Modern Bodies in The Making:
Tales from a factory and a bar in Southern China

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Abstract

This ethnography documents and examines the rising work and spend culture of rural migrant workers in Southern China. By weaving the lifeworlds in a factory and a disco bar together with the threads of the life trajectories of workers, I try to map out the impact of China’s version of modernity on rural bodies in terms of everyday skills and aspirations. The making of modern bodies is de-traditionalizing and de-territorializing. It de-skills and re-skills rural migrants and gives them the bodily experiences of modernity, which involve the forced, calculative, flexible and reflexive shuffling of time and space. It involves the manipulation of bodies, gestures, fashions, identities and relations previously held together mainly by traditional ties. It also triggers the desire to consume a different lifestyle and to develop a new life-project. Their bodily adjustments to ‘live’ modernly are heavily guided by western imagination, in which the vision of cultural modernization as westernization is compressed, hybridized and domesticated, producing a Chinese version of non-west modernity that is conspicuously western and capitalistic. Moving along this track of social formation are the rural-turn-modern bodies of migrant workers, who acquire multiple and hybridized layers of urbanity and rurality in their fragmented life trajectories.

Keywords: rural bodies, de-territorialization, everyday life, migrant workers, modernity, life politics.
This is an ethnographic study of the restructuring of individuals’ life projects and the formation of consumerist life style among young Chinese migrant workers. During the period from 2001 to 2003, our research team regularly visited factories and disco bars in Southern China. The two main research sites in this study were a medium size factory called Gogo Ltd.\(^1\) that produces American toys with heavily regulated manual labor, and a disco bar called TC-1 that produces lifestyle services by carefully regulated emotional labor. One of my research assistants served as a factory worker and a bar waiter respectively for 3 months, while I worked more closely with the managers of the factory and the bar, interviewing migrant workers befriended by my research assistants. From these research sites we branched out to other social networks for interviews and participant observations. This research design enables us to examine how micro life-politics and trajectories are drastically reshaped by the macro dynamics of China’s tiger leap into modernity at the turn of the millennium.

Empirically, I would like to ask two sets of site-related questions. The first set is related to clustered factories: How do these factories attract rural migrants? How do transnational capitalist processes, as embodied in factories, transform the daily lives of migrant workers? How do factory workers de-skill and re-skill to adapt to the consumerist lifestyle of the city? How do they aspire and learn to become modern and urban city dwellers? The second set of empirical questions is related to discos and bars: How do ambitious factory workers venture into the “higher” consumerist labor market of the leisure industry? What is going on at the untidy and sweaty backstage of discos and bars from which the tidy and glamorous city nightlife is produced? What are the underlying processes of lifestyle formation? How does the Chinese working class
appropriate western nightlife?

In answering the above empirical questions, I am also examining the general theoretical question of how the Chinese version of modernity is realized at a micro-level of everyday routines: How does the vision of modernity provide new narratives for rural migrant workers to imagine their own future? Is consumerism providing new expressions of individuality or producing a new form of collectivity? Eurocentric theorization of a singular evolution of modernity has been deconstructed as a historical specific vision that is blind to non-western alternatives (Eisenstadt, 2000). China’s still fledgling modernity, as an illustrative case, can be characterized as compressed and hybridized in the sense that it is rapidly catching up with existing modes of modernity in the west (Chan & Ma, 2002; Lee, 2000; Yeh, 2000). China benefits from the effects of accelerating temporal-spatial compression of information technologies, while at the same time it retains to early forms of assembly line capitalism. China is now providing and sustaining transnational “liquid” modernity\(^2\) with its very competitive and seemingly unlimited labor base. This labor base is composed of rural migrants who remain embedded in traditional networks (Man, 2001) but have found their way into new social networks in the cities, where urbanity is networked, differentiated, consumer-led, and transnational.

In China, a primitive production line economy coexists with what Lash & Urry (1994) termed “sign/space economy.” This Chinese compressed modernity has multiple socio-cultural layers juxtaposing each other. In spatial terms, factory zones are layered upon agricultural communities. In cultural terms, traditional practices are mixed with consumerist lifestyles. In social terms, the working class comes into close contact with the rising affluent middle class with astonishing social inequality. These local social
helixes are multi-layered and are also revolving around the push and pull of global and transnational dynamics.\textsuperscript{3}

In Southern China, compressed and multi-layered modernity means the pluralization of life choices, in which various forms of individuality are imagined and practiced. This pluralization is particularly conspicuous when contrasted with the collectivity that had been engineered by socialist China for more than 3 decades.\textsuperscript{4} As Giddens (1992; 1991; 1990) has pinpointed, modernity is reconstructing everyday life at very personal and intimate levels. In China’s market economy, there are bubbling new ways of making a living and fashioning a lifestyle, which require new sets of everyday tactics and skills. Previously fixated life patterns are now becoming life projects of reflexive individuals. In fact, Beck and Beck (2002) goes further by saying that modernity is a process of ‘forced’ individualization. To have a life of one’s own is not a choice, but an inevitability of modernity.

For Giddens and Beck, life projects are identity-based, which is both cognitive and emotive. In this ethnographic study, the reconstruction of my informants’ life projects has a more bodily component. Rural migrant workers learn to be modern city dwellers by disciplining their bodies, changing their postures, and manipulating their looks. Their future aspirations are embodied in visions of successful stereotypes of working and consuming bodies saturated in the media and social networks. However, these new possibilities of individuality, of shaping one’s own life, of remaking one’s own body, have been conceptualized in dominant discourses in very different ways: Marxist culturalists tend to depict work and spend consumerism as a social configuration that produces pseudo-individualism masked by the illusion of relatively unattainable upward
mobility, while liberal pluralist journalistic discourses tend to narrate consumerist
capitalism as a form of liberation that rewards hardworking individuals in particular and
improves the living standard of the whole region in general. In this paper, I want to
“bracket” grand structural narrative and observe more closely the making of modern
bodies at the micro ethnomethodological level of everyday life. My question is, in short,
how do rural-turn-modern bodies express themselves in Chinese compressed modernity?

Migrating to the South

In China’s compressed modernity, migration is not just a possibility but also a
compulsion for the rural poor to pursue a better life. Massive migration from rural areas
to urban areas, from the north to the south, from the inner cities to the coastal lands has
been one of the significant social changes in China since the 1990s (Lin, 1997; Logan,
2002). As China is catching up with modernity, when overseas capital, ideas, information,
technology and people rush into China for larger markets and lower costs, many Chinese
are also pursuing their version of modern life. In contemporary China, movement is the
synonym for progress.

In the summer of 2001, I boarded on a transborder bus in Hong Kong and headed
for Dongguan, a nearby province in Southern China. After a month developing a pilot
study there, I finally settled down in a medium size toy factory composed of about 500
workers. I worked in the packing department for a half a day to case my research design.
My first task of labeling the boxes was simple and monotonous. Being a stranger among
the skillful female workers, I was the focus of their attention. I spoke informally with
them about whatever they found interesting. For them, Dongguan is already a colorful,
modern city; and the more remote Hong Kong is a paradise of wealth and fun. For most of them, especially those newcomers, the picture of city life is based more on imagination than experience. Cultural and social distance is the best catalyst for imagination, and fanciful imagination is one of the motivating forces behind the massive migration.

Rural laborers are attracted to the factories for various reasons. Economic hardship is the main reason that is mentioned by the workers. Xu, the packing supervisor of Gogo Toy Factory, joined her cousins to start working in the factory because there was a drought in her homeland in 1993 and the crop that her family depended on for livelihood was badly ruined. The gigantic economic gap between Southern China and her homeland became the pulling force, while excessive labor in rural China was the great pushing force. Most workers we met in the factory have the education level of junior high school and do not have particular skills. Most of them said it is almost impossible to find a job at home. While Fordist production lines in Southern China require only minimal education and skills, they do require intensive labor. Rural workers are most welcome in these factory clusters.

From our casual conversations with migrant workers, it was quite easy to get a general impression that physical mobility in China is largely triggered by the great economic differentials within China. However, these internal differentials are also the result of a complicated transnational division of labor -- in Hong Kong-managed Gogo, mainland Chinese workers produce toys for the American toy market. At the heart of this transnational toy markets is a chain reaction propelled by the push and pull of Chinese workers’ demand for jobs; and the American children’s demand for cheap but quality toys. Hong Kong entrepreneurs, equipped with their expertise in management and
marketing, are mediating between the Chinese labor marker and the American toy market. This paper will not focus on this international division of labor, but it should be noted that the “making of modern bodies” in these factories are the composite result of domesticated transnational capitalism (Photo 1).

Photo 1: Chinese workers produce American toys in a Hong Kong-managed factory

Disciplining rural bodies

News stories in which factory workers are burned to death are stunningly unforgettable. A well-known case was the fire in a Shenzhen factory in the early 1990s in which a dozen of female workers were found dead in a locked dormitory. Television programs and academic papers were produced based on the personal letters of the victims and a dozen news stories. Besides tragic accidents, we are also familiar with stories of exploitation, such as child labor, low wages, and unpaid overtime. It is a fact that most factories in Southern China fall far below the standards of a reasonable working environment and humanitarian living standards proposed by western industrial nations. In western journalistic and academic discourse, industrial zones in Southern China are comparable to concentration camps. Yet, in popular media, there are liberal pluralists who
believe that the mushrooming of factories means the increase in the living standards of
the whole Southern Chinese region. In fact, the official position endorsed and promoted
by the ruling Chinese Communist Party is that of a die-hard, liberal capitalist. Investment
and development are acts of mercy to the ordinary people because, in the long run, they
too can enjoy the fruit of economic prosperity. Laboring in the factory helps them get out
of poverty and become one of the driving forces for social mobility.

The Pearl River Delta is peppered with factory zones (Lin, 1997). Is the running
production line a sign of exploitation or a symbol of liberation? Here, I am not
subscribing to the official discourse of development, neither am I restating the claims of
progressive journalists and western left-wing critical theorists that transnational
capitalists are exploitive and dehumanizing. My aim is to understand the transformation
of everyday life sparked by China’s compressed modernity. Indeed, Gogo factory is a site
of strong discipline. However, workers are also experiencing a process of
de-traditionalization that enables them to find new possibilities in the expression of urban
individuality unimaginable in rural life. The ethnographic accounts in this study cannot
easily fit into the dichotomy of exploitation and development.

Workers do complain about low wages and adverse working conditions. However,
when considering their alternative—going back to the farm, they prefer working in the
factory. As Faye told us, “I went back home after working in the factory for three years.
However, I could not stand growing rice under the scorching sun anymore. In less than 10
days, I came back to the factory.” When the workers compare factory life with conditions
at home, they might think that factory is not a bad alternative. I do not here propagate the
liberal pluralist explanation of what is going on in the factories in Southern China. The
harsh discipline of factory life is undeniably extraordinary. For those teenage migrant workers, entering the iron gates of a factory means drastic reconstruction of their everyday life. This reconstruction is engineered to minimize cost and maximize productivity. Productivity is not only about having efficient assembly lines, but also about managing the spatial and temporal experiences of workers. Workers work for paychecks, but they have to submit to the temporal-spatial discipline of shifts, meals, and bedtimes. Besides producing toys, they have to acquire a whole set of skills to make do in urban life (Photo 2).

![Photo 2: Mugs and tin containers at the shelf of the workers canteen.](image1)

The most obvious of these disciplinary adjustments is the regulation of work procedures and the pace of life through a rigid timetable. In Gogo, 7:30-8:00 a.m. is breakfast; 12:00-1:30 p.m. is lunch; and 5:30-6:00 p.m. is dinner. When the bell rings, workers rush into the canteen like a school of fish. When the work bell rings, no worker can afford not to work, no matter when they went to bed the night before. When the bell rings, it turns on the worker’s bodies like a Pavlovian reflex. As some of the workers told us, “sometimes we have to work overtime until 2 o’clock in the early morning. But we still have to get up to work at eight in the morning”. One worker said, “You can adjust
your alarm clock from 7:30 a.m. to 7:40 a.m. Maybe even to 7:50 a.m. But by 8:00 a.m.,
you have to start working.” The workers cannot say no to overtime. They have to follow
the pace of the machine instead of their bodily rhythm. In the peak seasons, for the entire
month, the workers have to work from eight o’clock in the morning until two o’clock the
following morning. As one of the female workers recalled, “I almost fell asleep while
working.”

Toy production is labor intensive. My research assistants Ah-man and Ah-zhou
worked in the production line on and off for a few months. The task was simple and
repetitive, yet exhaustive because of the speed. It is the movement of the production line
that determines the pace of factory life. In order to maximize productivity, the
management sets production quotas. For example, for a given task, the factory will pay
for 10 hours of labor. If the workers can finish the work in less than 10 hours, they can
leave earlier and still receive compensation for 10 hours. If they cannot finish their task in
10 hours, they have to work until the job is done, however they will still only be paid for
10 hours. Therefore, you can often hear the workers encourage/urge each other, “Hurry
up, if we cannot get it done before 8:00 p.m., we have to work for nothing.” Workers are
disciplined in the work culture of “breaking up” labor into calculative units, and these
fragmented units of experience are rewarded monetarily. This is the initial training of the
body to fit into the work and spend culture of capitalism. One of the most commonly
used phrases by the workers to describe their working lives is, “have already gotten used
to it”

De-territorializion
This paper focuses on the possibilities and impossibilities of the work and spend culture placed upon migrant workers that are new arrivals in more urban settings. As previously mentioned, the primary purpose of the disciplinary regime in the factory is to maximize productivity; yet it also opens up a window for the workers to experience a new lifestyle. In their home villages, the workers went to bed after sunset because there was not much to do when it was dark. Now they stay up late even when they are not working the night shift. On one particular occasion, we visited a coffee house after work with a dozen of the female workers. They were excited by the colorful lighting of the city and talked enthusiastically about the nightlife of the city, which meant simply strolling around public spaces and window shopping inside packed shopping malls. “Artificial” lights are fascinating for migrant workers because they are not only pleasant and colorful, but these lights also allow them to reorganize their daily lives previously restricted by “neutral” sunlight. In their eyes, the traffic lights, the neon lights, the automobiles and the glittering billboards are all symbols of prosperity, and hope of a better life. “I love watching the glittering lights on the roads,” a migrant worker told us.

Living in the dormitory is another aspect of the experience of de-territorialization. The private living spaces of workers are compartmentalized into small bunk beds, which are interchangeable and mobile. There are seven double-deck bunk beds (i.e. 14 sleeping slots) in a 30 square meter room. A dozen or so workers share the bathroom. Living in the factory is also a process of squeezing oneself in a tiny space. Hung said, “At home, I have my own room. Here I have to share a room with 11 people.” Dong has a 120 square meter house back home in Henan. At first, he was very scared of sleeping on the top bunk, “I couldn’t sleep at night, worrying that I would fall down.” After ten years of working life,
he now sleeps very tightly in his small bunk bed. In the dormitory, each person’s personal space is that of his or her bed, which would be covered by a mosquito net. While these nets do serve the practical purpose of keeping the mosquitoes out, the nets also function as markers, identifying and protected personal space within the collective living environment (Photo 3). Compared with the spacious environment of their home villages, living in the factory is restrictive and uncomfortable. But once they become accustomed to these small but flexible spaces, they tend to personalize and privatize them; posting their favorite posters and displaying personally selected decorations. The smile of Hong Kong pop star Andy Lau and Taiwanese “boy band” F4 add a touch of color and beauty to the otherwise monotonous gray walls. These posters and decorations communicate to the other workers that he or she keeps up with the current trends.

Factory workers remain in the factory complex and dormitory for the entire day. They are often exhausted and bored. When they finish working, they like to venture into the surrounding neighborhoods. One very interesting destination is the supermarket. Gogo is situated outside of the town center. Transportation expenses, despite being
inexpensive by the standards of local city dwellers, are expensive to workers. Thus, the workers spend most of their time in areas that are within walking distance. The situation has been changing though, as a few of the supermarkets started running free shuttle bus services in the factory area to attract new customers. On one particular occasion, we boarded a free shuttle with the workers to go to those air-conditioned supermarkets. It is difficult for us to even imagine the pleasure that the workers gained from one of these supermarket trips. They go to the town center to see, smell and touch a modern world that is new to them. The supermarkets are clean, spacious, bright and colorful. More importantly, the supermarkets are seemingly democratic. Anyone can touch the goods and take in all the sights and smells. City dwellers yearn for the pastoral smell of Mother Nature. The factory workers love the scent of the city. When they look at the jelly candies with colorful and elaborate packaging, they exclaim, Aren’t they beautiful? Don’t they smell good? For them, these packs of everyday commodities do not denote man-made plasticity but much welcomed modernity. The supermarkets are a manifestation of city life, of modern management, and of societal progress. They are, in Ritzer’s (1999) term, the cathedrals of consumption.

These slices of workers’ lives are illustrative in the sense that their spatial experiences are co-produced by the marketing strategies of supermarkets and the workers’ own desire for modern experiences. In their home villages, physical mobility is limited. Spatial experiences are “resistive” because of underdeveloped infrastructure and public transportation. When workers migrate to the South, urban spatial experiences become more flexible and “capitalized”. Migrant workers quickly break away from the natural temporal-spatial restrictions of their previous rural world and adjust to the flexible
temporal-spatial experience of the city. Yet these new spatial experiences are not idiosyncratic, but are strongly directed by market forces and consumerist desires.

**De-traditionalization**

Factory work is exploitative. But for rural young people, life in the factory allows them to break loose from the bondage of tradition. This section focuses on the modern impulses of de-traditionalization and individualization, using the issue of early marriage as an illustration. For teenagers, leaving home and migrating to the south is an intense experience. It is a liminal passage from a stable, traditional and collective environment; to a mobile, modern and individualistic environment. They travel alone, or with teenage friends, and settle in a factory of strangers. Most of them are introduced to the factories by relatives who arrived before them. However, these relatives are usually young themselves and are venturing into a life without the guidance of authority figures of the older generations. Traditions break loose and new consumerist lifestyles can be seductive. The restructuring of the temporal-spatial experience intensifies the urges for de-traditionalization and the development of new identities (Thompson, 1995).

Despite the hardships in the factory, most informants that we encountered actually welcomed a life free from parental control. Female informants told us that in their home villages, girls get married between the ages of 16-20. Unmarried females in their mid-20s are considered to be too old and cannot live a normal and respectable life being single. However, many female workers can experiment with more flexible forms of intimate relationships when they are away from home. Su had a boyfriend at home when she was 16. However, her parents were against the relationship. In order to stay together, they
came to Southern China. When we met her, she had been working in a Dongguan factory for 3 years. She had had a few boyfriends and thinks that early marriage is too restrictive. Ah-lok, a Gogo’s librarian in her early 20s, has chosen a life very different from her married peers in her home village. In the factory, she has befriend some of the female managers who have earned their financial independence and stayed single. Originally working in the production lines, Ah-lok took a lower paying job in the library, hoping to have more time to read books and improve herself. Back home, she was denied a high school education because she is a girl. Now she is planning a new life for herself.

Of course, workers are not completely free from the binding forces of tradition. Migrant workers are negotiating with traditions even when they are away from home. For example, Xu, a supervisor in Gogo in her late 20s, has decided to develop her own career instead of raise a family. She said: “It is fine for a modern woman to remain single.” But remaining single is never an easy option for her. Tradition employs gossip, discrimination, myth, and moral values to discipline its subjects and perpetuate its influences. Xu told us that village people call her an “old monster” when she visits home. Although financially successful, she is still viewed as a failure in the village gossip. Relatives would say, “Even the retarded one can find a husband”. After a few years when their services in the factories are no longer in demand, some have to return home and weave their urban experiences back to the webs of traditional relations. It is difficult to break loose, but the few years away from home is a brief period for young migrants to experience lifestyles they have never experienced before (Photo 4).
Consuming Individuality

Young people are strongly linked to their peer group. As previously mentioned, many workers told us that when they occasionally go home to visit their parents, they could not wait to come back. One girl said, “It is so boring at home. There was nothing to do. The only thing I did was eat and sleep. I didn’t have any friends to talk to. But here in the factory, there are so many young people. We live together and share so many things together. Life is so much happier.” Another girl said, “There are so many friends here. We are young people. We go dancing together. We shop for beautiful clothes together. We read magazines and discuss television dramas together. It is so fun.” Of course these girls are compartmentalizing the boredom of the production line and romanticize the “happier” life after work. The colorful urban life, imagined and social, is inflated and out of proportion with the reality of the work life. Ling, a 16-year-old girl from Henan, told Helen, my research assistant: “I came from a small village where everyone knows everyone else and everything remains the same. I really want to see high-rise buildings and walk on the city streets. I want to directly experience what a city is.” Another male
worker said, “In our homeland, you will be teased as a “turtle” if you haven’t been out.”

Since most workers are young people between the ages of 16-25, they are very sensitive to fashions and would like to merge themselves into trendy urban living if they could afford it. Hair is the element of fashion that the workers pay the most attention to in the process of this transformation. One of the workers said that he would only purchase well-known foreign brands of shampoo such as Rejoice, Panteen or Head & Shoulders. He said other cheap brands such as those manufactured locally would cause dandruff. Therefore, he would go to ParknShop, a store operated with Hong Kong capital, to buy shampoo because “generally speaking, ParknShop doesn’t sell fake products.” Yeung also dyes his hair dark brown because “it is fashionable. I look more urban.” For female workers, apart from buying shampoo, some of them even spend 300 yuan to have “fulizi” treatment to straighten their hair. 300 yuan is more than half of her monthly salary. When working in the rice fields, it is “natural” for the body to look old and for the hair to turn straw-like while one is still in her 20s. But in the city, migrant workers suddenly find out that natural rural bodies are considered ugly. Factory workers can control and manipulate their bodies with a variety of trendy products and services. This ability to manipulate their bodies provides the factory workers with a newfound autonomy. However superficial this might be, the workers feel that it is worthwhile to spend their hard-earned salary on bodily care products, which fill the front shelves of supermarkets in the factory zones of Southern China.

For young workers, spending an hour or two in the well-lit and air-conditioned malls and to touch and smell the goods on the shelves is a very pleasant escape from the factory. In fact, many of them go there to experience modernity “visually.” In their own
words, “to see what’s new, what’s in fashion.” They learn from their peers or the media that clothes are a personal statement of who you are. For workers, jeans are the boundary separating rural and modern life. Mei said, “At home, I never wore jeans. We wore those soft pants, very comfy. But here, everyone wears jeans. I was ashamed to wear pants again” Jeans are hard, hot, and difficult to wash and dry. But jeans are also the dress code of the city. “Wearing jeans make one look taller, slimmer, and give the appearance of longer legs.” City life is learned through observing other people. One of the workers told us, “It was not okay to dress like a country bumpkin after a few months. People would look down on you; they would tease you.” It is important to fit in (Photo 5).

Photo 5: Factory uniforms and bell bottoms.

The world of consumption is refreshingly new to rural migrant workers. To consume, to play, to indulge in sensual gratification—these are the mundane and commonplace bodily sensations of city dwellers. When migrant workers enter this sensuous world, life in their homelands becomes pale and colorless. Their senses are open. Such a world of sensation is of course the careful marketing design of a manipulative consumerist society. However, for these rural migrants, flashy commodities
provide a sense of autonomy to manipulate their bodies and identities, no matter how illusory and temporary it is.

The Sensuous World of TC-1

Many migrant workers have their first taste of urbanity in the factory. Some of them move on to other jobs and in some cases to more competitive southern cities, where the services industry are booming and absorbing a considerable number of unskilled workers. In coffee shops, restaurants, and bars, the low paid jobs of security guards, waiters and waitresses are mostly taken up by migrant workers from lesser developed regions. In the Shenzhen bar where we conducted our participant research, some of the waiters and waitresses worked in factories before they arrived Shenzhen. The name of the bar is TC Club. TC is a chain corporation with 5 upscale bars and theme restaurants in Shenzhen. I visited various TC bars and restaurants regularly for a year and my research assistant worked in the largest chain disco TC-1 as a waiter for a month. TC-1 consists of three components: the disco, the bar, and the western restaurant (the steak house). In the disco, the lighting is dim. The disk jockey plays hip-hop music. Female lead dancers wearing revealing clothes are moving their body wildly on stage. Male customers look at them with desire in their eyes. Female customers also watch and try to learn their steps. They all follow the music beats, moving their bodies in rhythm. In the bar, most customers come with their friends. They order dozens of beers; some mix red wine with soft drinks; others enjoy fancy cocktails. Every night, the 300-seat disco bar is packed with customers. How do migrant workers make sense of this sensuous world of consumption? How does this glamorous nightlife transform the lifestyles of these
workers? Besides conducting interviews, we adopted a full range of participation methods and mingled with the waiters and waitresses at work and at play.

When our research team first visited TC bar, its sophisticated interior design and management amazed us all. The bar is no less trendy than the trendiest bar in Hong Kong. However, when Ah Man, my research assistant, started working there as a waiter, the most remarkable experience of his first week in the bar was intolerable back pain induced by 8 hours of standing up straight. His feelings of exhaustion attached to the same site from the position of a waiter were very different from what we had experienced from the position of a customer. The trendy, pleasant, and sophisticated world is sustained by harsh manual and emotional labor. For customers, TC-1 stands for style, music and good food. But for the staff, it stands for stress and hardship. Similar to the situation in the Gogo factory, shifts and rest periods are tightly controlled and there are heavy fines when the rules are broken. TC’s workers are not making toys but providing a modern and trendy service. It is manual as well as emotional labor. The workers, to a certain extent, have to be convinced themselves that nightlife in the disco bar is trendy and cool in order to convey a carefree feeling to the customers. They cheer and sing. In Hochschild’s (1983/2003) words, the waiters have to do the emotional work of “deep acting” to sell individualism and carnival consumerism convincingly to customers. Those who work at the disco section are especially sensitive to the way they dress and look. In fact, they are usually hand picked during the recruitment exercises: only those who are young, handsome and pretty are selected. They willingly conform into a new modern look with trendy hairstyles, tight T-shirts, and interestingly, a new Christian name.

Having a new Christian name is not compulsory, but workers love to play such a
“modern” game. To become Peter, Tom or Mary is fun, and somehow respectable. It is western, and it is cool. Their new name is displayed on a name badge, worn on their T-shirts. In the evening, before the busy business hours, the manager will inspect the waiters and waitresses. They line up in front of the bar, and answer to a military-style roll call. The manager hails: “Tom!” And Tom replies: “Yes sir!” Mistakes will be disciplined and untidy looks will be tidied up. Despite the harsh discipline, the workers do experience the pleasure of being a newly westernized person. The “wearing” of a new name in English gives the workers a sense of fluidity and flexibility in the identity politics of urbanity. It is a vivid example of Althusserian interpellation (Photo 6).

The spatial configuration of the disco bar is a platform for producing a focused visuality of desires. The center of the bar area is space reserved only for the bartenders, who prepare cocktails and wine for the customers sitting around the bar. Men and women can gaze at one another. Bodily appearances and gestures become the visual focus of these exchanges. At the center of the bar are orderly packed and stylishly lighted bottles of wine. This visual mixing and blending of shiny bottles, dim lights, fair women, and
handsome men, contrasts markedly the “dull” appearance of both the rural and factory environments. Customers learn from each other, and the staff learns the body language of the customers.

Another spatial and visual center is the dance floor. There is an elevated platform in the middle and it becomes the center of attention because on stage there are dancers mimicking the sexually suggestive dances common to western music videos (Photo 7). They display their “perfect” bodies and perform their professional dance steps in front of a group of people yearning for the “good life.” Men and women on the dance floor look up to the dancers on stage and imitate their steps. The bar mangers recruit these dancers from prestigious colleges of performing arts. For the customers and the staff, these dancers are an “MTV dream come true,” in the flesh and very real. They are dancing wildly, shaking away tradition, and stepping into modernity. It is a ritual in which the dancers become the priests who bridge foreign imagination with the Chinese dream for a modern lifestyle.

Photo 7: Sexy dancing girls on stage.
Western Body, Chinese Dream

The Chinese version of modernity is unique, but western modernity is a powerful reference. The sensuous world of the disco bar has a strong element of westernized imagination. Western culture, for the rising middle class in Southern China, denotes modernity and prosperity. Western lifestyle is the mythic embodiment of what a good life should be. Mr. Chen, TC’s owner, requires attention to every detail. Music should be Jazz or R&B and must be in English. In the disco, the disk jockey plays dance music from abroad. All of these details culminate to create a mood of stylishness and comfort.

One interesting fact is that in Chinese bars, western customers are welcomed by bar owners because their presence convinces Chinese customers that the bar is authentically western. Western faces are visual indicators of the “authentic” western imagination that have recently been flooded into the Chinese popular media. Sometimes western bodies are deliberately displayed in these Chinese bars. Western musicians, disk jockeys, and overseas bands are frequently invited to perform at TC-1. I once saw three Caucasian models, wearing long hats and bell-bottom jeans with stars and stripes, march around the disco floor half naked, showing conspicuously their white skin. In TC, western bodies sell.

We spoke to an informant from another bar where western icons play an interesting role. One of the owners is an American man named Nicky who was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. Every evening, Nicky works in the front bar as a bartender and performs cocktail tricks. In his Chinese bar, Nicky’s presence is more about visibility than necessity. Since Nicky is a Caucasian, his presence is a visible statement of an “authentic American” bar culture. People come to see him throwing the bottles and
listen to his American accent (Photo 8). Nicky knows very clearly that some customers come to the bar to consume his “American-ness”. He always tells the customers that he is from Chicago. Although Chicago and a small town in Indiana are equally distant from the Chinese customers geographically speaking, Chicago is a part of the imaginative territory of urbanity.

Photo 8: An American bartender and Chinese customers.

Spatial symbolism is the intersection between imagination and spatial practices. It is a projection of cultural aspirations. When we visited the dormitory of TC’s waiters, we found out that there is a conspicuous presence of western imagination not found in the dormitory of Gogo factory. Discursive traces of western imagination seem to have traveled from the world of the disco bar to the living spaces of the bar waiters. Huge wall posters are everywhere. Unlike the dormitory in the factory, posters are more explicit and sexual. There is a life-size poster pasted on the wall besides the upper deck of a bunk bed, showing a naked couple making love on a tourist beach (Photo 9). The owner of this poster goes to bed with it by his side every night. Although I do not want to make interpret this too simply to say that these western bodies are inside Chinese dreams,
western symbols are indeed powerful and prestigious among these rural workers. Western bodies are desirable.

Photo 9: A life-size poster inside the male dormitory.

During the visit, Fai, a repairman in TC Club, was watching the Hollywood movie “First Blood,” featuring Sylvester Stallone as the American hero Rambo. Fai watched the DVD with his mini disc player, connected to a small television monitor. Fai’s brief life history tells a lot about imagination, the constructed body, and migratory trajectory. Fai was born in a rural village in Hunan Province in 1980. He started elementary school at 4, finished junior high school at 13, and he passed with flying colors. At 15, he dropped out of school due to poverty and became a repairman. At 17, he went to Shenzhen as a mechanic in a hardware factory making steel ward-beds. He practices martial arts. Bruce Lee, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger are his favorite stars. They have inspired him and he builds his body after them (Photo 10). At 21, he went to TC Club and has since been working there as the hardware repairman for all TC bars. He respects his
boss very much. His dream is to save enough money to open his own business at home. A mix of Hollywood movie stars, Chinese Kung Fu masters, and his successful boss has inspired his life-project.

Photo 10: Fai showing his well-built body in his dormitory.

We attended two anniversary celebrations (2002 and 2003) of TC Club in which workers were allowed to eat and drink and dance at the bar free of charge after hours. These two occasions provided us with a window to look into the impact of the bar culture on the workers at the ethnomethodological level. At around 3:00 a.m., when all the customers had gone, the workers from all 5 chain TC bars gathered at TC-1. They took the chairs of the customers and ordered beer and wine. Snacks were served at every table. The way they consumed beer and wine, the interactions between men and women, the staff was mirroring what they see at the bar during business hours, except that they were expressing themselves in a more dramatic fashion (Photo 11). On stage, the center of everyone’s attention was the group of workers that were more daring and adventurous. They danced skillfully and were rewarded with cheers and shouts of approval. Some were
eager to show off their well-shaped “modern” bodies by taking off their T-shirts (Photo 12). After ten hours of hard work, they danced for another 5 hours until dawn. It is difficult to empirically argue that the waiters and waitresses are mirroring the life of their customers. But at the ethnomethodological level, it is evident that their mannerisms, bodily appearances, fashions, and hairstyles simulate those of their clientele, which are quite different from what we observed at Gogo factory.

Photo 11: The waiters imitating the guests after-hours.

Photo 12: Workers stage a performance at the anniversary celebration.
Life politics

When rural workers migrate to the city, they begin to appropriate the lifestyle of city dwellers and think about what to do with their own lives. Back home, lifestyle and career options are limited. As Giddens (1991) and Beck (2002) have indicated, in the transition to modernity, life becomes “life projects”. Biography becomes “do-it-yourself biographies”. When rural workers come into contact with new bio-references, they start to contemplate the possibility of self-transformation. Not surprisingly, many urban myths encourage this. A worker gets a fortune and opens his own business. A female worker perms her hair, puts on a pair of trendy jeans and marries a rich man. To a large extent, these myths can be seen as a narrative of their collective desire of metamorphosis. “I” can become someone different. This is the consciousness of urbanity. It is also the most persuasive myth promoted by advertisers. One billboard says, “buy something and you will be someone else.”

Bosses, managers and all the urban nouveau riche are powerful models for de-territorialized workers. The customers spend money to have fun in TC. The staff works in order to earn miniscule wages. Such discrepancy and visibility of wealth might trigger the motivation for upward mobility or a sense of jealousy and inferiority. A security guard of TC said, “Sometimes, the thought of robbing customers comes to my mind. The money they spend in one night is much more than I earn in a month”. Of course, these negative emotions are mostly suppressed. The more acceptable and deliberately cultivated desire is to aspire to the consumerist lifestyle of the city. When a waiter takes the order from a beautiful woman in the noisy disco bar, he has to speak into her ear. He can “smell” the difference between a worker and a well-groomed lady. The
desire to live a good life is sparked off in such close and sensual encounters.

In our study, we have found that the social networks of these rural workers are saturated with stories of success. Sue is the owner of a bar called “Bookstore,” a restaurant/bar specializing in books and music. She is well-known as a radio host and a columnist. She told us very clearly, “I love Shenzhen. I fell in love with it at first sight. What other place could provide so many opportunities for people? In Shenzhen, you can do whatever you want, as long as you are competent. My bar is bright and clean. My music is comforting and low-key. My bar is not a place to manipulate people’s emotion. It is a place for people to relax, to enjoy a good afternoon break…”

Working for this successful female owner is bar manager David, who incidentally was the former manager of TC Club. When he was in his teenage years, he watched a dated Hollywood movie “Cocktail,” in which movie star Tom Cruise plays the role of a small town kid who ventures into the city and becomes a popular bartender and later a successful bar owner. David was inspired by the film and thought that a bartender is a well-respected job in the city. After migrating to Shenzhen, he befriended the owner of TC and seized the chance to work for him.

At the time of the interview, he had already left TC and worked in the Bookstore bar for a year. Seeing me as a potential sponsor (many workers believe that middle age men from Hong Kong are rich), he told me he was contemplating opening a bar of his own. And he enthusiastically talked about his well-conceived proposal that he thought would be a profitable one. In David’s case, aspirations of physical and social mobility were triggered, among other factors, by western imaginations and the myth of success readily available in the media and social networks.
Among TC workers, the most well-known is of course the story of Chen, the owner of TC Club. He began as a designer and made millions of dollar in the mid-1990s when Shenzhen officials wanted to light up the cityscape with various facelift projects. At that time, the people of Shenzhen were not very happy with the cityscape because the city was “dark as hell” in the evening when compared with Hong Kong and other western cities. Chen seized this opportunity and earned a lot of money from several big urban lighting projects. He then set his sights on the disco and bar business. He is a hands-on boss who pays attention to every detail in the design and management of the bar. He is feared and respected by workers and his glamorous success story has been told and retold among the staff and newcomers (Photo 13).

Photo 13: A westerner playing jazz for the bar owner in his function room.

The staff is familiar with these colorful stories. However, most of them can only dreams about these successes. The most common life trajectory for workers is returning to their home village after working in the city for about 10 years. Because there are unlimited supply of new coming migrant workers, workers in their 30s are considered old
and most of them have to leave their jobs. Some will save up money to start small businesses at home. Many female workers go home, get married and live a life of a “typical” Chinese housewife. However, some of them told us that after marriage and giving birth, they could not tolerate the rural living conditions because “they have seen the world.” Some go back to the city but job opportunities for matured female workers are limited. They stay in the city but are restricted to the lower strata of the society.

I would like to conclude this discussion with a telling of the story of Reirong, a security guard in his 30s. In one evening, Ah-man, Reirong and I went for a walk outside the factory. He was always thinking of opening his own business. So we went with him to a nearby shopping mall complex that was still under construction to “inspect” a good store location. That new shopping complex occupied half a city block. It was one of the development projects by Hong Kong tycoon Li Kai-shing’s company. It was not yet dark. Magnificent stone horses stood in front of the complex. Crowds of migrant workers were strolling around the street. Reirong said, “One never makes real money by working. The key is to use your brain, not your back. The rich people are making more money out of their money. We the poor are making money out of our labor. When one works for money, it means he has no money.”

Reirong wanted to steer his life away from the dead end of working class life and he was completely engrossed in his dream of entrepreneurship. He talked about rent, merchandise, and stock management. Invariably, he also mentioned the success story of Li Kai-shing—how he became a tycoon by his diligence, vision and courage, and how he made a huge fortune out of nothing. The Li Kai-shing’s success story is well circulated in Southern China. How many people are buying into this myth and thinking that they
would become Li Kai-shing? How much of this myth is ideological in the sense that it allows the workers to endure their sufferings? How much of it empowers the workers to live with a hope?

Reirong always talked about resigning from his security job. But at the end of each month, he would say, “I better wait for a little bit longer to save more money.” Or “I am not going to hurry. I shall wait for the best opportunity.” After we left the research site, we were told that Reirong was fired for a possible connection with a theft in the factory. Reirong is in his mid-30s and he is no longer marketable in the city and his dream of success is still a remote dream. “Long working hours, little money, few career prospects, this is our life,” said Reirong (Photo 14).

Photo 14: The security guard has just woken up from his dreams

**Conclusion: The Multiple Layering of Rural Bodies in China’s Compressed Modernity**

**Modernity**

China’s version of modernity is compressed and hybridized; this is partly because of the relatively unlimited supply of cheap labor and the developing domestic market.
economy in China, the labor-intensive Fordist mode of production is still cost effective and can coexist with the post-Fordist production modes such as automation and flexible management. The main emphasis of this paper is not on the structural formation of China’s compressed modernity, but to chart this Chinese version of modernity as it manifests itself in the everyday life and life trajectories of rural migrants. Within the few years in which young migrants leave their homes and begin working in Southern China, they experience the harsh discipline of producer-led factories and the seduction of symbolic consumption in discos and bars. The research design of placing a factory and a disco together allows me to examine China’s compressed modernity manifest in the lives of migrant workers at work and at play.

Factories in China are often time depicted as a symbol of crude exploitation. In fact, factory production lines are among the most persisting Marxist imageries that has motivated “sweat shop” research and investigative journalism in the last few decades. On the opposite side is the liberal pluralist argument of the beneficial effects of economic development, which is popular in the media as well as in official discourses. If a production line symbolizes exploitation, a disco bar is a popular symbol of uninhibited consumerism and expressive individualism. It can be seen either as a marker of sophisticated urbanity or the illusory dream of capitalism. By weaving the lifeworlds in a factory and a disco bar together with the threads of the life trajectories of migrant workers, I have tried to map out the impact of China’s compressed modernity on rural bodies in terms of everyday skills and aspirations.

From the above ethnographic description, both the Marxist and the liberal pluralist account of the Southern China story are too abstract, reductionist, and even
erroneous. Collective figures and grand narratives showing either economic frog-leaps or
the plague of exploitation are too general and crude to illustrate what is going on within
the lifeworld of the working class. It is difficult to fit the stories of the migrant workers
into analytic and interpretive dichotomies such as: factory and bars; production and
consumption; and, capitalistic exploitation and economic development. Indeed, workers’
bodies are disciplined in order to maximize productivity and marketability. However,
these disciplines are also opening up new lifestyle options previously unavailable in rural
settings.

The reconstruction of rural bodies is de-traditionalizing and de-territorializing. It
de-skills and re-skills rural migrants and gives them the bodily experiences of modernity,
which involve the forced, calculative, flexible and reflexive shuffling of time and space.
It involves the manipulation of bodies, gestures, fashions, identities and relations
previously held together mainly by traditional ties. It also triggers the desire to consume a
different lifestyle and to develop a new life-project.

Possibility is conditioned and constrained by the body. When the workers migrate
to the factory zones, the first layer of urbanity is inscribed onto the rural bodies through
the order of assembly line production. The bodily reconstruction is mediated by the
regime of calculative manual labor. The consumerist lifestyle is acquired by the
appropriation of lifestyle product and services freely available in the market. This first
layering is a result of the international division of labor in which cheap labor is exploited
for producing competitive products for the transnational market. This layering of urbanity
and modernity onto the rural bodies intensifies as the workers enter the sign economy of
emotional labor.
Compared with the conditions in the factory, working in the consumerist service industry of Shenzhen situates workers in closer contact with the lifeworld of the rising middle class. The modern, westernized, and consumerist bodies of their clientele are up close and personal. They provide new bio-references for migrant workers, helping them imagine the possibility of upward social mobility. In fact, in discos and bars, the lifeworlds of the middle and working class are interpenetrative. In this second layering, workers have to buy into, or “deep act,” a consumerist lifestyle in order to make a living in the service industry. He or she has to perform a consumerist emotionality to make the nightlife desirable to the customers.

However, migrant workers are trapped in the lower strata of society and upward mobility is difficult. They experience the flexible manipulation of one’s own body and life project, but this sense of autonomy is brief. It coincides with the 10 or so years when young workers can still trade their labor and youthfulness in factories and bars. In the life histories of most of our informants, their urban experiences indeed open up new possibilities for them to practice a different lifestyle and to break away from tradition.

They are exploiting the deterritorialized and de-traditionalized space for a few years. When they are in their 30s and their services are no longer in demand, the “window” of urbanity is closing up quickly. Living in the city is expensive. It is more affordable for workers to bring their savings back to their home villages and seek other opportunities there. Of course, the more economic and cultural capital they are able to acquire in the city, the more they can renegotiate a better social position in traditional networks. In their home villages, the migrants’ modern bodies are once again re-embedded into a rural lifeworld. It is a re-layering of the rural-turn-modern bodies into
In the above account, the bodily adjustment to ‘live’ modernly is heavily guided by western imagination. The vision of cultural modernization as westernization is compressed, hybridized and domesticated, producing a Chinese version of non-west modernity that is conspicuously western and capitalistic. Throughout the process of transformation, abstract global forces, both embodied in transnational production and symbolic consumption, are meeting the Chinese rural bodies in a concrete manner, triggering strong desires for physical and social mobility. In the rising work and spend culture of Southern China, social mobility revolves around overlapping but recognizable layers of social helixes. For rural migrant workers, they migrate to the South, work in cities, loosen up their traditional ties, and jump into China’s compressed modernity. They benefit from the pronounced contrast between the rural and the urban economy. They acquire the cultural capital of a new urban consumerist way of living. However, the work and spend culture, to the working class, has an ideological bent. Horizontal social mobility is easy. Upward social mobility is limited. The expensive urban lifestyle, dramatically expressed through consumption patterns in disco bars, is seductive but unachievable for most migrant workers.

By observing their clientele, the migrant workers witness a highly visible track of social mobility. That is a social track only for China’s nouveau riche, who have more social capital (connections), economic capital (money and property) and cultural capital (credentials, taste, and knowledge) to start with. The structural opening of China’s market economy provides new opportunities for these middle class professionals to create their own life projects unimaginable in the past. To a certain extent, their relatively luxurious
lives are built on the cheap and relatively unlimited supply of rural migrant labor. But the bridges between the two helixes of social mobility are very restrictive. The rising middle class enjoys a greater freedom to express their individuality. “Work hard, play hard” is the motto of the rising work and spend culture of Southern China. It is a fantasy for migrant workers and a newfound freedom for the rising middle class. Young urban professionals are actualizing the early dream of modernity, while common workers are relish in the success stories of the middle class. It is a compressed and layered helix of development, a seemingly realizable dream for one, but a near illusion for another.

Moving along these layered helixes are the rural-turn-modern bodies of migrant workers, who acquire multiple and hybridized layers of urbanity and rurality in China’s compressed modernity.

Epilogue

It was already four o’clock in the morning. I dinned with a few musicians in a food stall next to TC-1. We were the only customers there. A teenage girl had been waiting on customers for the entire day, more than 10 hours. She was exhausted and sat on a chair, waiting for us to ask for the bill. She was bored and thus played with the rotating plate on a table. Perhaps, she was remembering her childhood in the rural villages. Perhaps, she was contemplating working harder and getting a white-collar job. Perhaps, she was too tired to think about anything and was already half asleep. When we bid farewell, I strolled alone in the empty street. It was early morning. A young boy was dozing off in front of a 24-hour store. A cigarette was still burning in between his fingers. In Shenzhen’s leisure industry, cheap labor is burned away like a cigarette. Play hard, work even harder. This is a blessing. This is also curse. You have to work very hard in order to play.
References


All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

China is still in what Lash (1999) termed the “first modernity”, but it has an increasing mix of features of “second (or high and reflexive) modernity”, which is also described as “liquid modernity” by Bauman (2000).

There have been many articles written on the issues of social reconstruction and inequality in China. See for examples Chen et. al. eds., 2001; Zhang 2001; Zhen, 2000.

From 1949 when the Communist Party gained power to 1979 when the open door policy was officially installed.

All photos were taken by Ducky Tse.

One of researchers was Tan Shen, who analyzed more than a hundred personal letters written by the female workers before they died in the fire. See Tan, 1998.

My research assistant served as a waiter. I spent time with the boss and the managers. I was also involved in the arrangement of band shows. One band performing at TC was hand-picked by a Hong Kong agent. I worked with the band, the Hong Kong music company and the manager in the various trips when the band went to Hong Kong.

This is what Zhen (2000) called the “rice bowl of youth,” referring to the trading of youthfulness.