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## In the eye of the chicken

### Hierarchy and marginality among Beijing's migrant schoolchildren

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**ABSTRACT** ■ As Beijing is being transformed into a global city, new kinds of spatial and social hierarchies are produced. Based on ethnographic research conducted among students at a school for the children of migrant workers in China's capital, this article examines how new hierarchies are continuously produced through embodied spatial practices within city space, and examines how school texts, state ideology, and children's appearances produce new kinds of marginalities.

**KEY WORDS** ■ space, hierarchy, marginality, children, schooling, migration, Beijing, China

Consider the following story. It took place in winter, 2000, in a small, privately run school in Beijing for children of some of the millions of migrant workers from China's rural areas who had come to the capital as low-skilled laborers in the service and industrial sectors. This school, Bright Day Elementary School, enrolled approximately 175 children from across China in grades kindergarten through four, in a tiny, crumbling courtyard in the northeast section of Beijing.<sup>1</sup>

One day I observed a kindergarten class at Bright Day, the lesson content of which was 'We Love Beijing' (*Women Ai Beijing*). Using the same textbook that was standard in the Beijing public schools, Teacher Bai, one of the school's owners, led a packed roomful of six-year-olds through the text. An untrained teacher, he relied on the teacher's manual for pedagogic guidance.

Prompted by the teacher's manual he started by asking the children: 'How do we love Beijing?' The students gazed back at him, uncomprehending. He read from the text and teacher's manual: 'We go to parks to play, where we look but don't touch things, such as the flowers.' He continued. 'We pick up paper on the streets. We scold anyone who throws garbage on the ground. We're very good to guests in the city, too.'<sup>2</sup>

Teacher Bai continued. 'Why do we love Beijing?' the text asked next, generating more apparent confusion from the children. He turned again to the teacher's manual: 'China is our Motherland (*zuguó*). We love China and Beijing is the capital of China so we love Beijing. It's like the eye of the chicken.' He directed the children to study a map in their textbooks, in which an outline of China's territory was shown to resemble the shape of a chicken, with the city of Beijing in a position indicated as the chicken's eye.

Another question: 'What can we love in Beijing?' The children had more responses to that, expressing that they were quite happy to be living in the capital. This, however, was not the answer sought by the teacher's manual, and Teacher Bai tried again: 'In Beijing we can love Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall, the Forbidden City Museum, and the Summer Palace.' Oh right, the children nodded in agreement. Then the final question: 'What can we do at Tiananmen Square?' More puzzlement from the students. With a sigh, Bai provided the answer: 'At Tiananmen, we can see Chairman Mao.'<sup>3</sup> He paused then asked loudly: 'Do we love Chairman Mao?' The children roared back: 'Yes! We love him!' 'Who *was* Chairman Mao?' Bai continued after a pause, and the room fell silent in response. At about that time the other classes let out for recess and, the text completed, Bai let his kindergarteners out as well.

To be fair, kindergarten students in the state-run public schools may have had equal difficulty with this text, which required leaps of patriotic abstraction that could be difficult at that age. While obviously a bit mysterious to these children, I was already familiar with the content of this lesson, having observed it (or similar ones) being taught at other Beijing public schools where I was observing classes. For two years (1999–2001) I conducted fieldwork among children in the city (including spending two days a week at Bright Day over an eight-month period) as part of a larger project examining efforts aimed at improving population 'quality' during China's recent economic reform era (1978–present).

The lesson I observed encapsulates many crucial questions, all related to the ways that these children, migrants to the city, live in the city space of Beijing. What are the moral geographies of China's capital that make it the 'eye' of the national 'chicken'? What kinds of disciplines – of space, of motion, of bodies – are implied in this image? What kinds of scopic regimes of state-based political visualization (Feldman, 1997) see, monitor, and produce urban subjectivities?

With the approach of the 2008 Olympics, national and municipal leaders in China are working fervently to transform Beijing into a global city (Sassen, 1991); as in all such cities, this transformation depends on low-paid migrant labor, and produces new kinds of spatial and social hierarchies (Low, 1999; Massey, 1994; Sassen, 1991, 1999). By focusing on the children of migrant workers, this article looks at how newly globalizing cities produce different kinds of subjectivities, and how these are taught to and learned by children. The migrant children enrolled at the Bright Day School, I argue, are geometers in Bourdieu's sense: their 'socially informed bodies' (1977: 114) are fixed within the city as a symbolically organized environment; they continuously recreate both local and national space and their own subjectivity through their movements through and appearance in Beijing.

### ***Hukou and suzhi***

The migrant situation in contemporary China is directly linked to two historical phenomena: the recent opening of the Chinese economy to market-style reforms, and long-term constraints on population mobility and the distribution of state-sponsored goods and services through a system of residence permits called the *hukou* system. I will address these both briefly as necessary background for the observations I conducted at the Bright Day School.

In the 1950s, the central Chinese government adopted a series of measures designed to control population movement. Every resident of China was classified as either a rural or urban household through a household registration certificate (*hukou*). Although analysts differ on the motivating factors that led to these decisions, the effect was to create a 'caste-like system of social stratification' (Potter and Potter, 1990: 296) between urban dwellers and the rural peasantry.<sup>4</sup>

As Solinger (1999) describes in great detail, a Chinese person's classification as a rural or urban *hukou*-holder not only determined place of residence, but also the benefits s/he would receive from the state. The most basic benefit was food: urban householders 'ate the state's rice', while peasants were required to grow their own grain (Potter and Potter, 1990: 298). Beyond this, urban residents could also gain access to a series of state-supported benefits, including life-long employment, subsidized housing, free or low-cost medical care, and social security/retirement pensions. Rural *hukou*-holders were generally entitled to none of these benefits.

An individual's classification as an urban or rural *hukou*-holder was assigned at birth, inherited from the mother, and was extremely difficult to change. However, the *hukou* system was not a simple binary opposition

between urban and rural; instead it was based on a spatial hierarchy that ranked every location in China. Through the 1980s, the three centrally administered cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin were at the top of the urban hierarchy, followed by provincial capitals, smaller cities, and then towns. Below this were all of China's rural areas, where about 70% of the population held their *hukous*. Movement down the hierarchy was always possible: urban *hukou* holders could easily change their classification to rural, or could move from a large city to a smaller one; lateral movements were also possible. But movement up the scale, such as from a rural *hukou* area to an urban one, or from a small town to a larger city, was virtually impossible. The state controlled all upward spatial movement by a series of quotas.

Up until the early 1980s, the state had several methods by which it maintained *hukou* classifications. One was monitoring the residents of cities through party-affiliated 'neighborhood committees', which reported all strangers to the authorities. Even more effective was a rationing system that allocated all basic goods (rice, oil, grain, cloth) through ration coupons to which only urban *hukou*-holders were entitled. Thus, anyone moving to a city without prior approval would very quickly either be caught by the authorities, or would simply run out of food. The system was very effective, and has made rural-urban differences one of the most basic foundations of subject formation in China.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, through this system state power was (re)produced at least partially through control and surveillance over space. By fixing every member of the population into a geographic position, social status, social relations, and spatial positioning were constituted and assigned by the state.

The economic reforms Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping put into motion in 1978 led to two changes that made large-scale rural-to-urban migration possible. First, by the mid-1980s, increased productivity in agriculture had rendered millions of peasants redundant, just as a rapidly growing, privately owned industrial sector was beginning. This new sector was able to absorb huge numbers of low-paid laborers because of the second change, a general relaxation in implementation of the *hukou* laws and the commodification of many basic goods and services. By the late 1980s, foodstuffs and other basic goods (including housing) were increasingly available to purchase in cities on the open market (Chan, 1996). By the mid-1990s, millions of peasants had taken advantage of these new conditions to move to areas formerly restricted to urban *hukou*-holders, lured by higher wages in the industrial, construction, and service sectors. It is essential to note, however, that just because peasants are no longer prevented from entering cities, they are, in many cities, still unable to convert their rural *hukous* to urban ones.<sup>6</sup> They are still legally 'farmers', and are denied access to the goods and services – such as education – that are restricted to legal *hukou*-holders.

Thus, the ‘caste-like system of social stratification’ that was created during the Mao era has persisted in present-day China, producing what Kam Wing Chan (1996) calls a ‘two-class urban society’ (see also Potter and Potter, 1990). In other words, the urban–rural spatial and social hierarchy is now replicated within the urban centers themselves.

The rural–urban distinction is reflected both in official commentary on migrant laborers and in popular representations of the issue. Chinese government statistics distinguish between people who do convert their *hukous* from rural to urban, who are called ‘migrants’ (*chanyi*), while all laborers in the informal sector of the economy are known as the ‘floating population’ (*liudong renkou*). Precisely because they are usually not registered with urban authorities, the number of the floating population is notoriously difficult to pin down; researchers seem to agree, however, that by the early 1990s there were approximately 70 million people floating across China, and that this number probably exceeded 100 million by the end of the century (Zhang, 2001a, 2001b; Zhao, 2000)

The term ‘floating’ (*liudong*) itself is representative of urban attitudes towards the rural laborers in their midst.<sup>7</sup> Although the word sounds relatively innocuous in English, in Chinese ‘*liudong*’ connotes a lack of stability, a potentially dangerous detachment from the moral order that in China has always been associated with strong connections to localities. While much exemplary scholarship has looked at the economic, political and sociological aspects of the influx of rural laborers into China’s cities, very few have looked at the role these ‘floating’ people play in the urban imaginary.<sup>8</sup> What many analysts neglect to discuss, perhaps because it is so painfully obvious, is that migrant laborers in cities such as Beijing are peasants. This is not only a problem of legal *hukou* status and rights to membership in urban society (Solinger, 1999); the imagined as well as administrative dichotomy between peasants and urbanites is fundamental to how migrant laborers exist in the cities.

When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, peasants were ideologically privileged over urbanites. Kirkby (1985) notes several reasons for anti-urban biases among the founders of the PRC (Mao and his followers), including Mao and his colleagues’ peasant backgrounds, and the Chinese Communist Party’s road to power, through peasant – not proletarian – revolution. Valorized as ‘the essence of the Chinese nation’ during the Mao years, the peasant hinterlands were the site of revolutionary authenticity, while cities were seen as places of bourgeois cosmopolitanism (Zhang, 2001b: 224; cf. Holston and Appadurai, 1999). In the name of ‘learning revolution from the peasants’ and creating spatial egalitarianism (Kirkby, 1985) between urban and rural areas, millions of urban youth were rusticated in the early 1960s and during the Cultural Revolution.

The current movement of rural people, then, into urban space takes place

in a context that reflects more than just changing state policy – it is also part of an ideological re-mapping of the nation according to new moral geographies. Briefly, since the reform era, China's national development has become predicated on technocratic management rather than revolutionary fervor, and the privileged national subject switched from dwelling in the countryside to the cities. Rather than embodying the revolution, as they had done through the Cultural Revolution, rural peasants are seen to have become the embodiment of China's backwardness and lack of development. Poverty is now attributed to innate differences among people, so that underdeveloped areas both produce and are the result of 'low-quality' residents.<sup>9</sup> This biologization, consistent with the social Darwinism that drives China's developmental ideology, places the blame for underdevelopment in the rural population itself: its weaknesses, its traditionalism, and its conservatism.

Thus, peasants entering Beijing carry with them all of the ideological baggage that has been thrust upon China's rural areas: they are understood to embody China's weakness, lack of modernity, and backwardness. This is important to understanding how migrants are viewed and treated in the capital, where they are seen as sources of dirt, crime, and disorder. Migrant laborers are not only a metaphor for the market – which is how sociologist Dorothy Solinger, an expert on migrant labor in China, describes them – but also express the dislocations of recent economic transformations as reified in spatial and bodily form (Newborn, 1994). In contemporary China, geographic space embodies and (re)produces the nation's new mythico-ritual oppositions: modern/traditional, wealthy/impoverished, global/local, developed/undeveloped (Bourdieu, 1977). Space not only produces subjects, but in contemporary Chinese discourse it carries a moral valence which has changed over time; the moral dichotomies between the 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of subjects for the modern nation are now mapped onto a rural/urban distinction. These distinctions are increasingly coded as differences in 'quality'.

*Suzhi* is a common, everyday term in China meaning 'quality'. Its meaning is as imprecise in Chinese as it is in English; when describing children, it can refer to educational level, physical strength, height and weight, morality, and patriotism. Although the specific definition of the term is contested, there is tremendous consensus in China that the 'quality' of individual Chinese has to be raised in order to collectively raise the quality of the nation; as embodiments of the future, children are essential to this project. In spite of the difficulties of defining the word '*suzhi*', every person I spoke with in Beijing, and all of the written materials on the subject, were in complete agreement on one point: China's rural peasants have the lowest quality of all. Ironically, in Beijing the floating signifier of *suzhi* was firmly fixed within the 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*). After spending time with the children in the migrant school, however, this point seemed less ironic than descriptive: the migrant children's notoriously 'low *suzhi*' was

inextricably linked to their floating status, and to the ways they lived in, used, and experienced the space of the city.

### Bright Day School

On my first visit to the Bright Day School, the owner, Principal Chen, explained that by the end of 1999, there were over 100 schools for migrant children in Beijing.<sup>10</sup> Like migrant laborers themselves, migrant schools were a recent phenomenon; the oldest ones in Beijing had existed for less than 10 years. All such schools were privately owned and operated for a profit; the school principals were generally also the schools' owners and managers. These schools had opened to meet a new demand. Although through the 1980s and early 1990s, laborers coming to Beijing from the countryside had generally been men, by the mid-1990s an increasing number of couples and families were migrating to the cities from rural areas (Davin, 1999).<sup>11</sup> By 1999 there were an estimated 2.8 million migrant laborers in Beijing, of whom up to 30% were women, and which included an unknown number of children of elementary school age (Solinger, 1999).<sup>12</sup>

For financial reasons, children who either came with their parents from



**Figure 1** Some of the students at Bright Day; the classroom buildings are on the right. (photo by author)



the countryside or who were born after their parents' arrival in Beijing were largely excluded from the capital's vast public education system. Before enrolling in a government school, any child without a residence permit in Beijing was required to pay two sets of fees. One was to the city of Beijing to purchase entry into the system; in 2001 that fee was about 600 RMB per school year.<sup>13</sup> On top of that, each family then had to pay a separate fee to the individual school or school sub-district in order to enroll their child in a classroom. These fees varied very widely from school to school, and could run from several hundred to several thousand RMB per semester. In 1996 only about 12% of Beijing's migrants could afford these fees and were therefore able to send their children to state-run schools.<sup>14</sup> To circumvent these fees and offer education to children not legally registered in Beijing, migrants began to open their own private schools at rates affordable to the migrant population.

Conditions in the migrant schools were generally very poor. According to a study done in 1998–99 by the China Rural Labor Association,<sup>15</sup> although a few such schools were renting space from standard government schools and thus had access to those facilities, the majority existed in much more tenuous circumstances. Researchers for this survey visited schools that rented space in car-repair shops, public bath houses, coal storage facilities, or in the living space of migrant families.<sup>16</sup> Some schools had as many as 600 students, while others had as few as 20. In the vast majority of cases, school facilities were rudimentary at best, many not even having blackboards or chalk.

Before coming to Beijing, Principal Chen had been an elementary teacher and administrator in a school in rural Hubei Province, in central China. Increasing numbers of able-bodied men, and then women, from her village had left for larger cities in search of work, leaving their children at home under the care of grandparents. As employment became steadier and their incomes rose, more and more of these laborers brought their children from their villages to live with them in Beijing. At one point, a representative was sent back to the village to ask then-Teacher Chen if she would also come to the capital to teach their children there. She agreed, then recruited several young women from the village, recent *zhongzhuan*<sup>17</sup> graduates, to come with her and her husband to Beijing and together they started a small school for children from their home village. After a few years, however, more and more children enrolled in her school because of its reputation for good quality teaching and reliability. By the time I arrived the school had gone beyond teaching only students from one part of Hubei Province, and included children from all over China.

Upon her arrival, Chen's fellow villagers in Beijing had arranged for her to rent a small courtyard in the Taiyanggong neighborhood of Beijing. Until very recently, this neighborhood, although well inside the city limits, had

been agricultural and very poor. As the city expanded in the late 1980s and rental properties were legalized, long-term residents of this neighborhood were able to make more money renting out their tiny houses to newly arrived migrant workers than they could from tilling the soil. Eventually, most of the fields were replaced by low-end housing structures that local farmers rented out to sojourners from the rural hinterland.<sup>18</sup>

As was the case with Principal Chen's school, these new landlords also facilitated connections between the newly arrived migrants and the neighborhood police. Chen's school was technically illegal, for she had never registered with the local education authorities. Having opened her school without any approval – like most of the other 100-odd migrant schools in the capital – Chen paid a regular fee to the local police for them to turn a blind eye to her operations, which would later cause serious problems for me. I subsequently learned that this story was typical of many such schools in Beijing.

The Bright Day School covered kindergarten to fourth grade. Chen was planning to add more teachers and classes for the next two school years, so that the currently enrolled students could continue through sixth grade. What would happen to the children after that was still unknown, and posed a serious problem for many migrant families. Fees for entering the regular Beijing public schools were even higher for middle school students, and beyond the reach of most migrant laborers. Principal Chen and officials with whom I spoke at the Ministry of Agriculture both said that, as far as they knew, there was only one migrant-run middle school in Beijing. Therefore, once their children reached the seventh grade, many migrant families sent their children back to their home villages to continue their education, reasoning that by age 12 or 13 they were old enough to care for themselves. Many other children, however, remained in Beijing with their families after finishing sixth grade, and began working full-time as unskilled laborers.

## First day

On my first visit to the Bright Day School, Principal Chen met me on foot near the northeast corner of the Third Ring Road, a 10-lane highway circling Beijing that at the time was the largest traffic artery in the city.<sup>19</sup> The northeast section of the road was particularly developed, lined on both sides with high-rise apartment and office towers. To get to her school, Chen led me away from the Ring Road traffic, turning north up a small alleyway next to a department store. Almost immediately upon heading north, directly behind the high-rise buildings the streets turned to dirt and the high-rises gave way to tiny, single-storey, Chinese-style houses (*pingfang*) along



**Figure 2** The fourth grade classroom at Bright Day School, decorated to welcome my arrival as their English teacher. (photo by author)

winding alleyways. Other than architectural style, however, these houses bore no resemblance to the neatly restored Qing Dynasty-era traditional-style homes in the center of town, which drew hordes of camera-wielding foreign tourists looking for Chinese authenticity. Instead, it was obvious that the tenants of these houses were terribly poor: walls were black and crumbling, no sidewalks lined the edges of the roads, and huge piles of garbage rotted on street corners. I had, for the first time, entered a Beijing slum where I least expected it: right behind the Third Ring Road.<sup>20</sup>

After about a 15-minute walk, and more twists and turns than I could count, we arrived at the Bright Day School. There, a rusty metal gate at the school's entrance opened into a small, walled courtyard, which I estimated to be about 300 square meters. Along the northwest side of the courtyard were two parallel rows of small, dark rooms with south-facing entrances; these were the classrooms, plus one dorm room shared by the teachers and the school's few boarding students. Chen and her husband, Teacher Bai, lived in another small room against the northeast corner of the courtyard; it contained only a bed, a huge television, and several cardboard boxes full of packaged snack food which she sold to the students during breaks between classes. Next to their room was a single water spigot and a small table on which another woman, Ms Liu, prepared three meals a day over an open coal fire (lunch for all the students and teachers; breakfast and dinner for the teachers, principal, and boarding students). A dilapidated, netless ping pong table stood along the west wall, while an outhouse took up a section of the southeast corner. The rest of the small space was open for children to play in between classes, at lunch, and before and after school.

I had arranged with Principal Chen to teach English to her fourth-grade class. When she led me to meet them, I found the 23 fourth grade students packed into a dirt-floored, three by four meter room; a single light bulb hung from the ceiling, while all other light came in from the open door. The children sat on stools and used high, narrow benches as desks, and a small, unevenly cut piece of slate on the front wall served as the blackboard. The room was so crowded that I had to perch on a stool outside the doorway in order to observe when Chen taught.

Yet this classroom was actually an improvement over those used by the kindergarten and first grade classes, where close to 50 children were crammed into rooms approximately five by six meters. The younger children, more homogeneous in age, sat on tiny stools, with three children per small table. The rooms were so crowded that the front rows of students were seated directly against the front wall, and had to look straight up to see the blackboard. The first grade classrooms had one small window that let in more light (and more wind), but all the other classrooms relied on whatever light came in through open doors.

Teachers at Bright Day taught all the classes in the curriculum, unlike the

standard Beijing public schools, where each subject had a different teacher. And, unlike the standard Chinese schools, Bright Day teachers moved from one subject to another with great flexibility; no bells announced the end of one class period and mandated the change to another. Nor did Bright Day students follow a disciplined play-time schedule. Instead, teachers released their students to play in the open courtyard area next to the classrooms whenever there was a natural break in the teaching content, when students got too restless to sit still in class, or when a critical mass of other classes were let out (the noise from one or two classrooms-full of children playing immediately outside a classroom door was generally disruptive enough to cause the other teachers to declare recess as well). Unlike the regular Beijing schools, no formal or organized exercises were conducted during these breaks, which occurred once or twice every morning. In these ways the school notably lacked many of the disciplinary regimes of time and the body that are central tasks of government-run schools (Foucault, 1977).

The children also looked distinctly different from the students I saw in the state-run schools. Unlike students in the Beijing public schools, Bright Day students had no uniforms and came to class in multiple layers of whatever they owned. The children's clothes and faces were uniformly dirty, which Principal Chen explained as stemming from a lack of water. As was not uncommon in Beijing, none of the students' families had access to hot running water; but unlike most Beijingers, the migrant families could only rarely afford the luxury of visiting the public bath houses. Even more striking than the lack of uniforms was that none of the Bright Day students wore red scarves, indicating their membership in the Communist Party-sponsored Little Red Pioneers, nor did they wear the ubiquitous yellow caps worn by children in Beijing, especially in winter.<sup>21</sup> This lack was particularly noticeable because one boy in fourth grade wore a red scarf and yellow hat, which he had bought himself. Chen told me that the boy had bought these symbols of normative childhood so that he 'would look more like a regular (*putong*) student' in Beijing. In addition, the students in fourth grade evinced tremendous differences in size and appearance, which I later learned from Principal Chen was because their ages ranged from 10 to 15. Many had missed several years of schooling as they followed their parents across China in search of work opportunities; as a result, the children's physical size was far less heterogeneous than in the public schools.

### **Spatial and symbolic marginalities**

The children's lack of the appropriate markings of normative childhood, indexed by school uniforms and Little Red Pioneer scarves, mark them as children 'out of place' (Douglas, 1966), misfits in the city's fixed

generational categories. Their ragged appearance was not trivial, for the way they looked was part of what Feldman (1997) calls a 'visual imaginary', a 'body politics that is transcribed onto the physical appearance, dress, and (un)disciplined body of the outsider', and 'plays a crucial role in the construction of identity in urban everyday life' (1997: 34).

The migrant children's role in the capital's body politics is captured in the image of Beijing as the eye of the chicken. As the 'eye' of the national body, it is the scopic center of China, into which all knowledge is gathered and from which all power originates. This is both mirrored in and is a product of the internal structure of the city, which is designed as a series of hierarchically ordered concentric circles, marked by the 10-lane Ring Roads. Tiananmen [Gate of Heavenly Peace] Square is the epicenter of national power that radiates outward to the entire country; the symbol of the Gate itself is China's national emblem. The city's design combines the cosmology of the imperium with the centralized planning of the socialist state, placing the leadership at the center of the politico-symbolic world. To this long-term structural design the government has now added the spatial symbolics of the reform era, which posit Beijing as the symbol of a newly modernized China, a showcase for 'modern hi-tech development, large corporate commerce, managed foreign capital investment, and lucrative international and domestic tourism' (Zhang, 2001a: 176).

China's discursive geopolitics posit Beijing as the center of national development, which radiates out in waves that diminish upon meeting the 'low quality' conditions of the rural areas. This is captured in a discourse of marginality: the countryside is distant, remote (*pianpi*), undeveloped (Schein, 2000). Migrant laborers in the city, the embodiments of rural poverty, are also always described in the local media as 'on the city's margins (*bianyuan*)'; even those who champion better treatment for migrants and their children refer to their schools as 'peripheral to' or even 'parasitic upon (*jisheng*)' the city.<sup>22</sup>

It is this spatial organization that led to my initial surprise at the Bright Day School's location immediately north of the Third Ring Road. The extensive literature on China's migrants all says the same thing: migrants come from the nation's periphery and live on the city's periphery as well – even if they are right outside the Third Ring Road. Discursively, the Third Ring Road marks the outward boundary of the ever-expanding urban core in Beijing; everything outside of it is on the 'urban fringe' (Liu and Liang, 1997), in spite of rapid urban development that is expanding the city outwards in all directions. Yet the spaces migrants appropriate on these 'fringes' carry the contradictions of their liminal status in the city, for the distance to the fringe is more discursive than geographic.

The migrants' contradictory position in the space of the city mirrors their role in the reform-era economy: discursively marginal, yet simultaneously

central. They are marginal in that they perform tasks no one else wants to do, but are central to the new economy and provide the low-cost labor that makes Beijing's wealth possible. Indeed, their labor makes Beijing's high 'quality' possible: by taking on the lowest paid, lowest status work, they enable Beijing *hukou*-holders to occupy higher paid and higher status positions in the economy (Sassen, 1999).

In effect the migrants represent marginality by embodying their rural backgrounds, yet at the same time they are physically in the city, piercing the boundaries that separate the developed and the undeveloped, the poor and the wealthy, the 'right' kinds of high-quality bodies and the 'wrong' kinds. Thus the spaces they inhabit are 'marginal' to the city, in spite of actual location. The Bright Day School is walking distance from the Third Ring Road, in spite of the marginality of its existence. An even better example is the widely studied Zhejiangcun, formerly the largest migrant community in the city. Dutton (1998: 149) describes it as 'on the edge of city life', and architect Liu Xiaoli says that it was in 'an urban fringe that had remained nearly untouched' (Liu and Liang, 1997: 99) Yet at the same time she notes that city officials were extremely concerned about the growth of this enclave, because 'although it is outside the Third Ring Road, the geographical position of [Zhejiangcun] . . . is located only 5 km from the Qianmen commercial district' at the heart of the city (Liu and Liang, 1997: 99).

According to theorist David Theo Goldberg, this spatial construction of social marginality is not uncommon in major cities around the world. He says that contemporary 'urban geometry – the spatial categories through, and in which, the lived world is largely thought, experienced, and disciplined – imposes a set of interiorities and exteriorities' (Goldberg, 1993: 45). He discusses a concept he calls 'peripheral space', a relational urban form that 'does not require absolute displacement of persons to or outside city limits, to the literal margins of urban space, but merely their circumscription in terms of location and their limitation in terms of access – to power, to (the realization of) rights, and to goods and services' (1993: 47).

In Bright Day School this spatial organization of status is reproduced textually through the curriculum, which reinforces the spatial organization of the city through a pedagogy of city space. For example, I observed Teacher Wu, the third-grade teacher, take his students through a language-arts lesson on the beauties of the Great Hall of the People, which is on Tiananmen Square. He began by asking if any of the students were familiar with the building, but only a very few had actually ever been to Tiananmen, located only a few miles away. Frantically flipping through the teacher's manual for clues on how best to present the material to these children, Teacher Wu began to ad lib. 'It has a big entranceway, just like the one at your house, but a lot bigger', he told them. 'But the first room in my house is the kitchen', one girl protested. Wu dealt with this handily:

'No it isn't', he said matter-of-factly, and told her to sit down. The same questions and conflicts arose over whether the building materials used in the Great Hall were brick, concrete or steel, with a give-and-take between the students and the teacher about the meaning and interpretation of the text unlike any I had ever seen in the standard public schools.

Once everyone had settled down, Wu led the students in a recitation of the text. This proceeded relatively smoothly until the final paragraph. 'Ah! The Great Hall of the People is so majestic and grand!' the text exclaimed. Teacher Wu, to my astonishment, laughed out loud at the words 'Ah!' and 'majestic', and the students, following his lead, did too. So did I, observing from a stool in the doorway, at least partially because I had long felt the urge to laugh at this kind of hyperbole in the textbooks. I was relieved to find others who also found it rather silly.

This was one of the only times I ever heard a teacher and students laugh at the textbooks, and I only ever observed such iconoclasm at Bright Day. In the state-run schools, teachers and students interacted with the texts with tremendous seriousness. While the children saw some lessons as 'fun', they resolutely never found them 'funny', and the various 'ah's!' and 'oh's!' and other expressions of delight in the text over the state's Stalinist architecture were treated by teachers and students alike as opportunities to work on correct intonation and express appropriate awe. The give-and-take and the laughter at Bright Day clearly demonstrated how the meaning of these national sites was not fixed for these students, but was instead up for negotiation. In the regular schools, the teachers know what these buildings are made of, what they look like, and how they are to be interpreted by the students; the children have all visited Tiananmen and have seen these buildings for themselves. They have learned the appropriate attitude towards these places, and display awe at the magnificence and power Tiananmen and other national spaces represent. Without this background, the Bright Day teachers and students struggled to understand the material, how these national buildings were supposed to be read.

I observed this repeatedly as I visited classes at Bright Day, where the content of the Beijing curriculum was vastly at odds with children's experiences in the space of the city. A first-grade lesson on 'Loving the Chinese Communist Party' provides another example. Reasons given for loving the CCP included its responsibility for ending foreign imperialism in China, and for furthering economic development. Then one paragraph stated specifically: 'Our grandparents used to live in *pingfang* [single-storey, traditional Chinese houses] but because of the efforts of the Party, now we all live in *loufang* [multi-storey, Western-style housing].' The children dutifully repeated this text at their teacher's request, earnestly thanking the Communist Party for enabling their residence in the more modern and comfortable *loufang*.



In actuality, not one of the children at Bright Day lived in a *loufang*; they (and their teachers) were all residing in the worst possible kinds of *pingfang* in Beijing. Yet, the texts were powerful because they not only conveyed content information about the party-state and children's appropriate attitude towards it, but because it was spatialized: being the right kind of subject meant inhabiting particular kinds of spaces in particular ways. It was the Bright Day children's different habitus, literally marked by their homes, that gave concreteness to the abstract notion of *suzhi*, and that branded these children inexorably as 'low quality'. For the Bright Day students, the disjuncture between the text and their experience of the city both replicated and reproduced their marginality.

### Sunday in the park

The phone rang at 6:45 am on a cold and gray Sunday in early April; I answered with a groggy 'Wei?' The voices of what sounded like one hundred children shrieked back at me. 'Laoshi [Teacher], where ARE you? We're WAITING for you!' I had arranged to meet the fourth graders at 11:00 am at their school to bring them to one of the city's parks; neither our late meeting time nor the cold weather had stopped the children from arriving at school at their normal hour.<sup>23</sup>

When I arrived at the school, 21 of the fourth graders were waiting in high anticipation. The students first mobbed me and then Principal Chen, clamoring to be taken to the Summer Palace for the day.<sup>24</sup> This was definitely not what I had had in mind when I suggested a day trip with the children, because the Summer Palace is a North American teacher's field-trip nightmare: expensive admission tickets, a huge area, terrible crowds, a large lake without guard rails, and a dozen buildings. In my opinion this was not the place to take more than 20 10-year-olds, especially with only four adults to supervise. I had brought frisbees with me from the US, and had hoped to spend the day on some large, grassy area where we could picnic and play ball. The children had their own ideas, however, and although Principal Chen wavered briefly as I threw frantic warning signals at her over the children's heads, she quickly caved in and agreed to go to the Summer Palace. We somehow packed 21 children, three teachers, Principal Chen and her two children, and me into a small van owned by one of the student's fathers, and started off.

This was the first time I had been out with the Bright Day students, and I had not thought much about how we would appear to others in the park or the reception we would receive upon arrival. But it was clear as soon as we poured out of the van that the Beijing residents out enjoying the Summer Palace for the day were not happy to see us.

The differences between these children and others in the park were immediately obvious. Virtually all the other children in the park – even those with parents and not in school or Little Red Pioneer groups – were in school uniforms, red scarves neatly tied. The children in groups were lined up in neat rows, following their teacher's lead. The Bright Day children, however, upon entering the Palace gate, immediately scattered in 20 different directions. The other visitors to the park were noticeably startled, and audibly tsk'ed their disapproval.

Over the course of the afternoon, this reaction occurred many times – always in response to the children's lack of discipline. Other visitors actively commented upon the children's running through the park and disrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic, frequently making comparisons with the behavior of the other children in the park, who were praised for staying close to their parents' or classmates' sides. After finishing one of the ubiquitous snacks that are mandatory at Chinese outings, the Bright Day children were likely to toss their garbage over their shoulders or leave it where they had been sitting. The Beijingers were horrified, and several scolded the children and Chen in the same way as the kindergarten textbook had instructed. I heard others grumbling *sotto voce* about the low *suzhi* of the children, apparent from their littering and lack of discipline. More than once, a family group approached me to pose with them for a photo and were visibly shocked to learn that I was associated with that group of 'low *suzhi*' children who were dressed and behaving so badly.

It is important to note that the children never actually did anything seriously wrong at the Summer Palace that day; littering and occasionally bumping into someone were the worst offenses of which they could have been accused. But their inappropriate use of the park's space and their lack of bodily discipline were painfully obvious in that setting, especially compared to the other children. Running, shouting, littering, wearing ragged clothing, refusing to line up – their very exuberance at being outdoors, in a place where there was room to run – all these behaviors demonstrated, by contrast, how high-quality children are supposed to look and act. The Bright Day children became, in that setting, quality's 'Other', and the notoriously abstract concept – 'quality' – at that moment became painfully concrete. 'Quality' was whatever these children were not.

Yet I do not mean to suggest that the concept of quality is as simple as the dichotomy between well- and ill-behaved children; surely not all native Beijing children pick up their trash or refrain from running around in exciting places like the Summer Palace. Instead, I suggest that the problem of the Bright Day students' low quality was related to two scopic issues of embodied and spatial discipline, particularly as expressed within the park.

First, it is important to note what these children looked like, how they

registered in the vision of local Beijing residents. Students in the Beijing government schools, when appearing in groups in public, take very seriously their teachers' admonishments to be 'good representatives' of their schools. As such, they inevitably appear wearing school uniforms and Little Red Pioneer scarves, marching in straight lines and demonstrating the kinds of bodily disciplines that the schools work hard to cultivate through mandatory group exercise classes. The Bright Day students, of course, had no such disciplines: they had no uniforms or red scarves to wear, nor did their daily education include the disciplines of bells, exercises, and lining up that were an essential aspect of the public schools. Their behavior at the Summer Palace thus indexed far more than just poor behavior; instead, it pointed directly to their school's inability to control 'the potentially chaotic powers of the child's body' (Newborn, 1994: 228) through disciplinary technologies. I suggest that this is a particularly apt negative example of the disciplined child's body that Foucault describes, 'entrapped in a field of power, marked, trained, and forced to emit signs' (Foucault, 1977; also Newborn, 1994: 227). At the Summer Palace the migrant children did not emit the right signs – orderly discipline, appropriate affect, or cultural and historical appreciation of the site.

Thus, as they swirl through the park, their bodies are metaphors for migrants' unruly movement around the city, disrupting city space. These children – like all the migrant laborers in Beijing – are nomadic subjects (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), destabilizing the order of city space symbolized by its hierarchical concentric circles. Until the breakdown in the implementation of *hukou* laws, Beijing was, spatially, relatively stable: residents were fixed in employment and housing, city services were organized and in place, power radiated from Tiananmen through the city and out to the provinces.

In other words, who and what migrant laborers in the city are is determined by the ways in which they are fixed in particular spaces, as 'belonging' in China's backwards hinterlands, and representing these same spaces in bodily form when they come to the city. Migrant laborers – in the millions – symbolize these disruptions and the often disturbing social changes of the reform era. In this context, children running through the park, shouting and bumping into people, take on far more meaning than the simple acts of running and shouting would indicate, for they symbolize the disruption during the reform era of the socio-spatial order.

Second, the migrant children's low *suzhi* was also particularly apparent framed by the pedagogic and cultural capital associated with and woven into this setting. The Summer Palace is not merely a park – it is a Chinese cultural heritage site, one of the list of places the kindergarteners are taught to 'love' in Beijing. The ideal purpose of visits to sites like the Summer Palace is less pleasure than edification: they are pedagogic spaces where

children are supposed to see and then appreciate China's history and aesthetics in specific ways.

In fact, *all* park space in Beijing is pedagogic – not simply those places identified as historical sites. As Dong (2000) notes, as early as the 1920s the city government had specified public parks as prime locations for transforming Beijingers into modern, 'civilized' citizens. From the time that imperial playgrounds were first turned into places open for the public, parks have always been designed less as a place for recreation than sites within which city dwellers can be transformed into modern subjects by seeing and using space in designated ways. Today, high-*suzhi* parenting entails regular trips to city parks with children, as the Chinese Emperors' former playgrounds have now been transformed into playgrounds for the city's 'little emperors'.<sup>25</sup> The goal is not merely having fun outdoors, or to appreciate 'nature' in a captured, reified form, but to use park space to produce the right kinds of social relations, and the right kinds of subjects. Parks are for re-creation in the sense that certain kinds of urban subjects are produced through them, not for running, playing, and picnicking on the grass.

While I do not suggest that any Chinese children are appreciably awed by these sites in the way the textbooks intend for them to be (all the children I talked with loved Beijing's parks – especially the Summer Palace – because 'they're fun!'), the attempt always exists on the part of all pedagogues (parents, teachers, state textbook writers) to make the experience 'right' by appreciating the site, much like American parents taking children to art museums. The migrant children's utter lack of effort to view the Summer Palace as anything other than a place to have fun was part of the complex inner and outer construction of their low *suzhi*.

The Chinese state was present in many ways in the Bright Day School: through their use of the state-sponsored curriculum, through the presence (and absence) of state-approved normality, such as Little Red Pioneer scarves, through the state-mandated *hukou* categories that rendered the school illegal, and through scopic regimes that surveyed the children's appearance and movement in the city. But the state had another, more tangible presence as well. One day near the end of the school year, in early June, I was chatting with Ms Liu, the Bright Day School cook, when her face took on an expression of sheer horror. A Beijing city policeman had appeared behind me, and tapped me on the shoulder.

He spent the next half hour examining my identification and legal documents, and grilling me about my presence at the school. I stuck with the story that Principal Chen and I had worked out months before: that I was a student of Chinese at Beijing University; that friends in the Ministry of Agriculture had introduced me to the school; that I was volunteering as an English teacher because I felt so sorry for the 'poor migrant children'. I never mentioned ethnographic research or the real reason for my presence

at the school. After a while the policeman accepted my explanations and left, and I assumed the situation had been resolved. I was wrong.

When I arrived at Bright Day the following week, Principal Chen met me at the gate, wringing her hands. The police, she said, had given her an ultimatum: get rid of the foreigner (i.e. me), or they would shut down her school. She had no choice but to ask me to leave.

I never did find out why the police felt so strongly about my presence in the school. I asked several of my informants in Beijing for their opinions. Several believed that the police were embarrassed by the conditions at the school, and wanted to prevent a foreigner from observing the poverty that still existed in Beijing. Given the Chinese leadership's concern with turning the capital into a showcase of high-tech development, this may indeed have been the case. Migrant labor – essential to Beijing's development and daily operations – only existed in the capital through officials turning 'a blind eye': to *hukou* violations, to the conditions in which these laborers lived, to their movements through the city. Allowing a foreigner into one of the migrant schools made visible that which had to remain invisible.

I was able to see the Bright Day students occasionally after this. We had additional outings together, and sometimes I met with them or the teachers at pre-arranged times and places to have dinner together. But I never set foot in the Bright Day School again.

### **A lesson only too well learned**

It was clear that by the time they had finished fourth grade, the migrant children in the Bright Day School had fully learned the lessons that had first been raised in the kindergarten text: their role in the urban pecking order within the eye of the Chinese nation.

The students demonstrated how well they understood the production of the categories of 'hukou-holding Beijing resident' and 'high *suzhi*' through a skit they performed for me in spring, 2001. The skit was part of a new class that Chen had added earlier that semester, designed specifically to raise the 'quality' of the Bright Day students. All that year the Beijing media had been full of reports on how schools across China were implementing various kinds of educational reforms, designed to raise children's quality by making them stronger, more moral, more creative, and more independent. To achieve these goals, the local public schools were adding computer labs, sports and martial arts clubs, and lessons in calligraphy, chess, and musical instruments. Chen, however, did not have the resources for any of these extra-curricular activities. Instead, she decided to focus on raising her students' 'quality' by giving them an outlet for creative expression, which she did by setting aside one class period per week as 'Quality and Creativity

Class'. The children generally used this time to sing together, tell jokes to each other, and some of the girls performed short dances. And sometimes they wrote and performed skits.

Once when I attended their 'Quality and Creativity Class', several of the fourth-grade students wrote and performed a skit that lasted about 15 minutes. It told the very simple story of a migrant worker from rural China who was unable to locate a bathroom in Beijing. In the skit, one of the children, a gifted mimic, played a middle-aged migrant with a thick rural accent. All of his efforts to find a bathroom were thwarted by various gatekeepers – local officials, policemen, Party members, neighborhood committee members – who made increasingly outrageous demands on the hapless migrant before allowing him to use their facilities. These included demands for money, permits, permission slips, letters of introduction – and, eventually, a valid Beijing *hukou* – all just to use a bathroom. The spectators – me, Principal Chen and her husband, the other fourth graders – howled with laughter as the children brilliantly imitated the officious language and imperious attitudes of local officials. At the end of the skit the migrant died for lack of a bathroom ('actually', the skit's narrator cheerfully explained, 'he exploded').

The skit demonstrated that these children were fully aware of their marginality and their positions within the moral geographies of the capital. The skit points to the power of the social hierarchies built around residence permits and rural origins, and to the children's recognition of the petty humiliations that continuously reproduce these distinctions through daily practice. The lessons taught through their textbooks, their movements through the city, and their experiences there, had all been learned only too well.

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## Notes

- 1 The name of the school and its principal and teachers have all been changed.

- 2 Guests, in this case, are foreign tourists; none of these texts, designed for children who hold Beijing residence permits, ever imply that they have a similar hospitality obligation to 'visitors' from rural China.
- 3 Chairman Mao's mausoleum is located near the southern end of Tiananmen Square.
- 4 Analysts speculate that the state's reasons for implementing the *hukou* system included: guaranteeing a reserve army of (rural) labor to meet the needs of growing industry; fears of rural migrants swamping the nation's cities; desire for a highly effective surveillance system to monitor the populace; and a legal way to limit the benefits of state socialism to a small group of workers. See Chan, 1996; Cheng and Selden, 1994; Potter and Potter, 1990; Solinger, 1995, 1999.
- 5 Cf. Anagnost, 1997.
- 6 This depends on the city that rural *hukou*-holders move to. Some Chinese cities, including Shanghai, have either abolished the *hukou* system, or make it possible for new arrivals to purchase household registrations. As of the writing of this article (late 2003), however, Beijing still retained the *hukou* system.
- 7 I will use the word 'migrant' to describe this group of people, as a translation of the unofficial Chinese term for them, '*min'gong*' or 'unofficial laborer'. This term is also potentially stigmatizing because of its lower class connotations, but unlike 'floating' it does not connote that such people are only temporary or short-term residents of the cities in which they now reside.
- 8 An exception is Zhang, 2001a, 2001b.
- 9 See Anagnost, 1997; Jeffery, 2000; Mueggler, 2001; Schein, 2000.
- 10 By summer 2001, that number had risen to over 200. *Caijing Xinwen*, internet document.
- 11 Solinger (1999: 23) says that there was a very large increase in the number of women migrating between 1990 and 1995.
- 12 Solinger (1999: 287) cites a PRC source that in 1996 there were between 1–2 million such children in urban areas across China.
- 13 *Nanfang Zhoumo*, 7 June 2001, p. 1. Worth about \$75 US. According to a Ford Foundation study done in April, 1999, the average income of a migrant family in Beijing was 800–1200 RMB/month. Monthly expenses were almost equivalent (800–1200 RMB/mo), so that some families had no money left over at the end of the month, while others were able to save up to 300 RMB/mo.
- 14 Cai Linghua, Ministry of Agriculture, private communication.
- 15 This was a division of the Ministry of Agriculture, which had some responsibility for rural *hukou*-holders, including those living in cities.
- 16 'Survey of Schools at the City's Margins', *Newsletter of Assistance of Migrant Children's Schools*, China Rural Labor Association, 1 March 2000, p. 3.

- 17 *Zhongzhuan* is the common name for ‘*zhongdeng zhuan ye xuexiao*’ or three-year, technical senior high schools, particularly those responsible for training mid-level, white-collar staff. Students enter *zhongzhuan* upon completing ninth grade. Until recently, *zhongzhuan*-level teacher training schools supplied virtually all of China’s elementary school teachers, although in Beijing and other large cities, more advanced credentials are now required. In many rural areas, however, a *zhongzhuan* certificate is still considered a symbol of a very high level of academic success (Thorgersen, 1990).
- 18 See Dutton, 1998; Liu and Liang, 1997; Zhang, 2001a for detailed discussions of the transformation of formerly rural parts of Beijing into migrant communities.
- 19 When I first began fieldwork (1999) the Third Ring Road generally (but not always) marked the outermost boundaries of the very densely urban section of the city; by the time I left two years later, that urban density had extended out in all directions to a newly constructed Fourth Ring Road. By 2003, the city had expanded outwards to a new Fifth Ring Road.
- 20 City design in Beijing (except for the very center, which dated from Imperial times) was entirely a result of modernist planning (Holston, 1989), and until the 1990s very few sections of the city were segregated by class. Housing was almost entirely owned by the state sector and, because of large-scale demolition of poor-quality, traditional-style housing immediately after Liberation, by the late 1980s most existing housing stock in Beijing was very similar in design and amenities. For the most part, until very recently it was generally very difficult to tell the wealth or social class of a particular neighborhood in Beijing simply by looking at it. Poorer and wealthier people lived in quite close conjunction, and frequently in housing that looked very similar from the outside; an actual ‘slum’ was, until then, difficult for me to conceptualize (Zhu, 1999; cf. Zhang, 2001b).
- 21 The Little Red Pioneers is the section of the Communist Youth League reserved for children aged 7–14. Membership, marked by a red scarf, is (virtually) ubiquitous among China’s schoolchildren. Most elementary-school children in Beijing also wore yellow woolen hats in winter, and, less frequently, yellow baseball caps in warmer weather. The hats’ bright color was supposed to make the children more clearly visible to drivers.
- 22 *Financial News* (Beijing), 7 June 2001, p. 1; China Rural Labor Association, 1 March 2000, p. 3.
- 23 Sunday was most likely a work day for their parents, who would only have been able to bring the children to school at their regular time.
- 24 Located in Beijing’s northwest corner near the Fragrant Hills that abut the city, the Summer Palace was built in the late Qing Dynasty as a summer-time retreat for the imperial family to escape summer’s heat. After the overthrow of the Qing, the palace was turned into a public park.
- 25 I thank Wang Mingming of Beijing University for pointing this out.



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