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BOOK REVIEW

## Migrants, Media and Cultural Politics in China

Wanning Sun. 2014, *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*, Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Rowman and Littlefield ISBN 9781442236776 (hb); 9781442236783 (ebook). RRP US\$79.00.

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The movement of hundreds of millions of China's rural peasants into its cities over the past two decades has been called the largest migration in human history. Scholars in a range of disciplines have been studying these migrant workers (*nongmingong*) who toil in China's export factories and construction sites or take up service roles as maids, cleaners and security guards. Wanning Sun's *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media and Cultural Perspectives* is an important addition to this scholarship, contributing innovative research methods, theoretical perspectives and empirical data as well as a new understanding of the centrality of cultural production to migrant workers lives.

Sun's ultimate goal is to understand the relationship between culture and inequality in post-Mao China. To do so, she considers the relationship between the hegemonic and the marginal and how this relationship is connected to emergent media and other cultural forms. Individual chapters address not only the changing political and ideological landscape that produces dominant rhetoric about migrant workers, but the structure of different media industries and how migrant workers position themselves relative to certain kinds of media production (including photography, cinema, poetry, novels and documentary films).

Carrying off these complex, interconnected arguments requires several moves on Sun's part. The first is an insistence on politicising the cultural field. Sun carefully links her observations and interviews with the theoretical work of the Subaltern Studies Group, yet, rather than

simply assuming that China's migrant workers constitute 'the subaltern', she interrogates the meaning and implications of this category in contemporary China. Early on she explains that she chooses to translate the Chinese term '*diceng*' (usually glossed as 'lower strata') as 'subaltern' in order to bring class, class relations of dominance, and state ideology back into the discussion of *nongmingong*. She also reviews the question of who may count as subaltern and the associated question of who can (and cannot) speak for them, what a subaltern subject may be able to say, and under what circumstances, in the Chinese context.

The analysis of the relation between hegemony and state ideology that produces the historical subject of the *nongmingong* is linked to a broader discussion of China's Party-state, which remains a hovering presence throughout the book. Sun is, however, very careful not to present the historical emergence of China's migrant workers as a simple story of Party-state domination challenged by subaltern resistance. Instead, she describes multiple cases where migrant workers and their grievances are represented in the media, but only within a political agenda set by others. Throughout, Sun gives myriad examples of migrant workers' unexpectedly high degree of media literacy while demonstrating their unequal access to discursive resources, a situation that mirrors their unequal access to other material resources such as health, education and fair labour. She shows how the subaltern's voice is thus not simply erased or repressed but instead produced as part of a complex system of representation structured by the Party-state.

A second important innovation of this work is methodological. To gather the data for the book, Sun carried out ethnographic fieldwork in multiple sites in China across several years, including among export-factory workers in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in the far south and among construction workers and maids/household workers in the suburbs of Beijing. In the spite of the challenges entailed in following this highly mobile population, Sun managed to stay in touch with many migrant workers over time. The resulting longitudinal analysis presents rare insight into these migrants' changing working lives, developing engagement with media and shifting political consciousness.

Along with her ethnographic work among migrant workers, Sun interviewed NGO activists, filmmakers, journalists, employees in media companies and others involved with the production, management and assessment of cultural forms by, for and about migrant workers. She also completed surveys of the cultural lives of migrant workers and offers unprecedented quantitative data about the media products migrant workers consume, their viewing habits, and what they think about the cultural products that represent them and their lives to a wider audience. The book is thus not just an analysis of how the subaltern are objectified by various forms of media but adds a nuanced account of the social and economic conditions in which these products are produced and consumed.

Sun's third major contribution is to analyse migrants as both subjects and producers of media representations across multiple fields. Different chapters examine how the new media portray migrants and how they view the news, as well as the ways documentary filmmakers work with migrant-led NGOs to try to build collaborative representations of *nongmingong* experience. One chapter looks at how migrants are using new mobile phone technology to document their lives, while another looks at new forms of literature emerging as rural migrants write about urban experience.

Central to these chapters are questions of representation and legitimacy. Sun outlines the creative impulse among migrants in the context of an ideological landscape that constrains production by determining what is considered 'real' art or 'legitimate' narrative. For example,

one chapter describes how migrant photography, which appears to be a democratic form of cultural expression available to anyone with a mobile phone, is caught between being evaluated as 'art' or an 'authentic' representation of migrant reality; another focuses on poetry as both an important genre of self-expression and an increasingly contentious form of mainstream literature. Sun also documents the ways NGOs that seek to encourage migrant self-expression are similarly caught in a double bind where mainstream success is premised on artistic, literary and aesthetic values that by definition exclude the 'authentic' and 'amateur' voices of migrants themselves.

The final chapters update Sun's long-term interest in *nongmingong* literature with new attention given to how their sexuality and relationships are portrayed in novels. In yet another example of the dilemmas faced by migrants Sun examines how migrant workers' intimate relations are fodder for prurient objectification by outsiders while also being a central concern in migrant-authored literary genres.

The book's final important contribution is to go beyond discussions of cultural politics to ask whether cultural forms by and about migrants constitute these workers as a conscious class. Is there a new political consciousness coalescing around these emergent cultural practices and forms of expression? Addressing this issue requires Sun to consider whether class consciousness can be produced by digital literacy, labour experience, social experience or economic position. She concludes: 'The level of political consciousness among China's rural migrant workers is not determined by their digital literacy per se; nor is it formed solely through their experience as socially marginalized and economically exploited individuals. Instead, their level of consciousness is inextricably linked with the extent to which they are inducted and initiated into the technology-enabled process of politicisation and socialisation ... The real prospects for gaining voice, visibility, and collective consciousness increasingly depend on a successful and effective interface between the two'. (179)

In combining analyses of images and ideology with ethnographic inquiry, interviews and quantitative data, Sun's book delivers a deep and nuanced account of migrant worker culture. *Subaltern China* is an important contribution to China Studies and to media/communication studies more broadly. Scholars with little background in contemporary Chinese society will find this volume an excellent means to understand 'cultural politics with Chinese characteristics', while China scholars will find in it a detailed and sophisticated analysis of the current state of the *nongmingong*. Although Sun refuses to provide any easy answers to the book's central question—can the Chinese subaltern speak?—her engaging writing style and clear discussion of complex theoretical points makes an excellent case for introducing students to media and cultural politics in a non-Western setting.

## About the author

Terry Woronov is a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, where she is also a member of the Chinese Studies Centre. She has lived, worked and studied in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan for many years and a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Chicago.