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Rural migrants and their marital problems: discourses of governing and knowledge production in China — Source link

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Abstract

Since 2010, there has been a noticeable increase in China's academic publications about young rural migrants' love life. Social scientists play a crucial role in shaping public opinions and policy formations regarding the welfare of individuals from this disadvantaged group. Knowledge about rural migrants' marital problem – the nature of their problem, its causes and possible solutions – provides legitimation to the government's social policies, and for this reason it warrants careful investigation. Taking an interpretative policy analysis approach, the paper analyses the recurring narrative and discursive frameworks in the Chinese-language scholarship. Furthermore, it juxtaposes scholarship produced inside and outside China in order to bring into sharp relief the 'Chinese characteristics' of China's scholarly publications in the fields of social sciences. The paper also discusses why the private life of rural migrants has become a source of political and social anxiety. This discussion demonstrates the complex connection between socioeconomic inequality, social policy formations, and the cultural politics of class in post-socialist China.

Introduction

In January 2010, the Chinese central government issued a 'No.1 Document' – a policy edict from the highest authority – in which the government declared its intention to 'step up efforts to solve the problem facing second-generation rural migrant workers'. This was the first time the term 'second-generation rural migrant workers' had appeared in the government's key documents (Sun, R. 2010). The term refers to

young rural migrants born in the 1980s and 1990s. Many are the children of the rural migrants who went to the city to seek employment in the first two decades of economic reforms. A National Bureau of Statistics report published in 2016 reveals that China's internal migrants now number 278 million. Migrant labour services a wide range of sectors, including manufacturing and construction as well as service industries. Workers between 21 and 30 make up 29.2% of this community, with another 3.7% aged between 16 and 20 (National Bureau of Statistics 2016). The pattern of the marital status of rural migrants is also changing. A 2006 survey indicated that up to 80% of the entire migrant labour force was married, compared to only 20% in 2009 (Sun, W. 2014).

The No.1 Document of 2010 precipitated a number of nation-wide surveys about the lives of rural migrant young people. In the same year, the All China Workers' Union released a report based on a survey of rural migrants in 10 cities across several provinces, pointing out that a widespread sense of loneliness due to the lack of romantic prospects had become a 'defining' aspect of the migrant experience (ACFTU 2010):

> The second-generation rural migrants are mostly unmarried. This means that members of this community will experience important rites of passage – falling in love, getting married, having children, and sending children to school – while working away from home. This forms a sharp contrast to the first-generation rural migrants, 80% of whom were married. This is a problem we can no longer afford to ignore. (ACFTU 2010)

A similar sense of urgency was also conveyed in a report by the China Research Centre for Youths and Children, which found that more than 70% of the construction workers surveyed considered emotional loneliness as the most painful aspect of their migrant life (People's Daily online 2012).

Calls to pay attention to the emotional life of rural migrant youth have come from concerned public figures, scholars and media as well as government organizations. In 2013, Feng Gong made a formal submission to the 12th Communist Party Congress, highlighting the fact that many young rural migrants have trouble finding a marriage partner. Feng, a household name in China for his humorous cross-talk performances, is also a member of the national committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and a permanent member of the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang. He argues that the government should work hard to 'elevate the level of happiness of China's rural migrants' (Shao 2013).

China's social science scholars, think-tank researchers, policy makers, and media interpreted the No. 1 document as a clear signal that rural migrants' marital difficulties had become a matter of pressing concern. Discussions and analyses dealing with young rural migrants' difficulties in finding marriage partners have since appeared in a number of discursive spaces, including (1) national newspapers such as the *People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily*, which target readers in elite intellectual and policy-making circles; (2) widely circulated periodicals such as *Observation and Thinking* (*观察与思考*) and *Open Times* (*开放时代*), which target the general public but with a distinct concern with social issues; and (3) in social sciences academic journals.

Starting from 2010, there has been a noticeable increase in academic research publications about rural migrants and marriage. A search of the China Academic Journals Database – a part of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and the most comprehensive full-text database of Chinese journals in the world – using key words such as 'new-generation rural migrants' (新生代农民工) and 'marriage' (婚姻/婚恋) – points to a sharp increase in the number of research papers on this topic. Over the 32-year period of 1978 to 2009, there are 7754 results in total, whereas there are as many as 12,860 results within the six years from 2010 to 2015. In other words, the pre-2010 average was 242 papers per year on this topic, compared with 2143 papers per annum after 2010. It is safe to conclude that two main factors have contributed to this sharp increase: the empirical reality that second-generation young people have reached marriageable age, and the problematization of this issue from the point of view of the government.

The increased academic output on this topic is a safe indication of the level of anxiety on the part of the government. To attract funding as well as to get published, the majority of social scientists in China tend to choose to research on topics which are prioritised by the government – there are few alternative funding opportunities for social sciences in China. While social scientists had relatively more freedom to pursue critical research and collaborate with scholars outside China in the earlier decades of economic reforms, there has been much tighter ideological control in the last decade, especially since Xi Jinping's regime which began in November 2012.[i] The social sciences in China are now closely scrutinised, and are expected to serve the political agenda of the Party and the government and conduct research within ideological and political parameters that shore up the Party's legitimation. In 2013, Chinese

universities were told by propaganda authorities not to talk about 'seven things', including universal values, freedom of speech, civil society, human rights, and mistakes of the Chinese Communist Party (Carlson 2013). In May 2016, in his speech addressing an assembly of social scientists in China, President Xi reiterated these restrictions, saying that social sciences in China should have 'Chinese characteristics'. This included rejecting Western liberalism, supporting the political mandate of the Party, and avoiding anything that showed the Chinese Communist Party government and top leaders in a negative light (Xi 2016). Following these prescriptions, in 2016, the China Academy of Social Sciences, China's key social science research entity, announced a new policy to scrutinise all theses for their ideological soundness (Radio France International 2016).

In this paper I argue that we need to subject the scholarly writings in social sciences in China to critique not *in spite of* but *because of* the state-imposed categories and definitions according to which they operate. As members of a disadvantaged community, rural migrants embody China's most intractable problems of inequality, and as such, they are poorly represented in both political and institutional terms (Sun 2014). Social scientists in China function as key intermediaries between the government and the rural migrant community, and their roles are both important and ambiguous. On the one hand, they are well-educated, urban and professional individuals whose interests and views are closely aligned with the conservative state agenda on social stability (Li 2013; Ren 2013). On the other hand, these knowledge class elites play a crucial role in shaping public opinions and policy narratives about the welfare of individuals from this disadvantaged group. And their research about rural migrants' social experiences – the nature of their problem, its causes and

possible solutions – provides legitimation of the government's social policies, and for this reason it warrants careful investigation. More specifically, what causes this problem, and what are the proposed remedies according to this body of scholarship? What political and moral impulses propel the production of these views, and to what extent can the creation of this knowledge effectively dispel the government's anxiety?

This paper is concerned with these questions. Since a high level of ideological uniformity is expected in China's social sciences publications, the main objective of this analysis is not to generate quantitative data that confirms the presence or absence of diverse or even oppositional views. Rather, I adopt a critical discourse analysis method, aiming to interpret the 'meaning' of 'situation-specific' narratives (Yanow 2007, 110), in order to highlight 'multiple and competing discourses in policy texts' (Taylor 2004, 433). My intention here is to identify and then make sense of the principal discursive positions in this body of research. For this reason, the paper takes as its focus of analysis recurring narratives in contemporary social sciences scholarship on this topic. Drawing on a selection of papers published since 2010 retrieved from the Chinese Journal Database of the CNKI, I first conduct a critical analysis of key narrative frames. This is followed by an analysis of the politics of 'personal qualities', which, I argue, lends moral legitimacy to the discourse of governance. In both these sections of the paper, I juxtapose sociological/anthropological scholarship produced inside and outside China in order to bring into sharp relief the 'Chinese characteristics' of internal publications. In the final section, I discuss the reasons why the private life of rural migrants has become a source of political and social anxiety. My main aim is to shed light on how a neoliberal discourse of governance assists an authoritarian state in its management of

inequality.[ii] In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the incontrovertible but complex connection between socioeconomic inequality, social policy formations, and the cultural politics of class, and in doing so, also outline the 'Chinese characteristics' of such a connection.

Problems, causes and remedies

In the research literature surveyed, the difficulty facing rural migrant young people in their attempts to establish intimate relationships or find marriage partners is predominantly presented as a given, but interpretations diverge as to the causes of these problems. A recurring explanation is lack of equity and access, largely as a consequence of China's long-standing *hukou* policy.

Research on hukou outside China

Hukou is a Chinese term meaning 'household registration system'. Since its implementation in the late 1950s, China's long-standing and deeply ingrained *hukou* policy has effectively divided the nation along urban–rural lines, with up to 70 percent of the population having rural *hukou*. While the policy was used from the late 1950s until the late 1970s to keep villagers in the countryside, incremental reforms to the *hukou* system over the past few decades have made it possible for 'ruralites' to leave home in search of labour opportunities (Chan and Buckingham 2008; Jacka 2006; Solinger 1999; Wang, F. 2005; Zhang, L. 2001). Reforms in the *hukou* system have been implemented initially to meet demands for labour in the export-oriented market, and in more recent years, as a strategy to stimulate domestic consumption and continued economic growth. However, despite myriad reform measures, the

governments – both central and local – have been unwilling to abolish the strictures that persistently discriminate against rural migrants.

Due to the inherently discriminatory nature of the household registration system, *hukou* has become a keyword in the study of inequality in China and rural-to-urban migration. Examined from institutional and structural perspectives, *hukou* can be understood as a two-tiered system which shapes the systematic practice of social exclusion against the rural migrants who come to work and live in the city. Such exclusion, justified by the political and practical necessity of socialist geopolitics, continues to shape the unequal distribution of a range of social benefits, including health care, education, housing, and employment. Indeed, if we consider citizenship in the sense of social membership (Solinger 1999), an effectively two-tiered citizenship system continues to play a pivotal role in China. Situated in the context of structure versus agency dynamics, the issue of *hukou* is also central to anthropologists wishing to understand rural migrant individuals' behaviour, practices, and subjectivity. For this reason, ethnographic accounts of China's rural migrants produced by anthropologists outside China engage directly with the *hukou* question (Zhang, L. 2001, 2002; Pun 2005; Jacka 2006; Sun 2009; Gaetano 2015). In recent years, scholars have argued that the discriminatory nature of the *hukou* system has both material and symbolic components, in that does not simply divide people into rural and urban populations, but also shapes in myriad ways how each group imagines and talks about the other (Yan, 2008; Sun 2009, 2014).

Research on hukou inside China

Echoing the sociological and anthropological literature on *hukou* produced outside China, some Chinese social scientists also believe that *hukou* is largely responsible for the urban–rural disparity, and that it is a significant contributing factor for rural migrants' marriage problems (Li and Pu 2011; Guo 2013). They believe that a number of issues in the lives of rural migrants contribute to their difficulty finding marriage partners, all of which are shaped by, as well as directly correlated with, the *hukou* policy. For instance, most rural migrant young people have no permanent housing to their name, no secure employment or income, and low social status. Given their low income, they cannot afford to go on a date, let alone save enough money for housing, a car, wedding gifts, and a wedding, all of which urbanites consider essential (Fan 2011; Zhu 2012).

We also learn from this literature that young rural migrants of both sexes share common issues. Many are either born in the city or have lived in the city most of their lives. Most have few skills and little interest in farming, and most do not want to go back to the village to live (ACFTU 2010). At the same time, their prospects of settling in the city and enjoying similar entitlements as urban residents are barely better than those of their parents (Huang 2011). The ambiguity and uncertainty in terms of status (urban or rural residence) and identity (worker or peasant), plus a high level of mobility (frequently moving from one place to another to find employment) are anathema to sustained, long-term relationships (Fan 2011; Song and Li 2015). Furthermore, their employment is mostly characterised by long hours and low wages. Many migrant young people work in gender-specific workplaces, either the male-dominated construction sector or the female-dominated toy and clothing manufacture

sector, and they therefore have few chances to meet young people of the opposite sex (Liu 2011).

At the same time, it is also clear from this literature that *hukou*-determined socio-economic marginality affects rural migrant women and men in different ways. In their attempt to improve their life chances through marriage by obtaining an urban *hukou*, a small percentage of rural women end up marrying urban men who themselves face some kind of disadvantage. These men may be older, divorced, disabled, or poor. In marrying 'outside' their *hukou,* these women reduce the marriage prospects of male rural migrants within the cohort (Li and Pu 2011). A small percentage of migrant women become the mistresses of urban married men (Liu 2001). In both cases, these attempts to 'marry up' on the part of rural migrant women (Shi 2015) are found to lack 'emotional foundation', and often end in unhappiness (Xu, C. 2006; Guo 2013). Across both sexes, then, the literature identifies two important patterns: first, rural migrant women have a much better chance than men to achieve cross-*hukou* marriages; second, for rural migrant community as a whole, the majority of marriages and intimate relationships are with someone from their own cohort. For most rural migrants, successful marriages with urban people are simply 'wishful thinking' (Wu, X. 2011, 15).

In the meantime, while some women aspire to upward mobility through marriage (often in vain), almost all writings surveyed for this paper point to the fact that rural men at the bottom rung, unable attract women of similar status, report widespread feeling of sexual repression and low self-esteem. Not being able to afford betrothal gifts is cited as a key impediment to finding a marriage partner (Miao 2012). Many rural migrant men also report being rejected on the grounds that they do not own a

house, or because they have too many siblings or an impoverished family background, or because they come from a poor and remote area. In other words, if you are a rural migrant man who meets this description – and many of them do – your chances of finding a marriage partner are slim, especially if you are not physically attractive or do not have an engaging personality. A survey of 579 young Foxconn workers conducted by a labour-advocacy group found that up to 70% of male workers are single and without a girlfriend (Deng Kang 2015). Older migrants – those in their late 20s and 30s – are already living with the stigma of being 'men left on the shelf' (剩男). Yet, the pressure from their parents remains relentless. For this cohort, the emotional pain derives equally from loneliness and sexual repression and from the guilt of having let their parents down.

But it is not just the single young migrants who face difficulty in seeking love and fulfilment. Married rural migrants are also reported to face myriad challenges. The most obvious problem is long-term separation and its consequence of the absence of conjugal intimacy. Married couples, many of whom live in different cities and often in separate dormitory accommodation in the same cities, find it difficult to sustain conjugal relationships. One nation-wide survey in 2011 found that an increasing number of rural migrants get married while they are living an itinerant life and remain separated after marriage (Song et al. 2012). Rural migrants score much higher than their urban counterparts for divorce rates, loveless marriages, extra-marital affairs, and contraction of venereal diseases (Chongqing Report 2010).

Chang Zizhong, a research fellow at the Centre for Development under the State Council, a key policy think-tank in China, could not be more explicit about the link

between the happiness of individual rural migrants and the responsibility of the government:

> Some people may say that marriage is a personal matter and has nothing to do with society and government. Some say that if the individual can't find someone to marry, the mayor cannot be expected to be of any help. But in reality, the obstacles preventing young rural migrants from marrying are structural. The obstacles are caused by the socio-economic disadvantages rural migrants suffer as a result of our *hukou* system and our employment and education systems. The problems are a direct result of young migrants not having their basic rights guaranteed, and not having full access to their entitlements as citizens. Marriage is the next big problem facing rural migrants; it is also becoming a major new challenge facing the urban government. (Chang, Zizhong 2010a, 44)

Suzhi – the other side of the coin?

However, although these writers believe the causes of rural migrants' marriage difficulty are structural, and some gesture towards the end to reform the *hukou* system, they at the same time make it clear that a critique of the *hukou* policy alone cannot solve rural migrants' problems. Many writers list the 'undesirable' attitudes, outlooks and behaviours of rural migrant youths. They hold the view that, typically, rural migrants suffer from inadequate 'personal qualities', or *suzhi*, as it is referred in Chinese (Xiao and Chen 2012; Song and Li 2015). *Suzhi* is an all-purpose, all-encompassing term that is often used to refer to an individual's lack of civility, morality and self-discipline (Jacka 2009). Rural migrants' emotional problems are perceived to be both a consequence and a symptom of their low *suzhi*. In the view of

many researchers, rural migrant young people do not have an accurate understanding of what love is, and they date someone only to relieve boredom or loneliness, or to meet their need for companionship or sexual gratification. Migrant youth are also critiqued for not understanding the serious and long-term implications of getting married, and for tending to get married on impulse, thus leading to the common phenomenon of 'shotgun weddings', followed by 'flash divorces'. Furthermore, while rural migrant young people are open-minded about sex, they are perceived to be less prepared to accept the responsibility associated with sexual freedom. Finally, research suggests that young rural migrants are largely uneducated about a wide range of health-related issues to do with pregnancy, birth control, and childcare (Xiao and Chen 2012; Song and Li 2015).

According to many researchers, low *suzhi* means that rural migrants fall victim to the myriad and cacophonous discourses on love and sexuality on the internet and in commercial media, popular culture and social media. These domains are judged to have a negative impact on impressionable young rural migrants. As one paper observes, many rural migrants 'swallow, without digesting, the cultural fast food which is readily on offer' (Xiao and Chen 2012). As noted by some researchers, young rural migrants in the city are now widely exposed to urban ways of living, and many have come to expect a similar standard of consumption as city people, although this is unrealistic on their modest incomes (e.g. Yang and Shu 2010; Pan and Ge 2014). Internet-based popular culture is also widely blamed for the 'incorrect' outlook displayed by rural migrant youths. Rural migrants are believed to be particularly susceptible to negative influences, as they have trouble discerning the difference between the real and the virtual, the possible and the unrealistic.

The politics of personal qualities

In these narratives of problems, causes and remedies, we see a juxtaposition of socioeconomic and moral–cultural arguments. Policy recommendations in these writings are a mixture of critiques of *hukou* policy on the one hand, and argument in favour of *suzhi* education on the other. What is noteworthy is that these two arguments are more often than not presented as two sides of the same coin, and as complementary and compatible. *Suzhi* has become widespread since the 1980s and refers to the 'innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct' (Jacka 2009). Usually translated as 'personal qualities', *suzhi* is an extremely resourceful 'keyword' (Kipnis 2006) in the anthropological work on rural migrants conducted by scholars outside China,. It is often used to decry a range of deficiencies ranging from a lack of formal schooling and low literacy to poor personal hygiene and inappropriate table manners. *Suzhi* is usually found to be lacking in the behaviour of peasants living in poor provinces and migrants from these provinces (Bakken 2000; Jacka 2009; Anagnost 2008; Yan 2008; Sun, W. 2009).

Social scientists in China generally consider the link between low *suzhi* and problems in rural migrants' love lives as natural and logical, and as part of a well-established 'conventional wisdom', requiring no substantiation. In fact, *suzhi* discourse is central to the definition of what are referred to as 'disadvantaged social groups', and to the explanation of their formation: certain social groups become socioeconomically disadvantaged because they have low *suzhi* in the first place. Following this 'logic', recommendations aimed at solving their marital problems by increasing their *suzhi*

level seem equally logical and natural. Many papers share a similar view to the following one:

> A key factor which negatively affects rural migrants' attitudes to love and marriage is a lack of *suzhi* and capacity for moral self-discipline. Given this, a crucial pathway is education. Education will elevate their *suzhi* level, raise their awareness of civility, guide them to adopt correct values related to marriage, and foster in them an upbeat and positive outlook in life. (Zhao, L. 2013, 130)

If we are to follow the logic implicit in this quotation, rural migrants' lack of marital happiness is caused as much as their *suzhi* deficiency (lack of the 'right' personal qualities) as it is by structural inequality. As some writers argue, although rural migrants' problems manifest in economic terms, they are nevertheless caused by an individual's incapacity to gain a grounded view of life. According to such critics, migrant young people need to adopt a more realistic viewpoint or – to put it more bluntly – hold lower expectations about love and a happy marriage. Chang Zizhong, the same research fellow who highlighted structural, *hukou*-based inequality in an earlier quotation, observes that the government needs to find a way to convince rural migrant individuals that they can enjoy the romance of dating despite their difficult material circumstances, and that they can have a happy marriage which 'though not extravagant, can still give them some warmth' (Chang, Z. 2010b, 44). In other words, rather than arguing for the redistribution of economic resources in order to reduce inequality between various social groups, these writers believe that rural migrants should learn to be content with whatever level of love, romance and happiness they can achieve in their inferior status. Here, 'unrealistic' expectations about love and marriage are seen as a symptom of *suzhi* deficiency. Although these writers'

suggestion may be well-meaning, it nevertheless appears to betray a sense of class superiority, giving the impression of wanting to put those in the lower classes in their place.

Another symptom widely discussed in this body of literature is rural migrants' lack of self-awareness, self-reflection and capacity for psychological 'self-adjustment' in general. A typical suggestion involves psychological counselling, which is believed to be beneficial to rural migrants whose failure in pursuit of intimacy leaves them feeling depressed, frustrated and inadequate (Li and Pu 2011). Here, it seems that *suzhi* can be a double-edged sword: while it provides a basis for policy recommendations for the provision of skills training, health education and psychological counselling for migrant workers, it also provides a potent moral foundation on which prejudices associated with this social group can be validated and justified. An even more explicit attempt to frame workers' difficulties as an issue of psychological maladjustment can be found in a paper that argues that many concepts and methods in positive psychology, widely practised in the US, could be introduced to help rural migrants convert their negative feelings into positive ones so that their sense of happiness could be improved (Li, L. and Yu, Q. 2014).

Rural migrant young people's lack of *suzhi* is seen to have other worrisome consequences. It underlies their inability to negotiate the differences between modern and traditional attitudes and practices about sex and sexuality. A recurring narrative in this body of research is the tension facing rural migrant young people between, on the one hand, the modern ideas of individual choice, freedom, autonomy, and romantic love and, on the other, pressure from their parents to get married and have children as soon as possible. Widely exposed to the images and discourses of sexual freedom,

young rural migrants are reported to be much more accepting of co-habitation, sex before marriage, extra-marital affairs, and having children out of wedlock. At the same time, unable to resist pressure from both parents and society at large, during their visits home, many rural migrant young people in their late teens and early twenties engage in endless rounds of speed dating arranged by friends and relatives, often followed by shotgun weddings, some of which result in a quick divorce plus unwanted pregnancies (Zhu 2012; Wu, X. 2011). In other words, commentators suggest that rather than taking advantage of the benefits of modern attitudes towards sexuality to maximise their chances for intimacy as their urban middle-class counterparts do (Sun and Lei 2016), rural migrants are only interested casual sex – a superficial dimension of modern relationships. Worse still, this casual attitude towards sex is now widely associated with marriage breakdown on the one hand, and, worse still, the rise in sexual crime and the spread of venereal diseases on the other (Li and Pu 2011; Zhu 2012; Wu, X. 2011).

This persistent view of the moral and psychological inadequacy of rural migrants is in sharp contrast to scholarship on rural migrants produced by anthropologists and sociologists outside China. There, structural inequality not only accounts for rural migrants' material and economic disadvantage; it is also understood to shape the unequal ways in rural migrants are represented and recognised in the political and cultural domains. In other words, rather than pointing to moral deficiency as a likely cause for the hardships facing rural migrants, this scholarship usually critiques the very discourse of moral education. In contrast to the discourse promoting *suzhi* improvement, outside China the supposed and taken-for-granted link between *suzhi* deficiency and rural migrants is widely interrogated (e.g. Jacka 2006; 2009; Yan 2008;

Anagnost 2004; Sun 2009). For instance, engaging with the Marxist notion of surplus value, Yan Hairong, an anthropologist studying China's rural migrants, argues that *suzhi* functions as an 'intangible operator' in the labour contract. She argues that the *suzhi* discourse 'facilitates exploitation and makes it invisible', and in so doing, is central to a neoliberal governmentality (Yan 2003, 498). According to the logic of capital, *suzhi*, a concept which has become measurable and quantifiable, is used to evaluate the economic worth of individuals. This is most vividly embodied in rural migrants' low wages. The systematic practice of hiring migrants as cheap labour – thus enabling profit generation and capital accumulation – is morally justifiable due to the perceived low *suzhi* level on the parts of rural people. In other words, Yan argues that *suzhi*, as an articulation of a person's value, extracts value from rural migrant workers and this is crucial to the economic production of surplus value.

Suzhi discourse is not only important to contemporary China's booming, globally oriented market economy, it is also essential to new post-socialist forms of state governance and state control, as argued by Jacka (2009), another anthropologist studying rural migrants. This is because the *suzhi* discourse plays a central role in justifying the inclusion and exclusion of individuals from certain social groups in terms of rights and responsibilities (e.g. Jacka 2009). Echoing these arguments, Ann Anagnost points out that *suzhi* provides a crucial means of justifying class exploitation and domination. While the urban middle class justifies its privilege on grounds of their better *suzhi* (Tomba 2014), many aspirational rural migrants respond to the urban residents' view by trying to improve themselves and become more 'cultured' and 'civilized' (Jacka 2009).

Despite the seemingly natural and unquestionable ease with which these two arguments – the socioeconomic versus the moral–cultural – co-exist in the social sciences papers examined here, they are informed by radically different political and ideological positions, and are likely to produce vastly different socioeconomic outcomes. After all, *hukou* offers a socioeconomic argument against inequality, whereas a *suzhi*-based explanation is an argument that defends and justifies inequality. The *hukou*-based argument made in these papers is informed by socioeconomic reality, but to push this argument further and suggest radical redistribution of economic resources is not in the interests of the middle class, and therefore political unviable from the point of the Chinese state. There is little explicit elaboration in this literature about what concrete measures may be feasible, nor is much thought given to the likely ramifications of *hukou* reforms in regards to the support of the urban middle classes. Recent reports of vociferous opposition by Beijing and Shanghai residents to proposals granting equal rights to migrants in Beijing (Nanfang Weekend 2014) serve as a timely reminder of the likely backlash that any *hukou*-based pie-sharing policy recommendations may encounter from urban residents and socio-economic elites.

Public debates and academic literature on *hukou* reforms have indeed produced some tangible policy change. For instance, recent attempts to reform *hukou* system in some cities by adopting a point system – accumulation of points based on education, home ownership, and payment of taxes over a certain number of years. On the surface, this measure appears to have done away with the urban-rural distinction, but in reality, it privileges the wealthy and the educated – those who are usually believed to have good *suzhi* – while continuing to exclude the vast majority of rural migrant workers in low-wage and unskilled jobs. Some scholars believe that this may further hurt the interests

of rural migrants if they are to lose the rights to their land (Wallis 2016). Seen in this light, *kukou* reforms may have been widely promoted as a key measure for bringing about such limited redistribution without fundamentally altering social relations. Indeed, in its earnest desire to shore up political legitimacy, the Chinese Communist Party has sought to ameliorate social inequality 'through limited redistributive intervention without having to deal with inequality-generating productive processes and relations' (Guo 2012, 736). However, such intervention is too slow and too limited to benefit rural migrants in the foreseeable future.

Rural migrants' love lives and the maintenance of stability

In Chinese-language scholarship on rural migrants, the link between the rural migrants' social problems and the potential of these problems to disrupt China's stability and social harmony is taken for granted, and is often used as the justification for studying this group (Li Peilin 2003; Li Qiang 2004). It is clear that the presence of a large cohort of unmarried but sexually repressed or sexually active rural migrant young people in urban China is unsettling to the government and the state in general on a number of levels. Many young migrants are believed to be ignorant about health, especially related to pregnancy, birth control, and childcare. Some young migrants are reported to commonly engage in prostitution, commodified sex, and unprotected sex, which lead to the spread of venereal diseases and unwanted pregnancies, posing challenges to public health and the state's birth control policy (Song and Li 2015). Furthermore, sexual repression is believed to have ramifications for law and order and to pose a serious threat to the moral order (Chang 2010b, 44).

But concerns about these issues are social and political as well as moral and legal. Since a stable heterosexual family structure is considered to be the basic unit for the

maintenance of social order (Evans 1997), the percentage of single young rural migrants is considered to be a direct threat to social stability, linked as these statistics are with higher incidents of 'shotgun marriages', divorces, broken homes, and neglected children. There is a widespread contemporary perception of a link between repressed sexuality on the part of the unmarried rural migrant men and sex-related crimes in urban areas. In addition, historical literature also points to a connection between frustrated marital aspirations and social unrest in China (Bronwell and Wasserstrom 2002; Sommers 2000). It may well have been to maintain stability that, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, many unmarried 'over-age' young people received help from various government bodies to find a marriage partner when they returned to the city from the countryside (Zhang and Sun 2014). By comparison with rural migrants, the problems urban professionals face with finding a marriage partner, though equally real, are perceived to be less worrisome from the point of view of social stability. Instead of direct government intervention, to help urban young people the market has stepped in (Zhang and Sun 2014).

But the government's anxiety about rural migrants' marital problems goes beyond a concern with social order. The issue is now considered to directly impinge on the government's political legitimacy. After more than three decades of economic reforms, the various CCP leadership regimes have become increasingly aware of the threat to political legitimacy posed by a growing level of class-based inequality. To a great extent, the maintenance of social stability and the CCP's political legitimacy is believed to rely on its capacity to minimize, if not remove, the feeling of being stuck experienced by subaltern groups, particularly young people. It is logical to speculate that the concern with social inequality circulating in scholarly literature and media

helps shape and sharpen the government's understanding of its political challenge. This is evidenced in the rhetoric of top leaders. In his speech at the 'two congresses' in 2015, Premier Li Keqiang (2015) referred to the need to restructure income distribution and promote social justice, so that more young people, especially those from impoverished families, would be able to 'change their destiny through education', and would 'have more pathways for upward social mobility'. For the same reason, President Xi Jinping also stressed the need to remove obstacles which prevent people from participating in economic activities and from enjoying the fruits of economic development. He envisioned a future when everyone would have equal opportunities to succeed and to realise their dreams. Xi also warned that unless social justice were improved, there could be 'no guarantee for social harmony and stability, and people will lose faith in the economic reforms' (Wu, Z. 2015).

After all, the CCP has ostensibly abandoned its original goal of leading China towards a communist utopia and now openly declares the its central mission to be, instead, to ensure that 'our people' live a 'happy life' (Xi 2012). In other words, the level of happiness of the Chinese people has become a key performance indicator of satisfactory governance by the CCP. In his recommendation to the central government to improve the marriage prospects of rural migrants, Feng Gong – the well-known cross-talk performance artist quoted earlier – also said that the rural migrant's dream to get married and have a happy life was 'their China dream'. Feng's turn of phrase is both subtle and pointed. It reminds the government that the much touted 'China Dream' – the ideological brainchild of President Xi Jinping – would be devoid of moral substance and political legitimacy if members of China's marginalised social groups cannot even realise their humble dream of finding a marriage partner. Given

this, the statistics about rural migrants' love life (or lack of it) touches a raw nerve for the Party. This is especially the case, given that from its earliest revolutionary eras, the CCP has sought to win the support of the rural population by promising to make marriage and family life accessible to poor male peasants (Stacey 1984; Diamant 2000). To put it more bluntly, the marital difficulty of rural migrant young people is perceived to be a matter of pressing concern to the CCP, not because of these citizens' emotional unhappiness per se, but because of the likely political and social ramifications of their unhappiness.

However, although the problems in the private lives of rural migrants have become a source of anxiety for the government, structural reforms aimed at reducing inequality may turn out to have an even more disturbing and destabilizing effect on the middle class. This is because the argument for a more equitable share of resources between urban and rural citizens will have 'distributive consequences' (Stiglitz 2012, 72) – consequences which are unlikely to be welcomed by either the urban middle class or the vulnerable urban groups such as laid-off factory workers and recipients of minimum welfare benefits. It entails, in Butler's words, a redistribution of 'vulnerability' (Butler 2012) – an outcome which is unlikely to be popular with the middle classes. For this reason, the middle-class is seen to constitute a key stabilizing force in society, and as thus, are politically conservative (Ren 2013; Li, C. 2013). Threatening the social and economic interests of the middle-class by implementing social policy aiming at redistribution would risk instability as much as ignoring rural migrants' marital problems. That is the Catch-22 of the government's stability maintenance project.

Conclusion

Juxtaposing the production of scholarly work produced inside and outside China, we are able to see that both *hukou* and *suzhi* emerge as keywords. However, it is clear from this discussion that they are deployed to construct entirely different narrative frameworks within which to make sense of the emotional experience and marital difficulty of China's rural migrant youths. What lies at the core of this difference are the ways in which scholarly work is pursued to serve ideological and intellectual purposes. Protected by both geographic and political distance between themselves and China, sociologists and anthropologists outside China have the relative freedom to directly criticise the Chinese state. Motivated by a different intellectual agenda, and relatively unburdened with the need to address policy concerns or demonstrate policy implications, they generally see their core business as being to understand how the state-versus-society dynamic plays out in the context of the everyday experiences of individuals from disenfranchised communities.

This is not to say that social scientists in China are unmoved by the plight of disenfranchised groups. In fact, China-based scholars, especially those from a rural family background such as Li De (Li, D. 2011), have dedicated their research careers to documenting, often with sympathy and understanding, the conundrums and frustrations experienced by rural migrants. What sets this body of literature apart from their overseas counterpart is the fact that these Chinese researchers' scholarly knowledge is increasingly expected to both contribute to and lend credibility to the official discourse of governing. Trained to follow standard formula in presenting problems, causes and remedies, Chinese scholars are expected to generate findings that support the state's political and ideological agenda. In fact, both the structural and

cultural explanations outlined in this paper recognise that (1) the marital difficulty facing rural migrants is widespread, and the emotional needs of the rural migrants are not being met; (2) something needs to be done to address this problem. However, as my discussion has demonstrated, within China the production of knowledge about the problem is driven by an intention to govern vulnerable communities from the top down and to manage inequality, rather than by an anthropological desire to understand how social inequality shapes the emotional experiences of rural migrant individuals in their everyday lives.

There is a widespread consensus that whereas urban middle class citizens can manage the problems in their private life without much government intervention, the state should not ignore the private lives of rural migrants. At the same time, it is clear to all that, to improve rural migrants' marriage prospects, policy changes are necessary in the realms of social welfare, housing, healthcare, employment, and education. Also clear, however, is the fact that these changes may end up alienating the urban middle-class. For this reason, although the scholarly knowledge produced by China's social scientists has gone some way towards shedding important light on a pressing social issue, the politics that informs this process of production can only extend itself so far as to make the point that rural migrants have emotional needs and presently these needs are not being met.

What this discussion brings to light is the differential politics of knowledge production between China-based and overseas-based social scientists. It also uncovers the hidden connection between structural inequality and discourses of governing. Having pointed out that *hukou* is a major structural cause of rural migrants' marital problems, social scientists in China nevertheless have to stop short of proposing the

abolition of *hukou* as a structurally based solution. This is because a fundamental reform or abolition of *hukou* would lead to a radical redistribution of economic resources – a socioeconomic outcome that would not be in the interests of the middle class and therefore unviable from the point of view of the Chinese state. This is why, while some Chinese scholars certainly allude to the discriminatory nature of *hukou* and the need to reform it, very few explicitly argue for the significant reduction of structural inequality as the only effective solution. In fact, most of the policy recommendations made by these writers are along the lines of improving the *suzhi* level of rural migrants. Here, *suzhi* is framed both as a cause of inequality and as the site for its possible solution; more specifically, we see a systematic deployment of this cultural-moral discourse for the purpose of legitimating and governing – rather than reducing or eliminating – social inequality. The *hukou* system leads to structural inequality, which in turn becomes the root of rural migrants' marital difficulties. Yet, these writers do not see a *hukou*-based solution as being politically viable; it is the elephant in the room in their attempts to grapple with these issues. In its place, *suzhi* is presented as a discursive proxy, and as such, is far from convincing, both as a possible cause and as a solution. Herein lies the very root of the anxiety facing the government, China's social sciences researchers and the middle-classes in general. If anxiety is the feeling of unease about a feared outcome as well as an inability to dispel such fear, the problem of rural migrants' love life is indeed a source of anxiety. The *suzhi* discourse results from as well as further contributes to the political and social concern surrounding rural migrants' love life.

What this discussion has also uncovered is the important yet ambiguous position of China's social scientists. Adopting a critical discourse analysis, this paper

nevertheless points to the potential usefulness of future research that involves actual conversations with some of China's social scientists regarding their role as key intermediaries between vulnerable communities and the government. Such conversations may shed light on how they negotiate the possible tension between this public role and their own status as members of the middle classes. In any case, social scientists both within and outside China who are concerned with the reality of growing social inequality may want to reflect on the possibility that the knowledge they produce is not external to, and may in fact be somewhat constitutive of, the cultural politics of class.

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[i] Although it is difficult to find published evidence pointing to this, this observation is borne out by my personal communication with numerous social scientists in China.

[ii] This paper is part of a multi-year ethnographic project aiming to explore rural migrants' views on and experience with love, romance and intimacy. While drawing on insights from our fieldwork whenever it is relevant, this paper is not ethnographic, and is more concerned with the politics of discourse.