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Facing the threat of increasing popular unrest, under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (2003–12), the policy priorities of the Chinese Communist Party shifted from promoting economic growth at any cost to establishing a more equitable development model. The Party was now promoting a ‘harmonious society’ (和谐社会) that would ‘put people at the centre’ (以人为本). In the field of labour relations, this translated into not only a new body of laws and regulations—first and foremost, the Labour Contract Law discussed in the previous chapter—but also a propaganda drive to redefine the public discourse surrounding migrant labour. Chinese media was now celebrating the contribution of migrant workers to China’s spectacular economic growth and, therefore, to the international rise of the country. The establishment of the Migrant Worker Museum in Shenzhen in 2008 was part of this drive.

‘Make Contributions and Offer Your Youth for Tomorrow’s Dream’: The Establishment of the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum

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Rural migrant workers are an enormous mass of industrious, honest, modest, and low-profile workers ... In their hard struggle, they come to adore life even more; armed with their optimistic, forward-looking, and proactive spirit, they labour industriously, live a happy life, and offer their contribution silently.

— Panel at the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum, 2008

In 2010, fourteen employees at Foxconn Shenzhen, the world’s largest original equipment manufacturer facility for Apple products, committed suicide by jumping off highrise buildings (see Jenny Chan’s essay in the present volume). In the same year, hundreds of employees at a Honda factory in Guangzhou organised a large-scale strike to demand considerably higher wages and the right to elect their union representatives (see Chan and Hui’s essay in the present volume). Although disconnected, these two events sounded a loud alarm to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in Guangdong Province and beyond. The case study discussed in this essay—namely, the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum—was established two years prior to both incidents, but it is situated in the same broader context: the growing feelings of alienation experienced by China’s migrant workers and their growing rights consciousness.

Shifting Representations of Migrant Labour

Since the launch of economic reforms, rural workers have stood at the heart of China’s fast-growth and ‘labour-squeezing’ strategy of economic development.¹ They constitute the bulk of the labour force in the chiefly ‘dirty, hard and exhausting’ (脏, 苦, 累) manufacturing, construction and service sectors. But, despite the centrality of their role in China’s two-digit

economic growth, their status within society and their social recognition have lagged far behind. Indeed, while labour conditions have improved overall when compared with the 1980s and 1990s, rural migrant workers continue to bear the brunt of institutional discrimination, existing in a state of liminality and precariousness.²

Media representations of rural migrant workers in the late 1980s and early 1990s mainly depicted them as an unsightly horde without individual faces or voices, associated with filth, crime and various forms of social disorder. Migration from the countryside was framed in the rhetoric of 'law and order'. From the 1990s on, the homogenising characterisation of threatening 'flows of peasant workers' (民工潮) gradually gave way to more complex and hybrid narratives of singular individuals. Popular media, radio and, later, social media offered a wider array of venues for rural migrant workers to narrate their experiences of labouring and living in Chinese cities.³ These depictions increasingly included visual forms. Such changes have been most prominent in southern China, as the category of '*dagong*' (打工) publicly embodied the highly contradictory dimensions of migrant labour, encapsulating at once feelings of indignity and resentment in the face of exploitation, discriminatory treatment and precariousness on the one hand, and aspirations for social mobility, proximity to urban lifestyles and consumption on the other (see also O'Donnell's essay in the present volume).

In 2008, the government of Shenzhen's Bao'an District officially inaugurated a museum dedicated to rural migrant workers and their contribution to the extraordinary economic development of the city—China's first and most prominent Special Economic Zone (SEZ).⁴ This initiative took place against the backdrop of a shift in state policy towards rural workers and the adoption of a body of labour-related legislation and regulations that aimed at better protecting rural workers (see Biddulph's and Gallagher's essays in the present volume). From the early 2000s, with the promotion of the slogan 'putting people at the centre' (以人为本) and increased attention to the so-called disadvantaged groups (弱势群体), a gradual shift in paradigm took place as the Chinese Party-State began encouraging municipal governments to provide services to rural workers rather than just conceive of them as vectors of public disorder.

The Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum was the first state-sponsored museum devoted to rural workers.⁵ In this essay, we document how this venue selectively renders visible or invisible specific facets of political economy, power configurations and migrant workers' subject formation.

By how they curate and arrange objects, images and people, museums are able to incorporate people in state-making processes and strengthen social order or, on the contrary, as Beth Lord has argued, make visible the contingency and reversibility of social orders.⁶ As we will see, the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum belongs to the second category.

In what follows, we first briefly delve into the myth of Shenzhen, exploring how ‘the logic of socialist fabulation and the logic of capital have come together’ in urban form.⁷ We then proceed to an exploration of the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum’s permanent exhibition by focusing on how workers’ identity is constructed through the venue’s layout of objects, documents and images. Finally, we conclude with some general remarks hinting at the centrality of rural workers not only in Shenzhen’s mythmaking, but also in the very formation of the ethos of a self-reliant and self-enterprising subject in the post-Mao era.

The Myth of Shenzhen

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping’s now famous Southern Tour led to an acceleration of economic reforms and put an end to intense ideological debates about whether Shenzhen’s development was to be called capitalism or socialism. During his visit to Shenzhen, Deng emphasised that ‘the important experience of Shenzhen is that of daring to be a path-breaker’ (深圳的重要经验就是敢闯).⁸ Deng also stated that what mattered most was to ‘develop the productive forces’.⁹ Since then, although the exceptionality associated with Shenzhen’s status has somewhat weakened over the last decade or so, the city has continued to play at least three important roles: as a ‘model for the Inland in the strengthening of the market system’, as an example for the building of a ‘socialist spiritual civilisation’ and as a testing zone to forge a new role for the Party.¹⁰

The couple of years that followed Deng’s Southern Tour unleashed a profound wave of commodification of labour in Shenzhen and beyond.¹¹ After 1992, ‘doing special things in Shenzhen’ and ‘the liberation of productive forces’ in reality meant limitations on workers’ associational power and unfettered appropriation of workers’ labour.¹² As Shenzhen was becoming a model for the rest of the country to emulate, a rich imaginary of China’s most prominent SEZ was being constituted.

‘Shenzhen ideology’ was grounded in a series of norms and values emphasising ‘opening up’ (开放), ‘creating’ (创造) and ‘devoting oneself’ (献身), promoted by city officials since the late 1980s.¹³ The term ‘Shenzhen

Spirit' (深圳精神) was officially endorsed in 1990 by then CCP Secretary General Jiang Zemin, and it incorporated principles such as 'deciding for oneself, strengthening oneself, competition, taking risks, and facing danger' (自主, 自强, 竞争, 冒风险), and rejected 'erroneous moral values' (错误的道德观念) such as 'neglecting people's legitimate rights' (忽略老百姓应有的权益), 'egalitarianism' (平等主义) and 'conservatism' (保守主义).¹⁴ Rural migrant workers' 'low quality' (低素质) was to be replaced with 'a new four-haves person' (培育'四有'新人) manifesting 'ideals, culture, ethics, and discipline'.¹⁵

The Museum

In 2008, the Bao'an District Government officially inaugurated the Shenzhen Migrant Worker Museum. The location was the Shangwu Yigao Electronic Factory, which was supposedly the first Hong Kong–invested manufacturing and assembling factory in Shenzhen. The museum's principal permanent exhibition is divided into five thematic sections: historical background, migrant workers' contributions to the development of Shenzhen, workers' experiences of labouring and living in the city, government policies in favour of migrant workers' integration into Shenzhen's public services and a model of migrant workers' upward trajectories.¹⁶

The introductory panel to the museum espouses the values of and sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition. It reads:

Over thirty years of reform and opening up, generation after generation, labourers have shed their sweat on this warm earth [在这片热土上挥洒汗水]; labouring industriously and silently [辛劳劳作, 沉默耕耘], they have offered their wisdom and strength [贡献了智慧和力量] for the sake of the miracle of extremely fast economic development. They deserve to be respected and be loved. In order to record their contribution [为了记录他们的贡献] and to highlight the Party's care for them, we have established the country's first labour museum.

Although the museum purports to give visitors an experience of the working and living conditions of migrant labourers by allowing them to meander through assembly lines, dormitories, TV rooms and canteens, these spaces seem empty and disconnected from the harshness of workers' everyday experiences.¹⁷ Missing are their marginalisation outside factory

walls and the crushing exploitation and theft of time by the disciplinary ‘dormitory labour regime’.¹⁸ Similarly, while the exhibition displays a number of actual workers’ certificates and permits of residence and employment, these documents alone do not convey the fact that migrant workers bear the brunt of institutional discrimination and they overlook the effects of ‘routine repression’ exerted by urban officials on migrant bodies in public space.¹⁹ The impression is one of hollow materiality.

The Shenzhen ideology—with its vibrant environment of competition, attracting the city’s ‘builders’ (建设者) and enabling the optimal use of their labour power—is a recurrent one throughout the permanent exhibition. Shenzhen is associated with the term ‘this warm earth’ (这片热土), celebrating the city as a space of limitless opportunities—a space that literally awakens people’s subjectivities and labour power. Most of the pictures on display represent youthful migrant workers whose energy is mobilised for the sake of the city’s prosperity. The idea that Shenzhen and, more generally, ‘the South’ provide employment opportunities and chances for social mobility has circulated widely among migrant workers and urban elites throughout the Pearl River Delta. In the exhibition, the promise of opportunity euphemises underlying conflicts and asymmetrical social relations by concealing the structural violence embedded in the political economy of state capitalism in southern China.

Another pillar of the Shenzhen myth is the idea that no matter what hardships they are facing, workers need to remain confident in their capacity to overcome them and keep nurturing ideals and aspirations. The panel under a bronze sculpture reminds the visitor: ‘A beautiful life depends on people’s collective effort; under one blue sky, for tomorrow’s dream, they are willing to endure hardship. A group of labourers on top of a tall construction, they appear tall and robust, embodying the spirit of strength and confidence in struggling hard.’

Overall, the museum builds an identity for migrant workers as a compliant, silent, forward-looking and hardworking social body whose symbolic belonging to Shenzhen is conditioned by their contribution to the development and prosperity of the city. Despite the fact that the right to gain permanent residency remains an impossible-to-obtain goal for the majority of workers, according to the narrative of ‘making contributions’ to Shenzhen (做出贡献) or ‘offering one’s youth to Shenzhen’ (奉献青春), workers are supposed to feel an emotional sense of belonging and pride based on their contributions to and sacrifices for the city’s dazzling material achievements.²⁰

According to such rhetoric, any resentment or disillusionment they might feel due to the hardships and indignities they face should be submerged beneath this sense of pride and belonging, sacrifice and contribution. This comment from the museum provides an illustration of such rhetorical emphasis:

They are the first ones to greet the early sun, they are also the last ones to accompany the moon in the evening. They have used their hardworking and robust hands to hold the beauty and splendour of the city. History can testify: those who have given Shenzhen their utmost effort and sweat, those who have offered their wisdom and strength to Shenzhen, those who have left their most beautiful years of their life to Shenzhen, these people are the real deserving Shenzhen people.

On the whole, the exhibition—through its configuration of objects, documents, writing and pictures—constructs a linear discursive chain. Hardship, hard work, self-sacrifice and suffering should lead to an increase in productivity and economic development on the one hand, and an improvement in the maturation of a self-reliant and enterprising individual on the other. In the above passages, the rhetoric of sacrifice, hard work and pioneering converges in the figure of the model migrant worker. Their body and soul are entirely turned towards production as they can only temporarily embody a real Shenzhen person through their contribution to economic development.

Eventually, an entire section of the exhibition is devoted to state policies and to the relationship between the Party-State and migrant workers. This section quite methodically conveys the idea that the state's attitude towards these workers is one of care and benevolence. Substantial space is devoted to municipal as well as provincial initiatives providing services to migrant workers in the fields of culture, leisure, education, labour protection, welfare and health care. One panel reads:

Over the years, the governments at the national, provincial, municipal, and district levels have implemented a whole series of public policies and organised a whole range of activities showing care and love towards migrant workers. Workers' rights have been

continually protected, their political status has been continuously elevated, their cultural life has been constantly enriched and society has thereby become more harmonious.

If, as we mentioned earlier, the Chinese state at various levels has indeed designed a range of policies to provide services to migrant workers and better protect their rights, these have not fundamentally altered the political and institutional configurations and ‘patterns of unpredictability and disempowerment’ that continue to characterise migrant workers’ conditions.²¹

Youth, Shenzhen Exceptionalism, and the Party-State

Our exploration of the representation of migrant workers in the first state-sponsored museum devoted to them in post-Mao China shows how central migrant workers are to the narrative of Shenzhen as a space guiding the country in terms of the valuation of labour power. The self-referential dimension of this politics of recognition is indeed predominant within the museum. In the incorporation of rural migrant workers into this imaginary, class antagonisms, as well as the material and symbolic violence that migrant workers are subjected to, are made invisible by providing ‘visibility without legitimacy and rhetorical recognition without economic and political substance.’²² The museum’s presentation of workers’ experiences conceals the political and institutional coordinates underlying their precarity and, in so doing, de-politicises their actions, claims to social justice and politics of identity.

Our study also shows that the representation of rural migrant workers links the myth of Shenzhen to a neoliberal ethos of the self-enterprising subject. The museum’s permanent exhibition suggests rural migrant workers exemplify values such as optimism in the face of adversity, diligence, risk-taking, autonomy and self-improvement combined with Mao-era values of making contributions and self-sacrifice. In the process of building an identity for the SEZ from the late 1980s, and even more so from the middle of the following decade, these values have been promoted with intensity. Shenzhen, represented as a model of the modernist civilising city, has indeed been culturally constructed as a zone of limitless opportunities, of statistical wonder—the Shenzhen miracle—and of exceptionalism, where people could try things that were not possible elsewhere in China.²³ In this process of mythmaking, the SEZ has been

very closely associated with the idea of valuation of talent and bodies operating in a competitive environment that optimises youth. Hence, the Party-State's founding legitimacy and identity based on the rejection of capitalism and exploitation are reconciled with the disciplinary regimes and violence exerted on workers' bodies, time and space in the SEZ's celebratory narrative of progress.