8. Boundaries, exclusion and identity construction: experiences of rural–urban migrants in China[1]

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

Prior to the early 1980s, perceptions of China's rural population were varied and inconsistent. They were sometimes depicted as enthusiastic, proud, physically powerful, easily led, defiant against oppressors, revolutionary, natural and dignified under duress, and sometimes were seen as cunning, stubborn, conservative, thieving, backward, selfish, superstitious and acquisitive (Kelliher 1994, p. 397). The ruling class constructed such images for political purposes[2] (Jacka 2005). As they were prohibited from moving freely, due to the rigid household registration system (*hukou*) and rare opportunities for expressing their own views existed, rural people were collectively silent under state socialist China.

Today, although rural migrant workers are still officially registered in rural areas, the 'rural' label that applied to their former farming duties is mostly no longer relevant to their new occupations in the cities. At the same time the identity of rural migrants, as constructed by the institution of the *hukou* system, appears to be undergoing a transition. The term *mangliu* (blind flow) that was commonly used by the government in the early 1990s was discarded at the end of the 1990s in government official publications and mainstream media. The term 'industrial workers'[3] (*chanye gongren*) first appeared in central government documents in 2006. This represented a change in the official perception: migrant workers were seen as a contributory force, rather than a destructive force, in China's economic development.

Nevertheless, a number of studies have shown that segregation still exists between rural–urban migrants and urbanites in China. This results in difficulties for the migrants in constructing a more positive identity and in establishing sense of belonging in their host cities. For instance, because rural migrants are deprived of being registered as urbanites in the host cities, the public services that they can access are very limited (Guo and Gao 2008; Li 2006; Solinger 1999; Wu 2007). Empirical studies also indicate that most rural migrants are employed in informal sectors, with both worse working

conditions and worse payment than urbanites (Cai et al 2002; Knight et al 1999; Meng and Zhang 2001). This disparity between rural migrant workers' occupations, their registered status, and the barriers to become real 'urbanites', may lead to high level psychological stress.

Different perspectives have been applied to understand the process of the identity construction of rural migrants, and the associated tensions. The rural–urban dichotomy is often the starting point for this type of research. Not only do the dualistic institutional arrangements obstruct rural migrants from equally obtaining public services in the city, but also the value conflicts make rural migrants find difficulties in being assimilated into urban society to become true urbanites by discarding their rural and traditional lifestyles and values, and by adopting the lifestyles and values of the modernizing urban elites.

A number of previous studies have examined identity and the transformation process of rural migrants in Chinese cities. Jacka (2005) explored the identity of female migrant workers in Beijing from the perspective of value conflicts between tradition and modernization. She found that rural identity was still salient among the female migrants. Pun (2005) discussed identity construction from the perspective of global capitalism and paid special attention to gender differentiation under China's context. She argued that capitalists and a working class clearly co-exist in China, with the latter consisting of those who identify themselves as workers or migrant workers. Yan (2008) and Sun (2009) examined identity struggles and conflicts among household maids. These previous studies have discussed the inner conflicts, struggles and adaption of rural female migrant workers in urban China. They suggest that transformation from rural to urban identity among migrant workers is not straightforward and is an ongoing and complicated process.

Rural migrants are a heterogeneous social group, as indicated in a number of studies (Tang and Feng 2005; Wan 2009). Rapid marketization has led to a process of differentiation among migrants. Some are more economically integrated into urban society because they have been able to take advantage of good opportunities in market competition. They are considered to transform their identity from rural people to urbanites more easily. Others have not obtained a sense of belonging in the city because of economic marginalization or other forms of exclusion. Therefore, market forces act like a double-edged sword in the process of the social integration or exclusion of rural migrants.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the changing identities of rural migrants in response to the conditions of market transition and social transformation in urban China. How do rural–urban migrants perceive themselves and construct their identities in the context of market

transition? Are the rural/urban group boundaries, which have been shaped by state forces that trace back to the pre-reform era, being reinforced or are they being transformed with the introduction of the market mechanism? More specifically, after entering the urban space, are migrants able to transform their rural identity or do they have an uncertain or even conflicting identity when confronted with the fragmentation of their values and identity? More broadly, we examine whether a rural–urban identity distinction is still relevant today.

8.2 SOCIAL IDENTITY, BOUNDARIES AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social identity is a person's perception that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Tajfel 1978). It relies on at least two important factors: the person's status in an existing hierarchical society, which assumes that the formation of one's identity depends largely upon a named and classified world (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Stryker and Serpe 1982); and social comparison (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1985), through which individuals adopt a certain standard to distinguish and label others as members of an 'in-group' or 'out-group'. In his classic study Barth (1969, p. 12) considers social identity to be a product of the process of border formation: 'it is articulated at the boundary and is defined and moderated by the contrast between "them" and "us"'. Barth found that ethnic groups result from drawing boundaries between themselves and mainstream groups.

Social identity reflects group inequality, which is constructed by a process of drawing boundaries through frequent interactions and social comparisons (Lamont and Molnar 2002). When access to resources and opportunities is gradually dominated by one group, it leads to the stabilization of existing boundaries – where individuals are associated with different chances, resources and status.

This process of drawing boundaries is referred by Jordan (1996, p. 5) as social exclusion, which is defined as 'how human beings, interacting in all kinds of collectives, come to include some individuals and exclude others from benefits of membership and at what costs to the rest of the members'. The clear recognition of inter-group boundaries reinforces the willingness of group members to fight for power and resources (Kriesberg 2003). Changing a particular social identity requires crossing or shifting the existing boundaries. For example, the social network is identified as an important element of the social boundary (Melucci 1996; Stryker and Burker 2000; Tilly 2005). It assumes that individuals are embedded in small and specialized networks of social relations. Therefore, crossing

the boundaries means to be embedded into a particular social network. Cultural sociologists (Lamont 2000; Swidler 2001) find that cultural factors, such as cultural repertoires, traditions and individuals' narratives, play an important role in shaping boundaries.

In summary, the relationships between social identity, boundaries and exclusion can be explained by two propositions: (1) social identity can be defined as a person's sense of self, which is related to boundaries between individuals and groups; and (2) boundaries to some extent reflect social exclusion and inequality in the society.

When discussing the identity issues of rural–urban migrants in China, it is relevant to explore where boundaries have been drawn between them and 'others' in the past. During the state socialist period, boundaries were shaped mainly through institutional arrangements (e.g. the *hukou* system) and geographical divisions (e.g. individuals were prohibited from free spatial movement). The power of the state functioned well in maintaining boundaries between the rural and urban divide, which determined almost every social sphere. It was planned and controlled by the central government and administered by various levels of local government. When geographical mobility control was relaxed and the government could not solely manipulate resources and opportunities, the boundaries and division between rural and urban groups began to falter. This breakdown has since affected any subsequent new identity formation, especially among rural-to-urban migrants.

'Rural people' are defined in this chapter as people having an ascribed agricultural *hukou* status and who are supposed to work on the agricultural sector according to the household registration system. This definition is assumed to include both institutional and occupational aspects of identity. Under the pressure of market reform and relaxation of peoples' spatial mobility since the economic reforms in late 1970s and early 1980s, traditional institutions that previously held to a clearly defined rural and urban divide have been readjusted. Rural people who used to work in the traditional agricultural sector started to work in non-agricultural sectors and gradually their employment has less to do with land and farming. This occupational transition provided opportunities to break the original boundaries of institutions and social groups and help establish new group relations. The reshaping of boundaries and the formation of new division mechanisms, in turn, would have impacts on the reorganization of power, resources and classes in transitional China.

8.3 RESEARCH INTO BOUNDARIES, EXCLUSION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

This chapter is based on the analysis of the mechanisms and key aspects of social exclusion of rural–urban migrants in transitional China. The data were collected through a survey conducted in a rural village (Mumakou), in central China, during the Spring Festival period in early 2009. Mumakou village, located in the southwest of Hubei province, is affiliated with Songzi city. In 2009, it comprised nine village groups, with 550 households and 2295 villagers. Unlike other more developed areas in southern or coastal China, Mumakou village was considered relatively conservative in its response to the changes associated with the economic reforms and opening-up. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, there has been a surplus of labour and a scarcity of cultivated land. Working in non-agricultural sectors or being employed in nearby towns or other cities of Hubei province had been common before inter-provincial migration started to became more popular.

Migration to other provinces did not become a trend until the late 1990s – possibly due to poor communication channels in the area that prevented employment information in other regions from reaching the area. Improved transport, particularly the railway line through Songzi to Guangzhou that was installed in 1998, has sped up labour migration to the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong province. Here labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing industries demanded large numbers of migrant workers. In addition, after 2000, long-distance bus services to Shanghai, Beijing, Xi'an and a number of eastern coastal cities became available and expedited the migration process even further. It was estimated in 2008 that, of the 1134 labourers in the village, nearly half of them worked outside the village.

During three months of fieldwork in Mumakou village, 301 individual questionnaires and 20 in-depth interviews were completed. In addition, more insights were obtained into rural migrants' perceptions and attitudes towards urban life outside the village by visiting rural households, interviewing local cadres and villagers and participating in two recruitment and training meetings organized by local officials. Table 8.1 presents the demographic characteristics for the 301 participants in the questionnaire survey.

Key characteristics of respondents indicate that more than 54 per cent were males, about one-third were aged younger than 25 and about one-third were aged between 26 and 35 years. The majority were married and had education from middle school or higher. More than half of the respondents in the questionnaire survey had at least one child. Except for five individuals, all other surveyed respondents still had agricultural *hukou* status and had not transferred their agricultural *hukou* status. In

Table 8.1 Social and demographic characteristics of migrants from Mumakou village (%, N = 301)

Sex		**Marital status**	
Male	54.5	Unmarried	21.7
Female	45.5	Married	77.0
		Others	1.3
Age (years)		**Have children or not**	
≤ 25	31.9	Yes	58.9
26–35	33.6	No	41.1
≥ 36	34.5	**Employment experiences**	
Hukou status		Only one	28.4
Agricultural hukou	98.3	More than once	71.6
Education		**Working status**	
Primary school and below	11.0	Returned many years ago	7.0
Middle school	67.1	Just returned and planned not to leave	12.7
Senior high school and above	21.9	Just returned and planned to leave	80.3

terms of employment experience, more than 71 per cent reported that they had experience of changing jobs in the city. Most of them (80.3 per cent) planned to leave the village again after the Spring Festival.

It should be noted that due to the nature of the sample, which was based on sending villages, not on destinations, it only captured those who had returned to their home village for the Spring Festival. The sample did not capture those who had chosen to stay in the cities during the Spring Festival period. It should also be noted that the survey required that all of the selected respondents had worked in non-agricultural sectors for at least six months, so as to ensure they had enough knowledge and experience in the city, which would have impacts on the formation or transformation of people's identity. It is plausible that the migrants who returned to the village during the Spring Festival period might have more connections with their home village, and they might experience more identity dilemmas compared with those who chose to stay in the city during the Spring Festival period. However, considering the majority of rural migrants would return to their hometown for the Spring Festival, to a large extent the survey is representative as the sample covered a majority of rural-to-urban migrants from this village.

8.4 FINDINGS ON IDENTITY

More than 98 per cent of the respondents in the survey had agricultural *hukou* status and were officially defined as 'rural people'. The survey

examined whether their identity based on *hukou* divide was still clear and salient. As social identity is constructed through a series of comparisons between groups, the survey contained two basic questions concerned with identity: 'when working in the city, do you still perceive yourself as a rural person?' and 'when coming back to the village, do you perceive yourself more as an urbanite?' Participants had a choice of four responses: agree, disagree, somewhat agree and don't know. Answers suggested different perceptions towards identity among the migrants, falling into three sub-categories – remaining rural, becoming urban and being in-between.

Those categorized as 'remaining rural' perceived themselves as rural people when compared with both rural villagers and urbanites; 'becoming urban' were those who perceived themselves as urbanites in both comparisons; and 'being in-between' were those who thought of themselves as 'both rural and urban people' or 'neither rural nor urban people'. If the answers to these two questions were inconsistent or were 'don't know about their identity', they were categorized as 'ambivalent identity'.

Figure 8.1 shows that respondents who positively considered themselves as 'remaining rural' accounted for 24 per cent while the percentage positively categorizing them as urban was only 5 per cent. Nearly half (47 per cent) felt ambivalent. Yet 9 per cent still identified themselves as both rural and urban, while 15 per cent as neither rural nor urban.

Undertaking rural–urban migration does not necessarily enable rural migrants to adjust their identity easily. Indeed, identity adjustment is difficult for many rural migrants in Chinese cities, as they often feel out

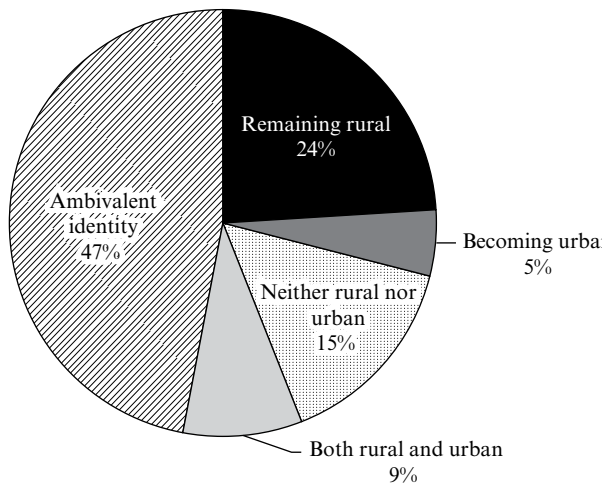

Figure 8.1 Perceived identity of rural–urban migrants (N = 286)

of place or have no sense of belonging (Jacka 2005). To a certain extent their experiences are different from rural migrants in other countries, due to the unusual institutional system in rural and urban areas in China. For example, studies in Turkey and the Philippines have found that young female migrants seem able to carry dual or multiple identities easily and can adjust their behaviour appropriately to different settings (Erman 1998; Trager 1998). In these countries, segregation is eroded by efficient transportation, mass media and frequent communication between rural and urban areas. Thus, migration minimizes geographical isolation and facilitates exchanges of information. It appears that in these countries rural and urban identities co-exist among rural–urban migrants rather than being seen as in opposition to each other. In contrast, rural–urban migrants in China seem to suffer a sense of a lack of belonging and a sense of frustration when trying to integrate into urban society. The following extract from an in-depth interview illustrates this.

> I have been working in the city for several years, so I don't think I am still a rural person. When I come back (to the village), no one looks [*sic*] me as a rural person. They (villagers) think I was working in the city and must have earned a lot. I don't want to return to the village again either. But I have never perceived myself as an urbanite. Not only was I not born there (in the city), but also my job is quite humble (longer working hours and for poor wages). I have encountered discrimination several times in the city. Some urbanites look down upon us, and regard us as rural idiots (*xiangbalao*). As mentioned in the newspapers, I think I am a marginalized urban person. (Male, furniture manufacturing worker, 29 years old)

Citizenship or residence of a locale in China is regulated by the state through the household registration, or *hukou* system. Although the central government has been working to improve the integration of rural migrants into the city, the policy is still regionally and locally fragmented. Several local urban governments have attempted to grant local urban citizenship to rural migrants but the prerequisite criteria are often so high or restrictive that it is out of reach of most rural migrants. The well-publicized progressive *hukou* reform in the capital city of Hebei province Shijiazhuang in 2001 was one of the examples of such policy experiment by a local government. In addition to accepting those who were well-educated, wealthy, or family members of urban residents, Shijiazhuang also allowed rural migrant workers who worked continuously in the city for at least two years to convert to local urban *hukou* status. However, only a small proportion of migrant workers could take advantage of this policy as only those who worked as 'contract workers' (normally with state-run enterprises) could apply. The majority of rural migrants worked in low-skilled jobs in the informal sector and few could work

continuously for two years and therefore they were not qualified to apply for *hukou* conversion (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Migrant workers' lack of employable skills in the formal sector in the urban context means that many are marginalized and unprotected in the urban labour market. Being subjected to unequal institutional arrangements and facing vulnerability in the labour market makes it difficult for rural migrants to settle in the city, especially for those with families. Many have no definite ideas about future settlement and they vacillate between their native villages or hometowns and cities. Sometimes they feel determined to live an urban life and never go back to the villages and other times they are frustrated and consider returning to the countryside. Therefore, the crisis of 'legitimizing identity' (Castells 2004) in the city is aggravated by their marginalized economic position that obstructs the formation of a stable and clear identity.

After moving into an urban space, traditional kinship and geo-relations of rural culture are eroded. Rural migrants find themselves in a more heterogeneous environment and must try to build new identities through interacting with strangers, some of who become their new role models of city life (Pan 2007). Therefore, the process of cultural fragmentation affects subjective ambiguity. This results in migrants finding it hard to shake off their rural roots, even long after leaving their villages, while at the same time growing in the realization that they are not well integrated into urban culture.

8.5 FINDINGS ON BOUNDARIES AND EXCLUSION

In this section, identity construction in the urban context is examined. Identities hinge on marking a difference and every sense of 'we' must unavoidably leave out or exclude a 'they' (Gilroy 1997). Through identifying who the respondents referred to as 'us' and 'them', it is argued that rural and urban identities perceived by rural migrants would not be fixed. Rather, identities take on various connotations in different contexts. As 'rural' is regarded as a culturally traditional and negative label, rural migrants tend to try to distance themselves from a 'rural' identity label by assimilating into 'urban' identity in terms of clothing, lifestyle, speech and behaviour. 'Urban' is often regarded as a culturally modern and positive label.

At the same time, they often raise doubts about the legitimacy of these labels, either given by others or themselves. In addition, they may gain new identity labels relating to their occupation, work relationships, economic status and social networks. Economic status plays a greater part in

identity construction in the city, which also underlies the increasing power of the market in the formation of identity boundaries.

8.5.1 Social Boundaries

When migrants have an experience that touches identity boundary, frustration is often the result – as seen in the following interview with a 42-year-old male construction worker.

> We went to the large supermarkets, hoping to explore the mega-city. Unpleasantly, the security guards looked at us cautiously and sceptically as if we were thieves. We felt frustrated and angry as the security guards monitored us.

Rural migrants tend to strive to assimilate into the cities or urban space not only because cities or urban spaces have long been associated with superiority and modernity but also because such assimilation is a strategy for avoiding discrimination in the public space. The following interviewee demonstrates this point.

> At that time, I did not wear decent clothes . . . now I have learnt that, if I put on a clean jacket with a fashionable hairstyle and shine my shoes, they will not discriminate against me through my appearance. (Male, 32-year-old construction worker)

A number of studies (Jacka 2005; Pun 2005; Sun 2009) have identified the differences felt particularly by female rural migrants for their clothing, rural dialect and style of speech contribute to a sense of inferiority in the city. They are easily distinguished as outsiders by their country-style clothes, anxious manner and body language, which are considered incompatible with a modern urban setting (Jacka 2005).

> [Being] incapable of speaking Cantonese is a big disadvantage (in Guangzhou). As they know from your dialect that you are not Cantonese, they may bully you. Sometimes when buying vegetables we asked 'why is it so expensive?' They yelled 'just go away if you cannot afford it'. But we have to not take it too seriously [what we normally do is to be silent] otherwise there is no way to survive there. (Female, 46-year-old restaurant waitress)

To counteract this distinction, rural migrants actively imitate urbanites' dress, speech and manners. Clothing and style of speaking, as elsewhere, are important signals indicating one's background and social status. Jacka (2005, p. 227) also points out that clothing or style of speaking is 'not only wealth or one's eye for fashion' but also the sort of people with whom one identifies and the kind of person one is 'on the inside'.

Overt discrimination deepens rural migrants' sense of being out of place and reinforces their sense of not being integrated into mainstream urban society. Nevertheless, the reasons for discrimination in the public space are increasingly being challenged. One reason for this is that second-generation rural migrants, some of whom were born in the city, and others who came to city after finishing school, have little or no knowledge of farming or a rural lifestyle. Better educated than their parents and more knowledgeable about urban settings they are more sensitive to urban inequality and also have different personal strategies for dealing with the problems.

Evidence of second-generation rural migrants' sensitivity is seen in a subtle change in the word *suzhi* (quality). This word first appeared, in relation to rural migrants, in the 1980s in state documents investigating rural poverty. They attributed China's failure to modernize to the 'low quality' of its population, especially in rural areas (Anagnost 2004). Though the term has been widely adopted, the standard of judging 'low *suzhi* people' is flexible, including a host of attributes such as education, culture, morality, manners, psychology and genetics. The notion of 'lacking quality' is applied to rural migrants, litterbugs, those who are short in stature and the poorly dressed (Kipnis 2006). They are considered less educated, having flaws in their appearance or some sort of cultural abnormality. Interviews with informants indicated that older migrants accepted that their *suzhi* was comparatively low and they mainly attributed this to their low level of education and 'not knowing how to talk in the city'.

However, young migrants began to doubt the legitimacy of this label, as they also used this label to explain the behaviour of some urbanites and unequal treatment in the city.

> It depends on individuals. Some local people are nice, while some are low *suzhi*. It is unavoidable to meet some low *suzhi* people. Then I keep silent to avoid trouble with them. (30-year-old female garment factory worker)

> Some locals were rough and with low *suzhi*. They always found [*sic*] troubles in our restaurant. They had not received much education and we must tolerate as they are low *suzhi*. (24-year-old male chef)

Overall appearance, speech and *suzhi* are widely used as the boundaries to distinguish rural newcomers from local urbanites. These characteristics vividly reflect the power of urban discourse in image construction by both rural and urban people. On one hand, rural people make efforts to assimilate and absorb urban values and lifestyle. On the other hand, they, especially younger migrants, are beginning to doubt and challenge the legitimacy of those symbolic boundaries as they realize that urbanites

are a far less homogeneous group than initially thought. Modernity and superiority are not necessarily associated with all urbanites in the cities, as some are not well educated and demonstrate low moral standards in treating their migrant counterparts. By considering the fact that some urbanites have 'low quality', rural migrants could be empowered when encountering discrimination in the public space. With increasing numbers of younger migrants and second-generation rural migrants in the cities, there could be more considerable and ongoing erosion of the rural–urban identity dichotomy.

8.5.2 Economic Boundaries

In this section, two forms of economic boundaries that rural migrants might experience in the city are examined: (a) homeowners vs. tenants and (b) *laoban* (business owners) vs. *dagongde* (employees). The economic boundaries are closely associated with the institutional boundary determined by one's *hukou* status. In many cities, the entitlement of owning residential properties is only available to local residents and therefore the vast majority of migrants, rural or otherwise, would only be able to rent from property owners. To a lesser extent, business ownership is also associated with one's local *hukou* status. The relationships and interactions between homeowners and tenants and between business owners and employees are considered an important aspect in influencing the formation and transformation of rural migrants' identity in Chinese cities.

Homeowners versus tenants

Since the economic reforms starting in 1978, Chinese people have been immersed in a consumer society in which the pursuit of consumption becomes a driving force of economic growth and social transformation. Unlike the situation during the state socialist period, consumption of goods in recent decades is not simply an ordinary economic activity but plays an important role in constructing self-identity or social status of Chinese people. 'Home' is more or less equal to owning a property, either a house or apartment. The nature of the property itself, as a possession, is a source of personal autonomy (Couper and Brindley 1975). As Agnew (1981, p. 76) states, 'the control of one's own private space gave people a feeling of freedom from the control and they had the power and opportunity to make something of themselves, to be more of an individual, to achieve a kind of self-fulfilment'. Home ownership also means more security and stability. As most Chinese people value families and a permanent lifestyle, some equate owning a house with having a family, which is also indicative of having a stable place and a sense of settlement.

Home ownership has become highly significant in forming urban group boundaries and in signalling whether one has become a local urbanite or not, as seen from the following interview.

> Wenfang and her husband went to Shanghai in 1998 and worked there for almost a decade. They were among the first of the wealthy in the village and had transferred their rural *hukou* to urban *hukou* in the nearby hometown (songzi) years ago. When they were asked whether they felt any exclusion in Shanghai, her husband was very positive, answering that 'if you are rich, they won't exclude you; but if you are poor, you will definitely be excluded'. Wenfang worked as a domestic maid and provided personal care services to families with old or sick people with irregular working hours and working places. She talked frequently about how hard they had been working in Shanghai, trying to save as much money as they could in order to become real Shanghaiese. When she was asked to list the criteria she thought important to become a true Shanghaiese, she did not hesitate, and replied that at least they should own an apartment. (35-year-old female)

The housing market in China started to develop after 1998 and is characterized by the rise in commercialized housing markets and a decline in both workplace (*danwei*) and state subsidized housing systems. The limited social security system in China has also encouraged people to invest in housing as a means of averting risk and insecurity. Investing in property is considered as a popular way of earning a pension. The importance of house ownership for a family is also reflected in its importance as a step towards marriage. Many rural migrants find getting married difficult unless they can afford a property.

A rural family who can earn extra money is likely to invest in renovating or building a new house in the village. The survey in Mumakou village found that a comparison of housing conditions in the neighbourhoods is a frequently discussed topic, and the quality of housing is an important criterion when judging the economic and social status of a bridegroom and his family.

Skyrocketing housing prices have excluded rural outsiders and other low-paid urban underclass, and have created a tenant class in the Chinese cities. In addition to its cultural impacts, the lack of home ownership in the urban areas is exacerbated by a deficient and poorly regulated housing rental market and by the social housing system, which excludes rural migrants from applying for affordably priced and government-funded properties. The urban social housing system is one of the legacies of China's *hukou* system that has different entitlements for locals and migrants in cities. Because many rural migrants cannot afford to own their home in the city, either through the housing market (too expensive) or social housing system (not entitled), they regard themselves as urban floaters with no sense of settlement.

The rental market is irregular, unregulated and underdeveloped in China. Most transactions are conducted underground without supervision by an authority, which results in unregulated prices and unfavourable living conditions – a precarious and disadvantageous position for tenants. Compared with those who own their own homes, tenants are more likely to experience uncertainty in their living arrangement. In order to save money, rural migrants often choose to live in peripheral areas of the city or congregate in urban villages where rents are more affordable than other urban areas. Wenfang described how her family lived in the Zhabei industrial zone in Shanghai, which she depicted as an area with a mixture of all sorts of people.

> It is a very old, crowded and disordered area with many outsiders living and working there, while some local rich residents are gradually moving out of the area.

The wealth hierarchy naturally differentiates between areas and individuals, constructing invisible borders within the city. The phenomenon of spatial segregation between urban locals and migrants is gradually infiltrating urban China, resulting in migrant-concentrated shantytowns in many Chinese cities. Rural migrants have become a major segment of the urban poor class (Guo and Cheng 2010).

Economic differentiation based on home ownership has recently received more attention, for two main reasons. First, possession of a property plays a vital role in one's sense of belonging and security. This is part of the reason why Wenfang's family insisted on claiming that they were not Shanghaiese, despite living there for almost a decade. Property ownership is also a prerequisite for converting from rural *hukou* to urban *hukou* status in many cities. Second, housing is a status symbol, in terms of scale, location and decoration (Veblen 1953). Therefore in urban areas home ownership normally carries a higher social status than in rural villages. This partly explains why migrants, if they return to their hometown, still insist on owning a house in town or in a small nearby city, if they can afford it.

Employment status: *laoban* (business owner or boss) and *dagongde* (employee working for a boss)

Aside from property ownership, other economic boundaries relate to capital assets: *laoban* (business owner or boss) and *dagongde* (employee working for a boss). *Laoban* literally indicates the person who owns business or capital assets and employs workers for production, while *dagongde* are the workers who are employed by *laoban*. The employer–employee relationship is a fundamental relationship in any society where businesses

are operated and economic activities are conducted. However, this relationship has been complicated in China with the shift from a socialist-oriented economic philosophy to a market or capitalist-oriented economic system. According to the socialist philosophy, workers in the cities used to be the 'masters' of the society with secure employment and entitlements. Employers were state-owned units or urban collective-owned units that were funded or supported by the state. From the workers' perspective, in the reform era, the shift has not been easy, as it has taken the workers' position from the relative security of socialism to the unpredictability of capitalism. Thus, the *dagongde* who were interviewed reflected on the effect this change of ideology has had on their dependence on the *laoban*.

> We work for others (*laoban*) . . . As *dagongde*, we must do whatever the *laoban* asks us to. (32-year-old male construction worker)

> Affected by the Financial Crisis, the factory did not receive much [*sic*] orders. Both the *laoban* and we (*dagongde*) were worried. Lack of enough orders means we had to reduce production. This would affect our earnings. (30-year-old female garment factory worker)

One garment factory in Guangzhou, where Xiaozhang worked, closed earlier than usual during the 2008 Financial Crisis period. Six years ago, like many rural families, Xiaozhang and her husband had headed for the city to *dagong* (working or being employed as a worker), leaving their parents and daughter behind in the village. After spending six years in Guangzhou, Xiaozhang decided to return. She said:

> I am familiar with Guangzhou and it is very prosperous. I like there, but I know I don't belong to there. We are *dagongde* [sigh]. There is no hope for our future. With less than RMB 1200 [per month] in Guangzhou, I feel I am nothing. My husband and I save as much as we can, and I think we can develop our own business (*becoming a laoban*) in our hometown. (30-year-old female factory worker)

Psychologically, the identity of *dagongde* has resulted from rural migrants' moving to the cities and their desire to earn more money. Many rural migrants regard their working status – *dagong* in the city – as a temporary situation, as they intend to return to their hometown later on. Also, compared to white-collar jobs, *dagong* implies insecurity and instability with little bargaining power or protection. Many *dagongde* were not protected by a formal labour contract and their employers only verbally communicated employment conditions. The work is often monotonous, uncreative and workers are often humiliated and treated with disrespect. Working as *dagong*, as opposed to white-collar workers, implies different relations

with both the state and employers. The former is unstable with weak protection while the latter is well protected and entitled to rights and benefits. Most migrant workers in cities have to bear the responsibility of looking after their own health and welfare and many do not have the pension benefits that are available to local urban workers.

> She (*laoban*) promised my salary was RMB 700 per month while I was just paid RMB 600 . . . she told me the business was not that good, so the salary had to be reduced. In fact, my workload wasn't reduced accordingly. We slept 5 to 6 hours per day and we felt so tired, but she never sympathized with us, and never understood how much importance that a small amount of RMB 100 meant to us. (24-year-old male chef)

> It would be terrible for us *dagongde* to be sick, because our *laoban* did not approve sick leave unless it became serious. They could forfeit us for any reason. Some workers wanted to quit because of the unhuman management, poor salary and long working hours. (28-year-old male electronics factory worker)

In recent years, the types of industries and sectors open to rural–urban migrants has increased and many enterprises now have to depend on cheap labour provided by migrant workers. After many years of *dagong* experience in the city, a 'group' consciousness is gradually forming among rural–urban migrants that all *laoban*, regardless of their background and industry type, are inclined to exploit workers. Rural–urban migrants have started to understand that their rights are being infringed if their employers unfairly treat them.

Although antagonism between capitalists and workers, as described by Karl Marx, was abolished during Mao's rule, the description of *laoban* in the interviews with migrant workers indicates that *laoban* and capitalists share some similarities. This notion is also supported by Pun (2005), who argues that labour relations in China reflect some aspects of capitalism.

In recent years, various forms of resistance have become apparent, despite collective confrontation actions being suppressed and contained. Of the 20 informants interviewed, two had been on strike due to a delay in salary payment. Various forms of rebellion, such as delaying, taunting, non-cooperation and job-hopping have frequently been used by rural–urban migrants to express their dissatisfaction in employment conditions. One worker said:

> I have fired five bosses since I *dagong* in the city. Sometimes they delay my salary, and sometimes I feel the pay is too little to survive. (29-year-old male construction worker)

The economic boundaries represented by the relationships between homeowners and tenants and between *laoban* and *dagongde* reinforce the subordinate social and economic status of rural-to-urban migrants in Chinese cities, which in turn prevents them from integrating in the urban society and becoming urbanites. The institutional legacy of China's decades long *hukou* system (discriminated against rural people) and the newly developed market-oriented system (not protecting migrant workers) work together to place rural-to-urban migrant workers among the lowest in the hierarchy of Chinese urban society.

8.5.3 Network Boundaries

Kinship and geo-relations, as important sources of information and assistance during the migration process, play an important role in identity construction. *Laoxiang* (fellow villagers or people from same place) are a network built among the rural migrants who come from the same place of origin. Migrants from the same origin tend to congregate in certain urban places or sectors, such as 'Zhejiang village' or 'Henan village' (Xiang 1999; Tang and Feng 2000). These villages help rural migrants adapt to and survive in the city. The network, based on reciprocal relationships and residential congregation in the city, strengthens group cohesion and deepens the significance of kinship and geo-relations on identity. Maintenance of the *laoxiang* network relies on the perception of 'face' (*mianzi*) and reciprocal tradition (Pan 2007). As two interviewees in this study said:

> My friends are all outsiders . . . we have very few contacts with local urbanites. (29-year-old male factory worker)

> In fact, I didn't want to live in that place because most residents were floating population (*liudong renkou*). All people there were highly mobile, we were always wary of each other. We didn't trust others, except several *laoxiang*. We also didn't have time to communicate with others because most of the time they were busy with their own work. (28-year-old female salesperson)

However, after working and living in the city for several years, developing and being involved in different networks is also helpful for personal development, as an open and heterogeneous network normally provides more diversified information and resources. *Gongyou* (co-workers) are the other important network of rural migrants based on employment (or *dagong*) in the city. *Gongyou* are also mostly from rural areas of China but its members are more heterogeneous than the *laoxiang* network. So while also offering assistance and information for rural migrants in the city, this network is much more complicated and differentiated than the kinship

networks. Conflicts and exclusion would not only occur between rural migrants and urbanites but also within the migrant group.

> We did not have much contact with local urbanites; therefore we did not have much conflict. The people working here are in different occupations. In [the] catering industry, competition is fierce. The conflicts mostly occur within we *dagongde*, sometimes conflicts with Henanese and Sichuanese because of scrambling for business. (24-year-old male chef)

The attitude towards *gongyou* differs from one individual to another. A co-worker relationship could develop into a good friendship or they could remain strangers. The results from this study indicated that most rural migrants found their first employment through the introduction from *laoxiang*, while the proportion of migrants obtaining employment information through *gongyou* network is higher. Moreover, *gongyou* from the same region are still considered more reliable than those from other regions.

The multiple social networks maintained by rural-to-urban migrants are important avenues of obtaining employment information and assistance in the city when needed. However, they also provided a community to rural migrants, in which most of their social interactions and economic activities are conducted with fellow villagers or people from the same places or origin or with those who share similar social status and experience. This also to a large extent prevents rural migrants from interacting with urban residents and integrating into the urban community. As suggested in the previous section, one's identity is largely defined by one's expression through lifestyle, clothing, language, and habits and behaviour. Therefore rural migrants' social networks, of fellow villagers or co-workers, hinder the identity transformation process of rural migrants in Chinese cities.

8.6 DISCUSSION

The analysis above reflects Barth's (1969) notion of social identities, in this case rural–urban migrants' identities, being shaped and defined by the boundary between 'them' and 'us'. Here we have seen how migrants adopt different expressions of identity to form boundaries in the city. We have tried to decipher whether the identities used in talking about 'them' and 'us' represent the same groups. The assumption in this study has been that the long-term institutional boundaries between rural and urban groups defined by the pervasive *hukou* system, which would have an inexorable impact on migrants, even after they have lived in the city for a lengthy period of time. Table 8.2 provides a summary of the indicators of boundaries and identities discussed above.

Table 8.2 Boundaries and identities of rural migrants in China

Nature of boundary		Us	Them
Institutional boundary	*Hukou* status	Rural people	Urban people
Boundary in public space	Clothing/dialect/ *suzhi*	Rural people/ non-locals	Urban people/ locals
Economic boundary	Home ownership Capital assets	Tenants *Dagongde*	House owners *Laoban*
Network boundary	Kinships and social groups	*laoxiang*/*gongyou*	Urbanites/ strangers

While identities may appear fixed, they can, in fact, be quite fluid and even overlap. For example, in terms of property owners and tenants, the property owners are more likely to be urban people as a result of their economic status and entitlements provided by the urban *hukou* system. Similarly, those identified as *laoban* are more capable of affording (i.e. through paying a high fee) a local urban *hukou* if they do not already have it.[4] Thus, having either home ownership or capital assets makes it easier for rural individuals to cross institutional boundaries and become urban residents. In terms of urbanites/strangers (in other words, locals vs. non-locals), as opposed to *gongyou* and *laoxiang*, the term 'them' can refer to groups of local urbanites, urban migrants from other cities and strangers outside *laoxiang*/*gongyou* networks. Therefore, the reference group – 'them' – should include a large segment of urbanites.

Different expressions of identity are reflections of boundaries constructed within the city, which result from both institutional exclusion and economic exclusion in the labour market and society. In terms of the boundaries observed in public spaces, especially migrant-concentrated communities in the city, rural migrants' rural identities are generally more distinctive, and it is easy to distinguish them from the local urbanites through appearance, clothing and dialects. It should be noted that although exclusion and discrimination towards rural people in the public space is still evident, the boundaries between urban-to-urban migrants and local urbanites are more blurred, as urban–urban migrants share more similarities with local urban residents in terms of level of education and social capital. As indicated in a recent study (Wang et al 2014), there was still a greater degree of wage discrimination against rural migrants, which resulted from the double discriminations arising from the urban and rural divide and the local and non-local divide in Chinese cities. They also noted that the segmentation between locals and non-locals (including rural

or urban migrants) was more dominant than the segmentation between urban local residents and rural migrants, which was the case in the pre-reform China.

The unleashing of market forces is creating new identities among rural migrants and is expected to play a more important role in their identity negotiation and formation, which also affect their social and economic wellbeing. On the premise of no breakthrough in urban institutional reforms, i.e. no universal abolition of the *hukou* system (as outlined by Kam Wing Chan in Chapter 2), a more realistic way for rural migrants to forge a new identity is to aim to cross the economic boundary and become integrated into urban life. There are cases of crossing institutional boundaries through individual endeavours, such as changing their identity from *dagongde* to *laoban* or from tenants to homeowners, through improving their economic status and wellbeing. These stories of rural migrants becoming economically well-off and gaining respect in the big cities encourage other rural migrants to make the effort to persevere and become urbanites (Murphy 2002).

However, without fundamental reforms of the *hukou* system, the rural migrants' individual efforts would be hindered and the identity transformation process of the vast number of rural migrants in Chinese cities would be delayed, which in turn would also delay the formation of civil society that China needs for long-term development and prosperity.

Nevertheless, the economic boundary is becoming increasingly important in excluding and including particular groups in the urban society. Unlike the institutional boundary, it does not necessarily exclude all rural people nor include all urban people. Instead, those prospering in the market will be included while others will be marginalized in the urban system. As indicated in the above analysis, rural migrants' perceived identity, towards either rural or urban identity, is closely related to their economic wellbeing and social networks. Home ownership and business ownership in the city are two clear indicators of a sense of wellbeing and settlement among rural migrants. Social networks, however, could play a positive role in assisting rural migrants in the urban labour market; it could also prevent rural migrants from fully integrating in urban society and forming an urban identity. Urban people, especially the middle-lower white-collar classes, may also be confronted with a process of marginalization in the capital-dominated market. A typical case is the newly emerged group ironically called the 'ant tribe'[5] (*yizu*), comprising mainly university graduates, who are unable to buy a home in the cities but have to live in poor conditions in crowded rental accommodation. The 'ant tribe' phenomenon is the result of harsh market competition in China and it plays a role in marginalizing urbanites. For this reason, not all people believe that

obtaining urban *hukou* and officially changing their *hukou* status could significantly alter the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

> Even though you have an urban *hukou*, it is meaningless if you cannot earn more money. But if you can earn more after you get the urban *hukou* that would make a difference. (28-year-old male factory worker)

According to Ellemers (1993), there are three management strategies to reconstruct identity – upward mobility, social creativity and social revolution. Based on his study, we might propose that rural–urban migrants may also 'reconstruct' their identity and change the boundaries of division within the city through these strategies. The first is upward mobility through market competition to obtain a higher economic status and realize economic integration. As discussed above, this avenue is open to a small proportion of rural–urban migrants. The second is social creativity, which means redefining and revaluing the positive or negative aspects of groups. This strategy could help low-status groups take on a more positive identity. For example, pressuring the government into reforming or abolishing the *hukou* system would change or eliminate the institutional boundary that provides a strong basis for the rural–urban identity divide. The third possibility is social revolution. If boundaries become impermeable, members of low-status groups will consider enhancing their social identity by changing the power structure through revolution, so as to improve the comparative social status of their group as a whole.

It is apparent that rural–urban migrants in China have adopted the first two strategies but the third one is so far not evident. Pun (2005) argues that even though China manifests some aspects of capitalism, the emergence of a labour class is not one of them. This type of grassroots and/or union-driven strategy is unlikely in China until there are fundamental democratic reforms in the society.

In the absence of institutional reforms (i.e. abandonment of the *hukou* system) at the national level, some urban governments are making efforts to somehow adjust the *hukou* system, and provide better public services to migrants to weaken social conflicts. At the same time, despite their relatively lower status in the city compared to many locals, rural migrants' average economic level is better than of their counterparts in rural China. So they compromise and accept an inferior social position in the cities for higher economic gains, which would not be available in their home villages/towns.

8.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the identity of rural–urban migrants in China within the context of transition to a market economy. The proportion of migrants positively perceiving their identity as either rural or urban was quite small and the majority of rural migrants felt uncertain or ambiguous about their identity. Nearly half (47 per cent) felt ambivalent. A small proportion identified as both rural and urban while slightly more identified as neither rural nor urban.

It has been argued that identity depends on where the boundaries are located between 'us' and 'them'. Aside from institutional boundaries (i.e. the *hukou* system), three other boundaries were found to delineate 'us' and 'them': boundaries in the public space, economic boundaries and network boundaries. First, boundaries in the public space can be seen as the outcome of the institutional divide that has prevailed since the 1950s. Different arrangements for rural and urban dwellers have resulted in different rural and urban identities and stereotypes. The symbols of categorization as 'included in' or 'excluded from' a group include dress, dialect and *suzhi* (quality).

Second, economic boundaries, especially home ownership and capital assets (business ownership), also play an important role in identity negotiation. Urban home ownership not only provides a sense of economic achievement for migrants in cities but also brings psychological security and makes it possible for migrants to change their rural identity by purchasing an urban *hukou*. But the vast majority of rural migrants cannot afford home ownership in the city, especially large cities, and most of them do not have the means to become business owners in the city. The emergence of a new urban poor, of people who are excluded from the housing market, is evident. Rural migrants, together with other urban poor, have become the most disadvantaged people in Chinese cities.

Third, in terms of network boundaries, rural–urban migrants are involved mainly in *laoxiang* and *gongyou* (kinship and co-worker) networks. When they encounter difficulties at their destinations, they rarely seek help from institutions or local residents. The social networks that rural migrants maintain in the city are important means of gaining assistance and obtaining employment information but they play a role in preventing them from fully integrating into urban society.

Many rural–urban migrants adopt more than one identity and choose particular expressions of these identities under different conditions. Sometimes they still regard themselves as 'rural people' in spite of living and working in the city for several years, and sometimes they identify themselves as *dagongde* or inferior 'tenants', and consider their social

network is quite closed as they have less contact with local urbanites in the city. These multiple identities reflect a lack of a sense of psychological security and a sense of belonging.

As market reforms in China accelerate, it is expected that these forces will play an increasingly important role in migrants' identity construction. If the state were to abolish the institutional divide between rural and urban areas, and within the cities, it would create a more equitable environment for rural migrants and the newly emerged urban underclass. But this seems unlikely in the near future. It is more probable that dual exclusion – institutional exclusion and economic exclusion – will continue to hinder the process of rural migrants' integration into urban society. This, in turn, will delay the formation of civil society that could facilitate China's long-term prosperity.

NOTES

1. The writing of this chapter was supported by the International Macquarie University Research Excellence Scholarship (iMQRES), China National Social Science Fund – Youth Project 'Welfare Attitudes of Migrants and Welfare Inequality in China' (Project Number: 12CSH085) and Pujiang Talented Program (12PJC070).
2. Jacka (2005) has systematically reviewed the historical changes in perceptions of rural areas and rural people in China. She suggests that these images have undergone changes and been used for different political purposes. Roughly speaking, at the beginning of the foundation of the People's Republic of China, rural images were more positive. After the 1950s, the images have been ascribed with paradoxical meanings. On the one hand, rural people were described as revolutionary, diligent and positive; on the other hand, they were described as passive, uncivilized and needing to be enlightened (pp. 5–6).
3. The State Council published a document in 2006 (No. 5), which was entitled 'Suggestions on solving the issues of rural migrants'. In this document, the concept of migrant workers was written officially for the first time, 'Rural migrant workers are the new labourers during the process of industrialization and urbanization. Their *hukou* is registered in rural areas, but they work mainly in non-agricultural sectors; they work seasonally, as both peasants and workers; they are highly mobile, and have become part of the industrial workers in China'.
4. Many cities have begun to reform the local *hukou* policies. Now there are several ways of obtaining local urban *hukou*. People, who afford an apartment, or with a certain amount of investment in local cities, have a greater chance of obtaining local urban *hukou*.
5. Urban ant tribes (*yizu*) particularly refer to university graduates who have temporary work and earn less than those in more stable employment in the cities. Since 1998, when universities in China began to expand enrolments, the government has gradually terminated its promise of allocating permanent jobs to university graduates. In recent years, university graduates seem to have begun losing elite positions in the labour market. Many members of ant tribes have urban *hukou* status registered elsewhere, or have paid for an urban human resources services agent to archive their *hukou* documents in order to keep their urban *hukou* status. This emergent group under market competition is also confronted with social exclusion in the cities (Lian 2009), which arouses more and more attention.

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