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Policing and racialization of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities

Dong Han

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Abstract

This article examines policing practices that produce forms of race-like status for rural migrants in Chinese cities. I analyse new forms of ‘natural attributes’-based discrimination and regulation of the rural-urban divide based on *hukou*, the body of laws that control household registration and movement of workers within China’s developing urban industrial order. I argue that rural migrant workers are policed in cities through a process by which new disadvantageous racializing identifications take shape, reinforcing stereotypes of rural migrants’ bodily features. This research applies critical race theory to issues generally analysed through the lens of class. Contextualized within China’s market-oriented reform, economic growth and social transformations, this approach to racialization endeavours to understand the intricate cultural and material aspects of rural-urban migration in China.

Keywords: China; *hukou*; migrant worker; policing; racism; racialization.

Introduction

Studies of racial identity in China often focus on concepts constructed along with the rise of China as a modern nation-state or on the relationships between state-recognized ethno-national ‘minority’ identities within the country. The former tend to probe deep into Chinese history and to trace the formation of Chinese nationalism and the notion of Han Chinese as a ‘race’ (Dikötter 1992, 1997). The latter can cover a wide range of issues in relation to ethnic minority culture, politics and economy. According to the official account, there are 55 ethnic minority groups in China, with the majority of Han Chinese amounting to 90.56 per cent of the total population by the end of 2005 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2006). Ethnic conflicts, issues

of 'assimilation', Chinese state policy and construction and transformation of minority identities are frequently discussed topics. However, drawing on critical racial theories, this article takes a different approach.

Seen most broadly, 'race' is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests (Omi and Winant 1994). Racial identities are constructed culturally and socio-historically, rather than based on any 'scientific' findings in human genes or biological traces. The idea of race evolves and is transformed through a process in which power and resources are distributed on the basis of fictional biological traits (Roediger 2008). In the US race is often perceived as a matter of skin colour, where differences can mark and regulate social status, pointing to different positions in the power relationship (Gómez 2007). A critical racial study needs to avoid prioritizing any particular system for classifying race or ethnicity, and, instead, can endeavour to develop comparative studies of racism with other social relations in order to understand how racialized identities are being articulated in particular social and political contexts (Bulmer and Solomos 2004). It is important to note that 'all social relationships have both material/economic aspects and cultural/meaningful aspects' and 'it is possible to develop an analysis of social identities round the notion of *multiple positioning*' (Fenton and Bradley 2002, emphasis in original). Although these arguments are mostly based in Western contexts, they figure significantly in this article and open up new spaces for researching racism in China.

It is in this sense that police practices and systematic stigmatization of rural migrants in Chinese cities become the focus of this research. I focus on a 'natural attributes'-based discrimination in China's developing urban industrial market economies, and on the rural-urban divide based on *hukou*, the body of laws that control household registration and movement of workers within the country. I argue that rural migrant workers (*mingong*) are policed in cities through a process by which disadvantageous new racial identities take shape. Solinger draws a parallel between migrant workers in China and racial groups in the West, stating that 'the Chinese peasants' lot in the city was much more akin to that of black people in South Africa before the 1990s or of blacks and Asians in the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century' (1999, p. 5). This article seeks to test and explore this comparison by documenting the process in which migrant workers are not merely 'parallel to' victims of racism but can be seen as subject to processes of 'racialization' unique to the Chinese context.

The analysis of changing policing practices is central to new perspectives on racialization in contemporary China. Chinese police are the sole governmental organ to implement the system of *hukou* (similar to an internal passport regime made up of legal controls over

one's right to reside and work in a particular area). Police manage *hukou* registration, transfer and book-keeping. In enforcing the rural-urban *hukou* divide, urban police use force to execute their duties, including locking up rural migrants and transporting them back to where their rural registration fixes them. In the process, the police rely on stereotyped physical features of *mingong* to identify the subjects of *hukou* enforcement, thus creating a situation in Chinese cities in which having particular visible features can subject one to a whole set of discriminatory legal restraints and policing treatments. I begin by discussing ethnicity and racism in China, then move on to discuss *hukou* as a segregation system and its enforcement through policing. Then I detail the case of Sun Zhigang, a *hukou*-less migrant worker victimized under racializing *hukou* enforcement and extra-legal brutality. I conclude by situating the racialization of rural migrant workers in the context of socioeconomic changes in contemporary China.

Locating racism in China

A discussion on racism in China needs to begin with a mapping of ethno-national identities. In the official account, there are 56 different ethnic groups in China. Han Chinese (*hanzu*) form the dominant majority and the other 55 groups are referred to as 'ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu*)'. This categorization is a recent product of the People's Republic, which conducted a lengthy process of 'ethnic identification (*minzu shibie*)', using the Stalinist formula of four criteria: common language, territory, economy and culture (Smith 2000; Wang 2000). Today, the Chinese government uses the narrower criterion of descent to establish ethnic identity. A person with one-eighth ethnic minority descent can claim minority identity, without proving cultural affiliation or language competency (Hoddie 1998, p. 124).

The Chinese government has always paid significant attention to managing ethnic relations, particularly the relation between ethnic minorities and Han people. State ethnic policy has two distinct features: 'politicizing' ethnic relations and preferential treatment for the minorities (Ma 2004, 2007). Ma coined the term 'politization (*zhengzhihua*)', which means to grant minorities institutionalized political power on the basis of state-recognized ethnic identities. In addition, the Chinese government offers significant preferential treatment and privileges to minority groups (Hoddie 1998; Pang 1998; Ma 2007). Such preferential treatment may include less tax, more governmental subsidies and suspension of one-child-per-family restrictions. As a result, Chinese people try to claim ethnic minority status whenever possible, motivated by the benefits of minority identities (Hoddie 1998).¹ One researcher parallels such preferential treatments to affirmative action in the USA, and maintains that they contribute to greater social equality (Sautman

1998), but street riots in Tibet and Xinjiang by 'ethnic minority nationalities' in recent years challenge the state's claim to affirmative treatment of minorities, asserting instead that the state is aiming to extinguish them through Han colonization of their 'home' communities and violent police repression of minority members when they migrate to cities.

Issues of ethno-national or racial prejudice in China are talked about in ways that are very different from in the west. First, in the west many understand racism as between whites and people of colour, but this concept of 'race' does not apply to systems of racial ordering in some non-western countries (Dikötter 1992). In addition, over the last few centuries China has not had significant immigration, which is an important focal point of racialization and stigma in many western countries. Different ethnic groups in China today have been living together for hundreds, sometime thousands, of years and had extensive interaction with, and influence upon, each other. Significant differences in history and socio-political circumstances highlight the importance of locating 'common features' of racism (Bulmer and Solomos 2004, p. 8), rather than looking for Chinese versions of manifestations of western racial logics.

This research focuses on the particular contemporary Chinese logic of racialization of rural migrant workers in cities undergoing rapid industrialization and socially polarizing development. 'Racialization' emphasizes that racial and ethnic identities are not static but are constantly undergoing transformation. The focus on rural migrant workers (in Chinese, *mingong*) does not seem to fit readily into ethnic and racial studies – *mingong* do not seem to possess any unique, formally recognized ethnic features that distinguish them from urban residents. However, through policing they are subject to a whole set of discriminatory regulations and practices, enforced largely by looking for visible/audible identity markers like hair, apparel, personal hygiene and dialect. This is a Chinese case of racism, which 'attempt[s] to fix human social groups in terms of natural properties of belonging within particular political and geographical context' (Bulmer and Solomos 2004, p. 8).

It is by no means novel to note the racial (for some, quasi-racial) aspect of discrimination against Chinese rural migrant workers. Solinger (1999) draws a parallel between *mingong*, black people in South Africa under Apartheid and blacks and Asians in the USA in early twentieth century. While the latter two are generally framed and understood in racial terms, by placing *mingong* side by side with them she implicitly points to the potential of applying racial analytical tools to migrant labour in China. Based on the fact that rural identities are determined by blood rather than place of birth, Pils (n.d.) points out that the status of *mingong* in China bears significant similarity to

that of *pariah* in the Indian caste system. In addition, web forum postings and blogs in China tend to be more assertive in defining the discrimination against *mingong* in racial terms. A posting titled '*Hukou*, the Chinese version of Apartheid' argues that the Chinese rural population is faced with a segregation system comparable to, if not worse than, that of Apartheid in South Africa (Chinaworker.info 2008). A blogger argues that one of the consequences of *hukou* is racial discrimination (*zhongzu qishi*), that the segregation of *hukou* has resulted in the formation of two distinct *ethnic* groups, the urban and the rural (*cheng hanzu* and *xiang hanzu*), and that the gap between the two is deep-rooted and difficult to cross (Guancanghai 2008). When both institution-based researchers and individual bloggers use racial terms and analogies to describe rural migrant labour, generally analysed under a class-based framework, can we not argue that they have all perceived the inadequacy of a simple class perspective as well as the promise of racial analysis in this case?

***Hukou*, rural migrant workers and the police**

Rural-urban migration and state intervention have a long history in the People's Republic of China. When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, China adopted the Soviet Union's developmental model that stressed industrialization and urbanization. This model drew a profound distinction between the urban and the rural, the former being the developmental front and the latter the supportive backstage. However, massive migration from country to city began immediately, when underemployment in the countryside drove many peasants to move to urban areas to make a living. During 1950s the Chinese state took measures to stop and to reverse the rural-urban population flow, including both 'soft' measures like incentives and persuasion and harsh actions including detention and 'deportation', sending them back to where they were from (Solinger 1999; Biddulph 2007). This was because, under a centrally planned economy, state welfare benefits were available only to city residents on the basis of a static, easy-to-calculate urban population. Rural-urban migration threatened the provision of welfare to the 'privileged' urban residents (Cheng and Selden 1994; Solinger 1999). This was when *hukou*, the household registration system that regulates domestic migration, came into being.

Contemporary Chinese society has undergone profound changes in the past three decades. Market-oriented reform (re)installed capitalistic relationships in a wide array of social sectors and significantly re-shaped social hierarchy. City-centred, industrialization-oriented developmental policy extracted rural surpluses to fuel urban growth (Meisner 1999). Cities became the centre and forefront of economic

and cultural development. Rural residents, mostly peasants, went to cities to look for jobs and to seek fulfilment, when country life could promise neither a livelihood nor a future (Yan 2008). These processes resulted in large-scale rural-urban migration in contemporary China (Davin 1999), at a time when urban industrial sectors were hungering for 'free', cheap labour. The *hukou* (household registration) system, originally set up in the 1950s to bind peasants to the land they farmed, was no longer necessarily enforced to expel rural migrants from cities, but to mark their presence in the cities as forever 'temporary', taking advantage of their labour while denying them urban citizenship at the same time (Solinger 1999; Wang 2005; Florence 2006).

Researchers have pointed out the *de facto* 'immigrant' status of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities. Chinese law explicitly prescribes discriminatory treatment on the basis of *hukou*, and rural migrants are in a condition parallel to that of 'illegal' Mexican immigrants to the US (He 2004). Without *hukou*, rural migrants are deemed 'visitors' in their own country, 'strangers in the city' (Zhang 2001), 'second-class' citizens in urban China (Solinger 1999). In the prejudiced view of urban discourse, they are thought to be poor, greedy for money, having no good judgment and no education (Florence 2006), and they face intense contempt from the 'privileged' urban dwellers (Pils n.d.). The Chinese government, in many cases, also sees them as the cause of increased crime rates, worsening sanitary problems and deteriorating public order in the cities (Zhang 2001). Similar to some western cases in which new immigrants tend to be blamed for all social and community problems, *hukou*-less *mingong* in Chinese cities are always the target of social prejudice and intense police surveillance.

The police are the sole state organ to implement *hukou* in China. Different from the USA (and most western countries), where social security and other household-related administrative tasks are carried out by non-police governmental branches, Chinese *hukou* has always been managed by the police, which keep *hukou* books, register, transfer or change residential status and issue ID cards and temporary residence permits. In addition, it is the police who have the power to stop people in the streets, knock on doors, check ID cards and temporary permits, and detain people if they fail to show the required photo IDs. It makes the police overwhelmingly the most important and most frequently contacted state agency for rural migrant workers.

The police system in the People's Republic of China is deeply embedded in the history of political struggles. According to Dutton (2005), the Chinese policing system was born in response to a crisis in the history of the Communist Party, when its close ally, the Nationalist Party, suddenly turned against it and massacred huge numbers of Communists and sympathizers in late 1920s. From then on, the police force became a core organ in the party system, fighting against

‘enemies’ of the Party. This function persisted after the Communists came to power in 1949, and is a key feature of policing in China. Police in China have always enjoyed a wide range of power in investigation, interrogation and detention. The division of power between the police, the procuratorate² and the court is subject to the larger goal of fighting the enemies of the Party, spearheaded by the police. While the police are not free from supervision and checks from other party and governmental organs, their broad powers have deep historical and institutional origins.

One of the most significant powers of Chinese police is the ability to detain people as a form of administrative penalty. This is referred to as ‘administrative detention (*xingzheng jülüu*)’, in that the police is deemed an administrative organ, with an almost unlimited discretion to detain people. Administrative detention is a widely used policing tactic. As early as the 1950s, the police detained rural migrants in urban areas so as to ‘cleanse’ streets in the cities (Biddulph 2007). The Administrative Penalty Law (*Xingzheng Chufa Fa*) in 1996 formally stipulated that administrative detention is a form of ‘administrative penalty (*xingzheng chufa*)’ for ‘administrative offences (*xingzheng weifa*)’, which are minor offences that are deemed less serious than ‘crimes (*fanzui*)’. The power of administrative detention solely rests with the police, though judicial review may be invoked afterwards. In addition, being the state organ that enforces *hukou*, the police have the power to check anybody’s ID cards and other identity documents at any time. Suspected vagrants and beggars, or basically anybody that fails to produce required documents, can be detained by the police for further investigation, and, if applicable, be sent back to where their *hukou* belongs.

This is tremendous power for the police. It means that a police station, if so inclined, can lock up (if only temporarily) anybody in the absence of a photo ID. However, if we take into consideration that policing in contemporary China emphasizes targeting particular groups of people, rather than treating the population as a homogenous whole (Dutton and Lee 1993), then excessive police power cannot be deemed as a threat to an abstracted ‘citizen’ but rather as an institution aiming to distinguish some ‘citizens’ from others. Many urban residents of the new middle classes in China tend to blame rural migrants for social problems and increased crimes, a situation not much different from that faced by immigrants in the USA (Solinger 1999). In the city of Beijing, Zhejiang Village (*Zhejiang Cun*), the community of migrants from the southern province of Zhejiang, was demolished by the police in the name of tackling crime (Dutton 1998; Zhang 2001). In another instance, a report from Beijing police argues that control over migrant workers is the primary strategy for maintaining social order and tackling crime, though their own statistics

show that migrants commit less than a quarter of the total crimes in the city (Yang and Wang 1998). Indeed, rates of crime by rural migrants are generally overestimated. And most of these criminal activities, when they do occur, are petty, non-violent economic crimes – driven by extreme need and marginalization (Zhao and Kipnis 2000).

A new term, ‘three withouts’, was coined for rural migrant workers, beggars and the homeless, which compose a ‘target group’ for the police. ‘Three withouts’ means ‘without ID card, without temporary residence permit and without proof of employment’. It depicts rural migrant workers as aimless (without jobs), lawless (without temporary residence permits) and faceless (without identity). Being an updated version of another derogatory label, ‘*mangliu* (blind, floating people)’, widely used in the 1980s (Florence 2006), ‘three withouts’ not only demeans rural migrant workers, but also justifies arbitrary detention and abuse by the police.

As a matter of fact, nobody is really a ‘three withouts’. Every Chinese citizen has a government-issued ID card. Many rural migrant workers do have jobs in the cities, and if they are willing to go through the lengthy procedure and to pay often over-charged fees, they can obtain temporary residence permits.³ ‘Three withouts’ actually refers only to the moment one is stopped by the police in the streets – without the three in hand one will be detained at once. This poses a significant threat to rural migrant workers in the cities because, in order to protect them from theft, loss or damage at work, not many of them carry their documents with them all the time. If someone loses her/his ID card, the process of applying for a new card can be unpredictable and time-consuming, especially when the person lives away from where her/his *hukou* is. Also, migrant workers who toil on construction sites or collect scraps generally have very few belongings. It would be an excessive burden for them to carry their documents all the time. Through the case of Sun Zhigang, we will explore in detail what it is like to be a ‘three withouts’ caught by the police, how one’s looks could trigger discriminatory policing and extra-legal brutality, and how racial identities are constructed through the process.

The detention and death of *hukou*-less Sun Zhigang

On 17 March 2003, Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old young man, was walking in the streets of Guangzhou, one of the largest cities in the southern part of China. He had recently accepted a job offer from an apparel company, and had only just moved to the city. Sun was a migrant worker. The complexity and rigidity of the strict Chinese *hukou* system did not allow him to get a Guangzhou *hukou* although his employment was legal and a regular one. According to the law, he must obtain a ‘temporary residence permit (*zanzhuzheng*)’ in order to

live and work legitimately in the city. In addition, he was supposed to carry all his identity documents with him all the time, because the police might stop him in the street and check. On that day it happened. Sun did not have a temporary residence permit, and he actually did not have any forms of ID on him at the time. He was detained by the police, who a few hours before had just held a ‘mobilization conference (*dongyuan dahui*)’ that called for more severe law enforcements against ‘three withouts’ in order to maintain social order and to tackle crime.⁴

Sun Zhigang’s experience with the police could have ended shortly after. His friends and employer quickly learned about his detention and took his ID card and cash to the police station. Generally this could have led to an immediate release of the detained – it had been proved that he had an ID card and a regular employment and, since he just arrived in the city, it was excusable not to have a temporary residence permit. More importantly, Sun’s friend brought cash to pay ‘fines’ to buy him out. As Pils (n.d.) points out, without any lawful justification, it is common practice for the police to detain ‘three withouts’ in order to levy ‘tariffs’. It has become a lucrative business for the police and detention facility managers (Alexander and Chan 2004).⁵ With the ‘tariff’ paid and documents produced, the detention of Sun could have ended here. However, the police flatly refused to release him. Two days later, Sun Zhigang died in a detention facility. The police at first claimed that he died of a heart attack, but an autopsy showed that he had been beaten to death.

The fate of Sun Zhigang, reported through newspapers and online, triggered outrage among media audiences and internet users all over the country. As a matter of fact, Sun’s encounter with the detention and repatriation system reflected only routinized policing practice against rural migrant workers. Zhao (2008) points out that there had been many cases similar to that of Sun, though none of these stories reached the media or evoked any public reaction. Pils (n.d.) also notes that a number of similar cases, otherwise unreported, were brought to light only in the aftermath of Sun Zhigang. Sun’s case stood out as a newsworthy story because he had a college degree, which made him ‘atypical’ as a rural migrant. If people like Sun, that is, people who should fall into a category entirely different from that of *mingong*, could be detained, then arbitrary policing is indeed a threat to urban dwellers, who compose the majority of media audience and internet users in China. Guangzhou authorities later stated that Sun was ‘wrongly’ detained. It directly addressed the anxieties of non-migrant urban residents over the detention of Sun. Indeed, how Sun was ‘wrongly’ picked up by detention police from the streets was an underlying concern in a number of media stories and online comments.

Although the police have the power to check ID cards in the streets, they cannot possibly stop everybody passing by – in a crowded city like

Guangzhou it would virtually block the streets. Rather, the police judge people from their looks – their apparel, hair, dialect. For biased city dwellers, rural migrants have a series of identifiable physical features, including shabby clothing, untidy hair, bad personal hygiene and unrefined (or just non-local) dialect. The police obviously adopt these demeaning labels and use them in their identification of ‘three withouts’. As a college graduate, Sun Zhigang presumably should look different from a ‘typical’ *mingong* with little or no formal education. Therefore, whether Sun ‘looked’ like a rural migrant the night he was stopped by the police became a key question for worried non-migrant urban residents. The story by *China Newsweek* went like this:

Walking on Huangcun Avenue, Tianhe District, Sun Zhigang was suddenly stopped by police officers from Huangcunjie Station of Guangzhou Public Security Bureau. After that night it was impossible to know what he wore at the time. Therefore, it is impossible to know whether the police stopped him because ‘he did not take proper care of his looks [buxiu bianfu]’. (Tang 2003)

Some comments in the media, feeling less restrained by ‘professional’ principles that emphasized documented evidence, were more direct. One story went, in a sarcastic tone: ‘What are the features of rural migrant workers? They generally have shabby clothing. Sun Zhigang has a poor family. Even in his office he “wears only one outfit day-to-day”. . . . Of course he must be checked’ (Lao 2003). Another comment put it: ‘You may not look like a city dweller that much, having rough skin and coarse flesh (*cupi caorou*); or you are just like Sun Zhigang, taking poor care of your looks, having untidy hair and unshaved beard, then you may be spotted by the “experienced” detainers on the first sight’ (Chen 2003). The police never explained how they picked up Sun from the streets, but the correlation of visible ‘rural’ features and the probability of being detained was central to any attempts to rehearse the scene.

Through what Sun Zhigang went through, we could have a glimpse of a person’s experience once identified by the police as a ‘three withouts’ *mingong*. Here again Sun’s tragic death was ‘atypical’. After all, not every detainee was beaten to death. Most of them would docilely produce some forms of ID, pay the fines and be freed. Sun Zhigang was an exception. And, again, the police never explained, but Sun’s family, friends and media and online accounts all arrived at the same conclusion. From what his friends recalled, Sun quarrelled with the police. Different from an ‘average’ rural migrant worker, Sun apparently had some self-confidence and ‘talked back’ to the police, which was probably why he was killed (Pils n.d., p. 23). Several other accounts also related Sun’s death with his ‘talking back’ (Lao 2003;

Hong 2009). For Sun's father and brother, Sun would not have died if he had not gone to college and developed the habit of (and confidence for) reasoning with people (Chen and Wang 2003). A posting online maintained that Sun died because he courageously questioned the 'detention and repatriation' system as a detainee. He did not die as a tragic victim, but as a forerunner challenging the injustice of policing practice against rural migrant workers (Chukuangge 2003).

We may never be able to know what Sun said to the police, who refused to disclose any details on Sun's detention. However, given Sun's temperament and the general experience of detained rural migrant workers, it is not difficult to imagine the encounter of Sun and the detention police. Sun's family and friends all knew that he liked to reason and to debate. His roommate in Guangzhou remembered talking to Sun and advising him to be 'more flexible and adaptive' (Li 2003), in other words, to know when to stop talking and to swallow it. His advice probably did not work when Sun was locked up. To be detained as a 'three withouts' was a very humiliating experience, and physical abuse and brutal beatings were daily routines (Chen 2003). In addition, if Sun took it that urban and rural residents were equal before the police, he might have seen his detention as outrageously unreasonable – if merely failing to produce an ID card resulted in detention, then the city was too dangerous to live in. Moreover, why should he pay 'fines' for his detention, which was unjust and unlawful in the first place? However, detained 'three withouts' were in no position to debate with the police over their situation. Instead, they were expected to behave in a docile, inferior manner and to fit into the stereotype that urban police had of them, but Sun Zhigang apparently did not understand this as well as his fellow detainees. As his brother put it, 'My brother ... always wants to reason with people. If he had done whatever he was asked to, if he had squatted when told to,⁶ had obeyed the police's words, he for sure would not have died' (Li 2003). For the police, here was a rural-looking guy who tried to deal with them on an equal footing or, worse yet, tried to tell them that they were wrong. Sun was deemed 'too noisy' and must be taught a lesson. He was brutally beaten again and again, and died after two days at a detention facility.

Sun's case is only one more example of how the police select their targets from the streets by appearance (Alexander and Chan 2004). By relying on bodily features to identify subjects of *hukou* enforcement, policing sets up direct links between physical appearance and particular social, economic and political status. According to Hall (1996, quoting W. E. B. Du Bois), the essence of racism is to categorize people on the basis of 'differences of colour, hair and bone' and to distribute power unequally along racial lines. It is in this sense that policing against rural migrants in Chinese cities contributes to a

process of ‘racialization’. The case of Sun Zhigang exemplifies how categorization by physical features, followed by discriminatory law enforcement and extra-legal brutality, actually ‘took place’. The *hukou* system, the stigmatizing labels attached to rural bodies and policing practices that construct social hierarchy in correlation with social bias constitute the racist facet of the oppression and disenfranchisement that China’s rural population suffers.

Racialization of rural migrants under China’s market reform and development

Contemporary China’s economic growth took place when neoliberal capitalism swept through the west, and China’s growth model incorporated substantial elements of neoliberalism, in ways that enhanced rather than suspended authoritarian politics (Harvey 2005). Deteriorating social and economic conditions in the countryside drove hundreds of millions of peasants in another wave of migration to cities to look for jobs, forming ‘the largest mass migration the world has ever seen’ (ibid., p. 127). Due to the *hukou* system, rural-urban migration in China is different from internal migration in many other countries in that rural migrants must keep close links to their home village and county, knowing that they will eventually return (by choice or force) (Davin 1999). The cities they work in do not grant them any social, political or economic rights and benefits except (meagre) monetary returns for their work. The vast rural areas are essentially being treated as a reservoir and a reproduction site for cheap labour for industrialization in the cities (Yan 2008).

Under China’s present developmental policy, *hukou* and the second-class status of rural migrants in the cities are in line with the interests of both state and capital. The ‘temporary’ status of rural migrants deprives them of state welfare and protection, and discourages them from self-organizing, knowing that they may be leaving at any time. As a result, migrant workers’ wages can be driven very low. Because of *hukou*, China’s minimum wage is often lower than that of poorer countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, which makes China particularly competitive for transnational investments (Alexander and Chan 2004). As Loong-Yu and Shan put it, this helps the ruling elites to restore a ‘barbaric capitalism’ (2007, p. 79) and to enrich a few through the spatial and social apartheid of *hukou*. Moreover, *hukou* contributes to state control of a population undergoing rapid stratification and polarization. It is indispensable for China’s concurrent economic growth and political stability, achieved largely ‘through division and exclusion’ (Wang 2005).

Along with the economic ‘necessity’ of exploiting cheap migrant labour is urban bias against the countryside, rural way of life and rural people, which is closely linked to China’s modernization. Ancient China

had long been an agrarian society, but clashes with western industrial capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century initiated a series of profound changes. The intrusion of imperialism, symbolized by foreign concessions in Chinese cities, re-configured urban-rural relationships. In the modernization discourse, the countryside represented backwardness, poverty and incivility, in contrast to economically, culturally and technologically advanced (westernized) cities.⁷ The 'new' image of the countryside continues today. Yan (2008) maintains that contemporary urban bias against rural residents must be situated in the city-centred developmental path over the last three decades, when urban development was prioritized at the cost of the countryside. The dominant ideology places the city at the centre and forefront of national development, and China's backwardness is linked to its agrarian roots. It is in this context that 'peasant (*nongmin*)' becomes itself a derogatory term. Being rural becomes an identity decidedly different from the urban, and that difference can be conveniently summarized by the keyword '*suzhi*'.

Suzhi is a word central to contemporary China governance and society (Kipnis 2006). Sometimes translated as 'quality', *suzhi* is an inclusive and elusive term that can refer to one's morality, intelligence, education and many other elements in relation to character and ability. Yan (2008) draws an interesting parallel between '*suzhi*' in neoliberal developmental discourse and the term 'value' in Marxist analyses of commodification. According to her, *suzhi* refers to the essential qualities one must possess in order to be useful for, and to fit into, a developing society. The concept abstracts and reduces the heterogeneity of human beings, just like 'value' abstracts and reduces concrete and individual aspects of human labour. Kipnis points out that 'references to *suzhi* justify social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of "high" quality gaining more income, power and status than the "low"' (2006, p. 295). While the countryside is linked to backwardness, rural residents are defined by their lack of, or low levels of, *suzhi*. They are regarded by biased city dwellers as of 'low quality', including low 'physical quality', 'scientific and cultural quality' and 'quality of understanding notions' (Pils n.d., p. 31). Biased media depict them as being unqualified to live in the cities for both cultural and moral reasons (Florence 2006), implicating a certain standard of 'quality' that only city residents meet. Thus, the social divide drawn by *hukou* is directly associated with human subjectivity. *Hukou* no longer only determines where one can 'legitimately' live, but also connotes one's way of thinking and behaving.

Visible bodily features are key markers of one's *suzhi*, or quality. According to Kipnis, 'poorly dressed' is a sign of 'lacking quality' (2006, p. 296). In another instance, female rural migrants' *suzhi* is thought to be 'improved' when they have learned to appreciate and to follow fashion (Yan 2008). The most comprehensive account of

mingong's negative stereotype comes from a rude urban joke. According to that joke, for rural migrants to pass for urban residents, they need to be taught to take showers, brush teeth, manicure their nails, put on new clothes, refrain from talking in rural dialects, stop fighting and, most importantly, not to squat on chairs (Yan 2008, p. 178). These bodily features are widely adopted as the basis of discrimination not only by police but also non-governmental institutions. In 2005, a scenic area in Ningbo city put up a sign at its entrance forbidding rural migrant workers and scrap collectors to enter. According to the manager of the facility, this was because several thefts took place before, and the management believed that rural migrants were responsible. And how did they tell a rural migrant from a local? A security staff told the journalist that he identified them through clothing and dialect (*Beijing Youth Daily* 2005). The linkage between rural *hukou*, rural looks, low *suzhi* and discriminatory treatment is clear and straightforward.

In analysing Tibetan women weavers in a Lhasa carpet factory, Zhang argues that the deployment of labour policy and the embodiment of meaning-making practices always go hand-in-hand. To label weaver workers as 'deaf-mutes, illiterates, and women' works to 'reproduce hegemonic relations' and to 'normalize and legitimize the exploitative labor relations in a profit-driven industry' (2007, p. 393, emphasis in original). In her account, class formation is intertwined with gender and ethnicity politics. Similarly, Ngai points out that migrant rural bodies in Chinese cities are usually imagined to be 'rough, dirty, rustic, or lazy' (2005, p. 14), and this construct of new identities is fully in line with disciplining in the workplace. Indeed, it could be so much easier to make migrant workers toil in sweatshops if they internalized the low-*suzhi* discourse and felt they justifiably belonged to an inferior group of people. It is in this context that *hukou* no longer really binds peasants to the land but binds stigma to their labouring, migrant bodies. Policing, through enforcement of *hukou* and the threat/exerting of violence, is an indispensable part in the process. To revisit the case of Sun Zhigang, was he not trying to resist the racialization and thus dehumanization of his identity imposed upon him when faced with extra-legal brutality of the police?

To study the 'racialization' of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities is an effort to add to existing research a cultural perspective drawing from critical racial studies in the west. By 'racialization', I do not assert that a new ethnicity is taking shape, but that there is a 'racial' aspect to the oppression and exploitation of rural migrant workers, which is usually analysed using a class framework. While rural migrants lack generally recognized 'ethnic' features, I emphasize the importance of transcending existing racial and ethnic classifications and endeavouring to contextualize forms of embodied control within specific social, political and economic circumstances (Bulmer and Solomos 2004;

Virdee 2006). The ‘racialization’ approach does not exclude or deny class-based approaches. Rather, by borrowing analytical tools from critical racial theories, I aim to address the cultural processes that always come along with class oppression. If ethnic and class issues intersect, and all social relations have both material and cultural aspects (Fenton and Bradley 2002), then racial and class approaches do not diverge, but supplement each other.

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Notes

1. In a most recent case, the Chinese media covered a scandal in which a number of high school students in Chongqing forged minority ethnic identities in order to receive priority in university/college admission (He 2009).
2. The procuratorate, or *jianchayuan*, is a judicial organ in China’s legal system. It acts as the prosecutor on behalf of the state in criminal cases.
3. According to research on rural migrants to Shenzhen, it cost two months’ salary to pay for various certificates and permits before a migrant worker could ‘legitimately’ start to look for a job (Alexander and Chan 2004). Indeed, not many rural migrant workers are willing to, or can afford to, obtain a temporary residence permit. In 2003, less than half of the migrant workers in China had the permit (Pils n.d.). In the aftermath of Sun Zhigang, many local governments reduced the fees they charged for the permit.
4. Newspaper stories on the case of Sun Zhigang abound, and most of them are reprinted on the internet. Information in this paper was collected through documentary and online research in March 2006 and November 2008. Most details are from two stories published in *Nanfang Metro News* (*Nanfang Dushi Bao*) and *Beijing Youth* (*Beijing Qingnian Bao*), at <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2003-04-25/09501015845.shtml> and http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2003-04/28/content_851808.htm (accessed March 2006).
5. See also the story on *Southern Weekend*, 19 June 2003, by precisely the journalist who first reported on the case of Sun Zhigang. Available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-06-19/01551186977.shtml>.
6. The tendency to ‘squat’, in the biased urban account, is a signature bodily feature for rural migrants. In this case, apparently Sun’s brother knew that Sun would resist it, and that it could be of great importance in Sun’s circumstances.
7. I thank Yan Yuan at the University of Westminster, UK, for this point.

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