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Migrants and the Dangers of Namelessness, Part 1

By Alexander J. Brenner

APRIL 30, 2004

BEIJING, China—A cheer went up: “SARS is here!” A fellow with a weather-beaten face was just riding up on his flatbed tricycle, hauling a large canvas bag filled with glass bottles.

I was chatting with a half-dozen migrant recyclable collectors resting in the alleyway in front of my apartment building. I knew a couple of them, but the others were new to me. We were discussing Beijing’s first confirmed SARS case of the year, only reported the day before.

A migrant with a flattop haircut explained why his colleague was nicknamed “SARS.” During Beijing’s major outbreak of the disease last spring, the collector with the weather-beaten face fell ill and was forced to spend 45 days in isolation at Ditan hospital. It turned out he’d never had SARS, and as compensation he received 10,000 RMB (US\$1200) from the government. “Last year he was so poor. Now he has a fancy cell phone,” said Flattop, a bit jealously.

SARS asked where I came from. When he found out I was American, his first remark was, “So, is it true that in America ladies take off their pants for 8 *mao* (10 cents)?”

“Sorry, I don’t have much personal experience with this,” I said, resorting to the response I often use when I don’t really want to respond.

Flattop suddenly pointed at SARS and asked me: “How old do you think he is? Sixty-eight?”

SARS looked like he was in his fifties, but I knew from incorrectly guessing ages of migrants before he that was probably significantly younger. Peasants and migrants engaged in strenuous, exposed labor seem to age incredibly rapidly during their thirties, when they go from looking 22 to looking 55.

“Thirties, not quite forty?” I aimed young, and thankfully so; SARS was 39. Still, he was mad at Flattop for implying he looked old. “And you’re 72!” he yelled at Flattop, then began chasing him around a parked tricycle and punching him in the shoulder as Flattop laughed and tried to escape. “Telling a foreigner I got put in the hospital!”

The rest of us watched them rough-house; they quit only after each had repeatedly accused the other of having SARS.

We returned to the topic of age. “What year are you born in?” someone asked me. (*Ni shu shenme?*)

“Year of the Rabbit,” I replied.

“In America, what year would you be considered?”

“The same, except that we don’t really use the animals over there. I would

just say I was born in 1975.”

“How many months in your year? Twelve, like us?” asked the Village Mayor. The others called him Village Mayor (*cunzhang*), and he tended to ask the most wildly uninformed questions. I wasn’t sure this was a coincidence.

“They have twelve months like us,” said Baby Face, who looked about twelve years old. “The whole world uses the same calendar. But the time is different there.”

The others looked at me for confirmation. “It that true?” asked the Village Mayor. “What time is it in America?”

“It’s true, there’s a time difference,” I said. “It’s 3 in the afternoon here, so it’s 3 in the morning there.”

Everyone considered this for a while. (Other migrants I’ve talked to have also been curious about time zones. Despite China’s vast size, you never have to adjust your watch when traveling across the country: it’s always Beijing time.)

Then we switched to politics. The Kerry campaign should look into hiring Flattop. He launched into a blistering attack on President Bush, although he lost me after becoming so excited he lapsed into Henan provincial dialect.

“Bush acts like such a hegemon,” he said, reverting to Mandarin. “America bombed our embassy in Iraq.”

Wrong war and wrong president, but I just said, “I think that was in Yugoslavia.”

“I’m quite sure it was in Iraq,” said Flattop. At least these fellows knew there was a war in Iraq. Chinese papers this month have been filled with the story of seven migrants from Fujian province who were kidnapped in Iraq, then released unharmed. A middleman had told the migrants they could quintuple their normal salaries by painting a hotel in Iraq; apparently it wasn’t until their arrival that they discovered there was a war on, and that they would be working odd jobs for much less than promised.

Flattop continued his assault. “Bush should get SARS, it would be a real contribution to world peace.”

Just then one of my non-Chinese neighbors passed by on her bike, and we exchanged a few words.

“Where was she from?” someone

asked when she rode off. France, I told them.

“All you foreigners look alike,” complained the Village Mayor.

We started discussing life in developed countries. “America is very rich. Japan is very rich,” said Flattop. “Have you been to Japan?”

Briefly, I replied.

“Taka-taka-taka-taka. Hai! Hai!” said Baby Face, breaking into an unsolicited imitation of Japanese. “‘Hai’ means ‘yes’ in Japanese. They always say that in the movies,” he explained. “Taka-taka-taka-taka. Hai! Hai!” He turned to me and asked, “Is it true Japanese women are gentle and soft (*wenrou*)?”

“Sorry, I don’t have much personal experience with this,” I said. In patriarchal Chinese tradition, the ideal woman is *wenrou*, a term my dictionary translates as “gentle and soft.” In practice, however, the term also connotes heavy doses of meekness and subservience. As modern Chinese women become tougher and harder, many Chinese men seem increasingly taken with the notion of the self-effacing Japanese female. (And not just migrants: the elite male college students I taught in Guangzhou in the late nineties expressed this exact same interest. I suspect there’s some slightly lurid nationalist fantasizing involved.)

“They wear big bows on their backs,” said Baby Face, mimicking tying on a kimono.

At this point our conversation shifted into the usual





Migrants dozing on their tricycles

rapid-fire Q & A session on life in America. Are there bike thieves in America? Are there courtyard houses in America? Is there countryside in the America? Are there pigs in America? What type of pigs? Are there recyclable collectors in America? Could you make a living as a recyclable collector in America?

While totally stumped by the question about varieties of pigs, I provided satisfactory answers to the other inquiries. Then it was my turn.

“Last month at the National People’s Congress the government said migrants’ rights should be protected and they will receive treatment like that of city residents. What do you think?”

“Ha!” snorted Flattop. “I think that’s all bullshit (*shashou*).”

“So when will migrants really achieve equality with Beijing residents?”

“Not in our lifetime,” said someone else.

As if to underline this point, moments later a big, black *Hongqi* sedan rounded the corner and roared up the alleyway honking its horn, telling us to make way. The car had military plates, and belonged to the officer living in the renovated courtyard house next to my apartment building; we were occupying the space where he wanted to park. (Only wealthy businesspeople or high-ranking government officials and military officers can afford to live in renovated courtyard houses in the city center.)

This was the first time I had seen this military man

home in mid-afternoon, so I had never observed him interact with the recyclable collectors. Barely waiting for us to move aside, the sedan accelerated the remaining 20 feet and screeched to a halt. The officer, in full uniform, got out and slammed the car door, pausing to glare at the migrants before entering his house. I wonder what he might have said had a foreigner not been present.

“Jerk,” Flattop muttered. Mounting their tricycles, the migrants moved on.

* * *

In my last report I began looking at migrants moving from country to city, carrying the bulk of China from its inward-looking, peasant past toward its urbanized, globalized future. These migrants are protagonists of China’s globalization-led development, and yet, as I sketched at the end of the report, upon their arrival in the cities they are treated as cogs in a machine—as numbers, not names. In this report I will comment on the evolving status of migrants and the official attempts to grant them names—and thus, that key commodity in Chinese social interaction, face (*mianzi*). As I will discuss, however, endowing hundreds of millions of current and future migrants with names and faces in urban society is likely to prove a particularly daunting task.

First, some background. Through the early 1980s, China’s government maintained a monopoly of power over the movement of its citizens. If you weren’t in the location you were supposed to be, you could be forcibly returned there, and often were. Such a coercive system was deemed crucial to the maintenance of political control, as well as to the facilitation of economic planning. Maoist China was in a sense one massive company, with the Party CEOs assigning everyone a job at some spot on

the assembly line. The decisive document pegging that location was the *hukou*, or household registration. If you were born in a city to city parents, then you received that's city *hukou* and, quite likely, would remain evermore a resident of that city; likewise for the holder of a rural *hukou* (for farmers the only ways to acquire an urban *hukou* were to gain admittance to a university or to rise sufficiently high within the military—both very rare opportunities). For most of the history of the People's Republic, the *hukou* determined everything from how much social security and health care you received to how many children you could have and what kind of school they could attend.

During the last two decades of economic reforms, the government has increasingly ceded its power to determine the population's movement to market forces; this April 1st, in fact, marked the twentieth anniversary of the decision to allow farmers to enter cities and towns. Wealthier urban areas along China's coast have thus acted as magnets, attracting workers from across the country in what has been called the most massive labor movement in history. Against this backdrop, the *hukou* system has become increasingly ill-suited to manage the population—this despite various rounds of *hukou* reform.

Take Shenzhen, located in Guangdong province on the Hong Kong border. Little more than a fishing village 20 years ago, Shenzhen today boasts the highest per-capita income of any Chinese city, the legacy of its designation as a special economic zone that made it a trade and finance hub and attracted a large white-collar workforce. Shenzhen now has a registered, *hukou*-bearing population of 1.4 million—just over one-third of the city's five million permanent residents—as well as a “transient” population of three million. In other words, of the eight million people currently living in Shenzhen, less than one-sixth are full-fledged citizens;

everyone else carries a *hukou* from location.

Shenzhen is an extreme case, a metropolis materialized out of thin air; in a sense, everyone there—save an original fisherman—is a migrant. Shenzhen has thus become a perfect showcase for the disintegration of the *hukou* system. I have a friend there, a university graduate who makes a high salary researching Chinese goods for export to the American retailer Target. She hasn't bothered to get a Shenzhen *hukou*, because not having one doesn't affect her life in the slightest. New arrivals in the cities can easily make up for a lack of a *hukou*. As China has converted to a cash economy, services like education and health care are readily available to anyone who can pay for them. Shenzhen is leading the way in showing how a major city can function almost entirely outside the *hukou* system. This is China's future.

Shenzhen also highlights another hard fact: not all “migrants” are created equal. My *hukou*-less friend, who is about to take a vacation in France, is not the type we associate with the word migrant. The largest group of migrants pouring into Shenzhen and other cities have been peasants. In Beijing, for example, about four million people, a quarter of the population, are considered migrants, but only ten percent of this group has any post-secondary education; the vast majority are from the countryside. Possessing neither *hukou* nor cash-flow, these rural migrants have effectively been forced onto the fringes of urban society. And as many commentators have noted, over the last two decades they have had a social and legal status similar to—in some ways worse than—that of illegal immigrants in a foreign country.

Fortunately, this situation has been changing. Beijing has in fact devoted increasing attention to migrants for the last several years, and the central government's new policies on rural growth, discussed in my last report, also include a substantial focus on migrants. “Document Number One,” the just-released framework for rural development, devotes a whole section to “Ensuring the legitimate rights and interests” of migrants; it exhorts all local governments to make good the months and years of unpaid wages and calls as well for “the improvement of their labor conditions and schooling of their children.” These efforts show a recognition of the valuable role remittances from migrants play in boosting incomes in rural areas. According to the *Financial Times*, migrants sent or carried home 370 billion RMB (\$45 billion) in 2003, triple the size of this year's total national fiscal stimulus package.



A migrant construction worker at the gate to his work site; let's hope his smile indicates he just got paid. Visible in the background are, the cramped dormitories where he and his fellow workers live.

Just as important is a realization that millions of unhappy migrants could cause trouble in the cities. What makes them particularly unhappy is not getting paid. The government suggests that back wages currently owed migrants total about 100 billion RMB, over \$12 billion.

The problem affects a significant portion of migrants, with the Chinese sociologist Li Qiang estimating that one in four experienced some sort of default in wage payment in 2002. Imagine how you would feel if you had worked 12-hour-days for 11 straight months, only to have your boss say, “sorry, no money this year”—thus sending you back to your village on Chinese New Year holiday to greet your family empty-handed and ashamed. It’s easy to get upset just contemplating this kind of treatment; I can’t imagine what it must feel like to be that worker.

Certain industries are particularly notorious for non-payment, with the construction industry perhaps the most glaring. Government statistics show that private construction firms still owe their migrant workers 40 per cent of their back pay; the figure for local-government-sponsored construction is 27 percent. In fact, the non-payment of wages has been systemic, built into the way even “non-corrupt” construction companies work. Many projects are begun without full financing; if final sales of units fall short for any reason, there literally isn’t enough money to go around—and the union-less workers are of course the first to lose out. It’s great fun being a capitalist in China: not only are your workers dirt cheap, you get to shift your risk onto them.

The government is finally making a major push to force employers to issue back pay. For example, Beijing’s municipal authorities promise to demand companies to provide at least half of workers’ salaries on a monthly basis and ban sub-contracting practices that open loopholes for corruption and blame-passing. In his speech last March at the National People’s Congress, Premier Wen Jiabao promised that the back-wage issue would be resolved nationally within three years; a plan released subsequently calls for back pay owed on local-government projects to be paid by the end of 2005. The fact that Beijing will need two years to make its own subordinates pay up, including pay for work on high-profile projects like the Three Gorges Dam and the west-to-east natural gas pipeline, shows just how entrenched this problem has become.

Other measures have boosted the status of migrants. Last fall, for example, migrants able to prove that they had “stable work” in Beijing were for the first time allowed to register to participate in the December district people’s congress elections (the step is far more meaningful as symbolic progress for migrants than anything that will emerge from exercising the right to vote for the mostly powerless local people’s congresses.) Shanghai has just announced a progressive scheme to offer health



My barber, Mr Shen, a 21-year-old migrant from northeast China, poses with one of his hair-washing colleagues and a silk portrait of Chairman Mao (in most Chinese barber shops, migrant women wash your hair and give head massages and migrant men do the cutting). After following the National People’s Congress, he told me “it seems the leaders really care about us migrants.”

insurance for migrants, and the mayor promised that the city would issue new rules to protect their rights to social security, employment and education. “Migrant workers contribute to the city’s urbanization,” the mayor graciously admitted. “Their interests should be protected by the law.”

Do migrants realize the government is lavishing attention on them? How do they feel about it? It depends on whom you ask. Flattop and his fellow recyclable collectors seemed vaguely aware that their status was under discussion at the National People’s Congress, but they were decidedly unimpressed by the official rhetoric. On the other hand, my barber from rural Manchuria, Mr. Shen, followed TV coverage of the Congress and told me that “the leaders really seem to care about us migrants.” He also expressed a belief that overall conditions for migrants are improving. He explained to me the different kinds of temporary residence permits migrants in Beijing are supposed to carry, but said he no longer worries about renewing his permit. “Things have gotten a lot better in the last one or two years. Before, when we saw cops, we would run. Now I’m not afraid of the cops.”

It’s definitely progress when your barber no longer has to run from the cops, and the official noise coming out of Beijing certainly sounds promising for all migrants. Unfortunately, the official noise coming out of Beijing about most problems usually sounds promising. As the top leadership knows better than anyone, updating while enforcing laws is easier proclaimed than done. In any case, the central government’s pronouncements are but the bugle call heralding a wider battle; society-wide attitudes



Wealthy Chinese Drivers Wanted: The Volkswagen showroom at Oriental Plaza.

about the human and economic worth of migrants will be much harder to change. Failure to achieve such an attitude shift will make it much harder to integrate the tide of migrants—a tide carrying within it the potential for volatile discontent.

* * *

In recent years Party leaders have felt that the greatest threat to social stability, and thus their hold on power, is the widening income gap between city and country—certainly a motivating concern behind Premier Wen’s assertion that boosting rural incomes is the government’s “priority of priorities.” However, the only thing more threatening to stability than tens of millions of disgruntled and marginalized people in the countryside are tens of millions of disgruntled and marginalized people in the cities. By absorbing hundreds of millions of migrants over the coming decades, urbanizing, industrializing China will be importing a ticking time-bomb into its heart.

Not that there’s a choice. In the long term, the only way to deal with an under-employed peasantry is precisely to absorb it into the cities—and then hope for sufficient urban economic growth and job creation. But while China has the potential to continue expanding in coming decades, downturns are inevitable. Some economists are in fact predicting a slowdown sooner rather than later: they see the current boom as a classic bubble that may soon pop, and in ugly fashion. Even if the country manages a soft landing this time around and avoids deep recessions in coming years, it may still be difficult to create enough jobs. The recently-published *2004 Blue Book of China’s Economy*, put out by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), pegs unemployment as the major

challenge facing the country; integrating a vast peasantry into an urbanizing economy forms the core of this challenge. Although the official urban jobless rate is 4.3 percent, a CASS sampling of major cities puts the unemployment rate at 12 percent. Official statistics factor in neither jobless migrants nor those laid off from state-owned enterprises. The government expects urban unemployment to continue to rise this year, despite blistering economic growth. Without the lubrication of even faster job creation, urban China could begin to choke on its migrants.

There are no nationwide data on urban poverty, but earlier this year the Asian Development Bank issued its

own analysis based on Chinese statistics concerning minimum living standards. From its look at 31 large cities, the Bank concludes that 15 percent of migrants are living in poverty. Warning that millions of migrants have yet to make a move toward the cities, the report suggests that the problem of urban poverty will likely deepen. Due to the huge wealth gap between urban and rural areas, China already suffers from one of the world’s highest levels of inequality. While migration acts to counter this trend, it will also serve to stuff that inequality gap into much tighter, pressurized urban boxes. As experience in Latin American and other developing countries shows, while the concentration of rich and poor in dense spaces enables beneficial transfers of wealth, it also facilitates envy, disaffection and crime.

The fact that Chinese are offered no political outlets—no way to hold a march, let alone “throw the bastards out” in the next election—serves to keep a lid on feelings of discontent even as it makes these feelings boil ever hotter. I’ve personally seen what happens when the lid is temporarily lifted and Chinese are granted that rare chance to demonstrate. I was teaching English in Guangzhou in May 1999, when large street protests were allowed, and to some extent encouraged, to denounce America’s bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. I went down to take photos at Shamian Island, the location of the US Consulate and the heart of the protests, and I found that simply showing my white face resulted in the throwing of bottles and cans in my general direction. The Guangzhou demonstrations were minor, however, in comparison to those in Beijing, where the embassy was stoned for several straight days. And despite the severe defacing of the embassy’s exterior, the damage there paled in comparison to what happened at the

US consulate in Chengdu, where demonstrators broke into the compound and set the Consul-General's residence on fire as diplomats hid their families in closets. Meanwhile, in Changsha, capital of inland Hunan province, mobs thoroughly trashed several McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chickens, necessitating major repairs.

University students led the way in street marches—in fact I knew some of the Guangzhou protests' organizers—and engaged in plenty of stone-throwing. Knowing these students, however, I've always wondered whether their counterparts were the ones lighting fires inside the Chengdu consulate or taking crowbars to windows of fast-food restaurants. On my recent trip through Changsha, locals weren't sure who demolished the McDonalds and KFCs, and the assumption that kept resurfacing was that "hoodlums" (*liumang*) and disaffected people "letting off steam" (*faxie*) were responsible for the most violent behavior. During the Tiananmen protests in 1989, what scared Beijing most was the prospect of a broad mobilization of dissatisfied workers; the government response in 1999 indicates it may have held similar concerns. After the situation in places in Chengdu began drifting out of control, it may have been fears of anti-American displays transforming into wider anti-status quo demonstrations that led officials to roll back the protests only days after having sanctioned them.

This was probably a smart move, as there is no shortage of those dissatisfied with the current state of affairs. *The Most Severe Warning: Social Instability Behind the Economic Prosperity*, a study compiled in 2002 by the well-known scholars Wang Shaoguang, Hu Angang and Ding Yuanzhu, suggests that around 200 million people are unhappy with the status quo; eight percent of urban residents, about 35 million people, are believed to be "extremely unhappy." I'm not implying that today's many mistreated migrants are tomorrow's looters and pillagers. However, if you had worked all year and been denied your wages, might you not feel like smashing in some windows? Given the prospect of rising urban unemployment and poverty, I can't think of a better way to swell the numbers of "extremely unhappy" people in the cities then by 1) continuing to allow migrants in and 2) continuing to treat them like dirt.

If social disorder driven by feelings of injustice and inequality ever breaks out, its symbolic ground zero will lie not at Tiananmen Square—but rather one block to the northeast, at the Oriental Plaza shopping mall. The name "Oriental" Plaza is somewhat ironic, as the mall presents itself as a marketplace for western luxury goods in Beijing. Indeed, you could also say the mall is a symbolic ground zero for globalization in China—western companies from Apple to Zegna see this as the ideal high-profile location to show off their high-profile brand names. Beyond the usual expensive fashion and jewelry, the auto industry has an uncharacteristically strong presence for a shopping center: a large Volkswagen showroom draws crowds; a boutique called "BMW Lifestyle" sells black

leather accessories favored by expert drivers; Rolls Royce will soon open a store.

The shopping center is laid out on an east-west axis along one massively-long city block, so that one can enter from one end, stroll through the mall as if it were a street, and pop out the other side; there are even hokey street signs notifying you that you are strolling down "Oriental Avenue." As you work your way through, you will observe China's richest people buying expensive things—or else just standing in front of shop windows and imagining all the expensive things they *could* buy. From time to time, however, you may observe a migrant or two standing in front of the shop windows and imagining all the things they *can't* buy. I spoke to some who were doing renovation work inside the mall, but I suspect others had come to visit nearby Tiananmen Square on their monthly day-off and had wandered into the shopping center by accident. (A pilgrimage to look at Mao's embalmed body, lying white and waxy in the huge "Maosoleum" at the southern end of Tiananmen Square, is often the inaugural sight-seeing trip Beijing's migrants take on their first day off.)

Migrants stick out like sore thumbs on the average city street, so wandering through this mall they look as if they've just been beamed down from some other planet. For migrants, a trip from one end of the shopping center



Signs on "Oriental Avenue" point the way to conspicuous consumption.



Separate and unequal: a migrant on break from renovation work inside Oriental Plaza smokes a cigarette outside the mall's main door.

to the other must be like disappearing down the rabbit hole: is this real or fantasy? A wrist-watch that costs \$20,000? A Rolls-Royce that costs \$200,000? In some of the stores, nothing costs less than a migrant's yearly salary, and many things cost more than the sum total they can expect to earn in their whole lives. When you look through shiny shop windows at the price tags you see your own reflection; the paltry value of your entire life's labor is written all over your face.

"Oriental Avenue" provides a vision of a materialist utopia, the street all Chinese dream of living on, where everything and everyone is clean, rich, stylish and cosmopolitan. The mall offers you all this, and ubiquitous reflective surfaces in which to bask in your own sophistication. In fact, Oriental Plaza scares me: it provides too many reflective surfaces reflecting too much about China. The mall is a kind of microcosm of urbanized, globalized China—in which a select few have seemingly full access to the fruits of globalization, while most others are left out. Here in the cities China's wealth gap is shrunk to the space between the migrant's nose and the jewelry-window display—and how brittle is the glass pane reflecting back his poverty. □

Next: A rampage in the China shop? Or can rich urbanites and migrants work it all out? The answer to this question depends on how economic growth is shared, which in turn depends on the evolution of the relationship between urbanite and migrant. My next report will look in greater depth at the reasons for, and implications of, this tense relationship.

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