Spring 2013

Labor Migration, Self-reliance, and Neoliberal Government Policy: Paint Factory Workers in Shenzhen and Zhuhai, China

Mike Chen
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses

Part of the Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses/149
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Labor Migration, Self-reliance, and Neoliberal Government Policy: Paint Factory Workers in Shenzhen and Zhuhai, China

Abstract
This paper examines the effects that changes in the Chinese government’s methods of labor control have had on rural migrant workers in the Guangdong province. The situation of rural migrant workers in China resembles that of foreign migrant workers in other countries, because institutional barriers such as the hukou (household registration) system prevent rural migrants from becoming permanent residents of cities and reduce them to second class citizens with limited benefits. By employing ethnographic data from anthropological field research among migrant workers in paint factories in the cities of Shenzhen and Zhuhai, this paper discusses how neoliberal labor control has created self-reliant migrant workers. Neoliberal labor control is represented by the gradual relaxation of rural-to-urban migration restrictions and propaganda movements that promote neoliberal discourses. Drawing from the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, the paper argues that neoliberal labor policies facilitate exploitation because they allow the government to reduce state welfare for rural migrant workers living in cities while at the same time mitigating the potential for unrest.

Disciplines
Anthropology
LABOR MIGRATION, SELF-RELIANCE, AND NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENT POLICY: PAINT FACTORY WORKERS IN SHENZHEN AND ZHUHAI, CHINA

By

Mike Chen

In

Anthropology

Submitted to the
Department of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jaesok Kim

2013
Labor Migration, Self-Reliance, and Neoliberal Government Policy: Paint Factory Workers in Shenzhen and Zhuhai, China

Mike H. Chen
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

This paper examines the effects that changes in the Chinese government’s methods of labor control have had on rural migrant workers in the Guangdong province. The situation of rural migrant workers in China resembles that of foreign migrant workers in other countries, because institutional barriers such as the *hukou* (household registration) system prevent rural migrants from becoming permanent residents of cities and reduce them to second class citizens with limited benefits. By employing ethnographic data from anthropological field research among migrant workers in paint factories in the cities of Shenzhen and Zhuhai, this paper discusses how neoliberal labor control has created self-reliant migrant workers. Neoliberal labor control is represented by the gradual relaxation of rural-to-urban migration restrictions and propaganda movements that promote neoliberal discourses. Drawing from the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, the paper argues that neoliberal labor policies facilitate exploitation because they allow the government to reduce state welfare for rural migrant workers living in cities while at the same time mitigating the potential for unrest.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................... 1

Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 2
- Post-socialism and uneven development .................................................................................. 3
- Hukou system and theories of temporary migration ................................................................. 7
- Exploitation and the idea of neoliberal governmentality ......................................................... 10
- Fieldwork in Shenzhen and Zhuhai .......................................................................................... 13

Background ................................................................................................................................... 15
- Exploitation and the scrutiny of the international community .................................................. 15
- Neoliberalism ............................................................................................................................. 16
- Neoliberal governmentality transforms rural migrants into self-reliant subjects .................. 17
- Labor markets in planned economies ...................................................................................... 20
- Modern-day China hukou regulation and residence permits .................................................... 23
- Hukou conversion ....................................................................................................................... 25
- Modern-day China labor regulation .......................................................................................... 26
- The need for external laborers .................................................................................................... 29

Methodology ................................................................................................................................ 31
- Developing the idea for the project ............................................................................................ 31
- Arriving in Shenzhen .................................................................................................................. 33
- Re-locating to Zhuhai ............................................................................................................... 35
- Ethnography and interview process .......................................................................................... 36

Ethnography ................................................................................................................................. 37
- The average family in America must make $600,000/year ....................................................... 37
- Leaving for higher wages at other factories ............................................................................. 42
- No wenhua (culture) .................................................................................................................... 48
- Motivations for leaving home ..................................................................................................... 52

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 54

References Cited ............................................................................................................................. 56

Appendix ......................................................................................................................................... 62
Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Professor Jaesok Kim, my advisor, who has consistently guided me and helped me shape this research project. My interest in this project was piqued by a class that I took taught by Professor Kim, and without his support and encouragement, this project would not have been undertaken. He has been a fantastic mentor to me. I also thank the Department of Anthropology for helping me to coordinate my research. My research was supported by generous grants from the Department of Anthropology and the Gelfman International Summer Fund.

During my fieldwork in China, I was fortunate to meet many people whose contributions made this project what it is. I am deeply indebted to the management of the Shenzhen paint company, who ensured that my project carried on without any mishaps. I am indebted to the company for hosting me in the factory dormitories and for training me on the job. I am also indebted to the migrant workers who were willing to trade stories and give me insight into their lives.

Finally, I thank my parents, James Chen and Hong Xiao, who have inspired this project. Beyond all the support that they have given me in life, it is their story, one of migration, that has made it possible for me to have such fortunate opportunities as attending this university and undertaking this thesis project.
Introduction

My paper examines how changes in the Chinese government’s method of labor control from socialist to neoliberal have created self-reliant migrant workers. Neoliberal labor control refers to deregulated labor policies that increase the role of the private sector. In China, neoliberal labor control is represented by two important actions: the gradual relaxation of rural-to-urban migration restrictions and propaganda movements that promote neoliberal discourses. As a result of these two actions, migrant workers believe that they have agency over their personal improvement and accept failure as the fault of the individual rather than society. Thus, neoliberal labor policies facilitate exploitation: they allow the government to reduce state welfare for migrant workers living in cities while at the same time mitigating the potential for unrest. My ethnographic fieldwork identifies migrant workers in chemical plants in Shenzhen and Zhuhai who have internalized neoliberal ideals.

Popular visions of post-socialism foretell of a progressive transition towards democratic politics and free market capitalism, but I argue that the transition in China is more sophisticated. Actions that are regarded as signs of a retreating state may actually enhance the power of the state. Chinese government policies towards labor migration fall into the category of actions that need further interpretation. Over the past half century, the Chinese government’s economic policies have evolved from a socialist model of development to a capitalist model that takes advantage of its large labor force to grow labor-intensive, export-oriented industries (Fan 1995). Labor migration from the rural interior plays an important role in the economic development of coastal regions.
Labor migration is an interesting situation in China because the migrant workers are Chinese rather than foreign. While rural migrants are citizens, their situation resembles that of foreign migrant workers in other countries. Institutional barriers such as the hukou (household registration) system prevent rural migrants from becoming permanent residents of cities. The term liudong renkou ("floating population") describes a group of between 114 million and 152 million Chinese migrant workers who take temporary residential status in the destination cities while leaving family members and children in rural areas (Zhu 2007).

Post-socialism and uneven development

The designations of “socialist” and “post-socialist” are based on command versus market economy structures, along with attached historical, sociocultural, and political characteristics. The past half century has witnessed the gradual transformation of state socialism, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Many post-socialist countries experienced economic recessions and depressions during the initial years of reform, caused by the cost of implementing a new economic system and changing the structure of output (Matkowski 2004:48).

Post-socialist societies are characterized by economic and political change, exhibiting trends such as an increasing private wealth, a growing consumer culture, the emergence of privately owned enterprises, and marketization and privatization. China exhibits many of these trends despite its legacy of strong socialist practices (Zhang 2001:179). A common interpretation of post-socialist change is that of a progressive narrative where good triumphs over evil, market capitalism replaces socialism, and democratic processes overturn totalitarianism. Several scholars, however, reject this metanarrative on the basis of inherent
complexities in the reconfiguration of societies (Verdery 1996, Humphrey 1991). For example, some former socialist countries experience a return to feudalist modes of organization in the form of patron-client relationships and Mafia-style coalitions. This process is defined as the privatization of power (Verdery 1996). Also, post-socialist societies are not necessarily characterized by the retreat of the state. Zhang (2001) calls into question the weakening of the Chinese state in post-socialist contexts, arguing that social domination still exists but in a different form of patron and client networks.

This paper argues that post-socialism in China does not imply a retreat of the state. In regards to labor migration, the Chinese government has relaxed its hukou system to allow greater spatial mobility of its population (Zhang 2001:179). However, closer examination reveals that direct control has been replaced by neoliberal control. Neoliberalism does not foretell the end of government, but rather represents a prolonged government with different techniques. Strict labor policies have been altered and relaxed to promote an export-oriented economy, taking advantage of the labor surplus and movement from the rural interior. Furthermore, by promoting the suzhi (quality) movement, a form of propaganda in which government dictates morality and expresses the need to raise the quality of the population through education and population control, the government makes workers believe that they are low suzhi and need to advance economically. After internalizing these neoliberal discourses, workers act according to the state’s objectives. My ethnography will show that workers accept neoliberal labor policies with reduced welfare because they believe that the new policies serve their own interests.
The Chinese government’s philosophy of economic development has evolved over the past half century. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) realized that coastal areas were more developed than the interior. This ushered in the first Five Year Plan (1953-1957), in which more than two thirds of industrial projects and one half of industrial investment was directed towards the interior (Kirkby 1985:138). Poor interior provinces were allowed to keep their revenues in state (Lardy 1975). During this era, the Chinese government’s internal migration policy reflected the philosophy of a socialist planned economy, which viewed big cities as the cause for problems like unemployment and poor infrastructure. Thus, rural to urban migration was strictly controlled for the sake of social stability (He and Pooler 2002). The Chinese government instituted the hukou system of household registration, which resembles the Soviet Union’s propiska (internal passport) system in how it restricts population mobility between rural and urban areas (Chan and Buckingham 2010:587).

In the 1960s, national defense became the top priority of the central government with pressure from the Vietnam War and tense Soviet and US relations. Defense policy merged with economic policy in the form of the “third-front” or san xian, which articulated a strategy of avoiding investments in vulnerable coastal cities (First Front), adjacent areas (Second Front), and instead constructing large capital projects and industries in the interior (Third Front). The first two decades witnessed China’s socialist regime choosing national integration and stability over national economic growth. It is estimated that China’s industrial output is 10-15% below what it would have been had the “third-front” strategy never been undertaken (Naughton 1988). In addition, migration policy emphasized urban-to-rural youth transfer, shangshan
xiaxiang, in which urban university graduates were placed in remote border areas during the Cultural Revolution (He and Pooler 2002).

The post-Mao period after 1976 reversed the policies of the previous administration, with Deng Xiaoping, who focused on efficiency rather than egalitarianism. According to the philosophy of this new period, some regions should get rich first in order to set the example and create wealth for other regions. Furthermore, China began taking advantage of its large labor force by specializing in labor-intensive, export oriented industries (Fan 1995). The mentality shift indicated an evolution away from socialist thinking.

In the 1980s, the Chinese government implemented the “three economic belts” model, in which the eastern region specialized in export-oriented and foreign trade sectors, the central region focused on agriculture and energy, and the western region specialized in animal husbandry and mineral exploitation. Growth in the eastern region intensified as China’s export economy developed, thanks to Deng Xiaoping’s “open door policy.” Five cities were designated Special Economic Zones (SEZs): Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, Xiamen, and Hainan. The SEZs attracted foreign direct investment into the country with tax exemptions for foreign companies (Fan 1995). Labor migration featured strongly in the rapid rise of China’s coastal cities. The barriers to migration were lifted with reforms to the hukou system in the 1980s, releasing surplus labor from the rural interior of China (Meng and Zhang 2001).

Post-socialist China’s emphasis on capitalist economic growth driven by export-oriented sectors at the expense of uniform national growth is responsible for uneven development of the coastal cities in contrast with a lagging interior. This uneven development explains the massive rural to urban migration flows, with the greater growth of jobs in the coastal cities.
Despite the acceleration of market forces, post-socialist China continues to exhibit some of the qualities of its predecessor socialist state. The *hukou* system remains in effect. Although weaker than before, it disadvantages rural segments of the population to the benefit of urban segments. The *hukou* system still exists in order to create a class of temporary workers from the countryside to supply industries that permanent residents in the cities would avoid. This also allows local authorities avoid bearing the cost of urbanization and development. The cost of labor production is borne by the rural society, because rural society must support the healthcare costs and pensions of migrant workers who only reside there part-time (Pun 2004).

*Hukou system and theories of temporary migration*

Past socialist regimes have adopted migration control as a tool to manage the labor market and support the centrally planned economy. In 1932, the former Soviet state implemented an internal passport system called *propiska*, which denied rural migrants the right to freely move to the city. The Soviet government saw unorganized migration and urbanization as a problem, claiming that controlled migration systems provided “social growth without social problems” (Buckley 1995:898). Passports contained residence permits for all persons over the age of sixteen, making it illegal to reside at an address other than the one listed by the permit. The Soviet state justified the *propiska* system as an expansion of government protection, but it forced those who changed residence to notify authorities within 24 hours and criminally charged those who were discovered to reside illegally (Buckley 1995:902). The *propiska* system was officially abolished following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1993, Russia passed a law titled “On the Right of Citizens to Freedom of Movement and Choice of Place of Sojourn and Residence within the Borders of the Russian Federation,” which represented Russia’s official
stance on removing the *prosipska* system: the current law requires mandatory notification of residence to authorities. The current system differs from the *prosipska* system because government authorities do not have the authority to withhold registration from individuals who properly apply for it (Rubins 1998:550).

The Chinese government implemented the *hukou* system in the late 1950s, modeling it after the Soviet *prosipska* system. The *hukou* system is a dual system that identifies every citizen along two axes: registration classification and registration location (Fan 2002). The two classifications are “non-agricultural” or “agricultural”. The location refers to where a person resides. Before the 1980s, it was impossible for a migrant worker to move to a city and survive, because of the rationing system and permit limitations. For example, the *hukou* system specified that rural residents who were not state employees were categorized as agricultural households and thus not eligible for grain rations. The *hukou* system tied location with food rationing and coupons; without coupons, it was impossible for a migrant to move to an urban area and survive (Meng and Zhang 2001). In 1958, the “Ordinances of Household Registration for Chinese Residence” required permission from the urban destination or local authority for migrants moving to urban areas (He and Pooler 2002).

Economic reforms went hand in hand with *hukou* system reform. In the mid-1980s, the food rationing system was replaced with a market system, which enabled individuals to buy food at market price and survive in the city (Meng and Zhang 2001). In 1980, the central government designated Shenzhen as the country’s first Special Economic Zone (Wang, Wang and Wu 2009). In 1985, the Shenzhen local authority allowed rural migrants to register as temporary residents (Shen 1995). A migrant could register temporary residence with the Public
Security Bureau or local police station after he or she was hired by an enterprise. Enterprises paid an “Increased City Capacity Fee” to the city (Pun 2004). In the following years, Shenzhen grew into a larger metropolitan area and took over local agricultural villages; in the process, local farmers’ hukou status was revised from agricultural to non-agricultural (Wang, Wang and Wu 2009).

Even despite the reforms, rural migrants face many disadvantages. Temporary residency permits in Shenzhen only last one year and are renewed annually for a fee, but if there is no work, the migrants must leave. This enables local authorities to avoid bearing the burdens of urbanization. The temporary residence system allows local authorities to avoid providing housing, job security, and welfare to rural migrants (Pun 2004). Rural migrants do not receive the same benefits as permanent urban residents, which turns them into second class citizens.

Due to the hukou system, rural migrants in China face similar conditions as undocumented immigrants in the United States and foreign workers in Germany and Japan (Fan 2002). They are Chinese, but they do not enjoy the same benefits as urban-dwelling Chinese; this extra dimension contributes to an extra feeling of deprivation.

Existing theoretical approaches regarding temporary migration help explain both the rationale behind the hukou system and why it continues to be used despite economic reforms. Industrial economies segment labor demand in capital-intensive primary sector and labor-intensive secondary sector (Piore 1979:86). Employers respond to low demand in the economy by laying off workers from the secondary sector. Locals do not work in the secondary sector due to the lower pay and job instability, which creates the need for external laborers. External laborers do not settle in the city, or else that would change their reference frame from the
place of origin to the place of destination. The *hukou* system ensures that migrant workers remain external laborers in the city without settling in the city. Their temporary status allows them to hold jobs in the secondary sector.

Furthermore, temporary migration features strongly in transition societies, but the type of migration may change as a society develops (Zelinsky 1971). In an early transitional society, there is massive movement from rural to urban areas. This changes when a society enters the late transitional society stage, in which urban-to-urban migration surpasses rural-to-urban migration. China has been in the early transitional stage since the mid-1980s. Its rapidly modernizing urban areas have been attracting massive movement from rural areas.

Finally, temporary migration is analyzed as a strategy that enables migrants to maximize income and minimize risk (Stark 1991). By spreading out between rural and urban locales, migrant workers can avoid the risk of not being able to make a living in the city. By keeping homes and farms in rural areas, migrant workers have a safety net in case they fail in the city. This theory provides one explanation for why migrants are willing to accept low wages and temporary status in the cities.

*Exploitation and the idea of neoliberal governmentality*

China has been assaulted by criticism from human rights activists. In the midst of Arab Spring in 2011, a few journalists predicted that the same phenomenon would be observed in China. China’s political dissidents such as Ai Wei Wei have gained attention in prominent international media outlets. According to popular views of China, resistance is inevitable because the regime is very oppressive and causes widespread discontent. Contrary to this romanticized idea of resistance, people in China do not resist despite discontent. My thesis
argues that resistance in China, or the lack thereof, can be explained by neoliberalism and neoliberal governmentality.

Neoliberalism is commonly viewed as a market ideology that directly opposes governance and state activity (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009). However, some scholars argue that neoliberalism is actually a tool of government. Zhang (2008) views neoliberalism as a technique of Foucault’s “biopolitics,” which means the use and impact of politics on all aspects of human life. In Foucault’s view, the state has no essence, and is rather a function of its practices. Neoliberalism does not contradict the power or existence of the state, but is a new form of state planning that seeks to optimize resources and population control (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

More specifically, Foucault characterized government as three things: firstly, “the consequence of a particular form of power”; secondly, “the result of transformations inside the contemporary state”; and thirdly, the procedures that “enable the operation of power directed toward the regulation of a population using various apparatuses of security” (Powell and Cook 2000:81). Governmentality expresses the idea that government is not only limited to negative and repressive actions, but also capable of producing positive and productive actions. The concept of governmentality offers a useful framework to understand the transition to liberalism and neoliberalism. It proposes three forms of power: governance by government in the traditional sense, through regulatory and bureaucratic bodies; governance through intermediate institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals; and self-governance by individuals (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). It is the third form of power that is applicable to the discussion of how neoliberalism can be viewed as a tool of government. Neoliberal forms of
government move away from the first two forms of power and toward forms of self-regulation, which take advantage of indirect techniques for controlling individuals. The neoliberal government’s production of knowledge and discourse is internalized by the population, which then guides the population’s behavior.

Post-Socialist China’s labor policies of relaxing hukou restrictions and propagating the suzhi movement are a form of neoliberal governmentality. The concept of suzhi is related to a grandiose idea of “quality” – the need to raise the quality of the population through education and through population control (Woronov 2009). The Chinese party-state believes that increasing the population’s collective “quality” will make the country more competitive in the global field. Suzhi can be analyzed as an instrument of neoliberal governmentality because it is a discourse that is instilled in the population in order to exercise power over the population. Individuals who believe in the discourse act according to the aims of the state, and therefore, they are helping to secure the good of the entire population.

The Chinese government’s emphasis on economic development based on cheap labor feeds into the concept of suzhi. As is expected in an industrial society, sophisticated urbanites are viewed as being higher quality than low-class rural farmers. The concept of suzhi is critical to the production of surplus value from rural migrant workers. Suzhi acts like an intangible operator in the labor contract, and it invisibly facilitates exploitation. The massive movement of millions of rural migrants to urban centers was viewed by local rural authorities as opportunities for quick poverty relief in the form of money remittances sent home (Yan 2003). The interpretation, according to the concept of suzhi, was that “labor migration enables a transformation of peasants from the despised ‘hick bumpkin’ to human writ large in those who
have truly realized their full potential as human beings” (Yan 2003: 501). The reference to full value hints at the idea that migrant workers can be exploited as an apparatus of neoliberal capital accumulation.

Neoliberal governmentality is a conscious attempt by the government to reduce welfare while mitigating popular discontent. Migrants view migration as a means to accumulate personal wealth and experiences. They view failure as not due to structural failures or injustice such as poor education, lack of healthcare, and poverty but their own fault of lacking suzhi. Migrants who believe in the national discourse may even feel that the obstacles, such as lack of permanent housing, are justified in the context of the personal quest. My paper will discuss the everyday measures that government introduced and workers accept, which increase self-governance to reduce the burden on the state to regulate migration via non-ideological measures. At the same time, these measures strengthen the power of the state in guiding the behavior of the population.

Fieldwork in Shenzhen and Zhuhai

My goal was to study the lives of migrant workers in order to contextualize labor migration, demographic change, and development in China. Part of this goal was shaped by my personal and family background. My father grew up in a small farming town in the Hunan province of western China. Committed to upward mobility, he arrived in Beijing for higher education. He was 16 and it was his first time living in a large city. Just like the other rural migrants who have moved out to urban areas to seek economic opportunity, he came to Beijing to chase the economic dream that the quiet countryside could not afford him. He met my mother, and the two of them later immigrated to America in pursuit of a dream. The story of
this migration has been told to me many times. Over the summer of 2012, I decided to migrate in the opposite direction. I traveled to Shenzhen and Zhuhai, where for three weeks I lived and worked in paint factories with other migrant workers.

My fieldwork focused on migrant workers because they clearly illustrate the post-socialist transition to neoliberalism. Migrant workers are members of the rural population and thus the target of national discourse on *suzhi* and population quality. They are most profoundly affected by the state’s production of ideas of feudal, backward, and low-quality peasants living on the edges of civilized human communities (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005:250). They have responded by migrating to urban environments, where they participate in China’s rapid and uneven development. Their stories are best positioned to reflect transition to neoliberalism, capturing both the rural and urban perspectives.

I chose Shenzhen as the destination for this research project because Shenzhen is a city of immigrants, making it ideal for fieldwork on labor migration. Shenzhen used to be a small fishing village located next to Hong Kong. The Chinese government created the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in this area on August 1980, acquiring land from locals to build public infrastructure and attracting foreign direct investment from Hong Kong and foreign manufacturers. Migration featured heavily in the urbanization of Shenzhen, transforming it from a small village to a metropolitan with over ten million inhabitants.

Shenzhen and Zhuhai are both located in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) in Guangdong province, which is a densely populated river delta in southern China and a locus of economic development. The PRD is also inclusive of Hong Kong and Macau. The PRD has attracted a large proportion of foreign direct investment in China. For example, in 1997 foreign direct
investment in Guangdong province was US$12.6 billion, which accounted for 24 percent of all of foreign investment in China (Shen and all 2000: (Shen et al 2000:312). 

After choosing Shenzhen and the Guangdong province as the site for my fieldwork, I had personal contacts help me find a suitable factory. Through my mother’s cousin, I had a personal contact in the management of a chemicals company headquartered in Shenzhen. The chemicals company has manufacturing and processing plant operations in a handful of cities including Zhuhai, but reserves Shenzhen for its corporate and R&D campus. I spent three days in the Shenzhen corporate office, where I conducted personal interviews with workers throughout the organization ranging from property maintenance workers to management officers. I was then sent to join the Zhuhai processing plant for two and a half weeks, as I had requested in my initial proposal. I presented myself as a student in all interactions with others.

**Background**

*Exploitation and the scrutiny of the international community*

Labor exploitation in China has received increasing scrutiny in the international media in recent years. One of the recent stories features Apple, producer of the much-favored dynasty of computer and software products, and its supplier, Foxconn Technology Co, where the majority of its 1.2 million employees are involved in the production of Apple products. Attention has focused on reports of suicide at Foxconn’s plant in Longhua, Shenzhen, resulting from what some groups argue is unfair treatment of workers. Labor rights groups have also pointed fingers at Apple in the US, pressuring the company and its CEO, Tim Cook, to carry out extensive audits to mitigate the criticism (Blanchard).
The issue of labor exploitation is common throughout history in various contexts. Labor exploitation in China, however, has drawn especial attention of the international community for several reasons. One of the reasons is China’s economic might as a manufacturing and export-oriented country. China recently surpassed Japan as the world’s second largest economy by GDP in 2010, growing at a rate that will allow it to overtake the US economy by 2030. Its export sector dominates the world at $1.5 trillion, earning it the title of the “world’s factory.” Another reason is China’s state bureaucracy and lack of democracy. In either case, the international community can find much to criticize about China or China’s government, for outcompeting other economies and for ruling over its populace with an iron fist. Labor exploitation and cheap labor enables China’s economy to compete effectively on the world stage, and the state bureaucracy enables exploitation to occur and squashes any resistance.

Popular views of China hold that resistance in the country is inevitable because the regime is oppressive and the people are not content. Contrary to this romanticized idea of resistance, my thesis argues that lack of resistance in migrant workers can be explained by neoliberalism and neoliberal governrmentality. These two concepts have created self-reliant migrant workers.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is commonly viewed as a market ideology that directly opposes governance and state activity, but its definition and context vary in the literature. Zhang weighs various definitions in his paper on neoliberalism and porters in Chongqing, China (2008). Aihwa Ong portrays neoliberalism as “market-based policies” which promote big capital at the expense of social programs (Ong 2006:1). Neoliberal states have been defined as those that
monopolize capital and power at the international level, at the expense of weaker states (Ong 2006:12). Neoliberalism can be viewed in popular discourse and media as financial flows that harm local economies and currencies.

Scholars have argued over applying neoliberalism to study postsocialist and non-Western contexts. The center of the debate is whether neoliberalism is appropriate given that governments of many postsocialist countries may exhibit authoritarian and illiberal policies. Zhang (2008) and other authors agree that in studying neoliberalism in postsocialist contexts, one should focus on the exceptions in which neoliberalism is introduced in population management or administration. Even though neoliberalism may not characterize the majority of the governing tactics of a postsocialist state, the instances in which it is used are examined for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, Zhang highlights the “wedding of neoliberal techniques and active state regulations” (2008: 68), in which the combination of neoliberal techniques and direct state regulation result in policy decisions and outcomes. In the case of labor migration in China, the combination of neoliberal techniques and active state regulation has created a situation in which regulation of rural to urban migration flow has gradually been relaxed in the past decades since the late 1950s.

Neoliberal governmentality transforms rural migrants into self-reliant subjects

The discussion of neoliberalism and its applications to postsocialist and non-Western contexts is closely related to the topic of neoliberal governmentality. Some scholars argue that neoliberalism is actually a tool of government. Zhang (2008) views neoliberalism as a technique of Foucault’s “biopolitics.” Biopolitics is defined as the use and impact of politics on all aspects of human life. Biopolitics includes the management of populations, which encompasses labor
migration. In Foucault’s view, the state has no essence, and is rather a function of its practices. Neoliberalism does not contradict the power or existence of the state but is a new form of state planning that seeks to optimize resources and population control.

Foucault characterized government as three things: firstly, “the consequence of a particular form of power”; secondly, “the result of transformations inside the contemporary state”; and thirdly, the procedures that “enable the operation of power directed toward the regulation of a population using various apparatuses of security” (Powell and Cook 2000:81). Governmentality expresses the idea that government is not only limited to negative and repressive actions, but also includes positive and productive actions. The concept of governmentality offers a useful framework to understand the transition to liberalism and neoliberalism. It proposes three forms of power: governance by government in the traditional sense, through regulatory and bureaucratic bodies; governance through intermediate institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals; and self-governance by individuals (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). The third form of power is applicable to the discussion of how neoliberalism can be viewed as a tool of government. Neoliberal forms of government move away from the first two forms of power and toward forms of self-regulation, which take advantage of indirect techniques for controlling individuals. The neoliberal government’s production of knowledge and discourse is internalized by the population, which then guides the population’s behavior.

Neoliberal governmentality in China has created self-reliant migrant workers. Migrant workers believe they have agency over their personal improvement and accept any failure as their own rather than structural failures of the system. The creation of self-reliant migrant
workers is related to two important ideas: the gradual relaxation of *hukou* restrictions and the *suzhi* or “self-improvement” movement. The government is responsible for both of these factors, echoing Zhang’s (2008) “wedding” of neoliberal techniques and active state regulation.

The *hukou* system is a migration control tool that identifies citizens according to urban or rural classification. This system has undergone many changes since it was adopted in the late 1950s. Before the 1980s, *hukou* was tied to grain and food rationing (Meng and Zhang 2001). In this manner, urban or rural citizens were limited to residing according to their classification lest they be cut off from food rationing. In 1985, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone allowed rural migrants to register as temporary residents with local police stations after being hired and sponsored by an enterprise (Shen 1995, Pun 2004). This landmark policy change was the first step in a series of changes that relaxed *hukou* restrictions, ultimately allowing the increase in rural to urban migration.

The *suzhi* movement is a form of propaganda in which government dictates morality. *Suzhi* expresses the concept of “quality” and the need to raise the quality of the population through education and population control. An example of one slogan reads, “Raise the quality of the population, control the size of the population” (Woronov 2009:567). Propaganda exists in the forms of banners, signs, tacit communication through media communication and education, and a variety of other outlets. Research is not clear as to the statistics of propaganda reach. The *suzhi* movement is not a distinct, tangible government program, but rather references a broad set of government actions that have communicated to the population certain morals. It is derived from historical techniques to mold attitudes.
The concept of *suzhi* facilitates exploitation because it imposes value concepts on humanity, abstracting and reducing human labor to a value articulation. It acts like an operator in the labor contract because according to *suzhi* values, labor migration transforms peasants from country bumpkins to humans who have realized their full potential (Yan 2003). Because the concept has been internalized by migrant workers, migrant workers view migration as a means of self-improvement, justifying any exploitative conditions that they encounter as challenges that must be overcome in the name of personal development. *Suzhi* may make workers believe that they are of low quality and thus deserve lower payments, adverse working conditions, and worse living conditions. Following *suzhi*, the larger population also agrees that the exploitation is justified for improving the quality of the population and developing the country’s economy.

Neoliberal governmentality has produced self-reliant migrant workers in China. Conscious actions by the Chinese state, including neoliberal developments in the control of labor in the form of *hukou* relaxation and direct attempts to dictate morality in the *suzhi* movement, have helped register the idea that migrant workers can be “exploited as a frontier of neoliberal capital accumulation” (Yan 2003:501).

*Labor markets in planned economies*

Migration control is a form of managing the labor market in centrally planned economies. Migration control was a feature of the former Soviet state economy, which developed the internal passport system called *propiska* in 1932. This system restricted the right of rural citizens from freely moving to cities. The motivation behind the policy was to give the state more control over urbanization and migration. Buckley (1995) surveys the basic features
of the system. Only in special exceptions were citizens provided with temporary propiska, such as students leaving to study in other cities receiving propiska corresponding to their dorms. In most cases, local police authorities had the power to enforce propiska and could deny citizens from residing in a place without the appropriate propiska, thus returning the individual back to his or her place of permanent domicile.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about the dissolution of the propsika system. The 1993 legislation titled “On the Right of Citizens to Freedom of Movement and Choice of Place of Sojourn and Residence within the Borders of the Russian Federation” now represents Russia’s official law on migration. Citizens who move to new locations are required to notify their new residence to authorities. However, government no longer has the authority to withhold registration from individuals who apply to register in a new place (Rubins 1998:550).

Migration control is also a feature of the Chinese economy. In the late 1950s, following a decree issued by Mao Zedong on January 9th, 1958, the Chinese government implemented the hukou system, or household registration system. It uses two axes: registration classification and registration location (Fan 2002). According to the first axis, registration classification can be “non-agricultural” or “agricultural”. According to the second axis, registration location refers to the place where a person resides.

The hukou system has undergone hundreds of revisions. Before the 1980s, the hukou operated hand-in-hand with the rationing system. The hukou system specified that rural residents who were not state employees were categorized as agricultural households and thus not eligible for grain rations. This stipulated that rural residents should produce their own grain.
The hukou system tied location with food rationing and coupons; without coupons, it was impossible for a migrant to move to an urban area and survive (Meng and Zhang 2001).

Economic reforms went hand in hand with hukou system reform. In the mid-1980s, the food rationing system was replaced with a market system, which enabled individuals to buy food at market price and survive in the city (Meng and Zhang 2001). In 1980, the central government designated Shenzhen as the country’s first Special Economic Zone (Wang, Wang and Wu 2009). In 1985, the Shenzhen local authority allowed rural migrants to register as temporary residents (Shen 1995). A migrant could register temporary residence with the Public Security Bureau or local police station after he or she was hired by an enterprise. Enterprises paid an “Increased City Capacity Fee” to the city (Pun 2004). In the following years, Shenzhen grew into a larger metropolitan area and took over local agricultural villages; in the process, local farmers’ hukou status was revised from agricultural to non-agricultural (Wang, Wang and Wu 2009).

Even despite the reforms, rural migrants face many disadvantages. Up until 2007, residency permits in Shenzhen only lasted one year and had to be renewed annually for a fee. Without employment, migrants were fined or forced to leave the city. This migration control allows local authorities to avoid bearing the burdens of urbanization. The temporary residence system allows local authorities to avoid providing housing, job security, and welfare to rural migrants (Pun 2004). Because rural migrants do not receive the same benefits as permanent urban residents, they are effectively turned into second class citizens. Due to the hukou system, rural migrants in China face similar conditions as undocumented immigrants in the United States and foreign workers in Germany and Japan (Fan 2002). In other words, the migration
from rural to urban environs is similar to the context of international migration. They are
Chinese, but they do not enjoy the same benefits as urban-dwelling Chinese; this extra
dimension contributes to an extra feeling of deprivation.

*Modern-day China hukou regulation and residence permits*

With the end of food rationing in 1992, the “non-agricultural” and “agricultural” *hukou*
classification lost its substantive importance. In response, a few cities removed the distinction,
replacing it with location identification. In other words, places like Shenzhen and Guangzhou
only recognize outsiders who lack the local *hukou* and insiders who possess it (Chan 2009).
Those who lack local *hukou* are legally allowed to reside in the city if they possess residence
permits (*juzhuzheng*). In the 2000s, many cities created secret police forces or “domestic
security protection forces” to enforce residence permits (Wang 2010:84). If found residing in a
city without a residence permit, an individual could be fined or forced to leave the city.

According to decree 169 issued by Shenzhen’s municipal government on July 31, 2007,
any non-permanent resident who has stayed in Shenzhen for more than 30 days must apply for
a residence permit. There are two types of residence permits: the Shenzhen residence permit
and the temporary residence permit.

Successful applicants for Shenzhen residence permits must meet one of the following
qualifications:

“(1) They are working in Shenzhen, whether doing jobs (including housekeeping
services jobs) or investing and establishing enterprises or other economic organizations;

(2) They own the house they inhabit in Shenzhen;

(3) They meet the relevant conditions for handling talent residence permits and
overseas talent residence permits of Shenzhen;
(4) They are starting up a business in Shenzhen and have the corresponding technological or financial conditions or they are creating cultural and artistic works in Shenzhen;

(5) They are receiving non-degree education in full-time schools including junior colleges and higher education institutions approved in Shenzhen;

(6) Other circumstances specified by the Municipal Government” (Decree No. 169)

Most migrant workers fall under the first qualification. According to Decree No. 169, in order to prove employment, applicants must include with their application an employment certificate provided by a legally registered business. If the applicant is a married woman between the ages of 20 and 49, she must furnish a family planning certificate issued by the family planning office where she lives; failing this, the woman must undergo a pregnancy examination conducted by the government free of charge. The decree also spells out a 15-day window in which the applications must be approved or denied. In the event that an application is denied, the applicant will receive a temporary residence permit.

In Shenzhen, the residence permit takes the shape of a credit card-sized ID card with a digital chip storing extensive information about the permit holder, including employment status, borrowing history, birth-planning record, and criminal record (Wang 2010). This information also feeds into an electronic database. According to Wang (2010), more than 30 thousand police stations across the country have electronic databases of hukou records. Many cities and counties share the information of 1.07 billion people, which consists of 83 percent of the population.

Since the new Shenzhen decree went into effect in 2007, residence permits are valid for ten years. This extended the permit period from two years (after which a permit holder had to re-apply). As it stands, Shenzhen provides the following benefits to all residence permit holders:
employment referral services and training sessions organized by the government; free contraceptives and vaccinations for all children; right to public housing and public education; right to register a vehicle and apply for a driver’s license; right to exit and re-enter Shenzhen, including visiting Hong Kong and Macau; and right to participate in community management according to government regulation (Shenzhen’s residence card 2008). Although permit holders have the right to public education, in reality, migrant workers often pay additional fees to send their children to public schools. These fees consist of textbook fees and other miscellaneous fees, which permanent residents are exempt from. These fees can be high enough to create a barrier for low wage earning migrant workers. And so despite the right to public education, equal access to public education is less assured. Furthermore, health insurance is not a right accorded to permit holders.

**Hukou conversion**

In contrast to the magnitude of rural to urban migration, rural to urban *hukou* conversion is a very exceptional case. Rural to urban *hukou* transfer can be generally categorized as either individual or collective conversion. In the individual case, personal characteristics lead to one individual gaining *hukou* status in the destination city. In the collective case, farming villages are incorporated into an adjacent city or town, and the village is upgraded to an urban area with rural *hukou* holders given the right to convert as a consequence of policy. Zhang and Treiman (2013) have found that one of the primary determinants for rural to urban *hukou* transfer is matriculation at a tertiary educational institute. Furthermore, the probability of individual *hukou* conversion varies depending on age, with a greater likelihood of transferring status in between the ages of 18 and 22 than other
ages. The probability of hukou conversion was found to be below 6 in 1000, based on an empirical analysis of national survey results.

With regards to hukou transfer, Shenzhen’s policies (Certain regulations 2005) indicate the individual and personal characteristics that make an applicant particularly exceptional. As of 2005, Shenzhen will consider and accept hukou transfer from people who fall into the following three categories: technological experts; tax-paying investors; and policy transfers. The first category includes those who hold college degrees in technology, those who have two years of international work experience in technological or management posts, and returning overseas students. The second category of investors includes business owners who have paid over six million Yuan in tax over the last three years and individuals who have paid over 240,000 Yuan in tax over the last three years. The third category of policy transfers refers to employees who move to the city on government policy assignment as well as their dependents. The standards for hukou transfer are very strict.

*Modern-day China labor regulation*

Labor law in China is divided into statutory, administrative, and international law. Guo (2003) provides a detailed summary of the existing state of labor law.

Statutory law is drafted by ministries and passed by the National People’s Congress, the highest legislature in China’s government. In regards to statutory law, the Labor Act of 1994 is the foundation for labor standards, covering wages, working hours, child labor, forced labor, women’s rights, and collective bargaining, in addition to describing a labor inspection system. The other important act is the Trade Union Act of 1992, which codified a system for trade
unions. The act legally allows one union per company or institution, and all unions must belong to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU).

Administrative law is set by agencies and consists of regulations, policies, and orders. Administrative law concerning labor has regulated minimum wage, protection of female employees, labor management of foreign-owned companies, and many other topics. An example of one regulation is the 1993 Regulation Concerning Minimum Wages in Enterprises. These regulations imposed minimum wage based on geography, while recognizing the right of municipalities to set their own standards. Furthermore, municipalities have the right to differentiate between industries in setting minimum wage. Administrative law is more relevant than statutory law because new policies get implemented by administrative law first before being passed as statutory law. As an example, family planning existed as administrative law for two decades before being codified in the Population and Family Planning Act in 2002.

Finally, China follows international labor law. The International Labor Organization (ILO) is responsible for setting international labor standards, which can then be ratified by individual member states. Out of 170 international conventions created by the ILO, China has joined 23. In comparison, the United States has joined 14 conventions but only 12 have been ratified by the Senate. International conventions affect collective bargaining, forced labor, equal employment opportunities, safe working conditions, and other topics.

Labor law applies equally to migrant workers and resident workers. However, recognizing that the implementation and protection of migrant workers is weak, since 2000, the Chinese government has required local governments to strengthen initiatives around protecting migrant labor rights, including minimum wage, working hours, and working safety. Furthermore,
the government has mandated the inclusion of migrant workers in urban social insurance programs and the Housing Provident Fund (HPF) program to help employees improve their housing conditions. Extending even beyond the rights of the migrant workers, the government has mandated protections for migrant children. In 2003, the government required local governments to provide equal access to compulsory education for all children (Li and Chu 2011:3).

There has been a clear discrepancy between policy and implementation. Despite the many policy initiatives to protect migrant workers, few initiatives have delivered the anticipated outcomes. For example, researcher surveys conducted in 2005 discovered that only 20-40% of rural to urban migrants were enrolled in the state mandated insurance schemes (Zheng and Huang 2006). This phenomenon is explained by employer incentives: many employers have a strong incentive to not enroll migrants in social insurance programs because they are required to contribute to those programs. Therefore, bypassing enrollment will save on employer costs. Migrant workers also show unwillingness to participate in social insurance programs because of either lack of knowledge or lack of confidence in the returns of participating (Xu, Guan and Yao 2011).

Migrant workers do have the means to petition for protection of their rights. They can appeal to local Labor Dispute Arbitration Committees, and if that fails, they can follow up in court (Halegua 2008). However, arbitration has its problems. The first problem is that arbitration can be costly, requiring time and fees that migrant workers cannot afford (Tong and Xiao 2005). Secondly, employers might drag their feet at the arbitration process, making it more difficult for the migrant worker to appeal effectively and forcing the worker to drop the case.
Thirdly, local officials may be biased towards employers in the interest of enhancing the municipality’s economic growth, creating an environment in which migrant workers are discouraged from applying for arbitration in the first place. Lastly, arbitration decisions can be difficult to enforce effectively. Even if migrant workers are rewarded with compensation, their employers can wait on returning wages to the workers. In the long waiting time period, significant factors like costs of living in the city or family circumstances could force workers to return to the countryside (Zheng 2005).

The discrepancy between education policy and implementation is particularly apparent. Although local municipalities are required to provide education to the children of migrant workers, most cities still set high barriers to public school entrance (Li and Chu 2011). Migrant workers are required to present credentials that they might lack, including birth planning compliance, health check-ups, and social insurance enrollment. Failure to comply with all entrance requirements may result in additional fees. Certain municipalities have explored private school options for the children of migrant workers. For example, Shanghai has designated and provided subsidies to specific private schools for the children of migrants (Li and Peng 2009). However, most municipalities do not subsidize private schools. In those cases, the schools for the children of migrant workers are below standard with poor facilities and shortages of teachers (Luo 2009).

**The need for external laborers**

Industrial economies segment labor demand in capital-intensive primary sector and labor-intensive secondary sector (Piore 1979). The demand for external laborers arises because of two factors related to this bifurcation of labor demand. Firstly, locals do not work in the
secondary sector due to the lower pay and job instability, which creates the need for external laborers. External laborers do not settle in the city, or else that would change their reference frame from the place of origin to the place of destination. Secondly, a competitive export-oriented sector depends on cheap labor. The temporary nature of workers makes them easily expendable and reduces the cost of investing in higher labor standards. In other words, temporary workers become vulnerable, subject to labor exploitation (Chan 2009).

The economic growth of the past decades lends support for this theory. China’s economic growth has been fueled by a labor-intensive secondary sector consisting of export-oriented industries, especially the manufacturing sector. Lee (1998) summarizes evidence which shows that migrant workers compose 70 to 80 percent of the labor force in coastal cities such as Shenzhen and Dongguan. In other cities, rural migrant labor is estimated to contribute 30 and 31 percent of the GDP in Beijing and Shanghai respectively (Nongmingong 2009). Chan (2009) argues that “freeing” peasant labor from rural areas has been a particularly effective strategy for positioning China as the world’s most competitive cost producer. The existence of labor control has deflected the “Lewis turning point,” the point at which a modernizing economy’s capital accumulation begins to increase wages to make it less competitive at producing. China continues to extract labor from rural areas and deploy it in export-oriented sectors at rural wage rates. Since 1980, there has been very little real increase of wages for rural migrant workers in coastal cities, even though the economy has burgeoned in the same time period (Sanyi 2009).
Methodology

*Developing the idea for the project*

My interest in the topic of labor migration, demographic change, and development in China was partially shaped by my personal and family background. My father grew up in a rural area of the Hunan province of western China. Just like other rural migrants who moved out to urban areas to seek opportunity, my father moved to Beijing to seek educational opportunity. He was only 16 when he earned admittance to a top tier school in Beijing. When he arrived at his dormitory in Beijing, it was the first time he had been in a large city. He once described the process of acclimatizing to the city as ‘very painful,’ and he bore a chip on his shoulder for much of his university career. This resulted from his lowly status as a rural migrant and the cultural barriers that he faced in the city. For example, he was unaccustomed to the processes of navigating the streets, markets, and fancy restaurants. Ultimately, he adjusted well and the story concludes with his migration to America and my upbringing on this side of the world.

My personal interest in China developed into an academic interest as a university student. An anthropology course on global labor conditions inspired me to focus my senior thesis on labor migrants in China. My professor, Dr. Jaesok Kim, has conducted ethnographic research in factories in Asia. He became my thesis advisor as I planned a summer research experience modeled off of some of Dr. Kim’s past research.

I began by defining the scope of my research. The subjects of my research are migrant workers who move from the countryside of China to the city to find work. To understand their experiences better, I knew that I had to conduct ethnographic research.
The research project evolved from a vague sense of purpose into a more formal proposal once I defined suitable locations for my project. I was attracted to Shenzhen because it is widely cited in literature as the model city for labor migration and economic development. Shenzhen was originally a small farming village dwarfed by its next door neighbor, Hong Kong. The Chinese government piloted the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in this area on August 1980. With land acquired from locals, the Chinese government constructed public infrastructure while attracting direct investment from Hong Kong and foreign manufacturers. Labor migration transformed Shenzhen from a small fishing village into a vast metropolis, counting over ten million inhabitants today.

Shenzhen is located in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) in Guangdong province. This region, in southern China, includes both Hong Kong and Macau. The PRD has attracted a large proportion of foreign direct investment in China, for example, accounting for 24 percent of all of foreign investment in China (Shen et al 2000:312).

Once I decided to conduct fieldwork in Shenzhen, I needed to find a suitable company. My mother’s cousin helped me get in touch with the head managers of a paint company headquartered in Shenzhen with factories in Zhuhai and Chengdu. In February and March, I contacted the head managers of the company to arrange the accommodations and details of my research project, and I spoke with supervisors who I would be directly interacting with. My methodology, which I will describe later in this section, did not require me to pose as a worker. I fully represented myself as a scholar conducting research. The head managers decided to “hire” me as an unpaid intern so that I could perform work at the factories and reside in the dormitories.
The paint company was founded in 1992, when a professor of chemical engineering moved to Shenzhen during the China’s period of economic reform; Shenzhen had been founded only 12 years prior with the advent of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) model. The company launched with a founding team of eight professors and ten factory workers. Initially, the company operated in a 200 square meter factory building with no office. Since then, it has grown to a total of 208 employees, with a full-fledged upper management team composed of eight individuals, and around twenty middle level management supervisors. Over time, the lead founder bought out the ownership stakes held by his seven partners. To this day, the company is largely held by his family with smaller stakes held by outside investors.

Arriving in Shenzhen

In May, I arrived in Shenzhen. I first stayed at the Shenzhen corporate and R&D campus, where I stayed for 3 days to meet with the upper management and to discuss my plans for the remainder of my research project. The Shenzhen headquarters is located in the Bao’an district, in an industrial zone pushed away from the center of the city. A manager told me that the paint company’s office campus is one of only two office properties in the area, making it a unique piece of real estate. It is surrounded on all sides by factories. The campus is composed of two 9-story office buildings, a 6-story living quarters building with dormitories, a small convenience store, and a cafeteria on the ground floor (Figure 1). While the real estate is wholly owned by the company, not all of the individual offices are occupied by the paint company because many of them are rented out to other companies. For example, BMW has an office on the 7th floor of the main building.
The Shenzhen corporate and R&D campus employs 88 people total. Upper level management consists of 8 people, R&D division consists of 14 scientists, sales and marketing division consists of 30 individuals, and property maintenance, security, and construction consist of the remaining 36 employees.

My research at the corporate and R&D campus progressed in the following way: firstly, I attended discussions with upper management where I learned about the company; secondly, I was paired with a manager who gave me a tour of the corporate campus; and thirdly, I was paired with Yan, a property maintenance supervisor who introduced me to workers to interview. In total, I interviewed 20 employees who ranged from security guards to scientists. I also interacted with employees when I was not conducting interviews or touring the corporate campus. I ate my meals in the main cafeteria and used this as an opportunity to sit down with the employees that I had most recently talked to.

My interviews were conducted informally and usually in an ad hoc way. In the process of walking around the facility with Yan, we would come across an employee whom she would introduce me to. After initiating discussion, usually about my visiting status and my recent arrival in China, I would tell the employee that I was conducting a survey for a research project for school. I would then ask the employee if I could ask a few questions for my survey. In every case, the employee responded in the affirmative. My interview questions were structured under four topics: background, family, working and living conditions, and societal views. The interviews often veered away from the questions that I had prepared in advance; accordingly, each interview followed a slightly different structure.
Re-locating to Zhuhai

After spending three days in Shenzhen, I went to the factory in Zhuhai. The factory is located on the outskirts of Zhuhai, next to the ocean and away from the metropolis, in an industrial area. A long highway connects Zhuhai’s metropolis to its periphery, which is flanked on both sides by factories. The Zhuhai factory sits on 110,000 square meters of land, which is like 11 football fields put together. There are nine buildings in total, with small paved roads that connect them. The main building houses the office and dormitories. The main building is separated from the eight other buildings (production facilities) by a yard, basketball court, and hedge of grass. The production facilities are labeled A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H; these facilities have different functions. For example, Buildings A and B are responsible for purchasing and storing raw materials, while Building H is responsible for packaging final paint product and preparing shipments (Figure 2).

The Zhuhai factory employs 120 people total. Management consists of 7 individuals, factory workers consist of 80, cleaners consist of 3, security guards consist of 8, office workers consist of 19, and cafeteria cooks and attendants consist of 3.

I lived and worked in the Zhuhai factory for two and a half weeks. On the first day, I toured the facility and moved into my room. For the subsequent ten days, I reported for duty in the mixing facility. I worked about 9 hours every day, beginning at 8am and ending at 6pm with an hour lunch break in between. During the lunch and dinner breaks, I found time to interact with employees. Again, I used my meals as an opportunity to meet new people and to be introduced to new employees. All total, I interviewed 21 employees who ranged from cleaners...
to chief supervisors. This was in addition to the notes that I collected from informal conversations and interactions while working in the mixing facility.

*Ethnography and interview process*

During my fieldwork at the Zhuhai site, I was involved in two tasks: participant observation in the factory facilities, cafeteria, and dormitories to analyze the interactions between migrant workers and their work, and interviews with the employees of the factory to learn about their personal backgrounds, motivations for migration, and insights on the *hukou* system. The interviews were conducted over the course of longer, more informal interactions.

An example of questions organized by topical area is as follows:

**Background**
- *Where is your laojia (hometown)?*
- *Why did you come to Shenzhen?*

**Family**
- *Do you have children or a spouse?*

**Working/Living**
- *Where do you live?* (Employees are given a choice of residing in the dormitories at no cost or finding their own accommodations.)
- *Where do you eat?* (Many employees choose to eat at the cafeteria and their meals get automatically deducted from their wages, but some choose to buy food elsewhere to save on costs.)

**Societal Views**
- *Do you possess Shenzhen Hukou? How do you feel about the Hukou situation?*

I found it easier to build rapport with some workers than with others. I made a particularly strong connection with Long, the driver who is responsible for carrying out errands such as shuttling executives to and from the corporate headquarters in Shenzhen. Long drove
me from Shenzhen to Zhuhai, and over the course of the three hour drive, we exchanged stories about our backgrounds and knowledge about each other’s cultures. At the Zhuhai site, Long introduced me to many of his friends, which extended my interactions to workers outside of my colleagues in Building E. In Building E, where I was assigned to work, I found a helpful friend in Zhai, the zuguan (manager). Zhai ensured that I was paired with a colleague on all of the tasks that I was assigned to complete, which gave me the opportunity to interact informally with my colleagues.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. In Shenzhen, Yan was present for many of my interviews and occasionally helped me to phrase complex concepts. In Zhuhai, I did not have any interpreter or manager with me. I had a pen and notepad with me at all times, and I would take notes during or after interviews, depending on whether my hands were occupied. I did not record any of the informal interviews because I thought that it would disrupt the natural flow of work in the factory.

Ethnography

_The average family in America must make $600,000/year_

It was my third day at the factory in Zhuhai. I was on my lunch break with Long, the factory driver. Long is responsible for running errands, including driving into the city center to make deposits at the bank, shuttling executives back and forth from the Shenzhen corporate office, and buying ad-hoc supplies. Long and I were having a discussion about income when he blurted out that the average family in America must make 4 million Yuan (around $650,000 per year).
I told him that his guess was quite far from the truth. A household with an income of $650,000 per year was definitely very, very rich. The median household income in the United States in 2011 was $52,762 (United States Census Bureau 2011). His response indicated to me that his impression of the United States was very skewed toward assuming that people in the United States are more wealthy than they actually are, but it also suggested that Long was aware of the huge divide between the rich and the poor. If he had assumed that American households make $650,000 per year, how did he feel about comparing his own income to this figure?

Long is 37 years old. He is from Jiangxi province, joined the army when he was 18 years old, then went to Shenzhen after two years of service. It was in the army where he picked up driving skills. He started working for the chemicals company when he arrived in Shenzhen and he has been with the company ever since, which is about ten years. According to Long, most of his childhood friends have left Jiangxi province and are now employed in various cities, exemplifying the rural to urban migration patterns that have characterized his generation of rural Chinese.

Long earns 3,000 yuan per month, which is a little less than $500. Of this amount, he sends 2,000 yuan per month back home to Jiangxi to support his three daughters and his elderly parents. Although his family situation is very inconvenient, it is quite typical for a Chinese migrant worker. As the background discussed, it is difficult to raise a child in the city without possessing permanent hukou. Only recently have cities begun to pass regulations that enable access to education to all children regardless of hukou status. For example, the
Shenzhen municipal authority recently issued a decree in 2007, stating that residence permit holders and their children have the right to public education (Shenzhen’s residence card 2008).

Though separated from his three children, who are 13, 6, and 5 years old, he and his wife luckily work for the same employer. Long’s wife works at the factory as an office staffer, typing and printing logos for shipments of paint products. They also reside in the same apartment, in special accommodations provided exclusively to employees who are married. Although there was no official policy for recruiting spouses of existing employees, I suspect that it is in the factory’s interests. Companies may also see the advantages in increased work attendance and efficiency of male workers in robust family relationships (Klubock 2006:438). Companies may provide benefits for married employees such as special accommodations; these benefits can be interpreted as a form of social welfare.

Long’s wife earns 2,000 yuan per month, bringing their combined income to 5,000 yuan per month. Their expenses compose primarily of she bao (social insurance) (800 yuan per month), phone bill (400 yuan per month), and water and electricity for the apartment (80 yuan per month). Food provided by the factory is deducted from their wages at a very marginal rate. The apartment is provided to them rent-free. This implies that Long and his wife put away roughly 1,720 yuan per month, which is equal to around $275 per month or $3,300 per year. Long did not mention any additional expenditures or discretionary spending, for example, on clothing, appliances, or technology, beyond saying that his cell phone was purchased for 1,000 yuan.

I use Long to illustrate the typical income profile of a migrant worker, in terms of earning power, expenses, and savings. Variations in income depend on numerous factors,
including location, industry, career progression, and whether the company is foreign-owned or Chinese-owned. In general, foreign-owned companies pay higher wages than Chinese-owned companies. For example, British Petroleum (BP) has a factory located five minutes away; according to Long, BP pays over 50% higher wages than the chemicals plant. Career progression and rank also play a role in determining wages. A good factory worker can advance to zu guan (manager) and earn a 1,000 yuan per month raise, bringing the total wages to 4,000 yuan per month. However, wages are not correlated to years of experience – at least, not at this factory. Long’s wage has not increased in many years despite his years of service to the company; in fact, many newer employees start at a higher base wage than he does. The factory pays competitive wages for new employees in order to recruit them, but it does not give commensurate raises to old employees.

There is no typical age profile of a migrant worker (Figure 3). The demographics of workers depend on the industry and job function. I was surprised to find that I was the youngest person at the factory; in several cases, I was as young as the children of migrant workers whom I interviewed. Chemical plants such as this paint factory have an older demographic than manufacturing plants, where the workers are mostly between the ages of 15 and 30 (Chang 2009). The work at chemical plants is less stressful than the work at manufacturing plants with assembly lines. Assembly lines, which produce physical and mechanical products such as TV sets or fans, typically pay their workers a fixed piece rate for each unit produced regardless of time spent. Younger workers are drawn to assembly lines in pursuit of higher wages because they have better dexterity and more resilience than older workers. Several workers at the paint factory had previously worked for assembly lines, and
switched jobs after they could no longer keep up with the rate of work or deal with the stressful environment.

Variations in demographics also exist by job function. *Qingjiegong*, cleaners or janitors, are likely to be 40 years or older. According to several of my interviewees, young people will not take a cleaning job in order to save *mianzi* (face). However, the occupation makes a decent wage at around 2,000 yuan per month. One cleaner that I interviewed reported saving roughly 10,000 yuan per year and sending it back home to where her child resided, with the hope that her child could attend university. *Baomu* are maids who can be hired to cook and clean private residences; *baomu* tend to be middle-aged women. These women are too old to work in factories, instead preferring the comfortable working conditions of private residences. *Baomu* make between 2,200 to 4,000 yuan per month and cut costs by sharing apartments with colleagues at *baomu* agencies or living in their customers’ houses.

As an older man with children, Long faces the decision of whether to raise his children in the city or to leave them at home to be raised by his parents (the children’s grandparents). This is a common situation that migrant workers face. Children of those who possess rural *hukou* will also possess rural *hukou* regardless of where they are born, and rural designation creates tremendous disadvantages for migrant children in the city. Migrant children face obstacles in enrolling in public schools, even though law requires most municipalities to provide education to all (Li and Chu 2011). Even despite recent reforms, migrant children must enroll in private schools and pay higher fees that the children of permanent urban residents do not pay.

I asked Long if he would raise his children in the city if there was no *zanzhufei* (school fee). He said that he possibly could, but most likely would not. Without considering education,
it is still cheaper to take care of the children back at home in Jiangxi than to raise them in the city because the living expenses are a lot cheaper. For example, the food grown on his farm at home can feed his entire family at a very minimal cost of farming. His house and farm sits on a 2 mu property, which I take to mean 2 acres; the size if this property is significantly larger than a small apartment in the city. All in all, he would not be able to provide a good standard of living for his children in the city.

His response indicates an attitude of self-reliance. This attitude is remarkable in light of how China has changed in the past three decades. It was only 25 years ago that it was impossible for rural migrants to legally come to Shenzhen to reside and work in the city (Shen 1995); liberalizing the hukou system has made the massive rural to urban migration pattern possible and enabled individuals such as Long to take chances by moving to the city. For Long to have such a self-reliant strategy is remarkable: he is, in effect, maximizing his income by staying in the city but minimizing his risk by keeping his farmland and his children in the countryside. This strategy might explain why Long and other migrant workers are willing to contend with lower wages and temporary status in the city (Stark 1991).

*Leaving for higher wages at other factories*

I found that workers displayed little loyalty to the firm. This attitude did not seem to be a result of factors specific to the paint factory, but rather an attitude that was prevalent amongst migrant workers. Several interviewees expressed the view that they would leave their jobs if they could earn higher wages at another factory. The labor supply seemed to be highly mobile and noncommittal to employers; this was contrary to my expectations of exploitation.
and vulnerable workers, which predicts that workers would be dependent on employers for residence permits, free rent, and economic livelihood.

All employees of the factory, apart from the executives and upper level managers, are employed “at will.” This means that they can be fired or depart at any point in time. Workers are free to leave if they wish to return to their rural provinces. Workers also receive major holidays off. The most important recurring annual holiday is *chunjie*, or Spring Festival (also known as Chinese New Year), which occurs for one week usually in the beginning of February. *Chunjie* is a homecoming of sorts, a tradition in which families gather for an annual reunion, partake in community festivities, and distribute gifts. Participation in this holiday is very high, with anxious migrants bidding bus and train tickets for this week several times over the regular fares. As was described to me by Zhong Wenke, the train fares increase five-fold from 100 to 500 yuan, and train passengers have nowhere to sit but must stand with no room for their feet; passengers are squeezed on all sides. Other sources reported that train fares increase by about 30%, but I was unable to confirm. Almost all those who have the financial means will partake in *chunjie*; the factory all but shuts down for that week.

Consistent with the idea that temporary migration is a useful strategy that enables migrants to maximize income and minimize risk by spreading out between rural and urban locales, many interviewees expressed confidence that they can return home whenever they want or once they tire of their jobs and rest for a few years before going out to find work again. Other findings have shown that this often occurs when migrant workers go home for *chunjie*: migrant workers may even fail to notify their employers that they are quitting their jobs, going home for the holiday and failing to return to the city after the week is over. When this happens,
migrant workers may be fully confident that they can come out to the city to find work again (Chang 2009).

Of the 21 interviewees at the Zhuhai factory, the majority of them had recently joined the company within the last two years. My results were biased partly due to my placement in the factory: workers rotate between different buildings and departments, but according to my manager, Building E is where the new workers start. In order to counter this bias, I made a conscious effort to interview workers in other departments in addition to Building E.

The results suggest a high turnover rate because the majority of those that I interviewed had joined the factory within the past two years (Table 1). These results are from a small sample of the entire factory’s workforce. After speaking to management, I learned that the number of people who leave the factory every month is approximately three to five. The factory hires on an as needed basis, picking new people to fill those vacancies. Recruitment is conducted at the rencai shichang, the “talent marketplace.” Every city has a rencai shichang, and they are located in administrative buildings and operated by the municipal government. For a nominal fee of around 10 yuan, any individual can visit a rencai shichang and receive assistance from a government employee to fill out online forms to apply for certain jobs. Alternatively, rencai shichang also hosts job fairs, where employers attend, set up booths, and interview and select people on the same day.

What I discovered from speaking to many of the employees is that recruitment also occurs through informal networking. In fact, none of the interviewees described using rencai shichang to get hired at the paint factory. Many employees already had contacts in the factory, whether spouses, relatives, or friends. These contacts had referred them to the employer.
Ching Kwan Lee (1995) expressed a similar finding in research on networks of migrant workers in Shenzhen. Networks are established based on common rural village or county ties. During the annual *chunjie* (Spring Festival) in which migrants return to their rural villages for a week to celebrate the passing of the New Year, migrant workers spread news about job opportunities in the city and help locals from their towns find work. Once they are in the city, locals spread information about job openings in other factories to help fellow townspeople to change jobs. These networks extend beyond spreading information to offering financial assistance in the form of emergency loans and general assistance in times of duress.

Despite the lack of loyalty and the willingness to switch employers for an increase in wages, interviewees expressed satisfaction with *ziyou*, or freedom of flexible working conditions. In the Zhuhai paint factory, the work environment is relaxed and gives considerable autonomy to workers to accomplish work tasks. This environment is not at all like the assembly lines described by Lee (1995), which are despotic in organization. Previous research conducted at despotic factory regimes in Shenzhen described three forms of control: restrictions on physical movement such as using the bathroom; temporal control in the form of shop-floor bells and punch-card machines; and docking of wages for poor behavior.

At the Zhuhai paint factory, workers arrive at the cafeteria between 7:30-8am and eat a quick meal for breakfast. Breakfast is the same every day – one tin bowl of quick noodles and one bowl of porridge. After breakfast, workers must swipe their badges and press their fingers against a fingerprint scanner at the security guard booth at the entrance of the factory. The workday usually begins with a meeting led by the *zuguan* (manager) in each respective building. Each of the eight buildings (labeled A-H) has a different function; I spent the majority of my
time working in building E. All of the buildings have windows to allow for natural lighting, unlike the dimly lit factory environments that have been described in other ethnographies (Chun 2003).

Building E is a mixing facility. It is the most complicated building from the outside, flanked on both sides by an array of pipes, tubes, and huge vats. It is about four stories tall, but only actually consists of two accessible levels because the first floor opens up into a vast area with a three-story tall ceiling. My job responsibilities varied day to day, but mostly consisted of ad hoc tasks. For example, I would act as a runner to bring measurements from Building E to managers of other buildings. I spent the entirety of one workday bringing barrels upstairs via the industrial elevator. I coordinated with the purchasing department (Building A), which was a storehouse of sacks of different chemicals. I was given autonomy to complete tasks and often paired with another employee. This gave me plenty of time to observe and work closely with other employees.

Managers and employees agreed on the flexibility of movement and lack of physical controls. Consistent with these views, I observed that workers are free to come and go into different buildings and around the factory campus as they please; in fact, many tasks require that they meet with colleagues in other buildings. As I mentioned, I would frequent the purchasing department to ask for the required raw material inputs for Building E’s operations. The presence of zuguan (managers) is very minimal because each manager sits in an office alcove of his or her respective factory building. Aside from the morning meetings and lunch and dinner breaks, I rarely saw Building E’s manager unless I walked into his office alcove to ask questions.
Some of the tasks are very physical in nature, for example, lifting and moving 100 pound barrels. Because of this, operational and floor workers take regular breaks in between physical tasks. Every now and then, workers would prop a plastic stool next to the entrance and sit outside to catch a break and breathe fresh air.

Lunch is served at 12pm. Lunch offers considerably more variation and selection than breakfast. The choice consists of two cooked vegetables, one or two meat dishes, steamed white rice, and a bowl of salty soup. For example, my meal during my first day at the Zhuhai factory consisted of the following dishes: lajiao (peppers) stir-fried with eggs; green beans; spicy fish; baicai (Chinese cabbage); and a bowl of steamed white rice. I found the food to be palatable but low quality in terms of ingredients – cheaper cuts of meat, less fresh vegetables, and a higher proportion of peppers and oil to add flavor to what would otherwise be a flavorless dish.

Workers generally sit with their closest colleagues, meaning the workers who also work in their building or department. Because workers wear colored uniforms that represent their job function, I could easily distinguish among workers and observe how they sat with one another. Blue shirts mark operations and floor workers; these workers let their shirts hang loose. White shirts are the uniforms of office workers, who tuck in their shirts and wear belts. Tan jumpsuits indicate mechanics and chemists who do more of the heavy lifting, such as tasks that require the closest contact with vats and chemicals. Facilities works including cleaners and maids do not have uniforms and wear their own clothing, which consisted of sleeveless shirts and long pants in the summer. As an operations worker in Building E, I was fitted with an oversized blue shirt and a pair of khaki pants.
Entertainment at lunch is provided in the form of two TV screens located on the walls of the cafeteria. I found that conversation was quite minimal, with workers fixating their attentions on the TV serials – action and drama shows. But fortunately, most workers welcomed conversation when I initiated. I would usually begin by asking about their hometowns, a topic that even the most reticent would discuss passionately. Broaching the subject of personal history was significantly easier after discussing hometowns. Most workers recognized me as a new employee and were curious about my origins. My standard explanation was that I was an American student and an intern at the factory; I was conducting research on the business and the working conditions. By the end of my first week, news of me had spread throughout the factory, and I no longer needed a lengthy explanation when introducing myself. I found that lunch break afforded me the greatest opportunity to meet new individuals and conduct interviews. Lunch is followed by an afternoon siesta. Workers return to their departments and buildings and lie on the ground next to the windows.

No wenhua (culture)

Zhang works in Building H, which is the largest department at the factory in Zhuhai. Building H is responsible for packaging the final paint product and preparing it for shipment. There are 28 workers in Building H, spread out between the first and second floors, with four workers and the manager in the office alcove of the second floor. Zhang is 45 years old and he has worked for this paint company for two years now. He sits at a desk at one corner of the first floor, conducting paperwork and filling orders. He is originally from the Shanxi area of Hunan province. He first left home in the 1994-1995 timeframe, married his wife in Shenzhen, and then brought his two children back to Hunan to be raised by his parents – reflecting the
common strategy of parents living apart from children with grandparents rearing children in rural areas.

Zhang was very blunt about his situation when I asked him how he came to join the company. He said that he has no wenhua (culture) and therefore must work in an industry characterized by manual labor. His parents wanted him to study harder, but his grades were never good so he was discouraged by school. He never went to college or vocational school and only has a high school education. But he does not regret not trying harder in school, because he simply does not have the ability to perform well inside the classroom. Like other workers, he seemed to be resigned or accepting of his situation, with a very neutral attitude towards his job (neither positive nor negative) and a blunt assessment of his prospects for more fulfilling work.

The language used to refer to uneducated people as lacking wenhua (culture) seems very degrading, but it is grounded in the historic treatment of and attitudes towards the rural populace. It is linked to the suzhi (quality) movement, which first arose in the 1980s in the context of eugenics. Yan (2003) describes the rise of suzhi movement, in which political and urban elites of the post-Mao era viewed the rural population with considerable anxiety and apprehension and saw the need to implement population planning in rural areas under the motto yousheng youyu (“superior birth and nurture”). The rural population was viewed as a chaotic mass of people, large in quantity but low in quality, weighing down on the national ambitions to develop China’s market economy.

Yousheng youyu culminated in a series of sterilization campaigns. In 1983, a campaign was conducted to sterilize women with two or more births. The larger strategy behind this campaign was to eliminate third or higher order births by the end of the 1980s (White
2006:140). The campaign would exempt minorities and those who had proof that they had used birth control effectively for the past five years with no unplanned births. The order was made by the highest rungs of government and communicated to provincial level officials, who set quotas for sterilizations (in the form of tubal ligations and vasectomies), abortions, and intrauterine device insertions. By the end of the one year program, more than 16 million women had been sterilized; the program was viewed as successful and its successes are attributed to a lack of instructions sent to the local officials to avoid using physical force and coercion (White 2006:143). In fact, local officials were motivated by results (quotas) and not worried about the methods taken to achieve those results. Several campaigns followed in the early 1990s, with evidence of abuse and widespread use of physical force only emerging later, confirmed by officials at the birth commission and central government (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005:250). In the worse examples of abuse, rural women were taken by force and placed in cages, where they underwent tubal ligations or had intrauterine devices inserted without anesthetic (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005:252). A local party official explained that the rural women were like oxen: when you first put the yoke on an ox’s back, it struggles and resists, but once you tighten the yoke, it accepts its fate as inevitable (Huang 1998:78).

The pressure on rural populations has eased since the mid-1990s, but the attitudes that treat the rural population as uncivilized, dirty, low in quality, and a threat to undermine modernization (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005:250) remain behind. It has evolved into a more paternalistic view and is expressed in both official discourse and everyday speech. For example, one author for a Communist party magazine emphasizes that the goal of the nation should be
to educate the peasants, in order to improve their political, economic, and cultural suzhi (Liu 1996).

As important as suzhi is to national development, the precise definition of it is difficult to trace. The clearest definition was given at a national conference in 1987, in which scholars proposed the following: suzhi is composed of physical qualities (“hardware”) and soft qualities (“software”). Soft qualities consist of culture (wenhua suzhi), psychology (xinli suzhi), and consciousness (sixiang suzhi) (Yan 2003:496). As difficult as the concept is to define, it distinguishes minority areas from Han Chinese areas, rural populations from urban populations, and developing countries from developed countries; the latter in each comparison is recognized at having a higher level of suzhi (Li 1988:60).

Suzhi is communicated to the population through various means. One means is through propaganda. Woronov (2009) describes seeing banners placed throughout his neighborhood in northwest Beijing, bearing the slogan “The quality of the people must be raised. Eugenics and raising children is very important.” In addition to overt forms of propaganda, the concept of raising the quality of children spread amongst educators and municipalities in the early 1990s; municipalities embarked on local campaigns to reform pedagogy, curricula, and teacher training in the name of suzhi jiaoyu (a neologism meaning “education for quality”) (Woronov 2009:571). Just like the definition of suzhi itself, the educational reforms taken in the mission of achieving suzhi lack specificity and instead appear to be feeding into an imaginary national dream. At the most concrete level, this national dream translates into children being assessed at the end of the semester on dimensions such as obedience to parents, politeness, attitude towards
strangers, frugality, respecting school discipline, and recognizing their own weaknesses and need to improve quality (Woronov 2009:577).

*Suzhi* is so commonly expressed that it has entered everyday speech. In my interviews, some of the managers in the Zhuhai factory and even the workers themselves reference this idea of quality, linking it to *wenhua* (culture) and *jiaoyu* (education). Zhang was not alone in bluntly describing his own lack of *wenhua*.

*Motivations for leaving home*

Peng, unlike Zhang, has no children. Peng is only 27 years old and works at the security guard booth at the entrance of the factory. He is originally from Hubei and studied computers at a local vocational school. He moved to Shenzhen in 2004 to join a computer company that recruited him out of vocational school, but after two years of working at the computer company he quit his job; failing to find a suitable second job, he moved back home to farm, where he became bored and migrated back to the city, ending up in Zhuhai and working at this paint factory. Unlike the older workers at the factory, Peng does not send any money back home. Instead, he spends it on himself. Because he studied computers, he has the hobby of collecting technology: he owns an iPhone, a personal laptop, and several other electronics. When describing why he left home for the second time, he said that he was not developing at home and wanted to *fazhan* (develop) as a person. He chose to come to

Piecing together the motivations of people to migrate to the cities was a difficult task. Based on the 21 interviews that I conducted at the factory in Zhuhai, I have organized interviewees’ migration considerations into five different categories. In response to the question of why they had migrated to the city, most interviewees described that they needed
to look for work and that there was no work at home. A smaller proportion of interviewees, like Peng, explicitly described wanting to develop as a person. The remaining respondents characterized migration as a result of studying and enrolling at vocational schools in the city, family decisions to move en-mass to the city (one older man settled in the city and started working at the Zhuhai factory because his son and daughter-in-law were working at the factory), or being encouraged to move to the city by local networks or friends (Table 2).

It was similarly difficult to trace the precise patterns of migration, since many migrants had moved back and forth from rural to urban areas, changing the cities that they migrated to. I make an attempt to list the original province of origin for the 21 interviewees at the Zhuhai site and the 20 interviewees at the Shenzhen site (Table 3). I found that most workers that I spoke to originated from Hunan province, which is located immediately northwest from Guangdong but is much less urbanized than Guangdong. The proximity of Hunan province explains why many workers originated from there. The most distance migrated was from Heilongjiang province, located at the very northeastern tip of China, in an area known historically as Manchuria.

The motivation to develop as a person is consistent with the notion of suzhi (quality). The younger workers whom I interviewed seemed to express more dissatisfaction with rural life and were more ambitious about their prospects for developing in the city. Consider the response that Zhong Wenke, an office worker in the Shenzhen corporate office, gave to explain why he migrated to Shenzhen in the first place:

*Shenzhen is very kaifang (open) and diverse. It is close to Hong Kong, which is an opening to the rest of the world. By coming here, I can learn more about the world than I could where I came from. People come here from everywhere in China. I used to think*
that beifang ren (northern Chinese) are different, but I changed my outlook after going
to school and meeting new people here.

Zhong Wenke is 29 years old and married with his wife, who resides with him in
Shenzhen. He is originally from Hunan province but went to Huanan Nongye Daxue (South
China Agricultural University) in Wushan, Guangdong province. He graduated in 2008 and came
to Shenzhen to work; he has worked for four years at the paint company with a focus on
marketing. His explanation above shows that he has very specific ideals for why he chose to
work in Shenzhen. Also, his background is unique in comparison to the factory workers in
Zhuhai. While most of the ethnography thus far has focused on workers at the Zhuhai factory
site, where I conducted most of my fieldwork, Zhong Wenke provides an example of a
university graduate whose skills are employed by the Shenzhen corporate office. No workers at
the Zhuhai factory site had university education, although a few did attend vocational post-
secondary school (Table 4).

Peng and Zhong Wenke, in contrast to Zhang, are more confident about their prospects
for personal growth. Zhang, who is older and more experienced in factory labor, was very blunt
about his situation and resigned to the idea of doing manual labor for the rest of his career.
Peng, on the other hand, hopes that he can continue to learn about computers and one day
develop the skills to work at a computer company again. Zhong Wenke, for now, is content
doing his office work and living the city life in cosmopolitan Shenzhen.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the experience of rural migrant workers in China in relation to
changes in the government’s method of labor control from socialist to neoliberal. My findings
are that migrant workers in paint factories in Shenzhen and Zhuhai express neoliberal ideals
because they believe that they have agency over their personal improvement and accept failure as the fault of the individual rather than the fault of society. Furthermore, they are self-reliant and use temporary migration as a strategy to achieve personal and economic development while minimizing the risks of not being able to make a living in the city, choosing to keep their permanent homes and families in rural areas.

Neoliberal methods of labor control include the gradual relaxation of rural-to-urban migration restrictions and propaganda movements that promote neoliberal discourses. I argue that both of these actions represent neoliberal governmentality: a conscious attempt by the government to reduce welfare while mitigating popular discontent. Neoliberal governmentality can partially explain why labor exploitation continues to exist in its present form of low wages and limited welfare for migrant workers, without leading to resistance. While romanticized ideas of resistance predict that exploitation leads to resistance, my thesis argues that the lack of resistance in migrant workers can be explained by neoliberalism, neoliberal governmentality, and the creation of self-reliant workers.
References Cited

Blanchard, Ben

Boas, Taylor and Jordan Gans-Morse

Buckley, Cynthia

Shenzhen Municipal People’s Government

Chan, Kam Wing

Chan, Kam Wing and Will Buckingham

Chang, Leslie T

Chun, Soonok
2003 They Are Not Machines: Korean women workers and their fight for democratic trade unionism in the 1970s. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.

Shenzhen Municipal People’s Government

Fan, Cindy C
Greenhalgh, Susan, and Edwin A. Winckler

Guo, Baogang

Halegua, A

He, Jiaosheng and Jim Pooler

Huang, Shu-min

Humphrey, Caroline

Kirkby, R.J.R.

Klubock, Thomas Miller

Lardy, Nicholas R

Lee, Ching Kwan
Li, Shuqing

Li, Ying and Ernest Chu

Li, A. M., & Peng, W
2009 90% of migrants' children get free compulsory education in Shanghai. Xinhua Net News, April 1.

Liu, Xiuming

Luo, T. Y.
2009 The education of rural migrants' children and policy suggestions. Social Scientist 1:116-121.

Matkowski, Zbigniew

Meng, Xin and Zhang, Junsen

Naugton, Barry

Nongmingong shiye diaocha (Survey of Unemployment of Rural Migrant Labor)

Ong, Aihwa
Piore, M.J

Powell, Jason and Ian Cook

Pun, Ngai

Rubins, Noah

Sanyi nongmingong, jincheng chuantianxia [300 Million Rural Migrant Labor Enters the City] 2009 Guangzhou ribao, February 5.

Shen, Jianfa

Shen, Jianfa, Kwan-yiu Wong, Kim-yee Chu and Zhiqiang Feng

Shenzhen's residence card offers little new for migrant workers

Smith, David A
2011 A little learning is a dangerous thing: part 1, keeping them down on the farm? Affordable Housing Institute Briefings, October 27.

Stark, O

Taylor, Jeffrey R
Tong, L. H., & W. D. Xiao

United States Census Bureau

Verdery, Katherine

Wang, Fei-ling

Wang Wang and Wu

White, Tyrone

Woronov, TE

Xu, Q., Guan, X., & Yao, F

Yan, Hairong

Zelinsky, W
Zhang, Li

Zhang, Xia

Zheng, G. C., & Huang, L. R. L.

Zheng, G. H.

Zhu, Yu
Appendix

Figure 1. Shenzhen Corporate Campus Site Layout
Figure 2. Zhuhai Factory Site Layout

Table 1. Years of Employment at Zhuhai Factory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Employment</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 1 year</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 2 years</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - 5 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Migration Considerations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation for migration (%)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look for work</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop as a person</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family / marriage</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends / local networks</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 3. Migration Patterns**

Province of origin (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunan</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangxi</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guizhou</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Szechuan</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hubei</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anhui</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heilongjiang</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangdong</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Settlement plans (%)

- Would settle in new city in future | 57%
- Would want to return home          | 43%

**Figure 3. Workers by Age Range (Zhuhai Factory)**

![Bar chart showing the number of workers by age range](chart.png)
**Figure 4.** Workers by Education Level (Zhuhai Factory)

![Bar chart showing the number of workers by education level.](chart)

**Figure 5.** Zhuhai Factory Site, View from Entrance

![Image of the Zhuhai Factory site](image)
Figure 6. Location of Guangdong Province, China
Figure 7. Urban versus Rural Population Percentages in China (after Smith 2011)