The Image of the Mingong in Chinese Contemporary Society and Cinema

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The migrant population in the Popular China counts 221 million people today, that is more than 16% of the entire population (1.34 billion people). But which is this statistical category that is hard to define and that includes more individuals than the whole Western Europe? Half-citizens, half-countrymen, these individuals, who are often classified as "floating population" *liudong renkou* 流动人口, are first of all migrants and it is their dynamic state that distinguishes them: they don't live in the countryside anymore but neither do they in the city; they are integrated into the urban economy but they are always involved in the agricultural or para-agricultural activities; they are city-dwellers but not necessarily citizens… Since this statistical category combines some social, economic and political dimensions, it crystallizes the main stakes of the urbanization process in China today.

The "floaters" exist because the Chinese government has always resorted to an administrative means to control the movements of the population: the *hukou* 户口. This document, adopted by Mao in the mid-1950's and aimed to avoid the massive movements of the population from the countryside to the city, consists of a part which makes a distinction between 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural' individuals and of another part which establishes a link between the individual and the municipality of residence. This distinction establishes a dual legal regime between the city and the countryside, particularly with regard to the land and the access to public services; as far as «the incorporation to the place of residence» is concerned, it administratively limits the access to public services.

This labor is stigmatized by an expression: the "mingong" 民工, that is the workers who come from the countryside. Since 1992, the constraints over the migration flow from the countryside to the city have softened; the administrative device of the *hukou*, on the other hand, has not. For this reason, when countrymen decide to leave their land to move to the city, they are considered as 'illegal aliens' and they often have to content themselves with working under the table.

The figure of the *mingong* couldn't go unnoticed to the eyes and the camera of the new generation of filmmakers who, opting for a documentary approach, make a plain and strict analysis of the contemporary Chinese society day after day. In order to make this analysis, the

filmmakers cast a lucid glance at the new urban realities: Beijing, portrayed as a disorientated city because of the passage from the communist period to the period of reforms; Shanghai, a city symbol of the economic boom created by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平; or any other city of the province, as for example Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯. As Xiao Jiwei says: "Jia's work is more than a cogent depiction of specific locales and times. His critique of Chinese urbanization and modernization is filtered through a poetic, often elegiac, view of the ephemeral present. If in a social critic's eyes, for example, "leaving" home/land is inevitably associated with economic disparity and forced migration, for a poet, leaving is also escaping from the present and seeking freedom—it is the permanent state of modern existence. The prevalence of transportation vehicles in Jia's films—train, bus, car, plane, boat, motorbikes, flat-bed truck, monorail, etc.—is the reality of a society in great flux as well as a metaphor for the inner restlessness of its citizens set adrift from home/land and trying to catch up with the change" (Xiao 2011).[1]

Train stations have a leading role in these movies whose directors keep the traces of the peregrinations of the *mingong* from their village to the city. In fact, their passage from the countryside to the city starts from a train station, which represents the last link they maintain with their village: at the train station, they eat, sleep and wait for the Train of Hope. This can be clearly noticed in the documentary *Looking for a job in the city* (*Jing cheng da gong*, 进城打工, 2003) directed by the filmmaker Ning Ying 宁瀛 in collaboration with UNICEF. At the station of a very small village of the Sichuan province, Ning Ying interviewed some young girls who, pushed by necessity, decided to emigrate to the city. Anyone moving from the country to the city faces an obvious level of cultural disruption. But the disruption is greatly intensified for a simple farm girl. As a matter of fact, a great number of these *mingong* is represented by women since employers consider them more docile and less claiming than men. In this documentary, most of them have never taken a train in their life…Their accounts, naïve and intense at the same time, are very moving.

The last train home (*Guitu lieche*, 归途列车, 2009) by Fan Lixin 範立欣 is another documentary where the train is an effective metaphor of the vagaries (suffered by all these migrants), but also of their hopes to get a better life and thus be able to secure a quite good future for their children. To show us their arduous and frustrating journey and reveal the impact their long-term absence has on their families, the filmmaker follows Chen Suqin and her husband Zhang Changhua, as they return from their factory jobs in Guangzhou to their family home, a rural farm, where they reunite with their two children, who've been left in the care of Chen's mother. In focusing on one family, Lixin Fan puts a human face on widespread hardship conditions in China. Like millions of others, Chen and Zhang have left their remote farm to work at factory jobs in the city, so they can support their children's education. Come New Year, they, like millions of others, travel home to see their children, who've remained on the farm to work the land while going to school.[2] Their painfully bipolar family life is a

problematic condition similarly found in millions of other contemporary Chinese families. Chen and Zhang manage to board the train, but must then continue their journey by ferry, bus and on foot, toting heavy bags. At first, the family's reunion seems grand. But their absence has caused deep tensions which soon surfaces: the daughter expresses anger at her parents because of understandable feelings of abandonment and such anger suddenly erupt into a shouting match and a fistfight. At the end of the film, the daughter refuses to continue her schooling and leaves home. She travels to Southern China and finds a job in a nightclub: she herself becomes a new migrant worker, repeating the cycle in the tragedy of migration.

In contrast to *Last Train Home*'s self-effacing style, in her documentary *Railway of Road* (*Xi wang zhi* lu, 希望之旅, 2002), following agricultural workers who leave Sichuan by train for a long journey towards China's far-west Xinjiang, where endless cotton fields are awaiting for the harvest, Ning Ying foregrounds her own presence through her exchanges with fellow passengers, as they respond to her disarmingly direct questions about their lives, hopes, and dreams with heartbreaking candor. People seem to be here more optimistic than other documentaries, especially women. In fact, economic reform brought forth by the capitalist system makes it possible for women to relocate, a move that gives them hope to overcome economic hardship and cross-generational gender oppression. That hope to overcome pre-modern rural conservatism and inequality via the modernization process keep them optimistic.

Hope turns to tragedy also in *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqi sui de dan che,* 十七岁的单车, 2001, Wang Xiaoshuai's 王小帅 most popular feature film. Here the hope for a new life is represented by a new means of transport: after arriving in the city, some countrymen are offered a job as deliverers by a fast deliveries company, a new job created by the needs of modernity, a job that they haven't ever heard about. So, also the bicycle becomes a device which allows to join the hard urban reality.

It comes also from the poorer regions of Sichuan Province, the farm-laborers from *Dancing with farmworkers* (*He mingong tiaowu,* 和民工跳), a documentary made by Wu Wengguang 吴文光 in 2003. That documentary is about an avant-garde dance performance which features 30 Beijing farm workers who had been recruited from building sites in Beijing. Rehearsals and the performance took place in the production hall of a former textile factory that was tagged for demolition. Thousands of production halls like it had already been torn down at that time as part of Beijing's rapid modernization. These farm laborers- who came to the city when they lost hope that conditions at home would improve- are the pillars supporting China's modernization, Wu Wengguang knows that and wants to give them for once the opportunity to stand center stage. At the first rehearsal the farm laborers' sole concern was that they be paid their normal salary of 30 RMB a day. Wu promptly paid them. It was only some time later that they discovered that they, the lowly migrant workers, would be in fact standing center stage.

For a long time, the «floaters» were invisible both statistically and administratively speaking,

but their role in the Chinese economic model was visible. Only the Census of 2000 made it possible to understand the demographic reality of the migration. In fact, for the very first time, the questionnaire allowed to know the duration of the stay in the city and to identify the «floaters». The surprises were great sometimes. The greatest surprise was Shenzhen, a particular economic area, which has become the workshop of the world. In 2000, the statistical yearbook of the Chinese cities, based on some assessments of the population officially registered in this city, gave the total population as 1.3 million. The Census gave 7 million! More than 5 million people lived and worked in Shenzhen even if their *hukou* was registered elsewhere.

It was hard for all the city planners all over the world to think they could be able to plan some cities for an arbitrarily defined number of inhabitants, the city-dwellers/citizens, even if there was already a much greater number of people who lived there actually. Today, except for some cities located in the delta of the Pearl River, such as Shenzhen, which concentrate the essential of the low-cost labor coming from the countryside in their worldwide profitable workshops and factories, most of the big Chinese cities count several thousands, indeed one, two or three million migrants.

The urbanization process in China is far from being carried out: the urbanization rate has reached 50%, while at the end of 1970s, after the Maoist era, it hardly reached 20%. The annual urban growth rate has reached 3% - 4% for about 15 years now.

In fact, the number of migrants is higher and higher: it has reached 100 million since 2000, that is the equivalent of 10 years of the population of France, Benelux and Switzerland together. Their presence in the city is more and more sensible today because of the precariousness of their life conditions which can be clearly seen from their physical status. Actually, there aren't real shanty towns in the Chinese cities, but there are entire districts—essentially populated by migrants, some of them living in the city centre but more often in the urban outskirts—which are nothing less than slums. The biggest ones and the most urbanized ones are the so-called 'villages amid the city' (*chengzhongcun* 城中村): they are ancient outer urban villages absorbed by the city and managed by ancient village communities which rent some hope residences to migrants who are incapable of joining the different real estate markets, even if they are subsidized. Houses in these areas usually have poor physical conditions and are often deficient of basic services (Huang and Jiang, 2009). However, they provide the most accessible and affordable solution for migrants' need to stay closer to their jobs under severe financial constraints. Deprived of the access to public services (health care, education, etc.), these migrants are sometimes tempted to create and manage their own services: this is the case of the schools of migrants. Wang Wo 王我 Wang Wo filmed them in Beijing in his experimental documentary *Outside* (*Wai mian* 外面) made in 2005.[3] The director uses his camera to capture the environment and people around him, immersing the viewer in a non-narrative, highly sensory experience of urban China in its visual splendor.

The local authorities are aware of the necessity of addressing the issue of the urban integration of migrants, of giving them the 'right of the city', often under the pressure of the local public opinion which can't accept the fate of this marginalized population subjected, if need to, to political and economic hazards: we can remember the image of the migrants thrown out of Beijing during the Olympic Games and that of tens of millions of migrants forced to leave the factories in the south of the country because of the recent global economic crisis. The hesitation is essentially due to the costs needed for the coverage of migrants and to the amount of money that the local budgets can't release.

For this reason, for a certain number of politicians and intellectuals as well, the status of migrant, of 'floater', is positive, because the link maintained with the countryside allows to adjust the individual economic strategies; migrants have always the possibility to integrate their village or their agricultural or para-agricultural activities when the urban job market doesn't meet their expectations anymore.

Are migrants going to keep 'floating' for a long time? Maybe they are. What we know is that they are not necessarily going to 'float' in the same way. While the manufacturing activity has been concentrated along the coast so far, in some big well-known metropolis, on the other hand, the new strategies of investors favour the centre of the country, which is less urbanized and less developed. Also here the cinema, a real avant-garde cinema, was able to capture this tendency thanks to the careful eye of Peng Tao 彭韬. In the short film *Wait*, the actress Zhao Tao 赵涛 plays a young peasant arrived in Chongqing with her baby to look for a job; her husband left to Pakistan and she goes to the post office every day to see if he wrote to her. She owns a stand of noodles which will be soon destroyed like many other things in Chongqing. Fortunately, her most loyal customer is a company director who offers her a job in the canteen of their building site. The river is omnipresent, the sprawling city extends over its two banks and to cross it there are some cabins swinging along the cable above the muddy waters. Her husband will probably never write to her but her life doesn't stop, just like a river which doesn't stop flowing.

This short film represents one of the five portraits of the city filmed under the direction of Jia Zhangke. They prove all these upheavals of the Chinese society which fascinate many people in a country where the rurality is still present. In this context, the Chinese city, characterized by very important changes, explodes and composes itself at the same time. The density is at the heart of this great urban adventure. And the mobility, represented by the *mingong*, is a major issue which needs to be integrated into the Chinese contemporary scene.

Notes

1 For more discussion on *minggong* in Jia's cinema, see Michael Berry's *Xiao Wu · Platform · Unknown Pleasures: Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'* (London: BFI Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

2 With the Spring Festival coming, the aim of "returning home with money and fame" gives all migrant workers a lot of pressure. One scene in the documentary *Distant Family* (*Yao yuan de qinqing–Zhongguo yi mingong de dongtian,* 2007 遥远的亲情–中国农民工的冬天), produced by NHK, a Chinese mainstream media outlet, shows the main character, Zhang, Jianping and his wife Yanqiu counting the balance of that month. 370 Yuan is all they have. The arm of their son is waiting to be cured. Jianping's father, a seventy-year-old man, is taking care of their home at their village.

3 According to a UCLA study made in 2008 before the demolition and displacement of *chengzhongcun* in Beijing, prior to the Olympic Games, the *chengzhongcun* occupied a total of 181 square km. Only 47.6% of migrants living there had graduated from high school, their average wage was 1,984 Yuan compared with 3,876 Yuan for Beijing's natives with nearly 75% working in China's tertiary sector. Forced to live in tiny housing, these migrants occupied on average 13.2 square meters of living space whereas the average living space in Beijing is 80 square meters; they didn't have bathrooms or kitchens, 86% didn't have heating, and 93.3% didn't have air-conditioning. For those living in these *chengzhongcuns*, the average cost per square meter of living space was around the same cost as for someone living in rural Beijing (Siqi, Long, Fan, and Gu 2009, 425-46).

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