

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

EVALUATION FORM FOR THE M.A. PAPER

Name of Student: ZHILAN FANG

Title of M.A. Paper: To be a new Laborer or not: Dagongren as an Identity-in-the Making.

**Evaluation and Comments: (Feel free to attach separate pages)**

Ms. Fang has done a fine job in acquiring a working knowledge of the semiotic principles and theoretical foundations of linguistic anthropology. She has deftly used them – in conjunction with wide-reading of material on labor in China today – to craft a well-written and well-argued essay on the (political) uses of the term *Dagongren* on particular Chinese internet sites.

The essay does a good job of reviewing some literatures, picking out the issues, especially in the analyses of (1) internet memes and (2) the situation of highly educated workers in China.

Ms. Fang analyzes a term she isolated (from a much larger set, as revealed at the end of the essay). *Dagongren* has a history as the label for physical laborers and especially migrant labor and is used by them and about them, especially in the voice of complaint. However, as is often the case with any label that is taken up and identified by a socially stereotyped "figure," *dagongren* has had a career of re-contextualization and re-signification. Ms. Fang does a good job of taking us through the changes that the label has shown: from term for/by physical laborers about themselves, to state speech used to physical laborers, to parody of physical laborers by state voices and others. It was then taken up by highly educated young people as a way of complaining about their own working lives, experienced as meaningless and futile. Most interestingly, one usage of this label by the highly educated aligned with physical laborers, uniting the two kinds of social struggle. However, in another twist, the educated voices Fang reject this alignment, insisting that *dagongren* is rather for themselves alone, not laborers.

The twists and turns in this story are highly interesting and well done. Fang concludes that the label *dagongren* is an index of an "identity-in-the-making" since the highly educated users of it are not entirely settled on EXACTLY what identity it indexes and names. Of course, no label is every entirely settled, and the open-endedness of this kind of continuing recontextualization (evident in all politicized terms) should not leave us thinking that they are "floating signifiers." On the contrary, as Ms. Fang notes, they are actively and consequentially "in the making."

Signed: Susan Gal

Date: Nov 6, 2011

Print or type name: Susan Gal

Letter Grade: A

**Note:**

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Y X N

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