rural village in the Shaxi valley, Yunnan.

Boss Chen. (2016, May 5). Guided conversation and informal interview. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., Yuyao, Zhejiang.

Yaxi. (2016, May 13-19). Guided conversation. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., Yuyao, Zhejiang.

Yaxi. (2016, May 22-25). Social media posts on WeChat.

“Danielle.” (2016, May 10, 22). Social media posts on WeChat.

Huadeng. (2016, May 10-17). Participative observation. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., Yuyao, Zhejiang.

Xiao Wang. (2016, May 14-20). Guided conversation. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., Yuyao, Zhejiang.

Lulu. (2016, May 5-19). Guided conversation. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., in her home, at restaurants in Wanda Plaza, next to a river by the countryside, and in downtown Yuyao, Zhejiang.

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“Zhouping.” (2016, May 13). Guided conversation. Banli Electrical Appliances Co. Ltd., Yuyao, Zhejiang.

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