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“All Migrant Workers on the Earth Are One Family” : An Ethnographic Study of Vernacular Rhetoric and Emerging Civil Sphere in a Transitional China

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“All Migrant Workers on the Earth Are One Family”: An Ethnographic Study of Vernacular Rhetoric and Emerging Civil Sphere in a Transitional China

by

MINGJIE WANG

B.A. Tsinghua University, 1997
M.A. Tsinghua University, 2000

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This thesis titled:
“All Migrant Workers on the Earth Are One Family”: An Ethnographic Study of
Vernacular Rhetoric and Emerging Civil Sphere in a Transitional China
written by Mingjie Wang
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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ABSTRACT

For the past decade, China had remained one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but the human costs, economic inequality, social discrimination, and political marginalization imposed upon the hundreds of millions of migrant workers had become unprecedentedly grave. In the context of such social predicaments, Grassroots Home (GH) emerged as a self-regulated association of migrant workers, who aspired to make their collective voice heard and to imagine a better society.

This research regards GH as a representative anecdote of China’s emerging civil sphere, defined as an ongoing social and rhetorical accomplishment of something approaching group solidarity and civil judgment about matters of mutual interest. Theoretically, this research emphasizes the role of vernacular rhetoric in the self-production of society in which social imaginaries and abstract principles of civil sphere take concrete forms in time and place.

This research explores three fundamental questions regarding 1) GH’s formation as an ongoing rhetorical project, especially in terms of maintaining autonomy in relation to the party-state authorities; 2) GH’s creation of something approaching a distinctly workers’ culture through vernacular rhetoric; 3) GH’s visions of a better society by (re)appropriating and (re)inventing cultural resources in a way that their meanings became rhetorically salient and communally comprehensible.

In order to explore these questions, this research blends rhetoric and ethnography by conducting sustained fieldwork at GH where the researcher observed and heard naturally...
occurring vernacular rhetoric among the workers and participated in their cultural activities and organizational duties.

This work finds that the migrant workers had demonstrated sophisticated rhetorical competence. Their engagement in a vernacular realm helped to preserve their self-organization as a place in which to remain independent from and strategically cooperative with the party-state. They had been building an emerging culture of their unique worldview by reclaiming the productivity of labor. They envisioned a better society by (re)discovering and (re)inventing the cultural resources of the socialist legacy, traditional culture of love, and an agrarian dream.

The findings from this research have theoretical and practical implications for better understanding and potentially engaging China’s emerging civil sphere. The empirical reflexive lessons learned from this research can help to further develop methods of rhetorical ethnography.
DEDICATION

To G.H.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my advisor, Gerard Hauser, for his friendship, advice, and introduction to the charming field of vernacular rhetoric. This dissertation would not have been possible without his words of wisdom, great patience, and unwavering confidence in me.

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I am especially grateful to the members of Grassroots Home (Hangzhou, China) for accepting me as one of their family members when I was doing my ethnographic fieldwork there. They have my heartfelt respect due to their cheerful and voluntary contributions to a common home and a common dream. Certainly, all flaws in this work are mine.

In writing this dissertation, I am very grateful to the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) for a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship (2011-2012), and to the University of Colorado Boulder Graduate School and Department of Communication for their additional financial support for AY 2011-2012. My ethnographic fieldwork was partially supported by a scholarship from the Department of Communication, to which I am also grateful.

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<tr>
<td>ACFTU</td>
<td>All China Federation of Trade Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHW</td>
<td>Beijing Home of Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GH</td>
<td>Grassroots Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSCRR</td>
<td>Liang Shuming Center of Rural Reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Ministry of Civil Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGMW</td>
<td>The new generation of migrant worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRR</td>
<td>New Rural Reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>A popular blog website in China</td>
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<tr>
<td>SARS</td>
<td>Severe acute respiratory syndromes</td>
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Chapter 1

Prologue

A Play in One Act

Characters (in the order of their appearance):

Three co-workers (female, or male): working with Xiaoyu at the same shop floor
Xiaoyu (female): in her mid-thirties, a garment factory worker, far away from her home village
Boss: owner of the garment factory
Fangfang: 6 years old, Xiaoyu’s daughter

Scene 1: Shop Floor of a Certain Garment Factory

Starts backstage music of the song “Our World & Our Dream” (lyrics as follows):

_In the 9 sq. meters of a hostel room,_
_We rent a tiny world to live._
_We work nonstop from dawn to dusk._
_Migrating from the countryside to the cities,_
_Seeking jobs from construction sites to factories,_
_Our dream is to build a world that is truly our own._

_At endless assembly lines,_
_We sell our labor in order to make a living._
_Overwhelmed by working overtime, we don’t even know exhaustion._
_Spending our youth, blood, sweat, and tears,_
_Our dream is to send home some money,_
_That we saved from our food and daily expenses._
...

Music fades out. Light on.

Three co-workers (busy making garments) – It’s over 10 pm. Aren’t we supposed to call it a night?
Xiaoyu – Yeah, there are piles of laundry waiting for me at home. Doing overtime till 10 every night, I don’t even have enough time for chores.

---

1 The script is based on and translated by the author from the original one-act play created and performed by workers at Grassroots Home. Since the presentation of the play is somehow unique in each performance, the script here reflects the content and structure as performed in May 2011.
(The boss appears, carrying a chalkboard. He hangs the board up somewhere in the shop floor, with the following notice: “Day off for May 1 tomorrow; Overtime through 10:30 pm tonight. April 30, 2011”)

Boss – Work hard, everybody! Overtime through 10:30 tonight! Tomorrow is the May 1st holiday; you all have one day off! (Off)
Coworker (asking Xiaoyu) – Where would you like to go for fun tomorrow?
Xiaoyu – I will take my daughter to the zoo. I’ve promised her many times, but never made it.

(Voice-over: At 10:40-ish, the long-expected ringing bell signals the end of a tedious day’s work. Xiaoyu and her coworkers walk out the factory, dragging their exhausted bodies. Once back to their hostel, they are preoccupied with hand-washing clothes....)

Scene 2: Xiaoyu's Hostel

Xiaoyu – Fangfang, how about Mama taking you to the zoo tomorrow?
Fangfang – That’s great, Mama! My buddies at the kindergarten said it was a great deal of fun! They’ve all gone there before.
(Mother and daughter start to play some children’s game, excited about having a good time tomorrow....)

(Voice-over: May 1 has been a day of great joy for the two, but it ends quickly. In the evening, Xiaoyu starts to get worried. She has to go back to work tomorrow, whereas the kindergarten has two more days off for the children. Realizing it’s a bad idea to leave her child home alone, Xiaoyu’s last resort is to take Fangfang with her to the factory. She calls up the boss to obtain his nod and the team leader to give him a warning. Now she is ready for the arrangement tomorrow.)

Scene 3: The Same Shop Floor

(A desk is set as the prop for the sewing machine. There are containers around for ready-to-wears. Cut pattern pieces of cloth are organized orderly for sewing. Xiaoyu and her coworkers are busy with their tasks.
(Voice-over as Xiaoyu: It’s my kid’s first time to be in the factory, and everything has seemed so fresh to her. For the first half of the day, everything has gone quite smoothly. She interrupted me with all kinds of questions, but I managed to answer her patiently. In the afternoon, however, she has become familiarized with aunties and uncles around the shop floor, and invented her own way of having some fun....)

Fangfang (Pushing the container of clothes around on the floor, like a toy. Then she grabs some pattern pieces from the workload of Xiaoyu’s coworkers and starts to play hide-and-seek by covering her eyes, excited...) – Mama, look at me!
Co-worker: What the heck, Sister Xiaoyu! My materials are all messed up by your kid....
Xiaoyu (losing her temper, snatching the “toys” from Fangfang’s hands, and slapping the kid’s face) – Stop it!
Fangfang (frightened, wailing) – Wah-wah….
Xiaoyu (pulling the kid into her arms, and carrying her outside [stage corner]) – oh, honey, I’m so sorry…

(The child is still crying, but she becomes quieter as Xiaoyu’s voice is heard from the stage corner)

Xiaoyu (feeling sorry) – Don’t you know you were messing around? You poor little troublemaker…(The kid shakes her head, stopping sobbing. Now it’s Xiaoyu’s turn to feel sorry for what happened, tears in her eyes, lovingly) Listen to Mama, and sit by my side like a nice child, ok? No more mess, ok? Mama have to catch up with things and earn your tuition…

Fangfang (obediently) – All right, Mama. I’ll be good. I won’t touch nothin’ any more.
Xiaoyu (leading their way back to the shop floor [stage center]) – Promise?
Fangfang (affirmatively) – Promise!

(Vice-over: For the rest of the day, Fangfang has kept her promise, more or less. She sits quietly by her mother’s side, soon forgetting the little tragedy of moments ago, and starts to enjoy humming her nursery songs…)

Fangfang (sitting by her mother’s side, singing) – Dear Mama, you are the wonder of the world; in your arms, I am the wonder of the world. It’s so happy…. (gradually becoming restless, beseeching) Mama, I wanna go home…
Xiaoyu – But it’s only 8, honey…
Fangfang (insisting) – I wanna go home…
Xiaoyu (comforting) – All right… I’m finishing up soon.
Fangfang (after a quiet moment, yawning) – Mama, I am sleepy….

(Voice-over: At the kindergarten the children will normally have a nap at noon. But it has been a long day for Fangfang in the factory. No wonder she is bored and tired. Fangfang is somehow lucky to be able to stay with her mother, since millions of children of migrant workers have to be left alone back in their rural homes due to the tremendous costs of living and their limited access to benefits like education and healthcare in the cities. Sojourning in the city, Xiaoyu has had to send her daughter to a poor quality kindergarten with additional costs of tuition, which is over a thousand yuan² (154 USD), in comparison with local urbanites. But the child won’t understand that if her mother doesn’t hold on till 10 pm, the full-attendance bonus for this month will go down the toilet. And that would be 90 yuan [14 USD].)

Fangfang (feeling being neglected, almost saying to herself) – I wanna go home. I wanna go to bed… (hitting the “sewing machine” with her hands, making big noises, her mood alternating between boredom, sadness, and anger)

² Yuan is the unit of China’s currency, a.k.a., Renminbi. Approximately 6.5 yuan equals 1 US dollar. The official minimum monthly wage for migrant workers in the city of Hangzhou is about 1300 yuan (200 USD), while the average worker at GH could earn something between 1500~3000 yuan per month (231~462 USD).
(Voice-over: Xiaoyu feels helpless, struggling between her wages and the child’s needs. Finally, she decides to sacrifice the monthly full-attendance bonus, and asks the Boss for a one-day leave for tomorrow.)

Scene 4: Xiaoyu’s Hostel

(Voice-over: Back home, Xiaoyu has been busy putting things in order, bathed her daughter, dressed her, and moved on to the piles of laundries. The child is playing around the busy mother.)

Fangfang (as if suddenly) – Mama, why was your holiday only one day long? I have three days! How I wish I were you and you were me! So that you could have more rest. I could play with my buddies at school. Holidays are boring. I hate holidays…

(Voice-over: Xiaoyu is taken off guard, stopping her busy hands that have been washing clothes. She really has no answer for her daughter. She hugs the child into her arms, her body shaking with emotions, tears in her eyes again.)

Xiaoyu (still hugging the daughter, turning around to face the audience, throwing out her question) – Why? The children are released from school for three days, but we workers have only one day off. Why? It’s Labor Day for us workers, isn’t it? Why? Who can answer me? Why on earth is it…?

Dim light.
Starts backstage music of the song “Why” (lyrics as follows):

*Facing daily reality,*
*I feel the burden too heavy to be bearable.*
*Prices and rentals are soaring,*
*But our wages are not.*
*I’m worn out, breathless,*
*Thinking to quit this helpless life here in the city.*
*But as I think about my family and children,*
*I decided to carry on, no matter how bitter and back-breaking life is.*

*Why so? Why on earth?*
*Together let’s think about it.*
*Hand in hand, let’s join hands,*
*Hand in hand, let’s march forward together.*

*Why so? Why on earth?*
*Together let’s think about it.*
*Hand in hand, let’s join our hands,*
*Hand in hand, let’s march forward together,*
*Together!*

The End
Workers’ Voice in a Noisy World

The evening was a curious amalgam when this play was performed as part of the May 1st International Labor Day celebration in a residential area where Grassroots Home (GH)\(^3\), a Chinese migrant workers’ self-organization, was located. The program was a hybrid variety show consisting of seemingly incompatible genres, such as college students dancing to rap music, middle-aged-to-senior ladies playing with soft balls and bats in an acrobatic manner, some schoolchildren playing instruments timidly, and other children dancing exotic Cha-Cha with great zeal. In the audience, some unruly children were running in the space between the stage and the seats, screaming. Elderly sedative villagers were animated, not wanting to miss out on the rare fun. Young men and women in the rear were just hanging around as if it were a free-market fair, some pushing their squeaking e-bikes through the open back-doors of the yard. Some stood peeking in the dark shadows outside the iron-fences enclosing the concrete ground where the stage was set up. In spite of the apparent amateurism, clumsiness, and serious acoustic flaws, the show had drawn a noisy crowd of more than 500 spectators, a mixture of migrant workers, local villagers, and children. Nobody seemed to care about the thundering sounds of the passing jet planes (from a nearby municipal airport).

The show was a rare thing in the neighborhood, where the major forms of highly visible events had been weddings, funerals, and on-site commercial promotion shows. The huge backstage screen, with glowing crimson and golden colors, showed images of muscular workers and heroic soldiers ready to fight, and at the opposite corner of the screen, with peasants and urbanites rejoicing at the harvest of corn and other crops. The unsaid message of the communist

\(^3\) Henceforth GH, except instances where the full name needs preserving for certain reasons, e.g., when direct quotations from GH’s staff meetings are used. Another exception is when GH members fondly called the organization their “Home.”
revolutionary origin of the People’s Republic would be familiar to the average Chinese audience. “The working class is divine, and labor is glorious” (according to GH’s internal plan for the night’s show); this was the central theme GH had come up with in order to celebrate the workers’ holiday. The celebration was directed, planned, and coordinated by the migrant workers, whereas publicly it was designated as sponsored by the local official branch of the workers’ union (which, at the peak of political tension barely half a year ago, had vowed to eliminate GH for good). At the beginning of the show, the local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary made a clichéd speech, praising the migrant workers for their “contribution to the local economy with their hard work” and wishing them “a happy holiday as glorious laborers.” Interestingly, the workers used the same jargon, but really meant something different. The host and hostess, both GH members, had prefaced the show with a brief history of the International Labor Day, referring to the heroic event on May 1, 1886, when “216,816 workers in Chicago, united in great solidarity, went on strike to demand the 8-hour principle and subsequently gained an historical victory against oppression and cruel exploitation” (the host and hostess read the words from a ready-made script).

It is in such noisy situations and often more mundane and sporadic activities at GH that I set out, not without challenges, to discover the voices of the migrant workers.

Insofar as the play was concerned, its script was further complicated by contextual factors. It was fluid, multilayered, and crude at best by professional standards. In fact, the opening song was borrowed from one of the albums of laborers’ songs made by a workers’ art troupe, a brother organization based in Beijing, while the closing song was a work produced by GH members themselves during a series of workshop. Moreover, the script was actually an adaptation of a short story published in GH’s internal magazine. The story appeared to be contributed by Xiaoyu,
narrating in her first-person voice, who turned out to be the pseudonym of GH’s founder, Xu Wencai (as known as Brother Xu). Xu shared the story with GH members during one of their literary group meetings. “Furiously I strike her cheek…!” The sharp-voiced young female migrant worker playing the role of Xiaoyu read these lines aloud as the other actors in the GH’s dim-lit room concentrated on their respective parts of the story (as I followed these routine activities). Against the backdrop of routine activities I had been following, the story suddenly became believable. This mundane scene being performed in earnest by participants reenacted their daily travails; it became something to be pondered. At the imaginary wailing of the child on the shop floor (as the group paused in silence), the heart-breaking moment became a crystal ball in which to see how the invisible structures of political economy had greatly impacted the lives of tens of millions of migrant workers dislocated from their rural homes, an epic wave that had never been seen in China’s history.

While the play seemed to have assumed a life of its own (it could be adapted and performed time and time again), its origin was intensely autobiographic. Before starting up GH in its embryonic form as a website forum in July 2006, Xu had been working at garment factories for more than ten years, and at the time of this writing, his wife was still working at a garment factory in the industrial park not far from GH. The young couple had a 10-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son, sojourning together in a tiny rental room in the neighborhood of GH. Like other migrant children across the country, their daughter could not obtain admission to the local public school, but had to attend a privately-run one of inferior quality that charged extra tuition (in the range of 2,000 yuan [308 USD] per year); the boy went to a daycare center in the hostel area, imposing an additional financial burden to the working mother and the underpaid father (who ran
GH as a not-for-profit). In part due to their lack of status\(^4\) as local residents, they were among the two million so-called “outsiders\(^5\)” in the city of Hangzhou (and over 200 million across the country’s more developed urban areas) where they took all kinds of low-paying (often manual) jobs but lacked access to equal benefits and welfare. Xu’s children might be considered lucky, since they could migrate from their rural home and live with their parents (at least temporarily), whereas millions of others were, for financial necessity, left behind in the care of the elderly at home. Either way, the workers’ offspring were thrown into this complicated society of adults and their childhood, as dramatized in the opening play, was already indelibly marked by political economy of the country.

*The key point is that our future is so gloomy. We often think of our parents, who used to drop us at home so that they could “dagong\(^6\)” in the outside world. Now that I, as a father, have to drop my own children at home and go out to “dagong,” would my children, ten years later, have to drop me in order to go out to “dagong,” yet again?*

With his typical lucidity, Xu spoke of something so intimately related to his own experiences, and yet of so simple truth about the human conditions of hundreds of millions of “brothers and sisters of one family on the earth” – a line borrowed from a favorite song written by and for the Chinese working men and women. Around 2000, according to Xu, working conditions had deteriorated to a low level, as increasing numbers of migrant workers flowed into cities looking for jobs. “Overtime workload was extremely overwhelming and debilitating, and wages were often deliberately denied. Especially in the garment industry, in some cases the bosses simply disappeared at the year-end, and thus the workers would end up with no pay at all.

---

\(^4\) Namely, *hukou*, or legitimate status with local household registration.

\(^5\) That is, *wai lai wu gong ren yuan* in Chinese pinyin, or “laborers from outside [the city]” if translated literally.

\(^6\) Here, “*dagong*” is used in its Chinese pinyin form as a verb in order to retain the original Chinese sense of the colloquial term which means “to work as a migrant laborer.”
It was so cruel that after a whole year of drudgery some workers didn’t even have enough money to cover homebound travel costs.” Experiencing and witnessing daily difficulties and miseries, Xu started to think about how to change the workers’ conditions.

This project, simply put, is to tell the stories of Xu and his followers in establishing GH as a workers’ self-organization and struggling for a better society not only for the workers but also for the whole country. As an introductory episode, the opening play highlighted the focal point of this ethnographic work, which deals with the rhetorical character of GH as a representative anecdote of an emerging civil sphere in China. As dramatized in the play, the migrant workers’ quotidian copings at the hostel room as well as in the workplace constituted the experiential backdrop for interpreting the profusion of vernacular rhetorical discourse in and around GH. Through all kinds of rhetorical efforts, including such on-stage performances, the workers endeavored to transcend their experiences limited as private persons by “the 9 sq. meters” of their hostel rooms and confined to the “endless assembly lines” as cheap labor for the maximization of economic profits. From drudgery, domestic chores, and monotonous life in the hostel area where they sojourned, to singing, dancing, speaking, and acting together, the workers tried to transform themselves as more than just being able to make clothes and electronics or serve as waiters and temporary salespersons. They wanted to make their own culture and achieve a common dream. By creating and maintaining GH as a place of free association, the workers joined efforts to keep alive a public space where their vernacular voices could emerge, circulate, and spread. In spite of its meek existence, GH had grabbed much media attention and stirred the party-state power. Given the predicaments of migrant workers in general and the country’s overall restriction of free speech and free association, the emergence of GH became even more
significant, especially due to its rhetorical sophistications grounded in their folk methods and its alternative visions of a better society.

A View from the Balcony

At the balcony outside Brother Xu’s hostel room, I could take a mental walk around the neighborhood, stopping here and there and mapping its textures, outlines, bumps, and perhaps sudden turnarounds and hidden pitfalls of this all-too-ordinary and ambiguous place. Perhaps, such a surrounding was something that Xiaoyu (the play’s heroine) had encountered on a daily basis, so much so that it had appeared all too familiar to be noticed in her busy life. Under a closer scrutiny, however, the balcony opened up a candid view, providing an existential standpoint, from which I could align myself with a better angle to see the life-world of Xiaoyu (and Xu).

Down across the lane below me, I could see the obscure entrance of a rental space where GH was based. With its weathered greenish plague and star-and-moon logo, GH was located on the first floor of the 4-storey residential building, whose exterior walls, just like hundreds of other buildings in the neighborhood, were decorated with tiles alternating between orange and yellow and evenly interrupted by windows sealed with anti-burglary aluminum-alloy bars. (Once a newcomer at GH confessed that when passing by one day he took the Chinese characters 草根 (cao gen7, i.e., “Grassroots”) to mean, amusingly, “selling Chinese medical herbs.”) Just like the tens of thousands of rooms housed in the total 18 compact rows of houses, the exterior appearances in the neighborhood were so monotonously identical that the personality of each

7 Throughout this dissertation, the original Chinese terms and proper names are rendered in their Chinese pinyin forms, which are noted in italics in brackets for the purpose of clarity.
window could only be detected by the uninitiated visitor who could observe the festooning cloths, pants, occasional potted plants, the colors and patterns of the curtain, AC set, rain shades, junks, or the combination of any of these items.

GH’s staff and members would often distinguish their home as “No. 28” (see Figure 1 below), due to its physical address (in which “Gefan” was the name of the neighborhood in what was previously the namesake village):

No. 28 Row 4, Gefan Beiyuan

Figure 1. Entrance of Grassroots Home (viewed from the balcony)

I had come, at Xu’s invitation, to have lunch with him, along with his son (4 years old at the time). It was a lovely mid-autumn day and the whole city was filled with the fragrance of sweet olive trees. So we decided to take out the little dining table to eat on the balcony. I was truly honored at having the dishes made by someone I admired. Inside, there was the single room for the family of four, at the top (fourth) level of the landlord’s house. Like most sojourners in the neighborhood, the Xu’s lived with make-shift furniture and items with a squat toilet (with a hand-shower faucet, but no hot water) allowing only one adult’s squatting footage, and with a
tiny walk-in-closet-like kitchen with only a counter top made of assorted compost boards (you have to buy your own single portable gas range and small-size gas iron-bottle). For such a room, it used to cost 200~300 yuan (30~46 USD) per month, but now had increased to 400~500 (51~77 USD), eating up about a third of the newly released official minimum monthly wage (1300 yuan) (200 USD) in this particular city. Like all the other houses in the neighborhood, the landlord owned a dozen of such rooms, while the second floor was reserved for the owner’s family and the ground floor for leasing out to small businesses, most commonly breakfast eateries, small restaurants, convenient stores, drug stores, hair salons, second-hand stuff stores, several public shower rooms and Internet cafes (with filthy airs of cigarettes and sweats), and etc. Outside, local-peasants-turned-street-vegetables-vendors would usually set up their make-shift stands along the main roads, gathering at the climax of the late afternoon flow of people returning to their dorms. The street scene offered a visual display of consumer needs giving rise to the capillaries-like local economy self-selectively clustering along the most traffic-and-pedestrian-intensive main roads and lanes.

Down the main street, which formed the central axis of this 9-rows portion of the neighborhood (see Figure 2 below) and was, indeed, one of the busiest arteries of the neighborhood’s lifeblood, there was the ceaseless flow of migrant workers (mixed with the minority of local residents) especially on hectic mornings and evenings. This paved street pointed to its northern end where there were private-owned garment factories (of obscure brand names), and at its southern end there was a sprawling industrial zone housing large-scaled garment factories, electronics plants, frozen-food and instant-food factories, and other manufacturing facilities. Beyond, at the northern edge of the neighborhood, there were some
small patches of vegetable fields reminiscent of its rural origin, with piles of manure and big urns of rainwater mixed with urine, as well as remnants of cottages in the nearby village.

Figure 2. Google map of Gefan Neighborhood where GH was located (2011)

Haihua, the son of the landlord who leased the space to GH at the rate of 2,000 yuan (308 USD) per month, told me that until seven years ago, all the local residents had lived in their original cottages scattered around this area. In 2002, the district authority ordered the rezoning of the whole village by tearing down all the cottages and allowing each household to rebuild its new (current) one on designated, close-knit plots, with official compensatory money. The uniform appearance of all the 18 rows of buildings bespoke their reliance on the same model plan authorized by the district, although as time went by, the original and officially standardized tidy low-bush walls in front of each house were quickly discarded by many owners (seniors) and replaced with tiny gardens of vegetables. In any event, unlike sojourning migrant workers who were separated year-round from their family members left behind in the back countryside, Haihua was a well-to-do “local” in its strict sense. He owned local real estate, and being born local, officially qualified as a “citizen” belonging to the municipal jurisdiction. “We ceased
growing crops many many years ago,” Haihua said in a despising way, and would switch to his favorite topics, like “hanging around in the downtown pubs.”

The downtown area of Haihua’s memory could be detected only in abstract haziness in the far west direction from the balcony. There, the city’s world-famous icon, the West Lake (*Xi Hu*), nestled at the foot of green hills. The West Lake, regarded as the apple of Hangzhou city, and its inch-of-land-is-an-inch-of-gold vicinity of businesses, fancy houses, and tourist sites had been hailed as the indisputable crown of the city, as reflected by its nickname “the Heaven on Earth.” Indeed, the city had been ranked as Number 1 among China’s “Happiest Cities” (HZRB, 2011), but the ranking seemed as irrelevant to the migrant workers as the faraway downtown area appeared inaccessible from this obscure balcony. The migrant workers constituted about a third of the 9 million population of the city, but the majority of them sojourned in rural-urban fringes such as GH’s neighborhood. GH’s staff member Liu Heng said, “I didn't feel this Happiest City had ‘happy-ed’ us. After a second thought, I realized why: because we were not part of the Happiness Index whatsoever. . . . Rather we might be regarded as the city’s burden, because our (low) living standards tended to drag its leg” (Liu Heng). A recent report indicated that only 2% of migrant workers might be able to purchase their own homes here and therefore settle down with a legitimate local “*hukou*.”

The migrant workers’ access to the geography of the city was largely defined by their modes of transportation. The streets were busy with pedestrian traffic; bikes and e-bikes took migrant workers to their factories nearby and their children to schools of inferior quality due to their lack of local “*hukou*.” For those working in areas closer to the downtown district, the buses would take the workers back and forth to their destinations, work and dorm, many dressed in their work clothes as waitresses, salesgirls (wearing cheap make-up on), factory mechanics, and
so forth. That, however, was probably the farthest a migrant worker might go. There were inaccessible places, like the high-rise apartment buildings erected right in front of them, dwarfing the workers’ shabby dorm rooms (see Figure 3 below). These high-rises were separated by the debris-and-trash-covered ambiguous pathway connecting the workers’ neighborhood, and were protected by private security guards (themselves migrant workers) and wired encircling walls. The apartments would be sold at a pricey 20,000-plus-yuan (3,077 USD) rate per square meter (which means one year’s wages for an average migrant worker).

![Figure 3. The inter-space (debris) between GH’s neighborhood and the adjacent high-rise apartments (left: south-facing scene of GH’s neighborhood; right: north-facing scene of high-rises)](image)

Besides low-paying jobs, the city did provide some enjoyments (however superficial they might be), challenges, and sometimes allures. In spite of their crowded clusters of dorm rooms, the workers in fact had learned their techniques to navigate the urban landscape for their own recreation, such as hanging around in the open spaces near the University Park and playing badminton in the front yard of high-rise real estate gardens, making them “our place” at least temporarily. Occasionally, GH members would organize outdoor activities like picnics and climbing in the nearby public parks or the downtown mountains where ticket fares were minimal or free. For events like the municipal volunteers fairs, workers would join the events by putting
up a show, the repertoire including the self-directed “Workers’ Costumes Show” performed to the marching song “Ode to the Laborers.”

Fundraising for seriously sick workers, awaiting money to pay for life-saving medicine and surgery, provided another challenging opportunity for GH workers to define their existence in the city. Since its formation, GH had run fundraising campaigns for one emergency case each year. One GH member wrote in her QQ\textsuperscript{8} blog, “I wanted to go with my fellows to collect donations in the downtown streets, but I had to work in the factory. I even wished I had been richer so that I could be of some help to the seriously burnt toddler.” Later that summer she was so excited to tell us that she finally joined the fundraising fellow-workers, and bowed to passersby whenever a few of them slipped some money into the box held in her hands. The fancy shop windows, cars, and well-dressed passersby in the bustling streets formed a sharp contrast with the compact neighborhood where GH was located. The abstract sense of the urban allure was aptly manifest in the online thread, debating “whether one [supposedly a young migrant woman worker] would be better off crying at the seat of a BMW, or smiling at the back rack of a bicycle” (GH website).

In spite of all the invisible forbidden space, the vibrancy of the neighborhood was all the more salient as the young men and women depended upon whatever was available to them to cope with daily life. At the nightly fair, hundreds of sellers would set up their stands filled with food, clothes, shoes, everyday items, and the like (see Figure 4 below). Their low-end merchandise satisfied the basic needs of the migrant workers, even yielding a minimal margin of profit for the sellers. At the end of 2010, amidst economic downturn, marginal profits forced the owners of local breakfast eateries to unanimously raise the majority of their food items by 0.50

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\textsuperscript{8} QQ is a popular blog website in China.
yuan (8 cents) at least. “We shall increase the prices as we wish, and they [the migrant workers] shall decide to eat breakfast or not, as they wish.” GH’s staff posted online this overheard message as the owners were ready to make photocopies of their price-increase notice. At the finest terminals of the economic food chain, the haves (even though the small-business eatery-owners were migrant workers too) and have-nots were interdependent, and yet pitted against each other, exacerbated by economic recession. Meanwhile, rentals had increased almost 50%, from the 250s in 2009 to the 500s in 2011. But life went on day by day in this bustling place, and to survive one had to cope with whatever life had to offer.

Figure 4. At 4-ish PM, the sellers already set up stands for hostel-returning workers

The pulse of the GH quarter quickened every morning when the neighborhood woke up to squeaking brakes and honking bells of e-bikes. Pedestrians emerged out of their dooms and set off to their work along the dusty roads. They either stopped or grabbed breakfast on the run from roadside eateries whose owner-caterers had arisen several hours earlier (before dusk) to start the fire in their stoves, make soybean juice, and prepare steamed stuffed tiny buns, dumplings, zong zi (rice wrapped in broad bamboo leaves), stir-and-fried noodles, and the like.
One of the workers’ favorite types of breakfast was instant boiled noodles, which the caterers would serve by snatching it from a container of ready-made individual portions (like bird nests) to the boiling water and then scooping it out into a small foam-bowl ready to be mixed with soy source, bubbling hot oil, and green onion dices – a series of deft actions completed in quick-handed juggler fashion and repeated numerous times every morning. At the peak hour, there simply were not enough seats on the roadside makeshift seating area. Young men and women bystanders threatened to cancel their orders in the face of the all-too-occupied-yet-grinning food sellers, while working mothers burst into temper at their school-age kids who were procrastinating over the wanton soup.

Day after day, the evening scene and morning scene would repeat themselves, as could be seen from Xu’s balcony.

It was at this balcony that Xu would become homesick at moonlit evenings and had the inspirations for the anthem song for his Grassroots Home. The tiny hostel room could hardly be called a real home, which had to be construed with a pair of quotation marks in mind, a makeshift, as characteristic of their sojourning lives here. Below the balcony, however, he could see the facade of Grassroots Home, a “spiritual home,” as Xu and fellow workers would fondly call it. “I’m a dreamer, a sentimental person. I feel heavy at the thought of fellow workers’ miseries. I always tell myself, ‘It’s time to stop them!’ Everything must cease the way it has been. Change. Change social reality.” Through his diaries, online articles, polemics, as well as many long conversations and casual chatters with me and ongoing activities of the workers, the stories of Xu and GH gradually unfolded. To make change possible, he must start with himself. To call an end to something, he must start something new. To realize dreams, he must first of all invent a place where dreaming can even be allowed and the seeds of hope be kept alive. To keep this
place alive, Xu and his colleagues had demonstrated tremendous courage and remarkable wisdom that may forever change the way we understand China and its grassroots people.
Chapter 2

Migrant Workers, Civil Sphere, and Vernacular Rhetoric: A Theoretical Orientation

This chapter will pause the story of GH and the vernacular rhetoric of its emerging civil sphere to accomplish three major tasks. I will first contextualize this project by situating GH in the general socio-political conditions of migrant workers in China. I suggest that the social and rhetorical processes at GH merit serious attention and research, as the grassroots workers, despite their humble social status, had been demonstrating their growing human agency in coming together to form their self-organization and envision a better society. Second, I will review the key concepts and theories that inform this study. As used in the dissertation title, “vernacular rhetoric” and “civil sphere” are two heuristic, broadly conceived terms that denote a vernacular rhetorical approach toward the study of civil society and public sphere, two theoretically loaded and practically intertwined concepts that would better be subsumed by the more generic term “civil sphere” in China’s contexts. As will be elaborated shortly, this project treats civil sphere as an ongoing accomplishment of social practice that is fundamentally rhetorical. The theoretical turn to the vernacular, as I believe, readily recognizes the world-making and meaning-making agency of the grassroots social members who had been struggling for the survival of their self-organization in a place where the power of social structures does not absolutely dictate every aspect of human existence. (That, indeed, is perhaps where hope lies.) Finally, I will propose three key research questions informed by such a theoretical framework and intended to guide ethnographic fieldwork. In a nutshell, this project is a rhetorical ethnographic study of GH as an example of emerging civil sphere in a transitional China, and is expected to contribute some original insights about the contour of society-state relationship, emerging public space of the
workers, and alternative visions of a better society, as manifest at the grassroots level of the country. As a whole, I hope the findings from this research may help us better appreciate the human agency, good will, and aspiration of grassroots workers, and better inform the design and practice of civic engagement and civic education for a peaceful, democratic future of China.

Chinese Migrant Workers, NGOs, and Human Agency

Since the opening policy of China in 1978, Chinese migrant workers have made a rare worldwide phenomenon, as tens of millions of them left their rural homes to work in labor-intensive industries, especially in rapidly developing coastal cities. In December 2009, “the Chinese Worker” as a collective noun appeared in Time magazine as one of the runners-up for the “Person of the Year” (Ramzy, 2009). It is noteworthy that their name appeared in a time of ongoing worldwide economic recession, and moreover, alongside Ben Bernanke, chairman of the Federal Reserve, who appeared as the final pick on top of the Time list. Whether or not this is a journalistic tactic is not the concern here, but the juxtaposition is intriguing enough to make people wonder about the real working and living conditions of migrant workers, about the hidden human costs\(^9\) behind their major contribution to the world’s fastest-growing major economy\(^{10}\), and about the impact on them from urbanization, industrialization and globalization.

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\(^{9}\) For example, the New York Times published a series of articles on the “iEconomy” in early 2012, revealing the linkage between America’s loss of manufacturing jobs to overseas and the problematic labor conditions in Apple’s manufacturing partners in China (The New York Times, 2012).

\(^{10}\) At the time of writing, China was reported to have passed Japan as the world’s second largest economy, with a $1.33 trillion value of economy as estimated in the second quarter of 2010, slightly above Japan’s $1.28 trillion. The gross domestic product of the US was about $14 trillion in 2009. Source: New York Times (Barboza, 2010).
In order to contextualize this research project, it is necessary to provide some general information about the social conditions of migrant workers in China and about how GH stood out in the big picture.

First, it is fair to say that migrant workers have benefited from moving to urban areas by earning more money, but livelihood remains a basic problem for them. According to available survey results by Chinese authorities (see Khan & Riskin, 2005), “by migrating from rural to urban China an average migrant household nearly doubles its per capita income although it remains 35 per cent below that of an urban resident household” (p. 373). More tellingly, although migrating somehow reduced the overall rural-urban income gap, the ratio (2.82:1) “remain[ed] very high by comparative international standards” (p. 383), and the national Gini coefficient\(^\text{11}\) was still as high as 0.45 in 2002 (ibid.). More recently, according to the estimate of the Asian Development Bank (quoted in Foley, 2009), by 2007 China’s Gini coefficient reached 0.47, closer to Argentina and Mexico. Behind such extreme inequality lie several key structural factors, especially the “exclusion of the former [migrant workers] from much of the formal labor market, public services and asset redistribution programs like the housing reform” (Khan & Riskin, p. 383). In spite of their tremendous contribution to China’s GDP (gross domestic product), migrant workers are often considered secondary citizens, lacking access of such public goods as educational equality and health care.

Second, in recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the social-psychological impacts of migration on the workers. According to a comprehensive literature review (Wong, Chang, & He, 2007), the migrant workers are believed to live in marginalized conditions with

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\(^{11}\) The Gini coefficient is a measure of the inequality of a distribution, with a value of 0 expressing total equality and a value of 1 maximal inequality. Worldwide, Gini coefficients of income range from approximately 0.25 (Denmark) to 0.70 (Namibia).
regard to “employment and working conditions, social security, and medical benefits, education of migrant children, housing and discrimination by urban residents” (p. 34). Life seems hard to them, and the impacts of massive displacement from their rural homes are yet to be fully explored. In May 2010, for example, the Shenzhen-based plant of Foxconn Technology Group witnessed at least a dozen suicide attempts, resulting in 10 deaths of migrant workers (Xinhua News Agency, 2010). Immediately afterwards, the highest official body of the Chinese workers’ union – All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) – issued an emergent call to its nationwide local branches in an effort to take care of the psychological wellbeing of migrant workers (ACFTU, 2010a). While ameliorative efforts, such as “more leisure time for chatting and eating at work” (Zhang, et al, 2010), might reportedly help relieve the workers’ stress, psychological impacts should not be isolated from the country’s overall structural inequality. Any short-circuited claim about the group’s social behavioral patterns (e.g., crimes, youth delinquency, and educational problems) by attributing to their psychological factors should be received with caution.

Third, in recent years, social unrest among workers had been widely cited at home and abroad. For example, Rand Corporation reported to the US Congress that “in the past five years [since 2000] officials of China’s public security system have confirmed what foreign observers have sensed for some time: social protest has risen dramatically over the past decade, and is now a daily phenomenon in China’s political system” (Tanner, 2005, p. 1; also cf. Lum, 2006). In the first half of 2010, workers went on strike to demand salary increases in factories making exhaust parts and electronics for international companies like Honda and Apple (Ramzy, 2010), accompanied by a wave of protests in major industrial cities across the nation (Feng & Ma, 2011). As a massive labor force, migrant workers had been thought to lack collective power, but
with growing discontent, spontaneous resistance, and organized protests, the new generation of migrant workers was growing more sophisticated and competent in demanding their rights and benefits. Labor rights monitors hailed China’s labor protests of recent years as a milestone toward the rise of migrant workers’ class-consciousness not only in itself but also for itself (Chan & Xiao, 2012). On the other hand, China’s party-state power, instead of merely “shak[ing] hands with migrant workers” and telling them “their work was glorious” (Pai, 2010), seemed hard pressed to effect real changes.

Fourth, not by coincidence, at the beginning of 2010, the “new generation of migrant workers” (NGMW) was openly recognized by Chinese state authorities as a large social group with similar social demographic characteristics. For the first time, the (Chinese) term of NGMW (xin sheng dai nong min gong) appeared in the CCP annual rural-issues-related directive for 2010, stressing (among other things) measures to solve NGMW problems (Xin, 2010). According to ACFTU’s 18-page special report, dated June 21, 2010, this group is basically defined as those who are born in rural areas after 1980 and have migrated to take non-agricultural jobs; there are about 100 million of them and about 80% are unmarried (China Daily, 2010; also see ACFTU [2010b] for the full report). Among other things, the ACFTU report openly highlighted the uniqueness of this group and its implication for social harmony and stability, due to the NGMW’s urban experiences, greater awareness of labor rights in comparison with their parental generation, and social psychological needs in their places of sojourning.

It is within such a broad context of economic inequality, social instability, and labor protests that the workers’ growing potential of self-organization and collective action became a volatile issue in China. It must be noted that, in China, the ACFTU (All China Federation of Trade Unions) is designated by the party-state as the singularly legal trade union with its official
branches extending to the very grassroots level of residential districts and enterprises (cf. Chan, 2005; Lee & Shen, 2009). Although its right to organize local branches at both state-owned and private or foreign-owned enterprises is protected by the national Labor Law, ACFTU began to face a difficult and somehow paradoxical situation. For one thing, many enterprises, including big foreign ones, preferred not to have a union, and ACFTU had generally neglected to push its agenda. At the local level, moreover, “the union officialdom has been overwhelmed by the power of local governments, capital and management” (Chan, 2005, p. 9) on the one hand, and at the same time it is under increasing pressure to become more responsive to the needs of workers and more responsible for the protection of labor rights in such cases as wage disputes, illegal layoffs, and open exploitation (ibid.; also see the ACFTU report mentioned in the previous paragraph). The ACFTU system, however, was never watertight; as a matter of fact, according to a most recent estimate, there were “about 30 labor NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] now operating in different Chinese cities, registered as commercial entities” (Lee & Shen, 2009, p. 112). GH was one of them.

The playground for grassroots NGOs in general and labor NGOs in particular, however, was complicated. In a recent tendency of politically conservative academic discourse in China, NGOs were subsumed into the overall, neutral category of “social organizations” (Kang & Feng, 2011, p. 114), a preferred choice of word by the party-state, which covered a host of hybrid subcategories such as the major party-state-sanctioned associations and the outreaches of corporate social responsibilities. The dozens of labor NGOs seemed deceivingly small in number, given the fact that “social organizations” had reportedly grown rapidly, from around 4,500 in 1988 to 350,000 in 2006 (and projected for 510,000 in 2010); apart from that, however, an estimation of up to 2.7 million grassroots organizations had not been formally registered (Na,
Generally speaking, grassroots organizations tended to have financial difficulty, lack organizational competence and social accountability, encounter obstacles in getting legally registered, and might get themselves in serious troubles as soon as their work began to involve politically sensitive issues, such as labor, human rights, and religion (see Edele, 2005, pp. 16-17; Na, 2009).

The difficult for grassroots organizations (including GH) to get properly registered was a manifestation of the party-state’s “system of graduated controls” over civil society (Kang & Han, 2008). More specifically, in this system, “the state, in its own interests, exerts various control strategies over different types of social organizations according to the capacities of the social organizations to challenge the state and the value of the public goods they provide” (p. 36). Insofar as grassroots NGOs were concerned, they had been considered by the state as the least challenging, usually registered as a for-profit enterprise, supervised by the Administrative Bureau for Industry and Commerce (gong shang ju). Such abnormal arrangement, in fact, served as an effective strategy for the state to control grassroots NGOs with minimum costs, since the Bureau could raise various kinds of barriers in the registration processes. According to the Chinese state regulations with regard to social organizations (she hui tuan ti deng ji guan li tiao li), however, grassroots NGOs must be registered instead with the authority of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) (ming zheng bu), under the condition that a legally recognized agency would agree to serve as its supervising body. In reality, however, emerging grassroots NGOs normally failed to find a protective umbrella (so to speak), because existent organizations were reluctant to take on the social and political risk to fulfill that role.

Such social, financial, and political constraints made the emergence of GH an intriguing case of a successful breakthrough in organizing the workers and safeguarding its existence in
spite of all the adversities. As documented in Chapter 4, GH began with its founder’s personal responses to the sufferings of migrant workers (including himself) in the first five years of the 2000s. Although he failed to overcome the institutional barriers in order to pass registration, Xu continued his organizational efforts through the Internet since 2006, and two years later he and his followers started up a real-world facility to provide basic services for fellow workers in the mixed neighborhood of migrant workers and local residents. Despite its humble beginning and plain appearance, the fledgling association was an intricate network of staff members, fellow workers, supporters, volunteers, outside resources, a website, a magazine, and a growing constellation (with ups and downs) of cultural activities, services, and fundraising efforts. As of early 2010, GH had about 600 registered members, although many of them were inactive or probably had moved away from the city. Registration was open to any migrant worker with valid national identification card and a current job. But all services and activities were in effect open to all nonmembers. It had its own flag (shown in the above picture), membership emblem, and a designated organizational theme song.

Ever since its inception as a website, GH had attracted attention from the media, governmental authorities, and interested individuals from factories, colleges, and foundations. Its website was also reported across various media formats (e.g., newspapers) and was publicly accessible (daily visits unknown yet). According to some internal sources, GH was mentioned in internal reading materials circulating among top leaders of the state in 2010. Its presence was apparently well-known to the MCA, given the fact that Xu, as GH’s founder, was invited for a meeting with the vice head of MCA in May 2010 in Hangzhou. Amidst the migrant worker suicide cases, it seemed that ACFTU was worried about its lack of popularity among workers at the grassroots level, as its system apparently appeared to have loopholes where migrant workers
did not have union membership or were instead attracted by GH. In May 2010, provincial officials of ACFTU inspected GH and, in a very suggestive speech onsite, pointed out the roadmap for GH to be included within the official ACFTU system; otherwise, they might be in trouble. The stories of how GH members came together around a common mission and core values and how it eventually survived the political threat will be accounted in Chapter 5.

As a grassroots NGO, GH presented an intellectually interesting opportunity to explore the workers’ efforts of self-organization and discourse grounded at the bottom of the Chinese society, which has yet to be fully understood. The emerging NGMW were still young, lacking academic or political attention until recently due to media coverage (such as the recent suicides) and the central government’s publicized concern since early 2010. Extant research has been mainly focused on spontaneous reaction in the workplace. For example, through sustained ethnographic study in the dormitory and workplace of migrant women workers, Pun makes the following observation: “Dream, scream, fainting, menstrual pain, inner splitting of self, workplace defiance, slowdowns, fighting, running away, and even petition and strike are all points and lines of resistance behaviors, forming a cartography of resistance that will inevitably direct a challenge to power and control” (Pun, 2005, p. 195). Pun even speculates about “a silent social revolution” (Pun, 2005, p. 190) going on among China’s young workers, a speculation (if not wishful thinking) that was not substantiated by systematic, nationwide findings from studies of workers collective actions (lacking evidences in her case studies either). Until recent waves of labor protests, some surveys (cf. Han & Whyte, 2009) “didn’t suggest a dominant mood of anger at current patterns of inequality or pervasive feelings of distributive injustice” (ibid., p. 200). Given the vastness of the country and diversity of the migrant workers’ population, such contradiction among extant research findings was understandable, and any generalization should be made with
caution. Given the dramatic happenings in recent years, it remains to be seen how migrant workers such as those at GH had collectively responded to their social and political conditions. To focus on workers’ self-organization and discourse at GH, this project is based in some assumptions that departed from the emphases on workplace resistance, “revolutionary” potential, labor protests, or psychological responses.

The first assumption is that daily social reality for migrant workers is far more complicated and subtler than a matter of life-or-death struggle with capitalists or the state. As American scholar Andrew Ross pointed out, “when set alongside the task of alleviating the misery of those at the very bottom of the global labor market, foundational challenges to the prevailing system of production and consumption are considered to be the privilege of the relatively secure” (Ross, 2008, p. 784). As Calhoun observed almost 30 years ago in a reexamination of class struggle, the logic of capitalism in an increasingly global economy had developed to such a stage that the working class could by no means resist capitalism through revolution from within the system upon which the workers’ interest depended, but only possible through ameliorative efforts reliant on communitarian networking, unionism, and parliamentary politics (Calhoun, 1982, pp. 230-1). Prevalent feelings of grievance, if any, didn’t automatically get translated into spontaneous resistance, group solidarity, or collective action, as there would most likely be such constraints as calculation of costs and effects, political opportunities, efficiency of coordination, and the relative presence of coercive power. As the GH stories gradually unfolded, both the ordinariness and peculiarity of its emergence and existence hardly fitted in any ready-made theory and therefore deserved a broader way of conceptualization that is informed by some understanding of the fundamental logic of social change.
A second assumption, therefore, is informed by Manuel Castells, who, in a magnificent study of urban social change across different cultures, underscored “multi-class movements for the very simple reason that they do not relate directly to the relationships of production, but to the relationships of consumption, communication, and power” (Castells, 1983, p. 320, emphasis added). While GH hadn’t yet appeared to wage or join any drastic social movement per se in China, Castells’ observation reminded us to view the emergence of GH in a relational field of ideas, values, communication, and power, instead of essentializing or isolating it as a self-enclosed stand-alone entity. This assumption is further affirmed by Daniel Little’s important meta-analysis of social scientific theories of social change in China, where he concluded, in part, that “in order to explain the political behavior of a group it is insufficient to know what the group’s interests are, whether local or class,” and “it is rather necessary somehow to take into account the values and worldview through which deliberation takes place” (Little, 1989, p. 184, emphasis added). To better understand how social change might be possible after all, it is imperative to examine the communicative processes, values, and aspirations of potential change-makers, such as GH.

Third, the growth of GH from virtual space to a real place attested to the importance of social and discursive space in making it possible for migrant workers to come together in free association and coordinated action. Manuel Castells’ (2009) explicated how autonomous civil society organizations seized the opportunity and potential of “mass self-communication” technologies in staging their social or political agendas in the public realm (chapter 2; also, p. 302). Moreover, the presence of GH seemed to materialize a rare opportunity to observe the contour of emerging public space in which local communication processes took place, or in Castells’ words, “the space of societal, meaningful interaction where ideas and values are
...the space that ultimately becomes a training ground for action and reaction” (Castells, 2009, p. 301, original emphasis). In a sense, GH can be regarded as a social laboratory of grassroots self-organization and self-education, which can only be understood by delving into its local level of communication.

In the final analysis, the social significance and intellectual value of GH is predicated upon some fundamental assumptions about human agency. Insofar as migrant workers’ efforts to organize themselves and effectuate social change are concerned, there are political economic constraints that are admittedly objective, macroscopic, persistent, and overpowering. Within the parameters of given conditions, however, a nebulous contour of dancing between progressive and conservative positions seemed be emerging from the society-state interplay at the grassroots level. Within this evolving contour, human endeavors, as A. O. Hirschman would argue, are marked by both “unintended consequences” and “unrealized intentions” (Hirschman, 1991; 1977; also see Merton, 1936). The everyday practical field of meaning making and remaking is not totally determined by social structures and thus carries unintended consequences and uncertainties (Willis, 1977, chapter 8). More specifically, as can be observed from the unfolding stories of GH, the party-state never absolutely closed the gaps in its control at the grassroots level, while the emergence of GH might provide a window to the latent aspirations of workers for a better society. Meanwhile, although the free association of migrant workers outside the ACFTU system had potentially (and unintentionally) challenged the local authorities (which led to political tension), the “communicative labor” (Greene, 2004) of the workers might also result in something approaching “surplus symbolic value” (ibid.) which might in turn potentially transform the local field of social practices. Such, I believe, is the fuzzy, indeterminate, and intriguing character of human agency, which emerges and works “in terms of actions and
relations” during the full play of historicity (Touraine, 1988, p. 8), while historicity, in turn, is defined by “cultural orientations” shared by social actors “who fight for their control” (ibid.). Although various theorists may anchor “agency” in different constructs (e.g., Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus,” see discussion by Bohman, 1999), it remains to be seen how human agency manifested itself in what the migrant workers had been thinking, doing, and saying at and with GH at such an historical moment of a transitional China.

In short, this project acknowledges the migrant workers at GH as real people creating and engaging in voluntary association in a real place. The fact that GH came into being and survived political pressure (at least so at the time of this writing) made it an endogenous and intriguing case of emerging civil sphere that may (or may not) signify potential changes of Chinese state-society relationship and shed some light on the association life of grassroots workers. GH provides a unique opportunity for research in part because it, as an ongoing project of migrant workers, has not been comprehensively studied. There have been some official reports and media coverage of GH, but an insider view of associational life at GH may reveal a rather different picture. Given the perceived importance of the current generation of young migrant workers as to the country’s economy and their implications for social stability, the stories of GH and the voices of the workers are worth listening to.

Civil Sphere and Vernacular Rhetoric: A Theoretical Orientation

As a voluntary association of migrant workers, GH might capture one’s imagination of the ideal of civil society (cf. Kunreuther, 2011). It started with bottom-up efforts independent from state power and not for economic profits. It was local, small-sized, voluntary, and promoted self-reliance and mutual-aid among the workers. It was located in a neighborhood that, at a first
glance, appeared to be a vibrant community. As this project’s fieldwork gradually progressed, however, what happened at and around GH tended to resemble a mixture of “community organizing group” and “social change organization” (ibid.) which resisted simple classification, and the sense of “home” or “family” in its title itself was a unique folk way for symbolizing individual workers as a coherent group for their common good. Although throughout this work the term “GH” (Grassroots Home) was retained as a convenient non-theoretical reference (as if it were a static, fixed, and objective entity), a theoretical framework is needed (1) for the analytical purposes of defining key concepts regarding the civil sphere and vernacular rhetoric and (2) to guide ethnographic fieldwork by demarcating in a fuzzy field of inquiry what tends to be significant.

For various reasons to be elaborated below, in this project I use “civil sphere” and “vernacular rhetoric” as two heuristic terms to delineate a broad area of inquiry approached from a unique rhetorical perspective. Because concepts have implications and theories have consequences, I would like to use the “civil sphere” (cf. Alexander, 2006, to be discussed below) as an overarching term to avoid unnecessary separation or short-circuit between “civil society” and “public sphere,” two (analytically and in practice) interdependent concepts loaded with normative assumptions that may (or may not) be inherently coherent or feasible in the case of GH in particular and China in general. I would like to avoid the temptation to leap from the presence of grassroots organizations (such as GH) to the presumption that in China civil society prospers and a democratic-oriented (political) public sphere will inevitably follow (cf. Calhoun, 1993, p. 276). For the purpose of this project, I would like to tentatively define “civil sphere” as an ongoing social and rhetorical accomplishment of something approaching group solidarity and civil judgment about public issues. By and large, this is an operational definition that is
meant to sensitize the researcher to the “emergent” character of social and rhetorical practice that allows the social imaginaries and abstract principles of civil sphere to take concrete forms located in time and place.

As will be discussed below, the above definition of civil sphere draws on theories of ethnomethodology, vernacular rhetoric, as well as extant thought on civil society and public sphere. Theoretically, it extends from Hauser’s rhetorical reconfiguration of civil society and public sphere (Hauser, 1999; 2008), so as to foreground the affinity between rhetoric and civil society’s self-production as well as the formation of common judgment about public issues. In what follows, I will first delineate the major dimensions around which social members are likely to organize their civil sphere activities as will be observed in fieldwork especially in the case of GH, and then propose a vernacular turn to the study of civil sphere, which has methodological implications to be discussed in Chapter 3.

Civil Sphere

The term “civil sphere” is used by social scientist Jeffrey Alexander (2006), in part, to discourage the treatment of civil society as “an independent sphere… with its own ethics and institutions” (p. 6, original emphasis). While Alexander does envision a broad, normative civil sphere as “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time” (p. 4), he acknowledges the contradictions, dangers, ideas, and dynamically cultural, discursive, and institutional structures at play in an actual civil sphere as it “exists in the real world…located in time and place” (p. 6; also see chapter 20). For Alexander, the fundamental organizing principle of a civil sphere, as an ongoing project of democracy, is that “a certain kind of universalizing [solidarity] community comes to be
culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced” (p. 31). Although Alexander’s thesis is mainly focused on societies where the discourse and structure of democracy is more or less shared, which is probably not the case in China, his emphasis on solidarity-building through “historically specific interactional practices” (p. 31) is very useful for the purpose of this project, in which the grassroots workers had been engaged in similar activities. Particularly noteworthy for the purpose of this project, he is theoretically sensitive to recognize that, in order to sustain civil solidarity, social members need to participate in “a discourse that allows the abstract and universal commitments of the civil sphere to take concrete and imagistic forms…[or,] the narratives and codes of local and particular cultures” (pp. 38, 41). As can be observed at GH, such culturally specific discursive practices (e.g., imaging a better society) had the potential to reverberate beyond its four walls, echoing the workers’ voices in an emerging public space through their own songs and performances (such as the play presented in the Prologue).

Insofar as China is concerned, given its complex society-state relations, social structures, and cultural history, there have been many debates about the usability of western-based notions of civil society (see Ma, 2006, chapter 1, for a comprehensive review). For the purpose of this project, I agree with Iris Young (2000, chapter 5), who defines civil society as the realm of human activity differentiated from both the state and the market; accordingly, they are organized through three distinctive mechanisms: authorized power, money, and communicative action, in that order (p. 158). Young further distinguishes three types of human associative life, namely private associations such as inward-looking religious groups, civic associations, and political associations with clear public or political agendas. As a voluntary association of workers, GH resembled the category of “civic associations” to some extent, yet partook of some features of a community group on the one hand and a change-oriented advocacy group on the other. (For this
reason, the term “GH” as an entity is employed to mean “an emerging civil society organization,” with a focus on its local associational dimension in a broad field of societal transformation that has not yet approached significant institutional guarantee of a nationwide civil society.) For the purpose of guiding fieldwork, therefore, I will extract from the ideational resources of civil society three fundamental dimensions, along which activities at GH could be observed and interpreted.

First, there is the dimension of civil vs. uncivil. According to several theoretical sources (Keane, 1998, chapter 7; also see Alexander, 2006, chapter 8), problems of incivility are often overlooked by those who tend to idealize the notion of civil society. According to John Keane, a civil society contains within itself violent tendencies, i.e., uncivil forms of human interaction ranging from “everyday rudeness tinged with veiled threats of bodily harm to systematically organized violence” (1998, p. 136). Keane further provides a philosophical grounding for the notion of violence by emphasizing its “involuntary character” that implies “an extreme form of denial of a subject’s freedom to act in and upon the world” (p. 139). More concretely, Keane refers to the physical or psychological threat or harm to the “embodied individuals” (p. 140), which in turn may threaten or destroy the mutual interdependence of social life. To this powerful heuristic dimension, I would also add what Robert Putnam calls “civic malaise” (2001, p. 25) that is symptomatic of declining or disabling civic engagement. In essence, this dimension begs the question of how social members endeavor to define their civility by minimizing, repairing, or resisting “uncivil” aspects, such as physical or verbal violence, social apathy, and distrust. This dimension, as the following ones, is necessarily open-ended in terms of what may be manifested in a particular local context. Nevertheless, this dimension of civility, as defined against its countering factors, serves as a feasible and indeed enlightening angle from which the social and
discursive practices at GH can be observed and analyzed. As a matter of fact, a host of GH’s activities, such as community voluntary work, its open-house events (public lectures, for instance), and even public sanitary cleaning up, could all be regarded as efforts to nurture a sense of civility in a place where the residents and migrant workers used to be atomized and socially indifferent.

Second, there is the dimension of the state vs. society. According to Charles Taylor’s review of the intellectual roots of the idea of civil society, the distinction between civil society and the state is important to the western tradition of reforming absolutism and defending freedom (Taylor, 1990). Different lines of political thinking, however, depart from each other with regard to (1) how much freedom civil society as a whole “can structure itself and co-ordinate its actions through such associations which are free of state tutelage,” and (2) to what extent “the ensemble of associations can significantly determine or inflect the course of state policy” (p. 98).

According to western scholars’ observation (Unger & Chan, 2008), the dominant mode of civil society (if any) in China is state corporatism, and “only at [its] periphery do we find any small, local associations that are not in the grip of the central or local state and that are accountable to their memberships” (p. 67). Among China’s domestic scholars, it is widely accepted to characterize the state-society relationship as one of “constructive interaction” (Ma, 2006, p. 29), which implies the hidden notion that “confronting the state… will lead to anarchism and totalitarianism” (ibid.). Given the limited freedom of association as allowed by China’s state policies and laws, it would be intriguing to find out how GH survived and negotiated with local state power.

Third, there is the dimension of the market vs. society. This dimension is related to the aforementioned two in several ways. For one thing, as can be gradually observed through
fieldwork, members of GH tried very hard to prevent their association from being involved in market behaviors for profits, or being mistaken as such. Meanwhile, because financial resources play such a vital role in keeping a non-for-profit organization alive, the Chinese government actually came up with measures to restrict the availability of financial resources for grassroots associations. It is noteworthy that in early 2010, China’s State Administration of Foreign Exchange released an important circular about new requirements for domestic enterprises interested in receiving foreign donations (Davis, 2010). According to the new requirements, interested organizations must apply for a special bank account purely for the purpose of receiving foreign money. They must provide “a copy of their business license, a notarized contract with the overseas donor explaining the purpose of the donation, documents proving that the overseas donor is legally registered in its home country, and (possibly) ‘other required materials’ if the notary deems the above documents to be insufficient” (ibid.). These new regulations hit small grassroots organizations in China (including GH) especially hard, because, when needed, they lacked the organizational capacity to fulfill these requirements. Financing from foreign sources, according to some official sources (e.g., a widely circulated article by an executive editor for the People’s Daily, see Lei, 2011), must be curtailed as a contributing factor of potential foreign conspiracy.

In short, this brief review of civil society theories is intended to formulate a conceptual framework in which emerging civil society organizations in China, such as GH, can be explored in terms of the three dimensions (a) civil vs. uncivil, (b) state vs. society, and (c) market vs. society. It remains to be seen how GH managed to survive and sustain its work within such a relational matrix.
However, that is not sufficient. The play depicted in the Prologue offers some empirical evidence that an emerging civil society organization could incubate public discourse extending beyond its permeable organizational boundaries. As a matter of fact, it could also be argued that, at the embryonic stage of GH as an online forum, something approaching a socio-discursive public space came into being before the workers came together in real-world face-to-face communication and associational life. While the physical sense of belonging to the same organization larger than its individual members appeared to be a crucial factor in the workers’ efforts to get GH established and registered, the voices of workers had to be channeled through discursive (i.e., rhetorical) efforts aiming for a place in the universe of mainstream media contents and official discourse. For the purpose of this project, therefore, the theoretical framework will not be complete without conceptualizing “public sphere.”

The notion of public sphere is loaded with multiple theoretical positions that may each result from, lead to, or simply imply a corresponding conceptualization of civil society. According to Craig Calhoun’s acknowledgement, “a vibrant public sphere is the dimension of civil society most essential to democracy” in part because “it is crucial to identifying the public good and to shaping both public and private strategies for pursuing it” (2011, pp. 316, 321). The picture of public sphere, however, gets complicated quickly as one evokes a certain vision of (civil) society that is not necessarily liberal democratic. Sociability in urban life, for instance, may give rise to a public space of human life that is not specifically political, or can even be colonized by the ramifications of the social (Calhoun, 2011, p. 316; Arendt, 1958). A cursory look at GH would leave one with the impression that it was merely a place where workers socialized with each other and had some fun, but systematic fieldwork would expect to reveal
much more that was not seen or heard at the surface. Therefore, the following dimensions are crucial for mapping out something approaching “public sphere.”

First, there is the dimension of private vs. public. According to Nancy Fraser’s incisive view, the terms “private” and “public” are “not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres; they are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels” (Fraser, 1992, p. 131). In other words, what counts as private or public is culturally and rhetorically constructed, thus reflecting the self-understanding of a certain group or society with regard to the social meanings of appropriateness, interests, relevance, and politics (cf., Sharrock & Coleman, 1999, p. 17). In political discourse, in particular, these are “powerful terms frequently used to delegitimate some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others” (ibid.). In other words, the terms have pragmatic use values as a social discursive realm of competing definitions of social issues (cf. Warner, 2002, especially chapter 1). For the case of GH, more specifically, at least two notions of the private-public distinction are relevant. The first notion is the contrast between “the ‘personal,’ emotionally intense, and intimate domain of family, friendship, and the primary group and the impersonal, severely instrumental domain of the market and formal institutions” (Weintraub, 1997, pp. 20-21). As the opening play so plainly represented, the migrant worker’s child and family life as sojourners in the city collapsed with the impersonal and instrumental logic of the workplace, where the emotional exchanges between the mother and her daughter exposed and dramatized the inevitable connection between the country’s political economy and the workers’ lifeworld. The private became the public. The other notion has to do with public life based on citizenship, and at its heart there is “a process of active participation in collective decision making, carried out within a framework of fundamental solidarity and equality” (Weintraub, p. 10). Insofar as GH is concerned, the sense of “family” or “home” should not be
taken for granted in their literal meanings. Without fully recognized citizenship in the city (“What the city needs is our cheap labor as migrant workers, not humans as full citizens.”), the workers at GH had nevertheless envisioned “all migrant workers on the earth was one family” (lyrics from a migrant workers’ song), a dream of solidarity and equality. In other words, it would be fair to argue that GH members were involved in the practice of citizenship, even though they were often considered inferior outsiders of the city. In this GH was quite admirable.

Second, there is the dimension of material vs. symbolic. This dimension is meant to bring back the “body.” Here, I follow Negt and Kluge’s argument that public sphere is essentially a space of organizing collective experiences (cf. Negt & Kluge, 1972/1993, p. 2). The collective experiences of migrant workers, moreover, must be understood against their material background, ranging from the body in pain (cf. Pun, 2005) to the cultural geography of GH’s urban settings. In a sense, the public space of speech and action (Arendt, 1958/1998), or the public sphere of enlightened reason (Habermas, 1962/1989), is never as “pure” as such ideal types would capture. The key here is not to purifying public space of its messiness, but to appreciate and explore the ways in which social members managed to transcend or transform their lived experiences and situations (e.g., Philipsen, 1992). In his historical study of urbanization, Richard Sennett rightly points out that “the spatial relations of human bodies obviously make a great deal of difference in how people react to each other, how they see and hear one another, whether they touch or are distant” (Sennett, 1996, p. 17). The city, moreover, has been a hotbed of social movements throughout history (see Castells, 1983). It provides both opportunities and constrains for efforts aiming at social change (see Cloud, 2005). As David Harvey aptly puts it, “the history of cities and of thinking about cities has periodically been marked by intense interest in the transformative role of urban social movements and communal action” (Harvey, 2001, p. 188).
Insofar as GH is concerned, such factors as the human proximity in the city, flux of information, news, ideas, and people, and the tension between private life, market mechanism, and public issues may all contribute to the profusion of workers’ discourses and actions. As an ongoing project, the physical presence of GH might be symbolically transformed to function as “a spatial signifier of cultural values” (Ackerman, 2003, p.89).

Third, there is the dimension of public vs. counterpublic. Nancy Fraser, by examining historical evidences of actually-existing public spheres, makes a major contribution by defining subaltern counterpublic spheres as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). Insofar as GH is concerned, the migrant workers seemed to have found themselves in a world of popular culture and official discourses, where their voices were different. For instance, on the May 1st International Labor Day (described in the Prologue), the GH organizers managed to sandwich performances of its own choice between the official tone imposed by the local ACFTU and the popular entertainment offered by college students and local residents. As my fieldwork research progressed, though, the dividing line between what counted as “the” workers’ voices and their official counterparts appeared to be more nuanced and semi-hidden in situations like GH’s staff meetings. For some occasions at GH, the “we-versus-they” differentiation was the outcome of practical calculation rather than theoretical determination, in part because they had to do some balancing act between maintaining GH’s autonomy and cooperating with local authorities. In some scenarios that would need close participant observation, the leadership of GH might demonstrate more articulated messages of their own making and alternative visions for a better society.
In short, the rich theoretical resources about public sphere can supply further insights for observing and understanding what may emerge when individual workers came together in free association, action, and speech. The adage that “the whole is larger than the sum of its parts” is fairly apt in the case of GH, which gave rise to the things said and done that had not been possible for individual workers alone. Through the lens of an emerging public sphere, especially along the aforementioned three dimensions of public vs. private, material vs. symbolic, and public vs. counterpublic, new light may be shed on fundamental concerns and possibilities that were otherwise overlooked (see Calhoun, 1993). For a hypothetical example, suppose GH were forced to shut down by state power one day, flurries of (counter)public discourses and actions might happen, even though the association had ceased to exist in terms of its daily activities or real-world entity. Due to its fundamentally vernacular and rhetorical character (to be discussed below), something approaching a public sphere cannot be easily dismissed or dissolved as an entity or a crowd would be. It becomes symbolic. With the notion of public sphere mapped out as such, along with the dimensional conceptualization of civil society, I believe the overarching concept of civil sphere suffices as a theoretical and analytical starting point as to what to look for in fieldwork study at GH.

Vernacular Rhetoric

The concept of civil sphere, as dimensionalized and therefore operationalized in the above section, maps out the contours of the field of social practice for GH and its members, without the burden of theoretical assumptions and normative judgments concomitant with the various schools of thoughts about civil society and public sphere. In this section, the focus shifts to a vernacular rhetorical configuration of social practice. To begin with, I follow Burke’s definition
of humans as the “symbol-making, symbol-using, and symbol-misusing animals” (1989, p. 263), and his definition of rhetoric as “the use of language as symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (1950, p. 43). (Here, of course, “cooperation” implies its dialectical counterpart “competition” or “contestation.”) Furthermore, I follow Hauser’s recommendation to widen the scope of rhetorical inquiry by including “the broad range of symbolic exchanges whereby social actors seek to induce cooperation, from the formal speech to the symbolically significant nonverbal exchange, from practical arguments to aesthetic expression” (Hauser, 1999, pp. 90-91). While Hauser’s emphasis on the rhetorical locus of practical reasoning and public opinion formation seems to highlight the discursive side of the symbolic, his case study of the appropriation of historicity through cultural narratives and collective memories in (un)civil societies inspires a theoretical gaze toward the social side of the symbolic.

(A case in point is the GH performance described in the Prologue. While the dramatization of the worker’s lived experiences as structured by the political economy of the country demonstrated the discursive side of GH’s efforts to constitute and transform an emerging public sphere in which their voices could be heard and their experiences could be represented, reflected upon and potentially transcended, we should not forget the social side of these efforts that had not been possible without voluntary work, coordination, group deliberation, and trial and error. Even the entire stage built upon iron pipes structure was the work of worker volunteers at GH!)

The theoretical extension I am proposing here, therefore, is to follow Hauser (1999) to formulate a vernacular rhetorical model of social practice that recognizes both the discursive and the social as two sides of the same coin (social practice). For the purpose of this project, with particular reference to the notion of “civil sphere,” I would like to tentatively define “vernacular
rhetoric” as the creative process of meaning making, world making, and social coordination of non-institutional actors through a repertoire of naturally occurring and locally situated symbolic means. As such, “vernacular rhetoric” serves as a heuristic term, or “ethnographic imagination” (Willis, 2000), to sensitize the researcher to how a society actively (re)produces itself (see Hauser, 2008). As such, the vernacular turn may repair the chasm between the discursive and the social particularly by drawing one’s attention to the ethnomethodological insights on “how members’ actual, ordinary activities consist of methods to make practical actions, practical circumstances, common sense knowledge of social structures, and practical sociological reasoning analyzable” (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. vii-viii). The key is the fundamental character of order as is the common denominator of “meaning making” (communally shared), “world making” (morally and materially sustained), and “social coordination” (collective action oriented toward a common purpose). This, in turn (in my theoretical gaze or ethnographic imagination) preserves the hope of “objective possibilities” that are not absolutely confined either the social actors’ immediate social contexts (e.g., subsistence) or institutional determination (e.g., the restriction of free association). The notion of “creativity” is particularly noteworthy, because it points to my theoretical assumption that such a transitional society like China does not merely re-produce itself in the static sense of repeating the same old patterns and stuff, but in the dynamic sense of producing something new on the basis of available means of the symbolic and the material. In this sense, the notion of vernacular rhetoric is here meant to bring back the metaphorical, the poetical, the imaginative, and the human ingenuity, as Ernesto Grassi (1980/2001) has spelt out, into rhetoric as the ground of society. As anthropologist Michael Carrithers (2005) argues, rhetoric represents the fundamental human force and cultural ingenuity in world-making and meaning-making that should not be limited to the discursive side of speech.
While the discursive side is often focused on symbolic meanings somehow accessible from a hermeneutic distance, I would argue that the vernacular turn goes so far as to recognize the folk methods of rhetorical practices that can only be understandable from within the actual settings. As “formal properties of commonplace, practical common sense actions” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. viii), such folk methods embody social members’ endogenous understandings, attitudes, and knowledge about their local and institutional settings. The actual content of such artful actions (e.g., an unsuccessful attempt to put up a workers’ play, or venting a casual complaint online about unfair policies) may sound trivial or sporadic, but the folk methods employed to accomplish such actions can be made observable and analyzable as nontrivial revelation of the organizational character of social and moral order. As such, the notion of “ordinary culture” challenges “our categories of knowledge [and] analytical models…to allow us to think the inventive proliferation of everyday practice (de Certeau et al., 1994/1998, p. 256, emphasis added). In what follows, I will elaborate the theoretical implications of this vernacular turn.

First, the vernacular turn affirms the perpetual situatedness of social practice. The stuff that humans use to create their social world, as David Harvey aptly puts, are not “free-standing;” they “do not, and cannot, stand outside of us as abstract and absolute principles that descend from some ether of morality to regulate human affairs for all times and places” (Harvey, 2001, p. 199). By directing the theoretical gaze to vernacular rhetoric, this project echoes Harvey’s recommendation that “communities and neighborhoods are key sites within which explorations occur, both in terms of the learning and construction of new imaginaries of social life as well as their tangible realizations through material and social practices” (2001, p. 202). Together, the discursive-symbolic and the folk methodic sides of social practices offer front doors and back windows for accessing what may be observable and knowable only in local settings.
The notion of vernacular rhetoric implies a particular perspective on the moral universe. When discussing the problems of moral universalism, moral philosopher Barbara Herman notes that “normal moral agents are made out of messy stuff; the contexts of action are to some degree opaque; ways in which we change the world (including ourselves) will often turn around and change morality” (2009, p. 25). Herman goes on to recount John Rawls’ concept of “nonideal theory” in her discussion of injustice at the institutional level – broken promises, lies, violence or coercion that compel people into situations in which impermissible actions or ends are (rationally or morally) unavoidable (p. 26). As such, how can a people or a community still have a sense of moral order during their daily coping with social reality (suppression of free speech, for example)? As a matter fact, humans do manage to make their daily decisions and sustain a sense of moral order through their mundane methods. The following observation, as it seems to me, provides a neat description of the moral universe of China’s case, where the party-state and its structures are inclined to provide some leeway for leasing the grievance of migrant workers (as a disadvantaged group). According to Herman, “nonideal theory will then introduce strategies for managing propensities to failures within the normal (norms of apology, blame, and repair), and principles for permissible resistance and response to those kinds of actions that make persons of moral integrity vulnerable to the purposes of wrongdoers” (ibid.).

The second theoretical implication is that the vernacular turn underscores human agency by recognizing the epistemological significance of the quotidian, hence highlighting the rhetorical character of civil sphere activities. In a sense, the vernacular turn is the logical extension of the “social turn” (Lunsford, Wilson, & Eberly, 2009, p. xxi) and the “practice turn” (Langsdorf, quoted in Geisler, 2004, p. 13) that had been proposed in rhetorical studies in America. By turning to the vernacular, I think the rhetorical scholar is well positioned to diagnose or locate
agency in the ordinary, linking the social with rhetorical practice, without altogether losing sight of structural constraints. In other words, agency is not something to be weighed on the scale, or a problem to be solved, but permanently embedded in social practice. The real question, then, is in part an epistemological one: How can the rhetorical scholar access, observe, and understand human agency at work in social rhetorical practice? (The methodological implications are to be discussed in the next chapter.)

In theory as in practice, there are several ways in which the vernacular is made intellectually interesting and important. First, in a sociological sense, the vernacular turn compels rhetorical scholars to reconsider status, institutional discourse, and power (e.g., Nystrand & Duffy, 2003; Howard, 2008). For example, Amy Grim (2005) turns to the ordinarily occurring citizen discourse and concludes that citizens are attempting to subvert dominant institutional discourses surrounding the issue of euthanasia. In historical studies of rhetoric, this means the rediscovery of suppressed voices of subordinate groups, e.g., feminist perspectives on rhetoric (Ronald, 2009; Royster, 2008; Walzer & Beard, 2009, pp. 22-25; Gray-Rosendale & Gruber, 2001; Enos, 2009). Second, in a philosophical sense, the vernacular turn demystifies the ideal of reason. In his response to the instrumentalization of public opinion pools, for example, Hauser argues that “the everyday exchanges among ordinary citizens also are part of the public dialogue that forms and expresses public opinion” (2007, p. 336). Insofar as GH is concerned, the notion of “civil judgment” in the aforementioned definition of civil sphere calls for recognition of the aesthetic forms of collective expression of the migrant workers’ endogenous understanding of their human condition. Finally, the vernacular turn recognizes the artfulness of quotidian communication, for example, in the rhetorical practices of social movements, resistance, and prisoner’s conscience (Hauser & Mcclellan, 2009). In a sense, it demystifies the sense of art or
techné (see Cintron, 1997, pp. xi-xii; also see Cintron, forthcoming) that is usually associated with rhetorical cannons and oratory of leaders. Insofar as the migrant workers are concerned, the vernacular turn resonates with cultural theorist Paul Willis’ emphasis on “human creativity which is capable of… critical-imaginative meaning-making concerning their [workers’] own situation” and on “social art [capable of] sensuous and affective acknowledgement of the presence of structure” (Willis, 2000, pp. 5, 9).

The third implication of the vernacular turn is axiological. The fundamental question here has to do with the value of academic knowledge-making in relation to the wellbeing of research participants. In rhetorical study of social movements, for example, it is noteworthy that by “determining the important features of a movement – its goals, constituency, scope, and methods of persuasion – scholars are better equipped to understand the intersections between these features and, ultimately, the nature of movements themselves” (Stevens & Malesh, 2009, p. 13). In the process, social movement theorists – some are rhetoricians – “have become agents capable of, perhaps even responsible for – to some degree – crafting movement boundaries and articulating the distinct characteristics of participants as a way of defining movements theoretically and materially” (p. 12). Some rhetorical scholars will never go this far in their research, but the possibility is always there. For knowledge production is never apolitical or value-free, rhetorical scholarship is inevitably positional and hence rhetorical in itself.

The implication here has rather practical consequences. In the history of political anthropology, for example, because ethnographers often had to deal with local political issues, such as the welfare of indigenous peoples, they sometimes found themselves caught in the tension and even clash between the “abstract universal moral principles” and the moral ambiguities in specific local situations (Gledhill, 2002, p. 444-50). To put it in a more concrete
way, “why should ‘we’ care about ‘others’ whom we will never meet [again?] and whose sufferings may ultimately either be to our material benefit – as a factor in the world market price of sugar, for example – or be of total irrelevance to our own lives” (p. 446)? On that count, the abstract impetus in theorizing and the “non-vernacular” style of theory presentation may prevent the researcher from connecting with the people involved in the research. In practice, being able to adapt to the vernacular expressions and local costumes (not only through speaking but also other symbolic tools) is not only methodologically important for gaining an insider’s viewpoint, but also a great intellectual facility to translate concepts and theories into discourses and actions that are comprehensible, relevant, and useful in real places and among real people. To the extent that rhetorical practice is situated action with consequentiality (whether intended or unintended) for real people in real time and place, it invites the rhetorician to come to terms with the local rhetorical situation, to comprehend that consequentiality, and in so doing, to respond in appropriate words and needs.

In summary, this section proposes a working definition of civil sphere as an ongoing social and rhetorical accomplishment of something approaching group solidarity and civil judgment about matters of mutual interest. By drawing on theoretical resources regarding civil society and public sphere, the concept is further operationalized around the dimensions of civil vs. uncivil, state vs. society, market vs. society, material vs. symbolic, private vs. public, and public vs. counterpublic. Within such a contour of the field of social practice in an emerging civil sphere, this project is built upon a model of human actions that recognizes the discursive and social as its two indispensable sides constituted by virtue of vernacular rhetoric and folk methods. Such a
theoretical framework, informed by initial field data, serves to orient the central research questions to be explored.

Three Key Research Questions

Before I formulate the three key research questions that this project will explore, I wish, first, to quote a piece of advice made by Paul Willis while revisiting his ethnographic work on educational problems and social struggles of British working class youth in an industrial zone.

*In one way I am a simple empiricist: Write down what happens, take notes about what people do and say, how they use objects, artifacts, and symbolic forms in situ. Do not worry too much about the endless debates concerning ethnographic authority and the slippages of discursive meaning understood from an abstract poststructuralism. Tell me something – I know all the method problems – tell me, tell your readers, something about the world.* (Willis, 2004, p. 169)

Following Willis’s advice, and after developing what he would call a “theoretical sensitivity,” I formulate primary goal of his project as to tell compelling stories about how leaders and workers at GH had endeavored to create an emerging civil sphere where they could associate and speak freely (to some extent) and imagine a better society for a country caught in its unprecedented historical moment of transition. To that end, the following three research questions are to be explored, each focusing on a pivotal aspect of the GH stories.

Research Question 1:

How did GH workers come together in their associational life, secure its survival, and maintain its autonomy through their vernacular rhetoric and folk methods, especially along the dimensions of relating to the local state, the market, and other potential “uncivil” factors?
By extension, what did these organization-building efforts reveal about their endogenous understanding of civil society? In essence, this research question deals with GH as a representative anecdote of emerging civil sphere as an ongoing accomplishment of social and rhetorical practices by local members for free association and public discourses. In reality, there is ambiguity (cooperation and contention, for instance) at the local level of civil engagement, and that is where rhetoric becomes a salient domain.

Research Question 2:

Research Question 2: How did GH workers make something approaching a distinctly workers’ culture through vernacular rhetoric?

In essence, this question explores the rhetorical patterns and folk methods employed in organizing their collective experiences, representing their unique voices, and constructing their group identity in a public space dominated by prevalent consumerism and institutional discourse. As my field research would gradually reveal, “labor” in its political economic sense figured as a pivotal domain of lived experiences that the workers endeavored to transcend in order to gain a unique place in public.

Research Question 3:

Research Question 3: How did GH members envision alternative modes of civil society by (re)discovering and (re)inventing cultural resources that they might control to some degree?

This question is intent to delve deeper into the collective memories and cultural models in which GH endeavored to (re)root its social imaginaries. The communication processes in this regard were not always accessible unless participant observation was intimately involved. In a sense, this question reopens Alain Touraine’s assessment that, in the classical sense of struggling for “purity, for freedom, for equality, for justice, in the name of God, reason, or history,” social
movements were necessarily exhausted in modernized societies (1988, p. xxiv). While the case of GH might not approach anything resembling a coherent social movement, it is intriguing to explore what culturally specific moral vernaculars were circulating at GH for envisioning a better society.

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After this theoretical orientation (Chapter 2), the next chapter (Chapter 3) is going to provide methodological considerations with respect to the blending of ethnography and rhetorical studies. After that, in order to provide some general background about GH’s emergence, its founding stories are told in a separate chapter (Chapter 4). Ethnographic accounts exploring the three key research questions result in three corresponding chapters (Chapters 5, 6, & 7). A concluding chapter (Chapter 8) is devoted to summarizing the research findings, discussing the theoretical implications for understanding and potentially engaging China’s emerging civil sphere, and reflecting upon my ethnographic fieldwork. A short Epilogue (Chapter 9) ends the GH stories with an emphatic reminder of the vernacular voices in grassroots China, echoing the workers’ voices in the opening play (Chapter 1: Prologue).
In a broad sense, this project is conceived in a time when qualitative research is entering a new future after the eighth “methodologically contested” phase, according to Denzin and Lincoln’s recent characterization (2008, p. 4). As they suggest, qualitative researchers have been making “the social sciences and humanities become sites for critical conversation about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community” (p. 4). The rhetorical tradition’s animating assumption that “the connections between rhetoric and democracy remain fundamental and enduring” (Timmerman & McDorman, 2008, p. vii) have expanded its purview beyond literary and historical studies of public address. Since the 1990s, rhetoric scholars have produced an impressive body of scholarly work (for a useful review of this period, see Medhurst, 2008), particularly marked by rhetorical inquiry of public culture, public sphere, democracy, and social movements (e.g., Cintron, 1997; Hauser, 1999; Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Hauser & Grim, 2004; Cloud, 2005; Procter, 2006; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Timmerman & McDorman, 2008; Brouwer & Asen, 2010). As an extended case study, this project benefits from previous methodological resources, but at the same time involves some self-posed methodological challenges in part due to the theoretical framework as set out in the previous chapter.

This project adopts an ethnographic approach to the study of vernacular rhetoric. As such, it follows Hauser’s methodological recommendation for an “empirical attitude” (Hauser, 1999, especially pp. 275-281). This methodological challenge, in general, is echoed in the remarks of Lindlof and Taylor: “As the fields of rhetorical criticism and cultural studies increasingly overlap
[Rosteck, 1998], the former now struggles to revise its tradition of speculating about textual influence on audience. That is, cultural studies challenge rhetorical criticism to document that influence by participating in and observing its actuality” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 25). It is noteworthy that, more recently, a newer generation of rhetorical scholars is turning to social scientific study of rhetorical processes (Taylor, 2010, email communication; e.g., Cintron, 1997; Lindquist, 2002; underwood, 2004 &2007; Ward, 2010; Garlough, forthcoming). As a matter of fact, rhetorical practice (e.g., political oratory) has been the object of empirical inquiry for a long time, as anthropologists believe the everyday rhetorical practice of an indigenous people in public affairs makes visible and observable the working of their political system (e.g., Bloch, 1975; Yankah, 1995; Bate, 2009). Recently, rhetorical studies and anthropology tend to recognize each other’s contributions again and to converge on crucial issues and common concerns, for example, as attested by the International Rhetoric Culture Project starting in 2003 and joined by anthropologists and rhetoricians worldwide (see Strecker & Tyler, 2009; also see relatively earlier works, e.g., Boon, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Marcus, 1992; Denzin, 1997). This project is not alone.

In what follows, I shall first discuss the methodological considerations entailed by an ethnographic approach toward vernacular rhetoric for this project, and then provide a more personal narrative about the processes of ethnographic fieldwork that I carried out. The blueprint of the research design was laid out during the research proposal stage (after about two months of initial participation observation at GH in the spring of 2010), and since then has evolved and improved for practical purposes during my actual fieldwork. The methodological suggestions offered here have incorporated some of my ongoing reflections on the interplay between theories and methods, but retained the initial intention to engage in a conversation with rhetorical
scholars who are interested in similar empirical considerations. Further critical thoughts on my role as an ethnographer will appear toward the end of this dissertation (Chapter 8).

Rhetoric and Ethnography: At the Intersection

Traditionally, rhetorical studies have mainly relied on the hermeneutic method of “close reading” in making their claims about the rhetorical meanings, implications, or partiality of critical objects, usually texts, often cannons or oratories of prominent leaders. Such interpretative work is aided by a rich stock of rhetorical analytical tools (as a handful of textbooks on rhetorical criticism would attest), ranging from ancient Greek concepts such as Aristotelian notions of ethos, pathos, and logos, to contemporary ones such as the “pentad” (Burke) or “ideograph” (McGee). The terrain, however, gets complicated quickly as soon as we probe the arguably most critical issue of methodology, i.e., the epistemological justification of the use of methods in line with the often-implicit ontological framing of the object of inquiry. If, for example, rhetoric is considered as consisting of self-sufficient artistic products, then textual analysis based on rhetoric’s formal characteristics may be a plausible and reliable endeavor. If, however, rhetoric is conceived as residual and fragmentary (see Gaonkar, 1990), then “it seems that the task of rhetorical archaeology—that is, digging up from the residues of the past rhetorical artifacts that have been lost, misplaced, unrecognized, or never catalogued—ought to be a first-order priority for scholars of rhetoric and public affairs” (Medhurst, 2001, p. 504). Insofar as this project is concerned, in which civil sphere is defined as an ongoing accomplishment of social and rhetorical practices of local members for free association and public discourses, the vernacular underscores rhetoric as situated, quotidian, and consequential (see Chapter 2), hence calling for ethnographic methods.
First of all, the nexus between rhetoric and ethnography, as I would argue, essentially hinges on the notion of culture. It is generally accepted that ethnography means “writing about the culture of groups of people” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999a, p. 21, original emphasis), so as to “generate or build theories of cultures – or explanations of how people think, believe, and behave – that are situated in local time and space” (ibid., p. 8). In the broad field of communication studies, the methodological approach called “ethnography of communication” (e.g., Hymes, 1962; Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Saville-Troike, 2003), presupposes a certain theory of culture, in which the “building blocks” of communicative actions involve SPEAKING: setting or scene, participants or personnel, ends, act characteristics, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genres. Likewise, it can be argued that the long history of rhetorical theories has produced a vast array of conceptual models that involve various angles, analytical tools, and methods in order to illuminate what might be called “rhetorical culture” (Strecker & Tyler, 2009). Insofar as this project is concerned, vernacular rhetoric (as a theory of human practice) shares the fundamental, ethnographic understandings of culture as ordinary, productive, and situated. According to Paul Willis, for example, the “raw materials” for the processes of cultural production…come from “a wide variety of forms, plastic, oral, textual, musical, and from a wide variety of sources, historical and contemporary, local and mediated, commoditized and non-commoditized” (Willis, 2004, p. 173). Likewise, through the rhetorical lens, culture can be viewed as the processes of developing “practical mastery” over social members’ local settings by seeing the available means of persuasion and inventing symbolic means of inducing cooperation in the sphere of human history (Aristotle, 1991; Burke, 1950; also see Hariman, 1995; Atwill, 1998; Farrell, 2008, p. 324; Bartoli, 2009). Here, again, the rhetorical and the social become the two sides of the same coin.
Next, more specifically, one of the fundamental challenges of a vernacular rhetorical view of culture is the problem of context. More than a decade ago, rhetorical critics were “so occupied with the immediate pragmatics of the text that [they had] not devised an adequate strategy for signaling the constitutive presence of the larger historical/discursive formations within which a text is embedded” (Gaonkar, quoted in Rosteck, 1998, p. 227). In other words, without an adequate grasp of rhetorical contexts, rhetorical studies may end up producing just “thin description” or “inflated description” (my terms) of the subject matter. In theory, rhetoricians have already come up with the notion of “rhetorical situation” to remedy the problem (if just partially), although they might disagree with each other regarding (a) an objectivist view and (b) constructivist view of rhetorical situations (e.g., Bitzer, 1968; Vatz, 1973). I am here not to enter the debate, but simply wish to state my methodological position, indeed a pragmatic one, to move forward to investigate and empirically show how social members deal with and make sense of their local rhetorical situations through artful practices, e.g., “who is speaking to whom about what” (Hauser, 1999, p. 279). Ethnography may offer some help in this regard. Ethnographer Julie Lindquist, for example, when commenting on a series of working class studies, says that “socially productive working-class discourse is more often ‘found’ in places where it can’t easily be heard by others, since to be ‘working-class’ is, in one aspect, to have limited access to public channels of communication” (2007, p. 274; also see Underwood, 2007). The message here is simple and clear: In order to study vernacular rhetoric, the researcher needs to go where he or she can observe and hear it (e.g., see an interesting discussion of “listening culture” by Gross, 2009).

Another challenge comes from the quotidian character of vernacular rhetoric. In theory (see Chapter 2), I have already utilized the notions of vernacular voices and folk methods to highlight both the symbolic and formal properties of everyday practice as intellectually interesting and
valuable phenomena that should not be discouraged by its potentially trivial subject matters. Methodologically, I would like to emphasize everyday performance, not only of speech but also of other symbolic tools, as an important locus of cultural creativity and embodied knowledge. As hermeneutic-minded rhetoricians (notably, Hariman, 1995; 1998; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; also see Freedman & Medway, 1995, p. 15) have recognized, rhetorical genres and styles, for instance, are inherently performative and dynamic, informed by social members’ background knowledge and practical intelligence; this, in turn, poses the empirical question of how to put the “body” back into rhetorical inquiries. This is not easy. In a media-saturated world, rhetorical scholars need to resist the temptation to “transform ‘fieldwork’ into an exercise in textual analysis” (Lindlof, 2009, p. 63) by observing online contents or media products. Furthermore, the potentially uninteresting character and lack of salient “decorum” of everyday life at GH may prevent the rhetorical scholars from observing the inherently artful and stylized aspects of vernacular rhetoric. Insofar as GH is concerned, for example, the script of the opening play actually remained fluid and open for improvisation, and its inception had to be traced back to GH members’ literacy group discussions and hidden autobiographic anecdotes of the behind-the-scene authors. (Admittedly, its circulation and reception among different spectators and potential anonymous audiences were far from being clear.) In response this challenge, again, ethnography may come to help the rhetorician through the “backdoor” (so to speak) of affirming the sophists’ shrew understanding of the inherently instability of power and discourse, as ethnographers have turned their attention from “structure, stasis, and stable pattern” towards “dynamic process, change, contingency, improvisation, and performance” (Conquergood, 1992/2010).

Last but not least, an empirical approach toward vernacular rhetoric needs to take into account the consequential character of social practice in real places and for real people. As
supporters of a common discipline, rhetoricians used to worry about the globalization and thinning of “rhetoric” within virtually all aspects of human discourses, while anthropologists looked to “rhetoricality” to justify and stress the strength of ethnographic writings as “a performance emplotted by powerful stories” (Clifford & Marcus, quoted in Strecker & Tyler, 2009, p. 2, emphasis added). Although I do not dismiss the simultaneously unstable and creative potentials of ethnographic writing, I shall not go so far as to embrace a relativist view of ethnographic truths as Strecker & Tyler would maintain in saying that “real cultural events are not as real as they may seem, and that they must not be mistaken as being in any way more real than their [ethnographic] representations” (Strecker & Tyler, 2009, p. 2, emphasis added). To my mind, local cultural events, if nothing else, must be more real than my ethnographic accounts on the ground that such events may lead to real consequences and impacts on real people in a real place, but least likely so for my part as an ethnographer. For instance, the choices that GH members had to make and the cultural performances that they planned to stage were part and parcel of their routine work and might involve serious consequences for the organization and its members due to their word choice, failures, mistakes, and etc. More often than not, the “grassroots mind” (so to speak) had to be responsive enough to cope with the ever-changing local settings, negotiate between long-term strategies and spontaneous tactics (including seizing opportunities and taking risks), and improvise efforts of “making do” for all practical purposes (de Certeau, as commented by Conquergood, 1992/2010, pp. 17-18)\(^\text{12}\). Consequentiality (including unintended consequences), therefore, is in my opinion an indispensable component of the social members’ viewpoint and hence of the local rhetorical situations, especially given the fact that the key staff members had deeply woven their personal devotion in the unfolding stories

\(^{12}\) Once a university professor of education paid a swift tour at GH in order to get some idea about its learning programs for workers, and afterwards he concluded that GH’s efforts were “opportunistic and futile.”
of GH, as if it had its own life. Therefore, it is necessary to probe into and empathize with the endogenous understanding of consequences (in storytelling and internal debates, for instance) in order to better capture the practical logics of vernacular rhetoric.

So far, I have discussed methodological sensitivities as entailed by an ethnographic approach to vernacular rhetoric, with a particular focus on the situated, performative, and consequential character of everyday practice. The exploration is by no means exhaustive; rather, it has been informed by research experiences and is meant to serve as an open-ended practical guide for conducting actual fieldwork. Besides, it is worth noting that the blending of rhetoric and ethnography by no means suggests that one should give up “close reading.” As a matter of fact, according to Clifford Geertz, “doing ethnography” is something like “trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (Geertz, 1973, p. 10, emphasis added). While the metaphor of “reading” may make us wary of what Norman Denzin would call the primacy of “ocular epistemology” (Denzin, 1997, p. 34, and chapter 2 in general), it does not have to. By taking the vernacular turn, the rhetorician can really become what he or she used to be or ought to be, not only reading but also listening and speaking and feeling, taking cues and taking notice and giving heed, imitating and inventing and potentially intervening, improvising and rehearsing and perhaps pretending, and going to the people and working with them and learning from them (see Madison, 2012, especially chapter 7). In short, the rhetorician is on the way to become an ethnographer.

Research Design: A Personal Narrative
I first heard about Grassroots Home in November 2009, when I, as the organizer (on behalf of the Yen Center of Popular Education) of a rural reconstruction forum in Beijing, had a post-conference chatter with some of the attendees and NGO colleagues. Shortly after the Chinese spring festival of 2010 (falling in mid-February), I went to GH to do some initial exploratory research (ending in late May 2010). It is conveniently located about one-hour bus ride away my home village. For several times a month, I would commute between my home village and research field. For a portion of the trip passing a certain suburb district of Hangzhou, through the bus windows, I could see luxurious American-style villas on the edge of green farmlands, while the FM radio on the bus would play alluring *bossa nova* music (or whatever sensuous music and songs happened to be on the airwave). In contrast with the workers’ songs often heard at GH, my mind had an illusion of anachronistic mixture of all these scenes and images displaced from different places. At GH, my first experiences were not without false starts, confusion, and pitfalls. In fact, I carried the mission to start a workers’ learning center, which my Yen Center colleague Qiu and I branded as China’s bottom-up “Community College,” an idea that already had already taken roots in several projects across China. In Hangzhou, however, the plan did not materialize, making me even more humbled by and appreciative of the unending perseverance and practical wisdom of GH’s founder Xu and his followers, who had been working at the grassroots level fruitfully for many difficult years. In any event, it took me some time to orient myself in the seemingly chaotic environment at and around GH (see ethnographic description in Chapter 1). Here I would like to thank my colleague Qiu of the Yen Center for introducing me to GH workers in the first place.

My sustained fieldwork started in mid-September 2010, and continued through mid-July 2011, excluding the Chinese spring festival of 2011 (falling in early February) as well as much
of March (to fulfill family responsibilities because my father had a traffic accident and was hospitalized). As such, I spent a total of about 12 months doing fieldwork at GH. During the academic year of 2011-2 (from August 2011 through July 2012), I resided in Boulder to write my dissertation, while I would occasionally chat with my GH friends via the instant messenger. While in Boulder, the Internet made it possible for me to still access GH’s website and the staff-only email circulation that I was allowed to access, so that I managed to follow the major activities, events, news, developments, problems, and emerging topics and debates at and about GH. As my data kept accumulating and my data analysis gradually yielded a sense of saturation, with the major domains, subdomains, and corresponding factors and examples (see LeCompte & Schensul, 1999b) in place, I tried to refrain from obtaining additional data across the long distance. Understandably, however, life and work at GH still kept moving on, and some recent developments at GH in particular and in China in general have not been incorporated in this report.

In retrospect, I adopted multiple roles at GH. For the majority of my time at GH, I worked as an active volunteer or a facilitator. Somehow, my voluntary work started with small chores at GH, such as joining the staff members in doing some cleaning up before we began the morning meet-up sessions, usually at 8 AM. Because I did not want to intrude into the staff’s ready-made division of labor, I would seek little things that they neglected (e.g., cleaning up the restroom) or needed more help with (e.g., taking care of Xu’s 4-year-old son when others were not available). Such mundane experiences helped me empathize with the grassroots workers’ efforts of building and maintaining a common home through mutual aid (they called each other “family members.”). As a long-term volunteer, I had access to the cultural activities at GH as well as staff meetings, in which my role could also be considered as facilitator in a weak form (Kemmis and McTaggart,
It was a weak form in the sense that I intended to minimize my impact on GH by not influencing its decision making, not providing any advice unless I was asked to, and certainly not representing GH in any official sense. Although my actual tasks varied case by case, the commonest things I would do were serving as the note-taker during meetings (which gave me good opportunities to hear and observe vernacular rhetoric at work) and as a free-floating person during performance shows just in case I might be called upon for some (urgent) duty (which gave me opportunity to do observation).

As time went by, my roles evolved and became more complicated. I was named the external supervisor at the end of 2010 (a convincing sign of trust), but that only lasted for about a month as I had to go to Beijing and then Fujian Province to fulfill my obligations as an at-large committee member of the Yen Center in January 2011. For April and May 2011, I assumed a more active role as the facilitator of GH’s biweekly public lectures (usually on Sunday evenings), a.k.a., Grassroots Lecture Series. My major responsibility was to coordinate the events with the visiting lecturers, while I ended up giving three lectures by myself during the last few weeks before I exited GH in late July 2011. As mentioned earlier, my original task to seek opportunities to start a new learning center (a.k.a., “Community College”) for migrant workers required me to commit myself to something approaching “participatory action research,” which I did not fulfill in the end, but at GH I did gradually become more actively involved in its mission. (I’ll reflect upon this part in Chapter 8.) For most of the time, however, my voluntary work was still kept in a low profile, I was dressed just like a normal worker, and I believed my willingness to do little chores helped me maintain good impressions before others. Once in the field, I quickly realized that it was extremely important to keep self-reflexive regarding my potential impacts on the surroundings and interpersonal relationships. I tried to be helpful when some workers had
expressed some occasional needs (e.g., suggesting a book to read), but in retrospect I believed I made the right decision not to get intimately involved with any single GH worker beyond casual friendship (definitely no borrowing or lending money!), i.e., treating everyone equally instead of showing any favoritism.

Before I go on to explain the more technical aspects of my ethnographic work, including data collection and data analysis, I would like to mention the importance of personally sojourning in the neighborhood where the migrant workers sojourned. The majority of workers at GH had to go to work in the morning and would not be able to appear at their Home until after dinner, which meant a large part of participant observation had to follow their schedule, instead of mine. Meanwhile, the hectic morning and afternoon scenes in the neighborhood were part and parcel of the migrant workers’ life as sojourners after being uprooted from their village homes. Sometimes I would like hanging around the streets outside GH and tried to figure out any patterns in the visual displays of shop fronts, vegetable stands, cheapish consumer goods along the “free market” street, and some of small businesses apparently established to cater for the needs of workers who didn’t have a proper family life in their door rooms, such as publicly accessible shower rooms (with a charge per person), small boilers to make boiled drinking water for sale, and many stores of secondhand furniture, TV sets, cookware, bed frames, and almost everything one might need for a dorm room. Then I realized all these items, symbols, and facilities were meant for fast consumption in temporary living only; the workers didn’t belong here. Getting myself “settled down” like the workers did help me better understand, by contrast, how workers came together at GH mainly in the evening activities to enjoy and make their own culture that would really last as long as the songs were still being sung and stories were being told wherever the workers went across the country.
After explaining the circumstances (especially access and roles) in which I did my fieldwork, I would like to describe the technical aspects of my ethnographic research, namely data collection and data analysis. In the previous chapter, I have discussed an empirical approach toward the topic of civil sphere by highlighting a rhetorically informed ethnographic appreciation of culture. For the purpose of this project, I use “ethnography” to mean not only the process of data collection through mainly qualitative techniques (participant observation, interviews, and archiving) rhetorically informed, but also the process of data analysis (coding, interpretation, theorizing) ethnographically supported. In practice, my ethnographic research extended to the process of writing and reflection, which will be dealt with in the conclusion chapter (Chapter 8).

Data collection

This project utilized participant observation, archiving, and interviews as the major strategies of data collection. Apart from the aforementioned role- adoption, one of the preliminary goals of my participant observation was to identify and document emerging issues, concerns, problems, difficulties, and objectives of the real people at the real place (GH) (see comments on institutional ethnography by Smith, 2005, p. 32). Insofar as civil sphere was theorized as an ongoing social and rhetorical project, and social and rhetorical practices were eventful and consequential, the aforementioned identifying and cataloguing process was crucial for aligning with the social members’ perspectives on issues, problems, and objectives as perceived by themselves, e.g., internal differences regarding GH’s projects as well as the perennial struggle to get formally registered. In retrospect, I believe it was crucial for me to have gained access to GH’s internal meetings and involved in some of its activities. More often than not, NGO work appeared less tidy, stable, or glamorous than it appeared on surface or in media reports. For
example, the opening play, instead of a final product, was in fact the result of GH’s group activities, rehearsals, and autobiographic writings behind the scenes.

Second, through participant observation, I went wherever I could hear workers talk and sometimes joined their activities. The key point here was to get “nosy” while maintaining “courtesy” and “common sense” (Wolcott, 2005, chapter 5). In actuality, this goal was not as easy as it sounded. Although GH’s main conference room was the primary place where workers associated with each other and the staff members had their meetings, everyday communication was rather fuzzy and diffused. The average workers moved about the neighborhood and often participated in activities held offsite (i.e., in the downtown areas), and the staff members had to mind their own businesses by interacting with certain individuals that I might be unaware of or unsuitable to interact with directly (e.g., local officials). While traditionally rhetorical studies had relied on ready-made written texts that could be collected right in front of the analyst’s eyes (space-centered), vernacular rhetoric in its performative sense (often oral, but also employing other symbolic means) was rather a context-sensitive art of time, objects, symbols, persons, and stories. In this sense, my fieldwork was similar to what George Marcus would characterize as “strategically situated (single-site) ethnography” (1998, p. 95), which shared certain characters with “multi-sited ethnography” (ibid.). Gradually, through experiential trial and error, I learned to follow a practical list of prioritized items to observe (in roughly descending order of significance, but not always so): Xu, Liu Ming, and other staff members, staff meetings, daily evening activities, weekend public lectures, workers’ recreational activities (such as karaokeing and sports), and major occasional events (such as holiday celebration performance and fundraising events). Thematically, I followed the salient issues of GH’s evolving relationship
with the local authority, its cultural activities, and its social visions, thus corresponding to the major research questions I formulated in the precious chapter.

In the process of my participant observation, it soon turned out that GH had its own brief but rich history since its inception (see Chapter 4 next). At the beginning, I had not grasped the historical contexts in which GH staff and other members talked about past events, things, people, and relationship with the local authorities. In retrospect, it was highly advisable that fieldworkers on a similar project keep a separate notebook or document accumulating historical archives, anecdotes, artifacts, photos, memories, outdated documents, external reportages, self-created video clips and other related materials in a chronological order, which I did, in order to obtain a longitudinal perspective of the storylines, self-accounts, perennial themes and concerns, social networking, and individual social members’ past relationships with the association in question. At one point, for a simple example, I was overly concerned about one of GH’s core volunteers who had been involved in “a pyramid scheme” and probably financial crisis too. I wanted Xu to be cautious about that person’s potential impacts on GH’s reputation, but Xu continued to allow the person to be the preferred choice of performance show host (and he was a good one too), due to the fact, as I learned about later on, that he was one of first cohort of devotees to GH’s cause and came from the same hometown as Xu’s. Overall, in order to understand the unfolding stories of GH, I found it to be essential to explore its biography that had embedded and foreshadowed many themes, issues, concerns, potentials, and origins of symbols that ramified into its future development.

Finally, as for interviews, I mainly used the informal conversational type that did not use a written script of ready-made questions. I indeed prepared an interview protocol and actually used it for several interviewees that I considered to be external volunteers or sympathizers of GH; I
provided some of the planned questions with them, hoping to explore these outliers’ perceptions of GH in particular and China’s emerging civil society in general, so as to check my own perceptions. However, I ended up not using any particular data from them. The extensive quotes from the workers, as I have used in the work, were based on informal conversations (recorded), and the vernacular exchanges from GH staff meetings were reconstructed from my detailed minutes I took as a non-voting member. In any event, the gist of the questions I commonly explored during casual conversations is as follows:

- Social demographic information
- Personal relationship with and roles at GH
- Stories and experiences as GH members
- GH’s relationship with local authorities
- Perceptions about the workers’ songs, performances, and etc.
- Visions of a better society

Workers at GH had been the target of many rounds of surveys and interviews designed by college students, professors, and official investigators from the municipal office of policy studies, so much so that Xu said, to the effect, that they were “passively bombarded.” While this phenomenon was interesting in terms of how the workers were treated as passive objects of study, I did not find these questionnaires useful. In fact, I found that many workers would fake their answers, a tendency that further convinced me not to use formal written questionnaires. In practice, I would often seize opportunities to have casual conversations with GH workers when I was walking with them in the neighborhood, sitting around at GH, doing some voluntary task together, or eating our meals together. Interestingly enough, sometimes GH would hold events (e.g., meeting with visitors from other NGOs, literary interest group meetings, newcomer welcoming) in which migrant workers would talk about their stories at GH; all I needed to do was listen carefully and note the circumstances these “mundane interviews” took place. Overall, the informal interviews I did select for the ethnographic presentation in this report could be
considered as based on purposeful and representative sampling (see LeCompte & Schensul, 1999a, p. 124), and at the level of GH as an autonomous self-organization I treated the staff members as my key informants. By the way, for those brief casual conversations, I just took quick notes right on the spot or mental notes to be written down afterwards; for those lengthy conversations and some important segments of staff meetings, I kept digital recordings and/or onsite notes.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this project, I regard data analysis as an ongoing process of sense-making, coding, and interpretation. Sense-making (or understanding) happened as soon as my participant observation or other form of data collection began. Personally, as an ethnographer, I found it hard to be self-reflexive while doing participant observation or interviews; being too much absorbed in self-reflection (systematic sense-making) might distract myself from following what was going on onsite. Rather, I would take mental notes or truncated notes with the text composing function of my cell phone whenever I felt it was necessary to make some quick comments about what was going on. When writing up my fieldnotes or browsing archival materials, I would enhance them with side-by-side comments, asides, references to other scenes, materials, and theoretical sources, and even just question marks. As soon as my fieldwork and fieldnote-taking began on a daily basis, temporary codes (domains, subdomains, etc.) emerged quickly. For instance, after a few weeks of involved in GH’s daily activities, it occurred to me quickly that GH had evolved its repertoire of activities and services for its workers. Simply cataloguing and categorizing these activities (even just temporarily) helped me understand the big picture or the spectrum of ways in which the workers could participate with their bodies and
voices, including the timing and schedule, locations, key active members, content, and the potential ways in which I could join.

The centerpiece of my data analysis was building a codebook organizing and presenting the major domains, subdomains, factors, subfactors, variables, and comments and cross references in a single (electronic) document (see LeCompte & Schensul, 1999b). In the process, I gave particular heed to the self-accounts and mundane theories the GH leadership gave of major themes of interest (corresponding to my research questions). For instance, regarding the domain of “workers’ culture,” I made a subdomain of how GH leaders reflected upon what ought to constitute “our culture” and what that meant for the workers, and found that their cultural views had evolved throughout the brief history of GH from what might be termed a remedial model to a more sophisticated awareness of the workers’ creativity not only as laborers but also as makers of their own culture. Alongside each domain, I juxtaposed relevant official discourse that dealt with the same themes, e.g., party-state policies regarding migrant workers’ culture. The process of coding (and interpretation) was necessarily open-ended, and findings from (re)reading fieldnotes and initial comments contributed to the expanding, revising and refining of subdomains, factors, and subfactors. As to the variables, I took them to be qualitative examples and representative anecdotes that could illuminate the superordinate categories, and used summarized notes (instead of duplicating the relevant entire fieldnotes, which would take up too much space in the MS WORD file of the codebook) as cross reference to the actual (physical or electronic) locations of the data that I had already collected. The previous sentence meant that I managed my data with a series of folders or notebooks (physical or on my computer drive) containing various types, including (but not limited to) original fieldnotes (three physical notebooks), interview recordings, a 200-plus-page WORD document of GH’s historical archives,
a cumulative computer folder of minutes and occasional recordings I took for GH meetings, a
separate computer folder for GH’s everyday work-related files chronologically ordered, and
several computer folders for special topics. As a whole, the codebook served as the master plan
for my systematic analyzing, interpreting, and triangulating my ethnographic data, and it was a
highly recommendable form in part due to the visual convenience of organizing all the essential
domains and pertinent contents in a single WORD document that could spread right in front of
my eyes on a single screen.

The visual display of the codebook should not eclipse the important role that vernacular
voices had played in my data analysis. As a matter of fact, instead of relying on transcriptions of
interviews, conversations, and performances at GH, I listened to the actual audio recordings and
viewed some of the video clips again and again in order to relive the moments when GH staff
and workers spoke. Although doing so was time-consuming, the process rewarded me constantly
with great amusement at and appreciation of the artfulness of vernacular rhetoric as well as
pacing and reflection in front of my writing desk. The interlocked conversations, their vocal
qualities, the sense of being physically together, and background noises all helped to reconnect
me with the rhetorical situations (see Bitzer, 1968; also see the method of situational analysis
according to Clarke, 2005, especially p. 73) where vernacular rhetoric was at work among real
people in a real place with real passions and reactions. While it was unlikely to exhaust the subtle
rhetorical meanings in each individual case, a general feature of such vernacular rhetoric was the
dialogic character of intersubjective meanings (see Hauser, 1999, pp. 8-9, 67; also see Denzin,
1997, p. 40) ceaselessly (re)enacted, shared, and (re)invented in an emerging civil society
organization. A case in point was the ritual of singing the song “Ode to the Laborers” in the
evening when I finished my public lecture for a crowd of migrant workers (just a few days prior
to my exit from GH in late July 2010). As a “thank you” to my work at GH, the singing invited me into an enlarged conversation by filling my chest with the resounding of the powerful lyrics that I could not help but joining, and by doing so I felt the tiny voice of my “self” was giving up itself so as to be part of the chorus. At GH there were many occasions giving rise to this kind of improvisations, and subtle dialogic relationships emerged not only in the many quarrels among the GH staff, but also in their casual conversations in reference to official discourse. In order to overcome the muffling effect of ethnographic texts to better represent the workers’ vernacular voices, I quoted lengthy segments of conversations in the form of dialogues (sometimes with theatrical notes) reconstructed from recordings.

Finally, with regard to data interpretation, I have blended rhetorical analysis with grounded theory methods in identifying salient themes and patterns in ethnographic data. The theoretical turn to vernacular rhetoric provided an empirical perspective from which to recognize the endogenous ways of making and remaking local meanings through a repertoire of symbolic means. For example, the metaphor of “Home” (which, according to Kenneth Burke’s theory, tends to embody a certain attitude that in turn suggests “incipient action”) the workers used to describe their organization on a daily basis tended to organize a series of related meanings and actions (e.g., calling each other as “brothers and sister” and efforts to “protect the Home”). By grounded theory methods, I mean the ongoing process of identifying themes and patterns in the data as relevant to my theoretical interest (but not theoretically deduction) and constantly comparing the different themes, patterns, and examples to generate an emerging substantive or middle-range theory (instead of formal or grand theory) that “consisted of abstract renderings of specific social phenomena that were grounded in data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 7; also see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, by juxtaposing different perspectives and opinions among the staff
members regarding the thorny issue of coping with the local authority, I could induce their different cultural orientations with regard to society-state relationships. In the process of data interpretation, I paid particular attention to the folk methods with which GH members went about their daily activities and reflected upon the existence and meaning of GH. For instance, I believe that how GH workers endeavored to make their culture was as revealing as the content of their cultural activities with regard to the emerging public space of appearance through speech and action. As a whole, the real issues and eventful themes, along with the folk methods and vernacular rhetorical practices, constituted the principal tread that moved my ethnographic stories and concomitant analyses forward.

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In essence, the process of my ethnographic fieldwork and data analysis involved ongoing decision-making, sense-making, and interpretation, which gradually led to the “ethnographic stories” I’m about to tell in the following pages. To be more precise, the following stories are told at two levels, one being the thematically organized narratives of the major events GH had to encounter and issues it had to deal with, and the other being my rhetorical analyses conducted upon and informed by the ethnographic evidences. As a whole, this ethnography is told in what H. L. Goodall would characterize as a “traditional” way to represent “the field experience as one of the researcher’s straightforward entry into a culture and systematic analysis of it” (Goodall, 2000, p. 121), and where appropriate, the “realist tales” were joined by my “impressionist” accounts (see van Maanen, 1988) that were intent to establish my ethnographic presence.
Today I received a phone call from Mother, asking what I’m up to recently. Except for “I’m alright,” I didn’t know how to answer her…. What I’ve been doing is not simply something that eyes can see or hands can touch, and therefore it’s hard to explain it in a way she could understand. In Mother’s voice, I could sense she’s worried. She’s getting old, now relying on a walking stick, or so as I heard from my elder sister…. In the end, she told me caringly, “Stop goofing off! Find a proper job as soon as possible!”

Goofing off! These words stirred my heart. From time to time, I asked myself whether I should go back to my original job and stick to it single-mindedly…. As I hung up the phone, I immediately received another call, from a victim of job-related injuries seeking help. I referred him to one of our volunteer lawyers.

I couldn’t help recalling my feelings and the circumstances when I decided to quit my job two years ago….  

(Blog entry by Xu Wencai, April 20, 2008)

Out of the Garment Factory

April 18, 2006 was a memorable date for Xu Wencai: It was his 30th birthday, and he decided to celebrate it by resigning from the garment factory. That day, Xu finished making a chiffon skirt, perhaps the last piece of work in his 12-year life as a migrant worker. With a prolonged gaze, he silently appreciated the fashionable dress on the manikin. Once it had been his “tiny” dream to “resurrect the garment industry and bring beauty to the people,” but now it was time to leave that behind. He packed up his stuff, and turned in his resignation letter written the night before. Normally, a resignation request must be communicated to the boss 30 days in advance. This time, however, after reviewing the letter, the boss not only gave his nod immediately, but also offered his blessings and encouragement. Xu wrote:
Living in this world, each and every one of us is creating some value, which reflects our value as a human being. At the garment factory, the value that I can create on an average day is written in the price tags of several dresses, or perhaps scores of them. Now that I’ve got a very good idea of solving the problems that have been hurting migrant workers, I’m determined to put it to practice, so that I can create my own value far exceeding that of several or scores of dresses...

Xu wanted to form an organization of migrant workers, and he would name it Grassroots Home.

The idea was a long time coming. Around the year 2000, according to Xu’s account, working conditions were deteriorated at a low level, as an increasing number of migrant workers flowed into cities looking for jobs. “Overtime workload was extremely overwhelming, and wages were often deliberately denied. Especially in the garment industry, in some cases the bosses simply disappeared at the end-of-year, and thus the workers would end up with no pay at all. It was so cruel that after a whole year of drudgery some workers didn’t even have enough money to cover homebound travel costs.” Married, with a daughter and a son to be born soon, Xu had no illusion about his future as a migrant worker. Time after time, he reasoned, “The key point is that our future is so gloomy. We often think of our parents, who used to drop us at home so that they could dagong in the outside world. Now that I, as a father, have to drop my own children at home and go out to dagong, would my children, ten years later, have to drop me in order to go out to dagong, yet again?”

In the process, several significant events prompted Xu to initiate an organization of migrant workers. The first event was the news report, in October 2003, that the Prime Minister (Wen Jiabao) personally intervened by demanding the overdue wages of a certain migrant worker be paid. Reportedly, during his field inspection in the mountainous Sichuan province, the PM took a sudden detour on his road trip to visit a village. There he met a peasant woman named Xiong

13 Here “dagong” is used as a verb meaning “leaving one’s rural home to become a migrant worker.” The term is derived from the Chinese pinyin.
Deming and heard her timid complaint about her husband’s wages (over 2,000 yuan [308 USD]) being denied by the subcontractor in the county-city. Later that day, the PM had a chance to raise this issue with the accompanying county mayor, who saw to it that the money was paid to the man later that night. “During that period of time, I often heard from the news that the PM said, ‘First and foremost, my heart is unable to rest due to the peasant-migrant-workers.’ Regarding these words, I often thought to myself, since the PM had been preoccupied with all kinds of state affairs, why did we have to bother him with the matters of us migrant workers? Being a migrant worker myself, there is not much I can do for the country, except something for our fellow workers somehow.” Eager to figure out how to start, Xu touched upon many sources where “many experts argued that in order to tackle the predicaments of migrant workers, they must be organized together. Who were the organizers? Nobody knew… Why not me, if nobody else? I felt a great impetus at that.”

The second event (in 2005) was the death of He Chunmei, a 30-year-old female migrant worker in Guangzhou, after working for almost 70 consecutive hours of overtime. During her last four days at work, she managed to sleep for only several hours per night, and each meal had to be finished within 15 minutes. “I was shocked. As I heard from the news, her last sentence before death was, ‘How I wish to have a good sleep.’ It was also reported that, in spite of Chunmei’s death, the trend of forced overtime was continuing, and hers was not the first resultant death and wouldn’t be the last. I thought to myself, who, really, would be the next dead person? One of my brothers and sisters, doubtless. One of the sons and daughters of our China, doubtless. I still vividly remember the radio program hosted by Wan Feng14 in which he would habitually play the song of ‘We the Workers Are Full of Power’ by the end of every story of

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14 A famous radio host in the Hangzhou area where Xu and his GH followers sojourned as migrant workers.
workers’ grievance. I was deeply moved. I felt guilty about not putting my good ideas into deeds. I finally made up my mind to take action.”

And he did.

But it had not been easy. Besides his family’s initial bafflement, the horizon upon his road was anything but crystal-clear. In retrospect, it seemed to Xu that at that time few workers around him had reached such a level of consciousness as to appreciate his initiative. In order to safeguard workers’ rights, they were told to resort to the media or the labor department. On the other hand, the prospect of change for betterment in a far distant future didn’t seem appealing to them. Since he left the garment factory, sometimes Xu would go back to visit his fellow workers, only to find them preoccupied at the shop floor as before, sighing and complaining all along, a scene that had been so familiar to him and made him want to do something to bring about change. His former boss, being sympathetic to his idea, told him that it might take 50 years, or even longer, to see some real change (if any) happening to the overall conditions of migrant workers. “Fifty years? Then it’s really not too bad. But then why not 49 years? Or perhaps 48 years. By organizing our fellow workers now for change, change can happen sooner!” Xu wrote online.

He recalled an anecdote that dispelled his illusion of letting the workers just wait and rely on the mercy of others for change. A few years back, when Xu was still working in a certain garment factory, his fellow workers had been denied their payments for two months, and some started to quit their jobs. One of the workers was beaten up by the security guards, and being desperate, he sought out a certain radiocast journalist for help, someone publically known for his devotion to “the protection of labor rights.” Luckily, the journalist agreed to intervene. He helped that worker successfully acquire the overdue payments and compensations, and saw him off on a homebound train. “My friend and I were really moved by such a person that we could count on;
at least such was his image on the radio. So, a few days later, a friend and I also turned to him for help. To my surprise, he threw back such a reply: You migrant workers are so simple-minded. The guy that I helped out and saw off by train, he didn’t even send me a ‘thank you’ letter…. It chills my heart at the thought of helping these people like him….”

“After hearing this, we came to realize that we probably had sought out the wrong person,” Xu recalled. As it turned out, the journalist went to the factory and arranged to have a dinner with the boss…. Soon afterwards, Xu was notified of the final verdict: “On account of your leadership in organized resistance, your violation of factory regulations, and absenteeism for 3 days [during which I was actually commuting around the city to seek help from the labor department and the radio station – Xu countered], you are fired and shall be paid the minimum wages only.” That was, Xu added, for almost 2 months of regular work plus overtime; “I was kicked out with only a 300 yuan (46 USD) payment.”

The lesson from this experience, as Xu recounted, was this:

*Every [social] entity is concerned with its own interest first and foremost. As migrant workers, we don’t have a single organization or governmental entity that truly represents our voice. As such, we are doomed to become the disadvantaged group to be ripped off. After enough rip-offs, a certain ‘related department’ would launch some end-of-the-year X Program*\(^\text{15}\), so as to get the migrant workers sentimentally moved and to show the world how audaciously they cared about the workers welfare…. As a matter of fact, we saw many people doubt [the official behaviors] by asking questions in a similar vein: What the heck are the authorities doing on a day-to-day basis, except this end-of-the-year show!?

This personal experience reinforced Xu’s belief that the migrant workers must be self-reliant.

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\(^{15}\) The so-called end-of-the-year programs, among others, are official rhetorical gestures offered by governmental bodies to show their affinity with and care for the workers welfare. For instance, labor departments in various regions may be pressed to launch programs to assist migrant workers getting full payments, especially at the end of the year, which is traditionally deemed as the cut-off date for settling the whole year’s accounts, as migrant workers customarily return to their rural hometowns to spend the traditional Spring Festival.
Xu drafted an elaborate plan for the formation of the grassroots organization that he had imagined for so long. On the day of his resignation, with an application letter in his pocket, he walked into the municipal bureau of civil affairs, which was responsible for the approval and registration of various types of social organizations. In the letter, Xu passionately made his case:

At the end of last year, I learned from the media that some local residents had suggested the government establish a certain “Association of Non-native Migrant Workers” so as to protect their rights. This is exactly the kind of association that I’ve been intent to build. Therefore, since then I’ve made the decision to take up this endeavor. I have laid out the blue print of the Association of Migrant Workers in Hangzhou (a.k.a., Grassroots Association), and now I have had a preliminary work plan as well. In the process, I’ve received support from many fellow workers who showed great interest and expectation. With the issuance of the central governmental policies on the programs of new rural reconstructions, my plan will be proven more meaningful and make an even bigger impact....As I walked into the municipal bureau of civil affairs today, which happened to be my 30th birthday, a historical moment is being carved in my mind forever. From this Day One, I will go all out in sustained efforts to unite the vast majority of migrant workers so as to realize our grassroots dreams – good health, safety, harmony, and growth of our country!

“Unfortunately, the officer handling my files brushed them away without even taking a second look. I was told: ‘You migrant workers would cause trouble if you form associations of this sort, which, in principle, are forbidden by the government. If you insist on filing your application, you need to first prepare a financial proof of 30,000 yuan (4,615 USD) as operational overhead, and then find a supervisory entity for your intended association.”’ As Xu recounted this encounter, he maintained that it’s understandable that the government feared the potential trouble that organized migrant workers might cause, but he totally disagreed with the government’s underlying presumption (emphasis added). “I want to let the people know that, through my efforts, we migrant workers can work better, live better, learn better, and enjoy recreation better by organizing ourselves. United, we can make a better contribution to the harmonious growth and peaceful rise of our Republic!”
Undaunted, Xu came across the idea of forming a website for his dream association. A friend had recommended to him a newly launched website dedicated to issues of migrant workers, but it appeared so professional and official-like that Xu didn’t feel a sense of home at it. Being a migrant worker, he wanted to build a website true to their day-to-day realities. But he had no knowledge about computers or the Internet. So he took an 18-day computer class, and then bought a computer and several guidebooks to start the construction of the Grassroots Home website. While the website was still under construction and testing, Xu had maintained an instant messenger chatroom with the user name “Grassroots” (hence his early nickname “Grassroots Brother”), and also started blogging elsewhere on a public domain in the name of his emerging association.

The “plain home” of GH was ready online on July 1, 2006. Xu announced its launch with thoughtful, warm words:

*Compared with skyscrapers, this home is all too humble; compared with fancy websites, this site is all too plain. Some friends offered to provide their professional design for free, but I gratefully said “no,” insisting on my own plain style. You are welcome to hang around here, and make yourself at home. Yes, we want to build a home, a sense of belonging, for our fellow migrant workers roving in the cities. Brick by brick, shingle by shingle, each family member can contribute to making this home a place filled with warmth and love, and your contributions shall always be remembered in the heart of every one of us.*

In the ensuing years, the website, along with the call-in Grassroots Hotline and instant messenger, attracted an increasing number of “family members.” At one time, the number of registered users exceeded 1,000 for the public discussion forum, which unfortunately lost all its data at the end of 2007 due to an unexpected breakdown of the server (rented for free). Elsewhere, on Xu’s original blog as well as the website’s current version, the surviving archives of original posts, pictures, and comments were nevertheless reminiscent of the then-vibrant communication among the workers. They relayed and discussed news stories about miseries and
injustices, especially work-related injuries, deaths, and tragedies in migrant workers’ hometowns; they circulated online folkish commentaries and anecdotes about social malaise, instances of rip-off, and cases of citizen grievances, which were commonly from anonymous sources; they posted poetic lines and songs in praise of the workers and in hope for a better future; they shared personal stories as migrant workers, their sorrows, dreams, and what they liked so much about having a common place online; they particularly applauded and discussed the exciting plans that Xu publicized online.

While his website was typically crowded late in the evening (10-11 PM) when workers began to rest back in their hostels after a day’s work, it soon became obvious that a lot more workers did not even have access to the Internet. Meanwhile, Xu started to organize offline activities in the name of GH. Three weeks after the launch of the website, Xu personally reached out to ten local migrant workers who had been known to him only online, and handed a newly-made small GH flag to each one of them. This turned out to be an integral part of the grassroots ways in which Xu and his future collaborators would connect with potential supporters and keep themselves rooted in the authentic conditions of workers. With the help of volunteers, Xu would reach out to ordinary workers with survey questions; with the input from their grassroots perspective, Xu convincingly diagnosed his fellow workers most realistic cravings. Xu focused GH’s central organizational goal as to create a change-favorable environment in which to fulfill the fundamental needs of workers, namely, “good health, safety, harmony, and growth [for our country].” These words (in Chinese “jian kang ping an, he xie fa zhan”) were printed on GH’s flags (see Figure 5 below); the second part (“harmony and growth”) was reminiscent of the party-state’s policies of promoting “harmony and growth.”
Recalling those formative years, Xu felt that GH’s cause was “pushed forward by a strong force of love,” due to the support from fellow workers, college students, media, experts, and people from all walks of society. On the second anniversary of GH’s website, Xu fondly recounted some of the supporters’ contributions:

*Fei Yang, a migrant worker in the same city (Hangzhou), said she was deeply moved at becoming a member of Grassroots Home. She was the first person who mentioned the Home’s URL address on her instant messenger profile, a smart way to spread the word…*

*Huang Feng, a college graduate still looking for a job at that time, stayed up for many nights trying to maintain and redesign the website. He said he did this just because he was a son of peasants…*

*Xiao Xiao, a novice migrant worker sojourning in Guangdong, promised to donate to the Home, even though her monthly wage was only 800 yuan (123 USD)…*

*Shi Zhongsheng, a Sichuan-er working in the nearby city, came to Hangzhou to visit us in person three times, and donated a whole month’s wage for the cause of our Grassroots Home…*

*Zeng Fanshan, a migrant worker in the nearby city of Wenzhou, came to visit us twice. For more than a year, whenever he had some spare time to get online, he was apt to visit the Grassroots Home website, and through the instant messenger, asked me if there was anything he could do at his end…*
Li Zhongwei, owner of an Internet bar in Hunan Province, shut down his business, collected donations from netizens there, and came to collaborate with me so that Grassroots Home could grow faster.

Liu Ming, enthused by the Grassroots Home’s notions of “we” and “self-reliance,” quit his mediocre job in Guangdong (regardless of his family’s opposition) and came to Hangzhou to work with me. For more than 3 months, he slept on the [open-air] balcony outside my hostel room, while day in and day out he went all out to make the First Grassroots Festival of Arts and Culture a successful event.

Zhao Fengtao, from Anhui Province, became a friend of Grassroots Home at the end of 2007, and had supported our work in many ways. He even spent his own money printing fliers to spread the word about the Home, and recommended it to many migrant workers.

Figure 6. Xu Wencai (in front of the computer) with two GH volunteers in his dorm room (mid 2007)

A Utopia in Practice

September 15, 2007 marked another important date in the course of GH’s growth. On that evening, the bustling Yan An Road in the city’s downtown area was full of pedestrians as usual, many of them having come to hang around for the beautiful West Lake, shining like a crown of this city nicknamed “Heaven on the Earth.” At a conspicuous spot along the road, there was a historic building named the Victory Theatre (sheng li ju yuan), which was known for its presentation of great movies and various genres of Chinese traditional opera. That particular
night, at the theater’s entrance, a ritual brass band was playing their instruments in earnest, welcoming the excited audience of the evening show. This show, however, was not going to be a fancy imported movie or a traditional opera that only the “culturally rich” could afford. Throughout, the majority of the performers on the stage were not professional artists, but migrant workers, as was 90% of the audience. This was the First Grassroots Festival of Arts and Culture, planned and coordinated by the voluntary team consisting of GH members.

In retrospect, the festival marked an important reorientation of GH’s realistic goals for the coming years. Xu and his friends had tapped into the difficulty of focusing on labor rights protection, which was too politically sensitive. Cultural activities, by contrast, proved to be a much safer playground. The success of the festival, in particular, sent a strong voice to the general public that “migrant workers are not only interested in earning some meager wages; they harbor their own world of spirit and culture.” While it was hard to know how this message was received by the audience that night, the Festival accomplish at least several things of great significance for GH. Although admittedly flawed, the success essentially proved GH members as fully capable of mobilizing resources and organizing themselves. As “the first of its kind dedicated to the migrant workers,” the Festival attracted great media attention and in turn enhanced the presence of the emerging GH in the mainstream media space. In another sense, the event became a de facto winnowing process in which multiple players had a chance to position themselves in relation to GH (as well as its idea) one way or another, and in which several key figures emerged in shaping and pushing GH’s organizational mission.

Liu Ming, who had come to join Xu about 3 months before the Festival, had started an experimental “Migrant Workers’ Club” in Guangdong, where he sojourned with his young family. Named “A Blue Bar for the Meeting of Hearts,” his not-for-profit project was intent to
borrow the form of commercial recreational bars for (re)building a space where migrant workers could associate with each other, relax, learn, and cultivate their own culture “originating at the bottom of hearts.” In early 2007, Liu Ming came across two ongoing projects as presented online: one was a Beijing-based “Migrant Workers’ Home” (website) and the other was Xu’s Hangzhou-based Grassroots Home (website). Both initiators piqued interest in Liu Ming’s project, and in-depth discussion was in order for the purpose of potential collaboration. Liu Ming would have to make a decision as to which one to strike up long-term partnership with.

Here is an edited excerpt from Liu Ming’s (L) records of his online chat with the Beijing-based friend (F):

F: We cannot adopt an alternative approach like yours…. We must build a not-for-profit image publicly, and make our website a mainstream one dedicated to tackling the predicaments of migrant workers.

L: I don’t quite agree. [My approach is] alternative only in the sense of fundraising. I want to make my Bar financially self-sustainable.

F: Don’t think your model is a worthy investment on the part of investors and philanthropists.

L: Well, you are probably right. I haven’t grabbed sufficient attention yet.

F: Believe it or not, I can even let foreign presidents and first ladies come to visit or support my Migrant Workers’ Home…. Based on what you’ve seen from my website’s map, you should understand I’m not the kind of person dwelling upon petty projects.

L: Will you still stick to the notion of “Migrant Workers’ Home” when your project shall spread across the country one day?

F: Well, my website will serve to spread the model of our offline franchises…. But access to the website itself will be totally free of charge.

L: How about the rich people, then?

F: The rich may choose to work as volunteers, or donate money.

L: Wrong. The rich, too, need something good for the soul.

F: …. You don’t understand the true psychological needs of the rich.

L: Well, perhaps….

F: …. Have you ever attended any kind of formal philanthropic banquet or fundraising performance party?

L: No.
F: I’m afraid you and I are not even qualified to attend....

[At this point, the two friends appeared to have drastically different views, but they continued their online discussion in the following evenings.]

F: In order to run a not-for-profit, you must survive on your own footing above anything else. Earn some money first, so that you can do some good deeds.

L: I can run my bar successfully. I have managerial experiences in this regard. As long as the migrant workers have access to a place of their own, a place that they can feel emotional attachment with, this enterprise will be a great success.

F: Well, why do the migrant workers need a fancy place like a bar? They are merely the weak. Besides, yours is just a low-class bar. Some music? Putting people to snooze? Cocktails perhaps? Now you want to squeeze money out of these workers.

L: You are laughing at me, Teacher L. Do you think your words can make us migrant workers feel good? Why do you say we are the weak?

F: Because they are.

L: But they don’t have to be! We can make change by learning. And we can motivate our fellow workers to learn.

F: Now I feel you are getting more and more impractical. There are 500 million migrant workers in China. How many of them do you think will want to further their learning?

L: Wrong! (Suddenly realizing something) I don’t mean to make a single penny for myself!

F: Are you going to change the whole world? Have you ever saved at least a single person by using the wealth you’ve acquired, Mr. Not-for-profit?

L: Unlike you, I have my own life to take care of. I admit that I haven’t made myself rich enough to do what I wanted to. But I believe a loving heart is the most important.

F: Well, at least I take a portion of my income to do something for others.

L: I admire you. But does that mean you wish people to be grateful to you?

F: [...]Even a beggar wishes to give to others, but what he lacks is money.... My website is bound to bring in profits, as a website like this will accumulate a huge commercial value. [He started to disclose some strategies to be proposed to potential business partners such as telecommunications carriers and financial services, e.g., to sell prepaid phone cards and credit cards at discounted rates to migrant workers. That meant “a huge market with enormous margins,” he claimed.] We’ve conducted extensive surveys showing a great demand for vocational trainings among the migrant workers. We will put a price tag on each training course, for sure. But I promise to keep the whole website permanently free of charge....

L: Will you please incorporate my idea of “raising the awareness of migrant workers” in your work?

F: Our website will only provide the kind of information that migrant workers truly need. We don’t care about the soul.
Thanks to their intertwined arguments, and in spite of Liu Ming’s rather personal obsession with the idea of a migrant workers’ bar, he was somehow forced to articulate what had been his fuzzy ideal, highlighting “a place of their own” where migrant workers could cultivate their own culture and have free communication of the hearts. He was further convinced, as he wrote in a public letter to his GH comrades a few months later, that “by simply giving condescendingly, a not-for-profit enterprise won’t have a big impact in order to empower the migrant workers and better their conditions…. While I searched all over the Internet and realize that most websites are prone to calling the migrant workers ‘they,’ they didn’t strike a chord in my heart. But here at Grassroots Home, I heard the voice of ‘we’!”

Around the same time as the above chatting, Liu Ming had been communicating with Xu, his “online buddy” and future comrade. To be more precise, “we” had been chatting, discussing, and deliberating about the idea and plan of the Grassroots Festival, among other things, through the online messenger. A small segment of their exchange of messages16 sufficed to demonstrate their struggle to frame the Festival as well as the emerging Grassroots Home in a way that would reflect GH’s peaceful position with regard to society-state relationship.

L: Good evening, everyone!
Xu: The Grassroots Festival shall be carried out as planned, even more spectacular than everyone had imaged!
L: To make it a great success, it all depends on our own passion.
Xu: Welcome our new comrade!
Peng: Hi there.... I do support the idea of Festival!
L: Our power emerges as the power of the people!
Peng: OUR power? Have you got any feasible ideas? Don’t just do empty talk!

16 The following Peng, Shen, Snow, and Wolf are the nicknames of anonymous participants. In some places, the effect of delayed turn-taking online has been preserved in the transcript, as the reader will notice.
Xu: We are not talking empty talk. We have been taking action.

L: What we are struggling for is a healthy (dignified) festival of our own. Our voice has been recognized by state authorities.

Peng: Apparently, the said authorities of the said state are the every root of [China’s] problems. What on earth do you expect them to be capable of doing? Their behaviors won’t cure the cause of diseases.

Xu: WE are the mainstream in our own right. I mean, we have a key role to play through our collective efforts.

L: Peng, you are right on that. To make change happen, we must be able to cure the cause of the diseases, not just the symptoms.

Xu: Meanwhile, we cannot deny the functional role of the state. The Union of Farmers, as we have conceived, shall be a certain state-based body too in the future.

Peng: But what is this “state” going to become?

Xu: It’s our state, our nation. Although it does have some problems, we as its members cannot deny it. We must love our nation.... Welcome our new comrades!

Wolf: Good evening!

Shen: Welcome!

Snow: Greetings, everyone!

Xu: Wow, our team is growing in number!

Wolf: United, we have power.

Peng: (Continuing his argument) Well, as a matter of fact, what do you really mean by “the state”? Is it the President and his administration? Or is it the plain people that are us? If the latter, I must say I love the state. I’m deeply in love with this land.

Xu: Guard your tongue. Whatever we say or do must abide by high [moral] principles. We are struggling to have our association formally registered.... We want to let the world know that we are not of any lesser quality, that it’s for the sake of our country’s harmony and growth that we organize ourselves!

Peng: Do you really buy this talking point of “harmony”? I, for one, don’t believe it.

Xu: Without any belief, what do you hope to accomplish? Without any belief, why and for what do we struggle?

Peng: Do you really believe that thing called “harmony”?

Xu: It’s not a matter of believing or disbelieving it. It’s a matter of how we create it. Even though presently it’s not very harmonious at all, why cannot we struggle to achieve it?

Peng: Of course you can. But first of all, you must mentally believe that which you are struggling to achieve.

Xu: How can we let this society, this country, continue the way it has been (as you wanted to say, “So disharmonious”)?
Peng: How can you achieve what you vow to achieve, if you haven’t solved it at the conceptual level? Theory goes first!

Xu: Theory is harmful. Action first!

Peng: Well….

Xu: (concerned with Peng’s suggestive language about the “badness” of the current party-state leadership) We must be absolutely responsible for whatever we say or do.

Peng: I do admire your strong resolve.

Xu: So many beautiful theories we heard of, have they ever accomplished anything?

L: (Inserted) Our reasonable efforts to protect our rights are bound to be backed by the state.

Peng: But what are you really talking about when you talk about “the state”?

Snow: (Inserted) Strange. Who’s the Grassroots Brother?

Xu: That’s me.

L: (getting back to Peng’s question) The China under the leadership of Hu and Wen.

Peng: (Chuckle…) The China of 1.3 billion people under the leadership of Hu and Wen.

L: The China of 1.3 billion people under the leadership of Hu and Wen.

Peng: Well, if so, is there any slightest difference from putting your faith in the ancient emperors, as the Chinese people did so under feudalism?

L: Since our country is not harmonious enough, why cannot we do something for it? We are not letting our hope rest in the two leaders. But, we do know that our country really needs political leadership. And as a matter of fact, during the terms of Hu and Wen, many concrete things have been done for the sake of the disadvantaged people. Now that the state-level leaders have expressed their awareness of this (exigency of improving the welfare of the disadvantaged), we as the sons and daughters of our country are really obliged to do something for the sake of true harmony.

Xu: As long as the hundreds of millions of people are united into a single big heart and in joint efforts for harmony, the ever-nonexistent harmony will become reality.

L: The key point is to empower ourselves.

Xu: If everyone keeps complaining and keeps being negative, when shall anything positive happen?

Peng: Pardon me if this sounds ignorant, but my question is: Were there any other political slogans before Hu issued the notion of “harmonious society”?
L: (continued with his own argument) Therefore we need to build our team, a team from bottom up.

[After finishing this point, Liu Ming engaged in some further argument with Peng back and forth for a while, as Peng tried to prove that many historical slogans issued by the state had backfired…. Then the dyad came back to the original debatable point.]

L: Now we are in a process of self-empowering. In order to do so, we need to organize ourselves first.

Peng: Yes, you are right.

L: What are you going to do from now on?

Peng: Were you asking me?

L: Organized, we will have more power. With more power, we can transfer it to economic power and rights-based power. By that time, we would be able to get rid of the worms eating away our country.

Peng: (somehow hedging the question L directed to him/her) For me, if there is any realistic sense of the notion of “harmony,” it shall belong to the people, not as an instrument to assist the leaders’ control of power.

L: If we don’t organize ourselves to gain strength, how can we fight against the worms? Worms and the leaders, these are two different sets of concepts. (Chuckles)

... 

L: [Somehow referring back to Peng’s reply] Did you suggest a harmonious order for the people only, with no need for political leadership? Impossible! In order to achieve real harmony, we must have a sound political system on the one hand, and on the other, we need to empower the people at the grassroots level. The existence of disharmony is really due to these two key factors:

1 The existence of worms (due to a bad political system).

2 The weakness of the grassroots people (that’s why the rights of us at the grassroots level have been alienated.).

Peng: Grassroots? What are they? Against what are they defined? Aristocrats? Officialdom? Or what?

...

This online debate must have been impressive to Liu Ming, as he preserved the record on his blog. He particularly considered it part of GH’s internal deliberation that eventually led to a “fundamental, harmonious (i.e., peaceful) approach” to both its own growth and that of the country.
A few days later (on May 28 2007), Liu Ming boarded a northbound train. He had a stopover in Hangzhou to first visit Xu, a visit that would eventually make him cancel his plan to travel further north to visit the Beijing-based L for discussing potential collaboration. In his diary a week after his arrival in Hangzhou, Liu wrote (and posted for public view): “I was so attracted by the plain style of the Grassroots Home website, and was so impressed when chatting with my online buddy Grassroots Brother. At the Grassroots Home, I truly felt the kind of spirit that I myself have been pursuing, and I almost cried as I watched and savored the content of the website…. As the Grassroots Brother, Xu Wencai himself exemplified the idea of ‘self-reliance and perseverance,’ a truly self-made man. With a junior high-school education only, he must have been illiterate about computer science. Yet he pressed on by teaching himself and groping for a way out in darkness till this day…. As for the Festival, I know at the bottom of my heart that it is not going to be any single person’s obligation; it is bound to be OUR festival, a result of our collaboration and creation. Through our perseverance, our steadfast belief, and our uplifting spirit, we shall let our nation see the dignified and positive side of grassroots workers [as a coherent group]! As migrant workers, we shall prove that we are not unchangeable! Also, we don’t like to be pitied; we’d prefer self-reliant struggle and self-made progress!”

The success of the Festival also brought a great opportunity for Liu Ming and Xu to meet their future mentor (a Beijing-based “expert,” as Xu originally called him), named Liu Laoshi, who was one of the leading figures in the contemporary movement of New Rural Reconstruction (NRR) in China. Liu Laoshi, who was affiliated with the Rural Reconstruction Center at the People’s University of China, home to China’s best school in agricultural economics and development, was the founder of the Liang Shuming Center of Rural Reconstruction (LSCRR) based in the northwestern rural area of Beijing. Since 2000, Liu Laoshi had mobilized college
students to conduct surveys in the countryside and to learn from the peasants. “To go to the people, live among them, learn from them, plan with them, [and] work with them” (Yen, see IIRR, 2010); echoing the call of rural reconstructions leaders almost a century ago, the rural fieldwork led by Liu and his colleagues had gradually grown as the contemporary version of the wave of calling upon the intelligentsias to connect with the grassroots people. Meanwhile, some villagers across the country had started to organize themselves into rural co-operatives for cultural and productive purposes. Some of the villages became the sites for observation, experiment, and demonstration in the name of LSCRR. A few years later, some migrant workers (noticeably those at Beijing Home of Workers, see Chapter 6 for more details) started to organize themselves into local NGOs, which were loosely connected with the NRR movement and gradually expanded the movement’s scope. For the entire year starting October 2007, LSCRR, in collaboration with a few other organizations, implemented a training program on building NGO capacity and leadership. Liu Ming and Xu were enrolled.

The program provided Liu Ming and Xu timely opportunities to broaden their views, network with NGO colleagues and experts of various sorts, and absorb theories of NGO and social entrepreneurship. The program punctuated enrollees’ daily work at their respective home basis with one session of collective training approximately every 3 months, and covered a variety of topics ranging from Chinese political economy, policy analysis, and cultural studies to essential NGO work skills and field trips to LSCRR’s demonstration sites (e.g., rural co-ops). Most importantly, as Xu wrote in the introduction of GH, “Thanks to the training, our great passion has grown into a lifetime commitment to the common good.” One of the most important things that he learned from the training program, as Xu recalled, was the revelation that “although our work is focused on the welfare of the migrant workers, our mission should be
elevated to the height of pursuing national dreams… As such, we cannot limit our efforts by simplistically understanding them as struggling for labor rights only. We should absolutely not engage in opposition against the government and the business world. Embracing political antagonism would disqualify us as a not-for-profit, and perhaps even turn us into wrong-doers to our nation and history.”

Among the many impressive topics, Liu Laoshi’s critique of China’s contemporary culture was particularly influential to Xu and Liu Ming, and would forecast a pivotal theme in GH’s future work. The essence of culture (as Xu and Liu Ming recalled), according to Liu Laoshi, was “the pursuit of interest, which is the key to all kinds of cultural practices.” Liu Laoshi further argued that in contemporary China, “[the mainstream] culture is nothing but the external manifestation of ‘big’ (monopoly) capital’s vested interest and desire, eroding our endogenous cultural roots and national ethos…, especially through the instrument of consumerism.” Xu was particularly impressed by Liu Laoshi’s contention that “in a winner-take-all world dominated by big capital, the plain folks (ping min) and their labor, as well as other disadvantaged groups, have disappeared from the public space.” Echoing Liu Laoshi’s point, Xu lamented the social malaise that prompted the Prime Minister to call on the whole nation to “respect labor and its value as a fundamental moral principle.” The quote implied the counterfactual reality that the working class had been trampled. Xu continued to lament, “Whether in the ivory towers or remote villages, the human soul has not been spared under the erosion by capitalist culture, which is but the tool for a clique of some people to pursue their self-interest.” The PM’s quote would be put on a plaque hung inside GH’s office soon after its opening to the public, and it would remind Xu and his colleagues of the question he had asked since GH’s inception, “What out of conscience shall we do, so that we can have healthy and free souls?”
March 1, 2008, with the support of a local factory owner truly moved by the struggles of Xu and friends, GH had access to a temporary office, free of charge, located in the downtown area of the city. Meanwhile, “we” started to lay out a comprehensive plan to make GH a “spiritual home and a place to realize dreams” with the joint efforts of brothers and sisters. Its strategic plan was outlined as follows:

A HOME, MANAGED THROUGH DEMOCRACY: Engage fellow workers in decision-making and building our Home together as a better place; provide good services to fellow workers; assist fellow workers in realizing their dreams.

A HOME, STRENGTHENED THROUGH CULTURE: Enhance cultural and spiritual cultivation; ...build a learning center for ourselves, i.e., a cultural realm, an information center, a forum of communication, and a base of lifelong learning.

A HOME, SUSTAINED THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP: Build our own grassroots economy, so as to gain financial strength; ... we had created value for the process of urbanization at the cost of our youth and health, only to find ourselves marginalized or even excluded in the cities, without any hope except retreating to our rural homes, worn out, sick, and injured; ...now it’s time to stop complaining or waiting, and to build our own economy.... (Isn’t it a fact that all the restaurants, supermarkets, and even the whole market are dependent upon migrant workers that are us? Why, then, cannot we run our own?)

(In a nutshell, Xu envisioned a bifurcated future for the migrant workers.)

Some will stay in the cities as workers enjoying full rights (as citizens) and some will go back to the countryside as farmers enjoying the natural ecology.

Whether in cities or villages, we are able to build a good life with our labor.

This is our dream.

For this dream to come true, we shall not sigh but fight. When there are warm homes for us in every corner of every city, we shall find our brothers and sisters wherever we turn.

For this dream to come true, we shall keep self-reliant and perseverant. No one will care about the designation of “migrant workers” any longer, because we are recognized by the world as self-made men and women.

For this dream to come true, we shall keep self-confident, because the world will respect us.

For this dream to come true, we shall unite. United, no one will dare to ignore our rights, and we have no need for wasting our time and energy protecting our rights.

So that we can finally say our dream has come true:

Green Villages, Blue Cities, Harmonious China, Peaceful Rise!
“We use the word ‘Utopia’ to mean that our cause is as beautiful as it must deserve our hard work. We say it’s a ‘Utopian in Practice,’ because we are excited at the fact that we are putting our ideal into action, instead of just wishful thinking” (Xu). “Give me a firm spot, and we shall move the earth” (see Figure 7 above). Xu mimicked Archimedes in calling on his fellow workers to build the Home into that “firm spot” so that by joint efforts they could raise the disadvantaged people (as indicated in the graphics made by Xu himself) and liberate hundreds of millions of migrant workers from their sufferings.

A Home in the Real World

At the temporary office, Xu adopted an important approach in order to implement the workers’ learning center as imaged. He needed to reach out to and explore the capability of college students and their teachers. He invited a sociology professor to give a passionate lecture
on the prospect of development for migrant workers, and the participants, including college students and migrant workers, brainstormed many lively ideas about how GH might better service its members and realize its goals. While some of the ideas surfacing during and after that occasion were rather abstract, others were eventually put into practice, including the formation of the Grassroots Art Troupe as well as the organization of the Grassroots Lecture Series in various interactive forms.

At one point, the participants engaged in a heated discussion about “a key question: What do migrant workers lack?” In retrospect, Xu relayed how GH’s goals fitted into the picture:

Today’s discussion really didn’t lead to any definite answers to the question. On my way back to my hostel, I was also pondering the question myself: What do the migrant workers lack most? Back in my room, I asked many friends in the hostel the same question. The answer I got from my fellow workers is: We don’t lack anything! Exactly. There are many choices open for us in our life, and we can work hard to create what we need. We feed ourselves and keep warm. If we don’t earn much money, we can be content with modest food and clothes. Life, after all, still goes on. We really don’t feel lacking in anything....

But as I took a second thought quietly, a lot seems to be lacking. We lack the joy and happiness in spending time with parents and children. We lack time for leisure and recreational activities. We lack a safety net for our life....When we are young and capable of creating value, we can earn what we want in life. But once we are struck by bad luck or turn too old to be employable, we will lose security in life!

What we really lack, and therefore what we truly need, is opportunities to develop, create, and use our capabilities. It’s such a space of opportunities that the Grassroots Home aims to build.

In September 2008, a 14-page survey report about “the cultural propensities of migrant workers,” researched by a Hangzhou-based college student group at the request of Xu, was revealed to Xu and his fellow workers (Liang, 2008). “Although we have been working on the shop floor all along, we are still shocked by the findings [about our fellow workers],” Xu recalled. The students surveyed 292 migrant workers in the vicinity of what would be GH’s new base, and several findings were noteworthy. First, the majority of the migrant workers (92%) received an education ranging from elementary or lower (26%), junior high (43%), or senior high...
(23%). Second, a majority of them (77%) worked more than 8 hours a day (in accordance with the labor law), some of them (16.3%) worked more than 12 hours a day, and more than half of them (59.3%) did not have weekends off. Third, during their spare time, the top five types of activities were watching TV (48.3% of respondents), chatting with friends (38.7%), surfing the Internet (25%), staying with family members (19.7%)\(^\text{17}\), and playing card games or mahjong (19.5%). Among the recommendations suggested in the report, the students pointed out the need to provide more cultural facilities (public libraries, museums, etc.) and products (no examples provided) for the migrant workers to access.

Meanwhile, Xu said he was reminded of what the sociologist professor lauded about GH: “the more workers spend their time at Grassroots Home, the fewer would go to foot-massage houses; the more workers spend their time at Grassroots Home, the fewer would get drunk or engage in violence; the more workers spend their time at Grassroots Home, the fewer would play gambling card-games.” Xu was apparently encouraged by the comments, but soon realized the shortcoming of the temporary office space. “For one thing, our office is located in the downtown area where not very many fellow workers are able to frequent during their spare time. To accommodate a real spiritual home for workers, we must find a place, as soon as possible, where the workers are concentrated in clusters of hostels in the rural-urban fringe.” “Once again, the idea of forming a grassroots center came back to life in my mind. I called on several key supporters to forge the idea, and all responded positively. Liu Ming, originally based in Guangdong, suggested that each one of us donate 5,000 yuan (770 USD)…, forming a financial pool to support our Home, no matter how impoverished we might be.” Eventually, five of them emerged as donors, and other supporters made pledges one way or another.

\(^{17}\) It seems that these five categories were not mutually exclusive, and therefore the statistics tended to be of more qualitative value, as they showed the spectrum of workers’ spare time usage.
“In the wake of the economic recession, the coming winter would be extremely cold. By supporting each other, laying down the foundation for our new Home brick by brick, we feel so warm at the bottom of our hearts,” Xu fondly recalled.

![Grassroots Home on its opening day (November 23, 2008)](image)

*Figure 8. Grassroots Home on its opening day (November 23, 2008)*

*After a hard day’s work, come back home for a rest, reading a book, listening to music, or having a hearty chat…. Here, your weary soul will find warmth and joy....*

With these welcoming words, Grassroots Home in the real world opened its door to its family members on November 23, 2008 (see Figure 8 above).

*in medias res*

When I began my fieldwork at GH in spring 2010, I was thrown into the middle of the unfolding stories of this “real-world” self-organization that was less than 2 years old. On the one hand, GH’s relationship with the local authorities suddenly intensified as the staff was requested by the local branch of ACFTU to stop enrolling new members and to report the content and participants’ names of GH’s daily activities to the local police station, but during those stressful months, any viable solution to the crisis had remained uncertain until the end of the year. On the
other hand, on a daily basis, the GH staff made their decisions, discussed issues, talked about individuals, objects, events, and symbols, and told stories and anecdotes often in reference to GH’s past, without which it would be difficult to comprehend the naturally occurring rhetorical practices at GH. Therefore, in part to foreshadow and provide points of reference for the research questions to be explored in the next three chapters, this chapter offers a historical sketch of GH from its embryonic form as a web-based forum to a real place in an urban-rural fringe area. This sketch was pieced together on the basis of GH’s archives, the past issues of *Grassroots Magazine*, the online blog entries of Xu (the founder) and Liu Ming (one of the key founding members), my conversations with them, as well as the short self-introductory videos and fliers of GH. Except a few places where background information is entailed, the historical sketch is meant to let the founding members speak for themselves by incorporating extensive quotes and memories and highlighting the endogenous self-understanding of the GH project.

Actually Xu had planned to compile what he called “an oral history” of GH as part of its second anniversary celebration (on November 23, 2010) by piecing together interviews with former GH members and supporters, but his plan did not materialize. Some of GH’s earliest members and supporters had migrated into various parts of the country, and it was extremely difficult to reach them for interviewing. (As will be discussed below as well as in Chapter 5, the mobility of GH’s members was part and parcel of the migrant workers’ human condition.) The enthusiasm for writing GH’s own history, however, echoed an elegant aphorism from Beijing Home of Workers (BHW): “Without building our own culture we won’t have our own history, and without building our own history we won’t have our own future.” Likewise, Xu articulated what might be called his folk theory of narrative by aspiring to “[recognize] grassroots wisdom

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18 In Chinese pinyin, *mei you wo men de wen hua, jiu mei you wo men de li shi; mei you wo men de li shi, jiu mei you wo men de wei lai.*
and [spread] vernacular voices\textsuperscript{19},” an incisive phrase printed on the cover of *Grassroots Magazine*. This reminds us of Walter Fischer’s theorizing of narrative as to “recognize permanence and change, culture and character, reason and value, and the practical wisdom of all persons” (Fischer, 1985, p. 357), whereas in the case of GH Xu’s folk theory was not so much a matter of philosophical contemplation as an emergent character of everyday rhetorical practice and self-reflection.

For example, Xu came across the pivotal storyline of GH’s historic mission as “to image our dreams, work for our dreams, and realize our dreams” and described GH’s founding story as “the growth of one migrant worker’s dreams into one team’s pursuit of ideals.” Given the fact that GH’s growth had been a process of trial and error, ups and downs, and “groping in darkness” (Liu Ming), its history had been anything but clear-cut or predetermined. It was often (and would probably continue to be) fraught with unintended consequences (e.g., the political dissonance felt by the local authorities), unrealized intentions (e.g., the stalled plan of the Second Grassroots Festival), and unexpected events and changes (e.g., the greatly successful fundraising for a seriously sick member Huang Genlin in 2009, potential policy changes related to the migrant workers, as well as more microscopic changes like internal personnel changes). In retrospect, at some point (e.g., the temporary office space in the downtown area; Xu’s rejection of media invitation to join a grassroots talents show), some attempts might (or might not) even turn out to be a certain dead end of maze-like grassroots NGO work. GH’s microhistory, if any, tended to be characterized by what Foucault would call “discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation” (Foucault, 1969/1982, p. 21). Therefore, GH’s pivotal narrative structures, by contrast, were strikingly lucid, vivid, and memorizable due to their rhetorical simplicity and

\textsuperscript{19} In Chinese pinyin, *cao gen zhi hui, min jian sheng yin*. 

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capaciousness. As an example of what I would call “mundane constructivism” (to be discussed in Chapter 5 next), story-telling was part and parcel of the vernacular rhetorical repertoire in the process of GH’s constant self-production and (re)invention by artfully weaving its purpose, people, and a sense of existential stability and unity. This shall be elaborated as follows.

First, GH’s “classic” founding story was shared and circulated again and again in various forms for various occasions. During the weekly mixers of old and new members, for example, the participants would watch one or two videos of local media reports about GH, including one of the very touching moments of fundraising as a GH member named Xinhua was shown standing off street and singing a touching song (for over 100 times that day). A salient theme in “the” GH story was the attempt to recognize everyone’s contribution to make GH a better place. For instance, on the interior wall (see Figure 9 below), there was a collection of photos depicting previous major events organized by GH volunteers. Decorated with a hand-drawn heart shape, the acknowledgement board was constantly updated regarding numerous donations made by workers and supporters, who had offered small items such as used magazines, books, karaoke CDs, ball pens and writing brushes, used clothes, paper cups, chairs, washing towels, electronic fans, hand lotion, and calling cards. On the opposite wall, individual snapshots of GH family members (as well as a collective photo) decorated a hand-drawn background that roughly showed the various regions of the country where they had come from. To the uninitiated eyes, these visual aids might seem trivial or crude, but for a self-organization that had claimed to build a home for all brothers and sisters “on the earth,” these symbols provided vivid and concrete clues to an evolving story collectively enriched by real people who came to identify with a real common place. Essentially, the past became narrative materials (e.g., “one migrant worker’s dream…”) to be renewed in and to transform GH’s ongoing self-reproductive story.
Second, GH’s simple storyline was capacious enough to incorporate individual workers’ stories pursuing the same dreams or reflecting the GH “spirit.” A case in point was Xiao Long, who first learned about the Home through an introductory article about GH reprinted in a free tabloid found at his workplace (a supermarket). Xiao Long was intrigued by the words “spiritual home for the souls.” He tried to call GH’s phone number as publicized, but got a busy signal. So he took an hour-long bike ride to visit the place, and was impressed by the introduction given by the staff member. The way GH’s office space was furnished with small items through donation was a particularly touching scene for Xiao Long. The next time he came, with his girlfriend, he surprised the girl with a birthday cake and a cheerful celebration with so many “family members” at the climax of the International Labor Day performance night. Xiao Long contributed his story to the *Grassroots Magazine*. Later that year (2010), the couple would hang up a copy of the GH logo on the wall in front of their bed in their dorm room, thus starting up a branch in the hostel area in another part of the city. Xiao Long’s “grassroots home seed” story became a rhetorical trope that generated enthusiastic discussion about how to support his endeavors.
Third, therefore, there could be as many particular encounter stories as there were migrant workers who first learned about GH and gradually became members or supporters of the growing family. Every issue of the *Grassroots Magazine* would carry a few testimonial articles written by workers about their memorable experiences at the spiritual home. During the “mixing” meetings on Monday evenings, new and old members would take turns to tell their personal stories of getting to know the Home. Some recounted how they were introduced by friends or folks (from the same hometown) to come to have some fun or learn some basic computer lessons free of charge, then gradually joined other activities and were moved by the devotion of Xu and other colleagues of all their time, meager savings, and energy to the cause of improving the workers welfare. Some said they were tired at the workplace and bored by staying alone or just watching TV in the dorm rooms, but here at GH they had a lot of fun. Some workers first learned about the existence of the organization by reading the *Grassroots Magazine* that was distributed by GH volunteers at the workplaces around the neighborhood. Some originally thought it was a gang involved in pyramid schemes, until they came to visit it to find out the truth. Some workers, especially veteran volunteers, fondly recalled the heart-touching moments when they were engaged in fundraising for the seriously sick fellow worker Huang Genlin, who was awaiting kidney transplantation in fall 2009. The story-telling process not only offered everyone an opportunity to have a voice, but also created a kind of group synergy in which people identified with others of similar experiences and mixed very quickly.

Fourth, while the “official” GH storyline remained fairly consistent over time, the diffusion of the GH legacy was essentially a self-regulated process in which the GH story was intertwined with individual workers’ own stories and lived experiences. They talked about their Home on the shop floor, on the bus, with their hometown folks, and even to their bosses. They helped
distribute the signature *Grassroots Magazine* at such places as restaurants and factories in and around the neighborhood. They invited friends to come to “have some fun” at GH. In a particular case, “grassroots” became more than just a symbol by word of mouth. Old Guan, whose wife enjoyed the karaoke parties at the Home and working as a volunteer, was eventually persuaded to join the Home as well. A few months later, when the couple opened their small eatery, they named it “the Grassroots Restaurant” and promised to offer healthy and affordable food to workers, without using the notorious “recycled cooking oil.” The spot soon became the unofficial dining hall for the staff members, GH workers, visitors, and college student volunteers. In one way or another, GH members embodied the symbolism of GH in ordinary and quotidian practices. As recounted in the historical sketch above, Xu and Liu Ming played a key role in telling their stories of intimately encountering, interpreting, and rhetorically responding to the Chinese migrant workers’ predicaments (e.g., Chunmei’s death). Some of their personal episodes from personal blogs were not used in GH’s more or less standardized self-introductory script for public view, but they nevertheless formed part and parcel of the background understanding and lived knowledge surrounding the growing “biography” of GH.

Fifth, as a whole, the notion of “Grassroots Home” resembled what conversational analysts might call a “membership category” (instead of a fixed entity), which in turn might be construed as a metaphorical space, or rhetorical *topos*, with which Xu and his followers imagined and quested for a “real-world” place. Given the great mobility (and even instability) of migrant workers and their lack of access to a common place, it was probably no coincidence that Liu Ming, as Xu’s closest collaborators, had imaged and experimented with a similar idea of a place.

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20 The “recycled cooking oil,” literally, was recycled from post-consumption foodstuff and leftover, and then was bottled for sale. It was nicknamed “ditch oil” and was reportedly very commonly used in small, low-budget restaurants in China.
for “communication of the souls” among the workers. It was also for this “spiritual” reason (raising awareness) that Liu Ming was not satisfied with the commercial-oriented project proposed by his Beijing-based friend (L), as could be diagnosed from their long-winded chat. The online discussion about GH (in the making), by contrast, provided a segment of vernacular voices when the migrant workers debated about how to strategically and rhetorically position themselves (and GH) in relation to the party-state. Without even employing the terms of “civil society” or “public sphere,” the discussants touched upon what might be construed as the interdependent relation between society and state. That is, Liu Ming and Xu were not only convincing their followers that it was a moral imperative to adopt a politically correct (hence responsible and safe) stance of respecting the current party-state leadership in its concrete form, but they also echoed BHW’s adage that “what the state can be depends on whom its people can make themselves to be”21 (Sun Heng, talk at GH). It was in this delicate (yet concrete) relationship between society and state that GH emerged as an intriguing case of civil sphere that embodied the potential of what Paul Willis would call “a local and lived transcendence in and through a kind of sensuous awareness of contexts, seen and unseen [structure]” (Willis, 2000, p. 5).

21 In Chinese pinyin, you shen me yang de ren min, jiu you shen men yang de guo jia, which can also be translated as “the state can only be as good as its people.”
In a typically humid and stuffy early autumn night in this city, I was sleeping on the couch in GH’s facility. I had the generous approval from my GH friends to use the space before I found a rental room for myself. In quiet darkness, after all the noisy activities were over and the workers had gone to their dorms (the next morning most of them had to get up early to work), I asked myself, “What does this place mean to the migrant workers? What if it had been forced to shut down for good a few months ago? Does this place really matter?” “Some [local] leaders had requested we move the entire GH to [the new official facility],” Xu recounted, “but I had insisted that our Home must exist; otherwise, where should our family members go? It’s a matter of protecting our Home.” Xu told me that “during the stressful days in the past summer, I was literally holding the Home’s registration certification and the official seal while asleep.” Xu and his closest colleagues had deliberated on the necessity of relocating it to a region not under the control of the current authorities, splitting its functionalities into multiple sites, and even the worst scenarios on account of precedents in which labor rights self-organizations were banned by the party-state. How did GH survive?

In this chapter, I will develop an ethnographic account, along with a rhetorical analysis, of GH as an emerging civil sphere organization. I will make particular reference to the workers’ endogenous understanding of and rhetorical strategies to maintain its civility and autonomy. Instead of treating it as an a priori fixed entity, something that one could point to, it will argue that GH was an ongoing accomplishment, a rhetorical topos around which the universe of vernacular rhetoric radiated and mediated its relations with what was considered uncivil and
coercive. The prospect that GH could have been banned offered a particularly telling (albeit disturbing) moment that its physical place mattered so much largely because it had sedimented with GH’s history and future as “a spatial signifier of cultural values” (Ackerman, 2003, p.89). The plain style of GH’s facility itself was not “natural,” but symbolic and cultural as Xu had wished to avoid too much fashionable design that would appear less true to the lifeworld of the migrant workers. It was their collective home.

What’s in the Name?

When preparing to launch GH’s website in 2006, Xu had reflected upon the appropriateness of adopting the term “Grassroots” (cao gen). “My heart was pierced in pains when I first learned from a certain newspaper that the migrant workers were called the ‘grassroots.’ I clearly remembered that the newspaper defined the ‘grassroots’ as the people with the lowest level of income, in contrast with white collar, blue collar, and grey collar workers, in that descending order. What a fancy definition! In ancient China the plain folk were called the ‘grass people’ (cao min), and now the same logic is applied to the wretched of contemporary China who are called the ‘grassroots.’ …And ‘refugees,’ ‘migrating mobs,’ ‘peasant-turned laborers,’ etc…. I was wondering what other fancy terms the high-up and educated urbanites could come up with to ‘honor’ us…. After painful reflection, I decided to change my online nickname to ‘Grassroots’ in order to give the term new meanings. Later on, we shall have Grassroots Quotes, Grassroots Spirit, and Grassroots Home…. Before long, ‘Grassroots’ shall have brand new interpretations – empowered in solidarity, empowered with a positive mindset, and empowered through perseverance, the most ordinary grassroots people shall rise as a populace that deserves respect and dignity!”
While “grassroots” would grow into a cherished brand name in the next few years, the term itself had been a polysemy fraught with disagreement and contention. Heated disputes and quarrels among the staff members led them to conclude that the term “grassroots” turned out to be a better choice that allowed a way to include and talk about the migrant workers while avoiding the perpetuating designation of “peasant-turned workers.” Likewise, some of the workers I contacted during fieldwork had a problem with the negative connotation, such as “swollen-headed but incompetent” (yan gao shou di) often associated with “peasant-turned workers,” whereas they claimed to have gained much self-esteem owing to their association with GH. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, the reification of cultural discrimination was exposed as the ideological result of systemic exploitation and structural inequality. In a socio-political sense, ordinary workers clearly understood the fact that they did not have any political mediators to represent their voice and interest (see Xu’s comments in Chapter 4). One young female worker said to me in a group meeting, “We migrant workers are like the grass roots, literally, who support the flourishing of the ‘leaves.’ …They keep absorbing our sap, but never protect us…. I just lost my job recently; I’m very sad and helpless. For over a year I have been struggling by myself in this city. I felt our grassroots voices were so tiny and weak.”

Liu Ming (a founding member), with his aphoristic style, regarded the “grassroots” as “anyone outside the officialdom.” It seemed that Liu Ming was concerned with the tendency that the “grassroots” might be relegated as something like a residual category. He said, “There are elites growing up at the grassroots level, such as the recently emerging singing duet (who were originally migrant workers) who have grown famous, but there is a danger that such people will eventually become ‘fake elites’ due to severing their connection with the grassroots.” Xu’s recount of his personal frustration with the radiocast host (in Chapter 4) was a vivid example.
During their online chat (also see Chapter 4), Xu emphasized that “we” were the mainstream, alluding to the ironic fact that the majority of migrant workers (as well as peasants) were locked in the social stratification system without much hope of upward mobility (see Sun, 2004 for thorough sociological analyses). Again, while we were chatting on the porch of GH one evening, Liu Ming problematized the designation or treatment of the migrant workers as “the weak” by referring to the popular cartoon figure “Xi Yang Yang Sheep” as his impromptu metaphor (there happened to be some sheep-shaped talking toys on sale at the convenient story next to door); he said, to the effect, the sheep (the weak) would be perpetuated as the sheep (the weak) because they were named so, even though they could occasionally defend themselves against the wolves (as shown in the Xi Yang Yang TV series).

As a term, “grassroots” suggested two other challenges that Xu and his colleagues had to face. The first, more subtle one had to do with rebellious politics historically associated with the subaltern. In an article directly responding to the emergence of GH, a high-level CCP cadre conjectured ancient Chinese thoughts on the potential of the grassroots to cause “political disturbance and social harm” (Guan, 2010, p. 26). Amidst labor unrest in the recent years, no wonder Xu had been very careful about the kind of messages that were used and circulated in the name of GH, as he had cautioned an online user Peng during their chat (Chapter 4). Xu recalled that the word “grassroots” in GH’s title had been deemed “too suggestive in terms of class-based antagonism” by some local leaders. Likewise, Sun Heng, labor leader of the Beijing-based BHW, wanted to portray independent labor groups (such as his own BHW) as differentiated from the allusion or accusation of “rebellious mobs” (Sun, 2011).

The second challenge was the impetus for commercial benefits in the name of promoting grassroots talents. In retrospect, the growth of the organization somehow coincided with Chinese
media’s recent discovery of the commercial value in branding grassroots talent (well before the appearance of the famed British singer Susan Boyle). During the Home’s involvement in the 2007 Grassroots Festival, a Shenzhen-based cable TV station interviewed Xu to explore how he envisioned realizing his wishes and aspirations. Xu’s ambition, however, turned out to be too extensive and lofty to be compatible with the myopic motives of show business. After the organization opened its door in late 2008, Xu and his colleagues would have to reject strangers’ attempts to sell their business plans of direct selling (i.e., pyramid schemes), which unfortunately had brought financial disaster to one of the Home’s core volunteers. Outsider business schemes also concerned Xiao Long (see Chapter 4) who had initiated the Home’s branch in his hostel area.

Xu reflected upon these past experiences:

> Whenever someone approached me with the intention to do business, I would absolutely refuse them. I replied, “There are many ways, many opportunities, to do business and make money. Please leave us alone so that we can maintain a pure space…. For in this society, there must be countless organizations that are good at making money, I won’t bother to make the Grassroots Home one of them. However, there are not many organizations that are willing or able to create a spiritual home via self-reliance and mutual-aid. Therefore, I hope to make this Home such a pure one…. Therefore, I have offended many persons [by rejecting their commercial attempts]. Although they did have good ideas that might help the Home’s financial situation, I didn’t want to have the Home contaminated by the meager benefits. I have always believed that “the rare is precious.” If we can manage to make our Home into a spiritual home that is hardest to be found in this society, we will accomplish the most precious thing.

Since GH’s inception, Xu, Liu Ming, and other workers had explicitly echoed grassroots responses to China’s recent nationwide decrying of social malaise. In early 2006, China’s president Hu Jintao publicly designated what was officially summarized as “Eight Virtues vs. Eight Vices” (bá róng bá chí), i.e., in essence, eight do’s and eight don’ts that the President deemed as fundamental to the cultivation of socialist ethics, especially among the young people (Xinhuanet, 2006). Despite the coloring of official ideology, the President’s preaching willy-nilly
acknowledged the already-widespread and commonly-perceived decay of trust and civility in Chinese society. Through online group chat-rooms (including GH’s) and “mini-blogs” (the Chinese equivalents of Twitter and Facebook), many jokes, informal news stories (often with dramatic photos), mundane commentaries on current affairs (e.g., corruption), and even parables by anonymous authors were circulating daily. It was partly in this large social context that GH’s founders began to imagine their Home as a better place for migrant workers (and others) to freely associate in mutual trust and civility. Just as Liu Ming professed care for the soul of each and every common worker (see Chapter 4), Xu vowed to protect young migrant workers from being corrupted by what he dubbed “a sub-healthy culture,” a grey area of apparently legal but actually immoral cultural practices driven by money.

Xu’s aspiration for “the most precious thing” echoed the time-honored Confucian yearning for “the rites, once corrupted, only to be rediscovered in the vulgar” (li shi er qiu zhi ye). For Confucius, the corruption of the symbolic meanings and cultural practices (“the rites”) of those in power signaled the disintegration of the state’s moral-political order, and the good (moral integrity as manifested in appropriate cultural rites) that had really endured could only be found in the everyday life of the people without political power, mostly the peasantry living outside the city (“the vulgar”). In a dramatic (ironic?) contrast with the attempts of the party-state to salvage the country’s social trust through top-down requests, GH represented the constellation of bottom-up efforts to preserve “the most precious thing” (trust and love) of everyday life. More strikingly, these efforts were undertaken by individuals from a segment of population that had been trapped at the bottom of the social pyramid and was at the receiving end of social discrimination. As such, GH presented itself as an intriguing case of the balancing dance between the state and an emerging civil society in terms of vying for control of the country’s moral discourse.
In concluding this section, I’ve attempted to unpack the polysemy implied in the name of “Grassroots Home,” and by doing so I revealed the hidden anxiety and conflicting perceptions in even thinking of the name. As discussed above, since its inception, GH’s creators had tried to maintain and realize what might be called the “authenticity” of the workers’ association. To do so, they had to overcome the motive of money as well as the negatives associated with the grassroots populace. They wanted their organization to be inclusive and persuasive to people from all walks of life, rather than positioning it as a subaltern enclave. They were genuinely concerned with the social malaise prevalent in the Chinese society, and had striven to be responsible for remaking their world better as a peaceful and trustworthy place to live. In order to do so, as will be explored below, the workers had employed their own vernacular rhetoric that appealed to the master trope of “family.”

“All Migrant Workers on the Earth Are One Family…”

The lights suddenly dimmed in the crowded room, and people’s restless faces took on a bluish surreal look due to the flickering, outdated images projected onto the screen at the farthest corner of the room. The background music was very loud, and the singer’s voice was even louder so as to surpass it. The pulsating music gave the room’s space an encompassing weight, and the resonance of the soundscape made my chest feel as if it were going to explode. Several young men and women standing near me at the outer edge of the circle clapped their hands to the beat of the music while their faces seemed almost transfixed, with rigid expressions and sparkling eyes. I felt tear drops rolling in my eyes.

A wanderer far away from home,
Missing dear Mama,
Wandering till the end of the world,
I’m still without a home.
Winter winds blow with snowflakes,
Wiping my tears away.
Wandering, wandering, and wandering,
I don’t know what year is ending.
Now the small grasses start to grow again,
O another spring is coming to pass.
Wiping my tears away,
O another spring is coming to pass.

This was one of the many climatic moments of Friday evenings, usually reserved for karaoke. The singer tonight, nicknamed Little Sichuan (after his birth place and in part due to his short height), was a muscular deliveryman capable of carrying two 100 lbs. natural gas iron-bottles by hand at one time. He was just one of the many GH members enjoying themselves and entertaining fellow members by performing their favorite songs. There might or might not be someone volunteering as the moderator. For more extraverted singers, the karaoke performance had an almost mundane script, such as arousing the audience’s expectation and excitement with witty talk before starting to sing something from his or her favorite repertoire, or by improvising his or her own version of the lyrics, sometimes joined by one or more excited audience members. Some enjoyed themselves by becoming immersing in the songs, while others simply wanted to be there. But all were happy.

“Don’t be fooled by the ‘shiny’ appearance of our workers,” Xu said to me one day. He looked up from an article that he was proofreading, a personal the-Grassroots-Home-and-Me story contributed by a member to the *Grassroots Magazine*. “After working more than two years here, workers like Xiao Mei can’t even afford a cheap laptop that she has coveted so much for a long time,” Xu explained to me. I thought to myself, “No wonder she sometimes likes playing with the computer (for public use at the Home) so much,” and felt guilty for my previous
stereotypes of my worker friends as “lazy” and “addicted to the computer.” “But, don’t get me wrong… We don’t want to be portrayed as pitiful,” Xu added.

Xu’s words compelled me to reassess my observation at the Home. Underneath all these bluish surreal faces, underneath each one’s experiential story at and with the Home, there might be broken hearts, destitute situations, divorces or runaway husbands/wives, financial disasters, living with fear of unknown ailing symptoms due to lack of healthcare, aimlessly seeking some fun in the city, lived humiliation because of innate shortcomings and lack of education, wage issues, exhaustion at the assembly line, neglected physical problems due to lack of access to medical care, and the boredom of a secluded life in a hostel room. During my interactions with the Home’s members, there were more personal stories than I could possibly delve into. Nor could I possibly report them all here due to the limited space of this work.

However, one important thing was certain. In spite of all the troubles, the workers had really been longing for a place of love and security in the city of strangers. They held monthly collective birthday parties at the Home, celebrated Chinese traditional festivals with their own performances (sometimes joined by college student volunteers), helped each other with chores, and sometimes shared meals at the same table. Or perhaps they simply wanted to be together for some small talk, when at dusk fellow workers and friends would come back to the Home, like homing birds, bringing the day’s news and materials for some harmless jokes. On Monday evenings (that is, before the Home eventually changed its schedule due to inspection by local authorities), after new and old members shared their personal Grassroots-Home-and-Me stories, the new members would be invited to stand directly in front of the logo wall, and an old member would help him or her fix the GH emblem above the heart-position of the clothes, hug each other,
and start to sing the song “All Migrant Workers on the Earth Are One Family” with all the people in the room. Now, they were all brothers and sisters of one family.

“We don’t have money to help our fellow workers, but we do want to make a home for everyone,” Xu reflected. It’s hard to quantitatively assess to what extent the workers have succeeded at that, but the very existence of the Home, a common creation, was perhaps a qualitative leap beyond the sphere of private life. Let me provide an example.

Guanghui, looking more worn than his age of 37, was about 10 years older than most of his fellow migrant workers. He was not motivated to learn basic computer skills, seldom used the Internet, or listened to MP3s as the youth did. Guanghui worked in the refrigeration storage house of a frozen food factory, in temperatures far below freezing. Since he normally worked the night shift, he couldn’t attend the major evening activities at the Home, such as public lectures, films, salons and discussions, and volunteer meetings. Often, around mid-afternoon, after he slept, he would emerge from around the corner of the row of the buildings where GH was located. He would hang around at the Home and engage in casual conversation with whomever was available before he walked to the factory before 5 pm. As someone disclosed to me on terms of anonymity, Guanghui had once attempted suicide due to mental depression and financial problems, leaving a will written for his wife.

My first impression of Guanghui was his habit of staying apart from the noisy crowd of karaoke on one evening and stammering to me vaguely about “some deaf and blind person.” Who was that? At one of the grassroots literary group meeting later on, I saw Guanghui took out a slip of wrinkled paper from inside his jacket, and, timidly declining to read from it by himself, he passed it in a shaking hand to the group moderator. The moderator read the story out loud, sharing a plain story of how the “deaf and blind person” started to learn about the Home and
became a “Grassroots” family member. His narrative contained no jargon, no clichés, no verbal embellishments, only plain words by a person who described himself as “uneducated” and “illiterate” (i.e., “deaf and blind” in Guanghui’s own terms). Later on, after several casual conversations with him, I started to learn his stories.

When my wife and I happened to arrive in this neighborhood about a year ago, we didn’t dare to hope for too much. Originally we had wanted to go to Xiamen, that’s another city farther south, to work as domestic workers. We somehow ended up settling down here, taking odd jobs in this area. You know, people would measure an area by some means of transportation, but I measured this place with my feet…. It was on the evening of April 30 last year, I believe, that I first learned about Grassroots Home. I was supposed to have the next day off, which was May 1 – many people had three days off, but I had only one. So in the evening I walked past some volunteers and was given a copy of our Grassroots Magazine…. Following the sounds of songs, curiously, I found myself joining the crowds to watch the performance and realized it was a festival show that our workers put up, together with some passionate college students…. I was particularly impressed by two songs, “Many a Story at the Grassroots” and the “Star-and-Moon Song”. The next day, I came over to the Home to ask somebody for a copy of the lyrics of the songs…. Brother Xu gave me the lyrics of the second song, which turned out to be our Home’s theme song. But he couldn’t find the words for the first one, which was actually an adaptation from a ready-made old popular song….

Here at Grassroots Home, we are not bounded by blood ties. But why is it that we are all like brothers and sisters in here? I believe it is love that brings us together. Having settled down in this neighborhood, I likened Grassroots Home as a “paradise.” What is a paradise? It is where you find joy, happiness, love, and devotion. [For some reason,] the pop stars too would sing songs of “paradise” and “love.” But their songs don’t carry true meanings. Why? Because they can only recognize the two [Chinese] characters (天堂) that are used to name “paradise,” but the characters are not the paradise itself, but only symbols written on a piece of paper, only some representation that is used to bring revelation to the people and communicate to the people [about “paradise”]…. We must embody the Tao of goodness in ourselves, making ourselves humble….

I heard that on the Internet the “grassroots” kind of things have been made into a huge hype…., not to mention the guy who came here to promote his electrical drinking machines. The guy labeled himself “grassroots” too. But he’s not grassroots in the true sense of the word. His intention was clearly to make money. The guy was so purpose-driven that he knew what to say to please you…. Also, that young man [sitting on the couch by GH’s entrance when Guanghui and I were talking], (in low secretive voice to me) do you know what he’s spreading around? He’s advertising about how wonderful the stuff is that he is trying to sell. If his products were really so
good, why was he selling them as if under the table? That’s self-contradictory, isn’t it? ...Actually that’s a pyramid scheme.

No. 28 Row 4. This is my Home.... I was most impressed by the fundraising efforts to help Yang Debiao and his mother last year [2010]. Who would help them without gaining any personal benefits? The family members of Grassroots Home showed great, selfless love even though they hadn’t personally known or seen the mother and her son. Our fellow workers joined the fundraising efforts, even though some of them were already exhausted after overtime work in the factories. In order to join the fundraising performance show, some even asked for a break from their routine jobs. Later on, some entrepreneurs opened their wallets to donate money. But we donated our strength.... The Home is really a shining spot in the neighborhood, in the whole society. Why? At the beginning, others’ (i.e., non-GH) efforts to save Yang Debiao’s life didn’t cause much ripple among the general members of the large society, who didn’t seem to care. But we of Grassroots Home did it....

A few weeks after I had one last conversation with him, Guanghui sent me a text message that he was ready to move to the northwestern part of the city, where he could earn a slightly higher wage. He said he would miss everyone at the Home and determined to continue to spread the word about it. For a fleeting moment I became suspicious about how a “deaf and blind man” could compose such lyrical lines, but in my analysis, it was yet another piece of evidence showing what might be called the inventiveness of vernacular rhetoric.

*I don’t hope to become a dew drop in the morning or the twilight in the evening. I don’t hope to become a shooting star in the skies or a flower in springtime. I’m willing to become a seed, buried under the dirt, taking its root, and coming to fruition wherever I go in this world.*

Generally speaking, the “family” was quintessentially a private sphere of human activities. Used in a metaphorical sense, however, the “family” was socially and rhetorically extended at GH. Socially, members were loosely coupled via such happenstance as interpersonal relations (e.g., folks from the same hometown) and spontaneous role-adopting (e.g., some extrovert

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22 Yang Debiao, a 26-year-old migrant worker in Hangzhou, suffered from serious aplastic anemia. Poor and uninsured, Yang didn’t get any benefit for his case of occupational disease, and had to seek out the Grassroots Home for help in the summer of 2010.
member emerging as the karaoke party moderator), so as to cope with their everyday life. Such self-organization served the conditions for trust, love, empathy, and mutual aid. The Home became something larger than each individual worker, and when necessary, at least some people from its reservoir would be able to come together to meet particular occasional needs. The success of fundraising for Yang Debiao (2010) and Huang Genlin (2009) indicated the value of GH in forming considerable social capital for the relatively resource-poor, socially disadvantaged fellow members. Insofar as the Home became a place of daily attachment, its existence stabilized the sojourning life of itinerant workers, as Guanghui’ story indicated. They might wander in the city or beyond, but the Home would be there, physically and symbolically. Hence one of the introductory sentences on the day of GH’s opening in November 2011:

*After a hard day’s work, come back home for a rest, reading a book, listening to music, or having a hearty chat…. Here, your weary soul will find joy and warmth*…

Rhetorically, as Guanghui’s words suggested, the notion of “family” or “home” became a symbolic tool for the members to talk about and rethink their relationship beyond the terms of private life, kinship, and economic motives. The workers knew that they came together not for the purpose of seeking economic advantage. As Xu emphasized during a group story-sharing session, at the Home everyone was equal, regardless his or her physical appearance or material wealth. With power relations kept at bay, some sense of authenticity of human relationship seemed to emerge during the coming together of workers. The ideal Home served as what Kenneth Burke would call a “god term” in workers’ everyday communication. Although the ideal was beyond immediate reach, its “spirit” worked through faith-based reflection and affirmation about its purity and holiness. The “home” and “family” were rhetorically attitudinal and consequently summarized “incipient actions” (Kenneth Burke). No wonder the sympathetic
professor (from the CCP’s Central School of the Party) likened her visits to the Home to “church-going.”

In a more general sense, GH functioned in part as what might be called a “warm circle” (Bauman, 2001, p. 11). In the process, the migrant workers’ with only scarce leisure time managed to put together their efforts for some common purposes. Just like GH’s donation acknowledgement board suggested, the very existence of GH as a physical and metaphorical place captured its members’ imagination of something larger than the individuals, a collective enterprise in which their contributions of time, efforts, objects, talents, thoughts, and etc. were no longer piecemeal. Even the mere “being-there” of fellow workers would make the Home a humane place where one wouldn’t fail to find some companion; for activities like fundraising, the bodily presence of fellow workers gave them a sense of strength. Also, due to the fact that the majority of migrant workers at GH lacked proper family life due to dislocation from their village homes, GH provided a place where they could feel less lonely. As a whole, GH amalgamated the more private-orienting sphere of human associational existence and the outwardly-inclusive sphere that was proper to a civic association (see the next section). To be more exact, while the “family” metaphor somehow implied a certain membership control (theoretically, any migrant worker holding a proper job), it also framed a certain “imagined community,” sharing solidarity and affinity with all workers of the same social status and lived experiences.

Moreover, as will be noted in comparison with the official workers’ union system (see the section on “Crisis” below), such a self-regulated process of community-building was something that the top-down union system was unwilling to get involved in or incapable of managing. Evidently, such a club-like feature lacked any strict sense of institutionalization or hierarchy, as, for example, the volunteers needed to coordinate among themselves with regard to their weekly
duty schedule, so that they could fulfill GH’s daily needs without clashing with their responsibilities at job. Such a grassroots character, in turn, might be viewed as a certain apolitically political leverage, a space in which to prevent the life-world from being colonized by power or money. As individuals like Zhongsheng (a key member in the NGO field in the municipal area) and Old Wei (Xu’s fellow student at the training program on NGO issues) argued, the preservation of the Home’s unique “rooted” character was essential in their efforts to remain autonomy beyond the scope of the party-state’s co-opting.

Let the Workers Live with Happiness and Dignity

We felt a little funny about ourselves as we rode the bus from the Home to the downtown area, carrying banners, fliers, karaoke microphones, and the curious heavy black box which was in fact a portable set of loudspeakers with built-in rechargeable batteries and a USB slot for loading MP3s – a kind of gadget often used by wandering singers in public places. We were going to do another fundraising event for the serious ill migrant worker Yang Debiao, yet another sad case due to his lack of access to health care. Our hour-long trip, however, was somehow cheerful and exciting due to the serious work ahead. To get to our target spot right in front of one of the fancy shopping malls, its exterior walls festooned with huge advertisements of world-famous luxurious merchandise, we had to pass the underground pathway to avoid the traffic. So we did, carrying our props and passing beggars squatting and kowtowing on both sides of the pathway. Once out of the semi-darkness of the tunnel, we had to walk past a street corner spot, namely “Xiao Qiang Hotline Wall” (the title of a provincial TV program reporting social issues; the title was painted on the wall along with the program’s logo), where a middle-aged woman in rugged clothes was sitting motionlessly, hoping to get some media attention to
whatever was her grievance. I wished to know more about what was at issue with her, but I had work to do. I had to pretend not to see the Hotline Wall scene or the beggars a moment ago. We were up to save a youthful life and the performance must be put on as planned in a few minutes. Earlier in the morning, Liu Ming had already gone to visit the patient and his mother in the hospital, and would invite a friendly TV reporter to come to the scene while we were performing the songs:

If I get old and destitute someday,
Please bury me on a spring day,
As beautiful as today...

The series of fundraising efforts were successful, cumulating at an hour-long performance held at a downtown theatre on November 18, 2010 and joined by some minor singing stars as well as friends from the brotherly BHW. For GH, approximately once every year, one such fundraising project would be held in order to save a certain fatally ill worker. That, however, would be the maximum of efforts the Home’s staff and members could afford. As a matter of fact, after the 2010 project, the Home’s staff and workers were exhausted. Liu Ming, in particular, sacrificed about 6 months as well as his workers’ cooperative business project in order to coordinate the fundraising events. However reluctantly, Xu had to refuse, in the presence of many persons (including me), a Home member’s request for helping with her uncle who had just had a traffic accident. Just after the broadcasted performance, I personally received a phone call for help with an impoverished teenager girl suffering the same kind of disease. This unknown girl, the beggars squatting by the underground pathway, the woman sitting in rugged clothes, as well as the bloodless face of Yang Debiao – they haunted my mind.

Besides the great courage demonstrated by GH members, who were, after all, part of the most disadvantaged populace in their own ways, I sensed a moral dilemma that was really the
consequence of structurally-based social injustice. Without striking at the heart of structural problems leading to poverty and injustice, there would have to be more migrant workers suffering like Yang Debiao, but they would probably be less lucky if no organizations, such as GH, were brave enough to stand up to offer some help. And there would have to be thousands more Chunmei’s, as it shall be recalled according to Xu’s lamentation about her tragic death due to overwork, all adding to the impersonal statistics of human costs built into the national GDP.

It would be worth tremendous efforts and sacrifices to save a single life (Yang Debiao), or at least so according to Liu Ming (leader of the fundraising project), who vowed to care about “every and each single soul” of the workers. He said, “Whenever I may lose in the process, I’m at least still healthy and alive, but Yang Debiao may lose his life if we didn’t extend a helping hand.” To save thousands of lives from dying or getting hurt on the shop floors, in coal mines, by sharp paper-cutting machines, during Foxconn explosions, and unknown particles causing black lungs, etc., what must be done? And by whom?

It was in this dire context of the Chinese political economy that GH’s mission had to be interpreted. The mission was stated as “Let the workers live with happiness and dignity.” In order to do so, GH had come up with “a four-step roadmap,” which might sound more like a set of goals than solutions. In any event, they needed to be quoted before being commented.

It seems to the majority of grassroots workers that assimilating into urban life is still a remote dream. However, through numerous discussions in such formats as forums, salons, and roundtables, we believe that we’ve found a way to realize this dream – a four-step roadmap:

First, we shall say goodbye to the monotonous life between the workplace and the hostel, so that we can participate in community life.

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23 While China’s GDP had maintained a boastful 8% or more annual increase, the portion of wages actually had decreased for the past 20 consecutive years (Xinjingbao, 2010). It was often dubbed as the “blood-stained GDP” because tens of thousands of deaths were associated with poor working conditions, the recent explosions at the Foxconn facilities (Xinhua News Agency, 2010) being just one tragic example.
Second, with stable jobs and financial security, we can bring our whole family (the elderly as well as the children) to live together with us in cities, instead of leaving our dependents behind in the villages.

Third, we shall obtain social necessities, such as access to education, medical care, and affordable housing, so that we, as new citizens, can lead an urban life that is sustainable and enhances human development.

Fourth, by remaking the societal value system, we, as the builders of the cities, shall have the right to share the fruits of development. (Xu)

As GH’s spokesperson, Xu acknowledged that organization’s capabilities were limited to the first step and to some degree the second, whereas for the last two steps, what the organization could do was mostly advocate policy changes. For the first step, the Home had been organizing cultural activities in the neighborhood, such as the performance recounted in the Prologue. For the second step, the Home had organized several rounds of summer classes as a way of bringing latchkey children from their rural homes to reunite with their working parents in the city. For the last two steps, evidently the most ambitious goals, what the Home had mainly attempted was to advocate for regulation of eight hours workload, albeit without much progress up to date. As a whole, it would be fair to posit that the Home’s long-term ambition was to facilitate social changes that would make “life with happiness and dignity” possible for the workers.

In what follows, I shall analyze the vernacular rhetoric surrounding the Home’s mission statement in terms of its implication for an emerging civil sphere organization, instead of dwelling upon the details of services provided for its members. This preference, of course, doesn’t mean services were not important; on the contrary, as suggested above, the Home’s popularity among its members, especially within its immediate catchment area, had greatly contributed to its political leverage in power relation with the party-state. But as the following analysis will show, other things being equal, there was the tension between the
everyday services and the increasingly acute awareness of the impacts of social structural inequality upon the workers’ human existence that could not be changed simply through everyday remedial efforts.

First of all, the mission statement, if isolated out of context, might sound like a mere assertion, instead of having any persuasive power. It would make a big difference, however, if we recognize the fact that it was a self-organization of migrant workers who had been voicing such an aspiration. The suggested goals seemed to be commonsensical; yet, what really mattered was who had taken the lead to regard these goals seriously and risen to the occasion to achieve them, or who even dared to dream of them at all. In essence, behind such a vernacular voice, there were the real grassroots workers at a real place who aspired to not only own the goals as their collective mission, but also organized to explore potential ways to achieve it.

A case in point was grassroots efforts to own and define the term “happiness.” Historically, the notion of “happiness” had come a long way in tandem with Chinese social thoughts and societal changes. The common denominator of China’s political vision, arguably, would be the notions of “great equality” and “great harmony” according to the Confucian teachings (see Bauer, 1971/1976, p. 300), which essentially tied individual human flourishing with the tranquility of the entire society. CCP’s struggle to power in the early decades of Republican China, however, introduced to the cultural consciousness the idea that “the ideal society becomes tangible only in the revolution” (Bauer, ibid., p. 397). After decades of post-revolution political instability, the reform measures initiated in the late 1970s had led to a historical moment of achieving unprecedented “happiness” for the people (especially the peasants) in terms of boosted economic productivity, first tastes of material
affluence, and (for the peasants) relative tranquility in the rural communities. Amidst China’s growing social problems and widening inequality in recent years, the notion of “happiness” once again became a buzzword that could mean different things in different contexts. As GH’s staff member Liu Heng commented (see Chapter 1), popular surveys of “feelings of happiness” were designed in such a way as to exclude the migrant workers as legitimate residents of the city. When the workers indeed grabbed some media attention, the focus on their “feelings” of happiness (instead of materially and institutionally secured genuine “happiness”) tended to trivialize and relativize it as mainly a result of psychological attributes. By contrast, since GH’s inception, Xu had summarized the fundamentals of “happiness” from the grassroots perspective as pursuing “health, security, harmony, and growth [for our country] (in Chinese “jian kang ping an, he xie fa zhan”) that deliberately tied the migrant workers’ welfare to the political vision of the country. The first two items on Xu’s list implied a Chinese traditional value of happy family life under the same roof, which had been threatened by the staggering process of industrialization, displacing hundreds of millions of migrant workers from their rural-based families.

Second, therefore, the mission statement perfectly and deliberately echoed the party-state’s recent official discourse that highlighted in its supreme resolutions and policies the keyword of “happiness” for the entire people as well as the keyword of “dignity” particularly for the workers who had suffered discrimination. As expressed by the would-be President Xi Jinping, “China’s development should be of the people, by the people, and for the people, so that the developmental fruits can be shared by its entire people” (quoted by Xu). Such a rhetorical alignment had earned for GH a politically correct position. Through rhetorical re-appropriation, the grassroots workers at GH turned the monologue of official discourse into a
virtual dialogue between society and state. The silent laborers became vocal rhetors who were willing and ready to work for their “happiness” instead of waiting for it as a gift out of the party-state’s generosity. Again, beneath the tidiness of the mission statement, there exists a layer of not so tidy discourse that must be interpreted beyond the scope of an NGO. Although on the surface the mission statement did not sound as political as it was ambitious, what the Home’s staff had wrestled with seemed to border on a programmatic agenda of a social movement. In incorporating a politically correct mode of discourse, of course, GH had appropriated the party-state’s official discourse (“sharing developmental fruits with the entire people”) and appealed to the sentiment of patriotism (“peaceful rise of China”), perhaps rightly so, since the fate of working men and women were really woven into the common good of the whole nation.

Third, although GH’s vernacular rhetoric had been framed within the caliber of official discourse, its members were not oblivious to the pretense of official discourse. As a matter of fact, there was a general distrust and even mockery at party-state political jargon. A case in point is the terms “harmonious society” and “Chinese characteristics,” which might be called political “ideographs” (Michael McGee). The first, an otherwise sensible one, was actually deemed almost as a joke, a counterintuitive term in light of perceived social unrest, and, according to Xu (who would give the term the benefit of the doubt), it was theoretically redundant since “a harmonious society” was already presupposed in the Chinese Constitution which described the national vision as “a prosperous, democratic, and civilized country.” The second, also according to Xu, was just an excuse for the mistakes made by the party-state and a disguise for ill-conceived policies. “Will tomorrow really become better? We must rethink about such grandiose promises by the state,” a fellow worker said during a heated discussion.
about media coverage of official reports. This young man called himself “a modern illiterate” when walking with me one day, but was evidently not dumb with regard to what counted as propaganda.

Fourth, in line with the Home’s rejection of condescending benevolence or remedial philanthropy, GH had upheld a more politically delicate stance with regard to state policies. “The peasantry, or the migrant workers for that matter, is not interested in winning any favored treatment by the state; all we want is justice and equality” (Xu). On a spring day 2011, when Xu and I took the train to Beijing to attend a few meetings, he told me what “equality” meant, again, in a typical “grassroots” way. He said, “Imagine a mother happens to have two children, a girl and a younger son. Ever since her childhood, the daughter has been working very hard in the countryside, and, being poor, the mother can only send her favored son to school, who will eventually go to college, find a job in the city, and live there happily ever after. But what about the daughter? Will any mother, in the true sense of the word, abandon the daughter and favor the son only? Will any younger brother, in the true sense of the word, trample upon his elder sister just because their mother made a mistake when they were both young? Now, think again, what if the mother is our country, the daughter our countryside, and the son our city?”

Finally, to the extent that an organizational mission was the fundamental rationale for its very existence, GH’s statement may sound too ambitious to be contained in the framework of a single NGO with clearly defined, feasible goals. By professional standards, such lofty goal-setting for a grassroots NGO might be scolded as impractical and inefficient. As a matter of fact, this statement, in its current elegant form, was the result of heated debates and quarrels among the Home’s staff during numerous meetings. Up to date, the
Home did have a short-term goal to make itself an influential leader in the Yangtze Delta area of China (the southeastern area around Shanghai and Hangzhou) within the next three years. However, this self-limited goal was deemed as “too inward,” by which Old Wei (who was by that time serving as the Home’s consultant) meant that it was a shortsighted view of a mere NGO. It is worth quoting at length the comments made by Lao Wei during that crucial, close-door meeting when the Home was facing an internal crisis with regard to its strategic positioning (I served as the note-taker for that occasion).

After I reviewed the draft of the strategic plan [for the next three years], my first response is that it’s too ‘inward,’ i.e., it’s mainly restricted to the organizational level of thinking. We do need a vision, but not for the sake of simply putting it into words…. [As indicated in the draft,] its gist is setting some goals of an NGO only, which is in essence not different from running a company. All the arrangements, as I can see, are such that they are mainly to serve our clients. [That does make some sense.] But, how do we deal with the ultimate goals for the sake of the 200 m. migrant workers? Without such [ultimate goals,] an organization like ours will become aimless, sooner or later.

[Therefore,] we shall not be content with positioning ourselves in the Yangtze River Delta area. Within the nationwide field [of workers’ rights groups,] our greatest advantage and uniqueness lies in our originality and grassroots character. If we dwell upon this kind of approach and thought [as I’ve seen in the draft,] if we dwell upon such an understanding of the nationwide situations, we will soon be surpassed by others. If we don’t represent the interests of the whole working class, we will lag behind very soon….

Well, we do need theoretical thoughts, but not just for the purpose of running an NGO, but for the sake of establishing the foundation for our entire enterprise. Without such [a grand program,] we will inevitably be surpassed by other organizations, as long as these organizations became more professional than we are. If we don’t take our root in the rich soil [of the working class,] we won’t be able to hold a strong footing…. In order to solve small problems [such as our current internal problems,] we must first of all solve [conceptual] problems at the macroscopic level.

Lao Wei’s comments had rich implications. Overall, what the Home’s staff had wrestled with seemed to border on a programmatic agenda of a social movement, even though they tended
not to label GH that way. Such a perspective offered a different framework of reference in which the roles of GH, its members, and everyday work could be interpreted or oriented. In this framework, GH was potentially a change-maker, not a (not-for-profit) “company,” and its members were potential followers, not just “clients” to be serviced. In essence, Lao Wei cautioned his colleagues not to be overwhelmed or blinded by the burden of everyday work, and emphasized the importance of theoretical understanding of the overall political economy, not for the sake of theory, but for the practical purposes of grasping the organizational environment, sustaining GH’s vision, and hence managing its daily work not by coping but through leading.

In short, it would be fair to posit that GH, more than just an NGO, was involved in the self-imposed project of making social change possible so that the workers may “live with happiness and dignity.” It was clearly not content with serving its immediate clients or raising funds for a few needy individuals. It demonstrated a highly sophisticated capacity in demystifying the political ideology of official discourse and articulated its own vision and agenda in its unique, grassroots voice. Beneath its seemingly straightforward expression, moreover, there existed a more politically conscious motive for social changes and a self-positioning by siding with the wretched of the earth.

To Move or Not to Move? That Was the Question

The stressful summer of 2010, for GH, was as unforgettable as it would be for Brother Xu personally. In the middle of May, Xu accidentally burned himself around the right knee when filling his bottles with boiling drinking water at the public-use commercial boiler, a kind of everyday convenience for the great number of migrant workers sojourning in the neighborhood. He was almost crippled and couldn’t commute around the city to talk to people in person, which
was a mundane public relations practice that was crucial for the Home. To make things worse, he didn’t treat the wound properly by himself due to lack of money or insurance coverage. He began to worry about serious infection a few days later. We took him to the nearby hospital, and seated him in the shabby treatment room. After cleaning the wound with tampons soaked in hydrogen peroxide solution, the nurse, using a pair of forceps, had to tear off that part of the burnt skin that was only half attached to the flesh. We saw Xu’s face turning pale-white with cold sweat; his both hands were gripping his right thigh tightly, so as to steady himself and not cry out. Then his cell phone began ringing in his pocket; it was another urgent call from his mentor (based in Beijing) inquiring about any progress in dealing with the local authorities threatening to “tear down” Grassroots Home.

As the situation evolved up to this point, more specifically, the local authorities (mainly the official system of workers’ union, a.k.a., ACFTU) had requested GH to “move” from its original facility to a nearby two-story building, which belonged to the local government. As will be discussed shortly, this official order was a compromised result from top-down case-based approval as well as the local authority’s concern of political consequence of shutting down GH. Barely prior to this point of the unfolding events, however, the situation had been more intense. If Xu’s self-account had a reliable element, the decision to “tear down” GH was a symptom of the hard-line faction of the ACFTU to absolutely forbid the emergence of workers’ self-regulated union-like associations independent of its systematic control. This is clearly echoed in a publicly accessible article that appeared in an inland municipal-level newspaper of the ACFTU branch, which contended in an ideologically-loaded tone that “independent workers’ unions should absolutely be prohibited as these so-called “second unions” would break away from the CCP leadership and threaten to divide the working class” (An, 2012, last paragraph).
For GH, the request, if met, would symbolize its’ conversion as part of the official ACFTU system; it was dubbed by one of the Home’s key volunteers as “attracting the bird into the cage.” Once in “the cage,” however, the Home members feared that the bird would be a dead duck, so to speak. According to the official order, first, by promising to offer monthly wages for up to two year-round volunteers (read: not as official staff members [public servants]), the authority prohibited the future entity from accepting any major external financial support, especially foreign donations. Second, the future entity was ordered to drop the name “Grassroots Home” and should stop enrolling new members in its name. Third, the new entity must be renamed as a branch of what would be designated as “New-residents Volunteers Station,” a nominally official component of the ACFTU system. (The term “new residents” was a euphemism used by the officials to replace the term “peasant-workers” who did not have legitimate residential status in the city where they sojourned and worked.) This new entity, however, would not have its independent official seal or financial seal (read: without any rights to be involved in profit-making behaviors or fundraising events, unless authorized by the ACFTU). In short, there would be no Grassroots Home anymore.

To move or not to move? This question haunted the GH workers who had to struggle for the survival of the Home from the spring of 2010 to early 2011. As noted in Chapter 2 regarding the restrictions on free association in China, GH in its embryonic form had belonged to the lowest negligible category of social organizations of which the party-state would not bother to take any “special care.” This kind of relative freedom from interference, however, was no longer a sure thing when, in early April 2010, a news report by the state-run Xinhua News Agency about GH began to circulate as part of the internal reading materials among the ministry-level of administrative bodies, especially the top leaderships in charge of civil affairs, ACFTU, and the
Youth Union, whose job descriptions supposedly related to the key issues involved in the emergence of self-organization.

Written in a positive tone overall, the article, according to a public version made accessible shortly afterwards through a popular semi-state-run magazine, briefly narrated the foundation story of the organization and then called for the loosening of restrictions on workers’ free association so that “they may organize themselves in daylight” (Zhang, et al., 2010). The report’s accent on the rise of workers’ “spiritual quest” and their organized membership of over 600, however, might be one of the many factors that had stirred the top leadership, although the internal details of their true reactions were hard to be fathomed. According to Liu Chen, a professor of Chinese literature from CCP’s Central School of the Party based in Beijing, her account of her experiences might nevertheless provide some potentially similar light on conflicting opinions among the top leadership about the existence of GH. With regard to the course she taught to CCP high officials on the subject of subaltern literature, Liu Chen recalled, “The cadre trainees, who were mostly provincial leaders, in the class discussion that I led, had big quarrels as to the role of GH…. And someone approached me after class, whispering to me that such an organization was ‘reactionary’ [to the CCP]. I refuted that person by saying, ‘How so? Isn’t the CCP supposed to represent the vanguard of the working class?’”

Anyway, what did transpire gradually was a certain written approval by the vice Premier, who happened to be the former party-state leader in the province where the GH was located and presumably authorized the caliber in which the provincial authorities were supposed to maneuver around the thorny issue. The gist of the vice Premier’s approval was that “as long as it [the Grassroots Home] is not involved in any political background, it’s allowed to exist” (according to Xu’s recollection). Meanwhile, the provincial top authorities of the CCP as well as the
ACFTU took another precaution by approaching and seeking opinions from the supervisor (and colleague) of Xu’s mentor (Liu Laoshi) – Professor Wen Tiejun, dean of the School of Rural Economics and Development at the People’s University of China, and one-time top economic advisor of the State Department. Pressed to give some explanation, Professor Wen provided his perspective in his professorial manner to educate the officialdom, or so it seemed according to what he disclosed at a keynote speech during a symposium on innovations in local governance.

Taking GH as an example, he said,

A few days ago, I was visiting Grassroots Home, founded by migrant workers…. The government was very worried, wanting to figure out whether [this organization] would end up being oppositional. Well, the government’s concern might be well-grounded somehow, since this organization did intend to protect labor rights. To project labor rights, however, is what workers around the whole world are bound to do. The purpose of the ACFTU, first and foremost, is to protect its workers’ rights, isn’t it? You [the ACFTU] cannot simply protect the capitalists’ rights and interests, can you? The ACFTU [representatives] came to me, asking “these people [of GH] received training in the programs you supervised, and now they did this thing [establishing the GH]. What would you have to say about it?” So I answered them by explaining my view. I told them that you’d better find a way to make it possible for them to assimilate [into the city], so that all [social strata] become a coherent whole, instead of rejecting [the workers]. Because rejection would cause the highest costs, inevitably. If you look around the world, you won’t be able to find any politician who could successfully secure his or her political life by rejecting the working class. If you reject the workers, they will become rebellious. That won’t do you any good. It’s best to make peace. So, when they [the ACFTU and the provincial CCP authority] came to seek my opinion, I told them not to suppress [GH] by any means. Since they had already formed the organization, their participating members were capable of spreading the word on the Internet and would have numerous supporters responding to their call, just like the ancient rebels ascended to the top of a hill and called upon their comrades…

Although the details of the professor’s debriefing with the officials were unknown, his candid, dramatic, and public disclosure would evidentially suggest an interesting tendency that the tension between society and state could now be openly acknowledged. (Wen spoke while local officials were among the attendees.) The aforementioned top-down nod (potentially along with the calculated political consequences of suppressing GH, as Professor Wen’s talk seemed to
suggest) seemed to have become a crucial factor in getting the provincial authorities, especially the ACFTU, to change their strategies to deal with the organization that they had deemed “dangerous” earlier on (according to Xu’s recount). On April 15, 2010, the vice provincial president of the ACFTU, accompanied by officials representing all the authorities down the hierarchical line (the municipal, the district, the town, and the neighborhood levels) came to visit GH and met with the Xu and Liu Ming, accompanied by more than a dozen GH members. The two camps, seated face to face in the Home’s not-so-fancy room, made a dramatic scene in which the grassroots workers encountered those in power. This meeting would probably not have occurred without the growing political leverage of GH as an autonomous self-organization.

In a highly scripted manner, the vice president started his talk by praising GH for “the workers’ contribution to the building of Hangzhou [into a beautiful city,] its high worker efficiency, and its attractiveness to the workers.” Then he reiterated the mission of the ACFTU as the “only legitimate system to organize the workers, protect their rights, and provide education for them.” By admitting that the ACFTU hadn’t included all the workers in its system, as it should have, the vice president then expressed his “hope that [GH members] shall join the ACFTU system as part of its big family, so as to continue to play their role by relying on the ACFTU resources” (emphasis added). (It was interesting to note that the vice president also used the term “family” to describe the ACFTU system, whereas the newly conceived entity was really a “station.”) He offered the option for GH members to “serve as volunteers for the ACFTU system,” but at the same time expressed his willingness to be “flexible as to particulars.” Finally, the vice president summarized the ACFTU’s principles on this matter as “[it must] be led by the CCP, supported by the government, and abide by laws.”
In a not so uniform way, GH staff members made a few responses. Xu seemed to differentiate the Home from the ACFTU by saying, quite rightly, “What we have been doing is actually different from the ACFTU. We are from bottom up, whereas the ACFTU is from top down.” Liu Ming, in a rather abrupt way, seemed to be more inclined to work with the ACFTU by saying “we are quite willing to be a channel for the ACFTU,” albeit vaguely. Li Lei, another key member of the staff, candidly acknowledged the fact that “the lower status we assume in a grassroots way, the more easily we can reach out to the workers, as we have done so far.” The meeting was a sort of show-your-hand moment for the ACFTU, but apparently the GH staff had not come up with a unanimous decision that would allow them to navigate in muddy waters.

On a rainy evening two months later (June 17, 2010), the official plaque of “New-residents Volunteers Station” (hence shortened as “the Station” or “the new facility”) was presented to Liu Ming, representing the workers, during a formal ceremony celebrated with a variety of cheerful performances and attended by a big crowd of workers (see Figure 10 below). The ceremony was reported through the official provincial TV, which designated the headline as “Grassroots Home is No Longer Grassroots.” In the broadcast news, the aforementioned vice president was interviewed as saying “these workers [of the Grassroots Home] should be and are now truly absorbed into the ACFTU’s close-knit system providing services for our members, as they are enthusiastic, dedicated to, and rooted in the life of the youthful workers like themselves” (Zhejiang Satellite TV, 2010). Two weeks later, the aforementioned vice president paid another visit, with almost the same bureaucratic subordinates, but with a patently bossy tone, since officially he had become the top supervisor of the new entity, and must make sure that the conversion would be completed as ordered.
Now that the plaque of the new entity had already been symbolically unveiled (temporarily hung up at the GH’s original facility), to move to the new facility seemed to be just a matter of time. As a matter of fact, however, it would take almost the second half of the year (2010) for GH to fumble through a series of attempts to maintain their “old home” as its cherished base and to figure out a proper way to work with the ACFTU authority, while at the same time preparing for the worst scenarios. In response to the aforementioned top-down four-part order, GH stopped enrolling new members (each would pay a 10-yuan [1.5 USD] membership fee), thus reducing the risk of being charged with illegal organizational behaviors. Since GH was originally registered as a for-profit privately-owned entity specialized in non-degree training, the more logical designation of its members would be “trainees,” which now was adopted; but this really was a matter of playing with words, since the “trainees” could continue doing almost the same things as in the past.

Apart from procrastination, and in spite of the seemingly calmness in waiting for the slow renovation of the new facility to be ready for move-in (in October 2010), GH’s staff had many discussions and quarrels about how to best survive the unfolding circumstances. The following is
a reconstruction of the daily morning meeting (normally started at 8 a.m.) on September 30, 2010.

Besides me as the note-taker, there were five staff members.

Xu: Yesterday I was called to attend a meeting held at the ACFTU headquarter of this town, but didn’t get any definitive word on what decision they would make [regarding the matter of converting the GH into a new entity]. My best estimate is that they agree to pay 1,000 yuan (154 USD) per person starting this September, for up to two persons of us, as their volunteers. But they haven’t given me any definitive information yet. As such, how shall we proceed with the negotiation with them?... For this morning session, I propose to discuss about the [potential] relationship between the proposed New-residents Volunteers Station (henceforth “the Station”) and the ACFTU.

Li (mainly in charge of the Home’s financial matters): That doesn’t make any sense to me. 1,000 yuan (154 USD) a month. They didn’t even let us have a say in the Station’s budget plans or purchase bids. We would end up starving, in which case I would rather mind my own business [like doing odd jobs] while merely nominally signing up as its volunteer, but doing nothing for them.

Liu Ming (co-founder; mainly in charge of public relations): That’s also what I heard from them. They hadn’t given me a final word. For me, it’s ok to start the payment with September. An August installment is in the doubts.

Li: (impatiently) None of our original goals was met [according to what Xu just reported]! Extra money from the ACFTU, support the Home’s activities by budgets from them, and the protection of the Home from being banned – these three goals were all defeated. We cannot rely on the ACFTU in order to save our Home.

Xu: As it stands now, we have three options: 1, try our best to manage the Station well, for which we may be exhausted; 2, collaborate with them minimally, only for particular assignments; 3, merely work as their volunteers.

Li: If we end up with no. 3, that means the supposed cooperation with them shall totally backfire. For no. 1, do we really have the guts to do so?

Liu Heng (a worker-turned full-time staff member, mainly in charge of the Home’s internal management): Hey, guys, we cannot have a meeting by the two of you talking to each other only....

Qian (temporary staff member mainly in charge of migrant children’s activities): They originally promised to pay 2,000 yuan (308 USD) per month, now it became 1,000 (154 USD). Did they just come up with whatever a figure randomly!?

Liu Heng: We must lay out all the options on the table and then figure out which may ensure the best way of cooperation with them. What stakes do they have? What stakes do we have? And how to strike some balance?
Liu Ming: I have an additional option, which is to make “cooperation” a must condition, and try to run the Station by our best efforts and in our best interests. This means we need to strengthen our negotiation tactics.

(The other staff members seemed to ignore Liu Ming’s proposal at this moment. But a few minutes later, he would assert his point in a clearer way.)

Liu Heng: For me, the prerequisite is that we must seize this opportunity to run the Station. If it ended up being run by some others, no one knows what shape it would eventually take. In the end it might become antagonistic to us. [To prevent that, we must figure out a way to make] the Station and the Home two parallel sites.

Liu Ming: The second and third options are negative and hostile approaches.... That being said, I’d suggest a new negotiation tactic: I personally will comply with their requests, [as the condition to....] (Liu Ming was unfinished here).

Li: (again, impatiently) Let’s just quit!

Liu Ming: (a little annoyed at Li’s approach) Shen Deming was the chairman of the ACFTU township branch here. He’s gonna report this Station as China’s first of its kind, all the way up the system.

Liu Heng: What did they really want from us? How would they proceed [with the proposed Station] if we withdraw from the deal?

Li: Throw this kind of questions back to them! We are fed up with their telling us how “miserably easygoing” they are. That’s just the same old logic of the government. (Here Li referred to the complex political game in which the local ACFTU branch portrayed themselves as merely following the top-down order to implement the already public – albeit symbolical – announcement of the decision to establish the Station through cooperation with the GH. Thus they appeared to the GH as “miserably easygoing” – as Li sarcastically pointed out: “miserably” because they labeled themselves as merely following the top-down order, and “easygoing” because they did not want to see GH back out from their “mutual” agreement.)

Xu: One more piece of additional info: The ACFTU promised to help us find part-time jobs.

Qian: I’m going back to find a job for myself, and in my spare time I can help at the Home. But I won’t help at the Station.

Liu Heng: (thoughtfully, and sarcastically as if he were beseeching the ACFTU authority) It’s not that we don’t want to cooperate, but that these [unfair] conditions make it impossible to cooperate.

Xu: They are determined to make the Station a subordinate of the ACFTU system.
Li: The essence of the Station is a matter of bilateral cooperation. There are similar cases elsewhere. It’s not we who courted the ACFTU with this Station idea in the first place.

Liu Heng: Evidently, they are still keen on co-opting us and then run the Station in the ACFTU model. The same old stuff.

Li: Up to now, it’s still we who are making concessions, and they are still playing the same old card. (That is, portraying themselves as mere followers of top-down orders.)

Xu: (sarcastically) Well, if I go back to the garment factory, I will make at least 4,000 yuan (615 USD) every month…. (to Liu Ming, half seriously and half beseechingly), can you make a petition to the leaders? Tell them that Xu is burdened with earning money to pay tuitions for his kids. He is simply too poor to cooperate with them [on the said conditions]. Just tell them I am going to find a full-time job (read: a subtle threat that Xu was going to quit and no one else would be able to run the proposed Station for ACFTU)…. Well, I suspect that a big chunk of the money was stolen by some people. Look, the proposed money for the Station was around 400~500 thousands yuan (6,1538~7,6923 USD). But now we have been totally kept out of the loop from budget planning.

Liu Heng: Anyway, what’s our bargaining chip? The real bargaining chip is our famed status and the workers’ participation. If the Station is to be run in THEIR way, it won’t be another Grassroots Home.

Li: At the outset, it’s THEY who felt obliged to create such a new entity, and therefore we gained some advantaged over them. But at this point...(since we already symbolically agreed to cooperate with them by accepting the plague, we are losing our bargaining chips if we don’t run the Station according to their conditions.) …In any event, it’s unlikely that it will backfire [since the two parties are interdependent for their respective reasons]. But not very many people from the Government have the will to do such things as something truly influential, something contributing to their life-time political career. Therefore, my sense is no matter how well or poorly it will be run, they simply don’t care.

The above excerpt is representative of the various approaches among the staff in attempting to deal with the crisis. Although with few words, Qian’s response reflected some workers sentiment that the Home was being co-opted by the ACFTU, which was something they passively resisted by avowing not to serve as volunteers for the entity that did not really represent them. As for Li, his assessment of the “logic of the government” was fairly accurate, but his “just quit” approach turned very negative and therefore impractical, almost in diametrical
contrast with Liu Ming’s “full compliance” approach, an attempt to transcend the antagonism between the grassroots and the official. (Liu Ming appeared to be keen on his own practical philosophy all the time. See Chapter 7 for more discussion on what might be called a “universal love” approach). For both Liu Heng and Xu, they appeared to be more practical and eclectic in trying to figure out a way to achieve “some balance.” Put together, these different approaches put the whole staff in a disabling quagmire until the non-cooperative and antagonistic approaches (Qian, Li) were somehow led to unreasonable conclusions within their own logic. Two weeks later, as time seemed to be running out against GH, the staff had another, briefer discussion in the morning, in which Li was still keen on a worst-case-scenario survival kit while the others were converging on a more nuanced solution.

(Update: The ACFTU branch authority pressed the question of when GH would finally move to the new facility. As it turned out, the authority was still holding the leverage of not paying any monetary compensation until the end of 2010 when GH somehow complied with their request. They knew that GH’s current rental contract would expire in March 2011, which would put GH in an even more disadvantaged position. As a response, Xu told them that GH would not move unless the cooperation at the Station proved satisfactory, which meant that the authority would have to keep their promises in a way that would satisfy GH. Xu assessed the alternative “breakthrough” approach – that is, splitting the current major areas of the Home’s work into multiple physical sites instead of concentrating in this current single one – would not work out as long as such “breakthrough” happened in the same province, where the ACFTU would have their control anyhow.)

Li: (to Xu) Your tactic is wrong. The rationale behind my “breakthrough” approach is that as such we can evade their control and threat to shut us down. If following your approach, why bother to waste time bargaining with them in the hope that they would satisfy us? Just simply tell them we are not gonna move, not in the following 3~5 years. You cannot afford just procrastinating and hiding our purposes when dealing with the Government. It hasn’t made any concession from the outset, nor is it likely in the long run.

Xu: (somehow not directly responding to Li, but trying to convince him that evasion is not an option, whereas cooperation is, as it stands now) Their message is that if we don’t come to work with them, they will hire others to run the Station, which in my view means building an oppositional force right in front of our Home.
Li: We can avoid such antagonism by cancelling all outdoor events. Just do one or two big events [every year], that’s enough.

Xu: Don’t want to waste this opportunity and resources.

Li: (resolutely) They thought we would feel obliged to work with them. We can let them know that we can quit. We can do a second Grassroots Festival and allow the Youth Union to become our official endorser. After the event, we can threat to break up [with ACFTU]. (Note: The Youth Union was somehow competing with ACFTU in winning the support of grassroots workers.)

Xu: Once you agreed to work with them, and then you unilaterally break up, that would create an awful situation, which would be even worse than non-cooperation from the outset.

Li: If so, then make a “quit” decision and live with it. We must hurry up!

....

(after small murmurings and spells of silence)

Xu: Would it be possible for the same bunch of us to run two sites, this old Home and that new Station? Let’s figure out a way to make it possible to retain our Grassroots Home plaque while working with ACFTU at the same time....

(Brother Zou, one of the Home’s best friends who operated a tiny computer repair shop just a few houses away, was known for his straightforwardness and gadfly wit. He would often hang around the office when the staff was in the middle or end of the morning session, making fun of the staff meetings, and calling out the staff’s quarrels as “a waste of time” and “a lot of nonsense”. “Go do some real work,” he would scold the group in a funny way. This time, he, as a nonvoting Home member, jokingly dismissed Xu’s new proposal as letting the ACFTU “attract the bird [the GH] into the cage.” Then he started improvising his own fancy “occupy” plan in which to imagine all the workers being mobilized to move into the newly renovated facility, “cooking, eating, and sleeping there, without doing any work, unless they would fulfill their promise by signing up a proper, legally binding contract of cooperation and paying the overdue compensation.” At the same time, he said – waving his hands in the air like chasing crows in the field, while the others in the room started to join this momentary chorus by contributing their own bits – “Then we shall post all the events reports and meeting minutes,” – “Yeah, all totally blank sheets”, someone followed suit, – “For public view”! Some else continued, “Shame to you, ACFTU.” … Then, in case that still wouldn’t work, “Let’s write a letter to the Prime Minister...” Hahahahah…. The morning session apparently over, the whole room began to be filled with merry guffaws and banging on the wooden desk and hilarious exchanges of hypothetical triumphal celebration.)
In retrospect, it would be fair to posit that through trial and error, as well as via such quarrels, the GH gradually figured out a practical way leading to the de facto coexistence of two sites, in spite of the fact that “the crisis was deterred but not over yet” (Xu). To move or not to move? This question had figured prominently during the GH staff’s nervous attempts to save their own autonomy. If Liu Ming’s “full compliance” approach alone might have been dismissed as lacking principles or making too much concession, his underlying mundane moral philosophy to avoid implicit sentiment of “hatred” towards those in power allowed GH to maintain a conscientious as well as strategic advantage so as to overcome and transcend the political conservatism and perceived (and certainly looming) coercion suggested by the ACFTU authority. In practice, Liu Ming’s “full compliance” approach did not rule out potential risks as a result of going all out to embrace what seemed to be an opportunity to gain some access to resources (facilities, monetary compensations, etc.) squeezed out from the party-state. As time went by, however, Liu Ming’s “weak” approach turned out to be a “strong” one for GH to seize that opportunity.

Here, it must be noted that in a local quasi-political situation like GH’s crisis, it was virtually impossible to assess the comparative gains and losses as the potential result of its untaken “quit” and “breakthrough” alternatives, even though they appeared to be part of GH’s repertoire of tactics. As was often the case with local NGO work, social and political contingencies abounded with respect to the unfolding stories of GH as an emerging civil sphere organization, especially in relation to party-state power. Now that GH’s relation with the local authorities somehow stabilized, it would be a good opportunity to reexamine the vernacular rhetorical process that had happened. While some content of this process might sound trivial in retrospect (e.g., Xu’s speculation of quitting the Station project and going back to find a normal
job), the rhetorical contour (i.e., the ethnomethodological properties and rhetorical character) of this process could shed some light on the practical logic of a grassroots civil sphere organization in its efforts to maintain autonomy.

Before further analyzing this process, it was useful to quote Manuel Castells’ recommendation regarding the study of urban grassroots movements, which resonates with my rhetorical approach to the self-production of society:

*We should keep an open mind on this matter, not deciding in advance which ones are progressive, and which ones are regressive, but taking all of them as symptoms of society in the making....They are what they say they are. They are their own consciousness. We can study their origins, establish their rules of engagement, explore the reasons for their victories and defeats, link their outcomes to overall social transformation, but not interpret them, not explain to them what they really mean by what they say. Because, after all, social movements are nothing else than their own symbols and stated goals, which ultimately means their words. (Castells, 2002, p. 402)*

While I agree with Castells in terms of privileging endogenous understanding and practical logic underlying the “symptoms of society in the making,” I argue that the “symbols” and “words,” in the case of GH for instance, involved a vernacular rhetorical realm that was in flux not static, artful not transparent (“pure persuasion”). A case in point is the notion of GH as a “place” that stood out as a salient rhetorical *topos* in the internal debates and quarrels, as well as in the balancing act in power relation. Although the “old” Home had been a cherished physical place that had sedimented with the narrative, symbolism, and values of GH’s founding history, the prospect of a new Station next to door challenged the symbolic meanings of solidarity, belonging, and autonomy that had been associated with the old Home. If the workers could overcome their dislike for the new facility and hence use it for their own purposes just like their old Home, the original symbolic meanings seemed to be dissociated with the physical place where GH had been housed since its inception. For months during the transition period from
summer 2010 to the end of year, largely because of local ACFTU’s suppression, workers’ visits and participation at the “old” Home dwindled so significantly that Liu Ming was worried about the loss of their grassroots “spirit.” In his view, the old Home (including its physical presence) still represented GH’s cherished legacy and memories. Amidst confusion and anxiety, Liu Ming quarreled with his colleagues regarding whether or not GH’s core volunteers ought to be re-trained at the old home so as to relive the “grassroots spirit” in its pure form, i.e., most authentically. As time went by, however, the new facility started to pick up its first momentum in terms of revived activities, better functions (e.g., its renovated space for housing a separate reading room), and a new wave of enthusiastic volunteers, in part due to Liu Ming’s selfless devotion to mobilizing grassroots workers in fundraising efforts for Yang Debiao, whose urgent case coincided with the second half of 2010 when GH was struggling to overcome the crisis so as to move forward.

As hindsight, GH’s stated goal “protect our Home,” through a process of trial and error, led to a result that Xu would dub “one team working under two plaques [i.e., one officially under ACFTU and one under the original GH].” This I would call “cell division” metaphorically. GH workers’ struggle to maintain the integrity of the “old home” revealed the difference between what Henri Lefebvre calls “spatial practice” and “representational space” (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33). The first notion can sum up the actual social and rhetorical practices that GH members had been engaged in at the physical space of its “old home,” and later began to overflow from it or overgrow it and went on to be revived at the new Station. It would not be easier to inherit the original DNA of GH’s spirit in the new (physical) space of the Station, not the least because the new comers did not quite know GH’s founding story. However, it seemed that some efforts (e.g., story-telling) led by Liu Ming turned out to be successful in continuing GH’s cherished values
and goals. On the other hand, according to the second notion, the old home continued to represent or embody the symbolism associated with GH’s ideas and values; a case in point is Liu Heng’s proposal to reuse it as a kind of grassroots museum of the migrant workers’ culture. On top of this “cell division,” a third notion “representations of space” (also according to Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 33) helps to shed light the rhetorical and socio-relational processes in which the local authority and the GH workers had been vying to control the definition and representation of GH (both old and new, but especially the new one) through official and vernacular discourses. This shall be elaborated below.

In retrospect, the quasi-political tension over the existence of GH and the resultant anxiety over GH’s potential relationship with the local authority with regarding to the new Station involved the thorny issue of legitimacy. As it ought to be recalled, the ACFTU was designated and authorized by the party-state as the only legitimate system of workers’ organizations. In the new facility of the Station, the official jargon was clearly printed on one of the interior walls: “[ACFTU must] organize the workers, lead the workers, and protect the workers’ rights through legal measures” (see Figure 11 below). In terms of organizational institutionalism (see Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), ACFTU, backed by the party-state, supposedly served the sole authoritative source of legitimacy, i.e., endowed with the legal power to assess the “acceptability… of social entities, structures, actions, and ideas” (ibid., p. 54). The emergence of GH and its growing popularity independent of the ACFTU system, however, challenged ACFTU’s self-claim to be the sole authoritative source of legitimacy; in other words, the fact that GH obtained its legitimacy without ACFTU’s approval in turn called into question the latter’s own legitimacy. In a mundane political economic analysis, for example, there had been an open secret that “the ACFTU presidents are paid by the bosses, and therefore they certainly
need to work for them” (Shen, et al., 2011). GH’s staff member, Li Lei, responded to a surveyor from the municipal policy research office by arguing bluntly that “in spite of its nearly perfect system, the ACFTU doesn’t represent the workers – while workers may get a 5,000-yuan (769 USD) salary by organizing strikes, the ACFTU will help them to get 3,000 yuan (642 USD) (so to speak) by intervening.” Li continued to say, “It’s only when the ACFTU relinquishes its power and allows free election of its chairpersons that the unions will become the organizations truly belonging to the workers.”

Figure 11. A view of the new facility of the Station

In spite of the publicized official message (of the provincial vice president of the ACFTU on TV interview) that GH had been successfully “integrated” into the ACFTU system, issues surrounding legitimacy and legitimation were far more complicated. As an emerging civil society organization, GH had been accepted de facto through alternative sources of legitimacy. By siding with the migrant workers in order to protect their rights and meanwhile appealing to peace and love, GH gained its legitimacy in a social normative sense. To secure and solidify such
a moral ground, GH had successfully involved grassroots workers in cultural (and “spiritual” in terms of belonging to something transcendental) activities, which were lauded by media and further supported in a professional sense by the emerging field of NGOs nationwide.\(^24\) By contrast, Xu clearly understood the weakness of the new Station as conceived by the local authority. Xu said candidly in his first annual work report (June 2011) submitted to the local authority that the Station “[as conceived by the ACFTU] is a semi-official organization appropriately legalized and hence supported by other governmental entities, whereas its shortcoming lies in its inability to unite the workers by heart.” In private conversations, Xu made further comments about the implication of the ACFTU’s recognition of the existence of such a semi-official organization. Xu said, “ACFTU was supposed to be a tightly-controlled system, but now it began to include club-like loosely-organized associations.” The irony here was that even though ACFTU (re)claimed its sole legitimate authority over the newly established Station, there were fundamental aspects of GH workers’ social and rhetorical practice that tended to resist the top-down control, and meanwhile the inclusion of “club-like loosely-organized associations” proved that the ACFTU system was anything but monolithic.

The first significant feature of GH’s social and rhetorical practice was the self-regulated character of grassroots workers’ participation in the name of GH. The financial self-sacrifices made by GH’s staff members notwithstanding, a very rough estimate of the voluntary (uncompensated) input of work hours by participating workers for a major series of fundraisers (i.e., for Huang Genlin in 2009 and for Yang Debiao in 2010, respectively) could approach 3,000

\(^{24}\) Due to the limitation of space here, let me just state the fact that in 2010 GH became an associational member of the municipal club of not-for-profits consisting of eight (and growing) organizations. The professional notion of “accountability” would constitute a useful angle to measure what might be called professional legitimacy of GH’s everyday work, but as this chapter discussed early, as a social change organization, GH had its own agenda and purposes that might not be constrained by professional standards.
hours or more\textsuperscript{25}, thanks to the invisible social capital that GH had been building throughout the years. Xu summarized this succinctly as “the transformation of migrant workers traditionally perceived as problems to be solved into problem-solvers.” By contrast, the major forms of local authority’s support for the migrant workers – which, to GH staff’s dismay, was not written down in any formal contract – were limited in terms of case-based budgets, various forms of support from other local administrative bodies (e.g., the local Philanthropy Department’s authorization of collecting donation money), and the use of some facilities. All these came about under the condition that the major events henceforth must be designated as under the auspices of the ACFTU only (using its banner). It was ironic that the head of the township headquarter of ACFTU supervising the neighborhood of GH was recognized and awarded by the provincial headquarter for his achievements, including “more than ten major cultural events organized by workers up to date” (Wei, 2011). Countering such official discourse, the truth was that the workers organized those events and activities by themselves, not by order. As recognized by GH staff as well as its outlier supporters (such as Zhongsheng, aforementioned), bottom-up volunteerism was part and parcel of GH’s hallmark as a civil sphere organization that tended to resist the assertion of party-state power. Innovativeness, flexibility, tolerance of trial and error (thus involving risks), and relatively low costs, as all associated with the self-regulation of a grassroots association like GH, distinguished themselves from the top-down bureaucratic systems that tended to lack connection with the grassroots people, nor have the political will to do so (see Hsu, 2010 for some general discussion).

\textsuperscript{25} That is, including the hours that volunteers spent in rehearsing songs, donation events in the neighborhood and downtown areas, preparation, organization, and participation for fundraising performance nights, as well as one or more staff members exclusively devoted to the coordination of these activities for at least two months or more.
The second significant aspect of GH as an emerging civil sphere organization was the quotidian character of its communication processes. Even though the ACFTU originally tried to forbid the GH from using its organizational title, it simply could not stop any worker from using the “Grassroots Home” title or telling their stories at and about their Home freely. In practice, the story of the emergence of the Station was retold in a way that constituted yet another chapter in the ever-evolving storyline of GH, which, by contrasting the new facility with the visually shabby and simple “old” Home, surprised newcomers with the perseverance and courage of the founding members in winning this new place (instead of being offered as a gift from the top). As accounted earlier in this chapter, part of GH’s associative life resided in everyday communication among “warm circles” of workers, who would transform their personal encounters at GH into testimonial stories about GH wherever they were physically located (e.g., during excursions in the local mountains, through online chatrooms, via the circulation of the Grassroots Magazine, etc.). Such a vernacular rhetorical process was rather diffused and fluid, making it very hard to be regulated by those in power.

The third aspect of GH’s practice as an emerging civil society organization had to do with the politically correct framework that GH’s leaders had endeavored to adopt. In order to cooperate with the local authority with respect to the operation of the Station, Xu formulated its vision as “building a proud exemplar of facilitating the integration of new residents into the city” (partially shown in the photo in Figure 12 below). Here, the term “new residents” was a euphemism to replace the derogatory “peasant-workers,” and the notion of “integration into the city” was the key phrase in official discourse of recent policies intended to expand the workers’ access to economic equality and social benefits. As such, GH rhetorically aligned itself with and asserted its participation in the party-state’s national political agenda to bring about positive
changes to the workers’ conditions. In a sense, GH and the local authority began to transform themselves both as stake-holders in the ongoing project in the name of the Station. In spite of potential frictions over such issues as budgets (the local authority deliberated delayed the first four months’ payments until the very last day of 2010) and the appropriateness of certain proposed events (e.g., the stalled “Second Grassroots Festival”), the Station as a new facility for workers might become a stable and long-term venue in which the interests of both parties were bounded together. As a common worker of GH (Guanghui, as shown in the interview earlier in this chapter) told me, “We just need to ask for more [resources] from the authorities; now that the Station became a joint project, they didn’t have any good reason to withdraw from it or outlaw it because that would cause consequences for themselves.”

Figure 12. A snapshot of the entrance of the Station, with the newly conceived slogan printed by the right side of the door.

Conclusion

This chapter began with my argument to treat GH not as a static a priori entity, but as an ongoing accomplishment by social actors through their social and rhetorical practice. A case in
point was the spreading of GH as an idea, an ideal, and a collective enterprise through telling stories of individual workers’ encounters with, experiences at, and contributions to GH’s cause (as discussed at the end of the previous Chapter 4). The pivotal storyline of GH was an unending quest for a common dream, which in my analysis represented an endogenous metaphor of imaging and creating an emerging civil sphere. In a country where the notion of civil sphere had no historical precedents, one of the first changes that the founding members of GH had to face was that the very idea of an organization like GH was possible, and that this idea had to be distinguished from devastating misconception of mob mentality, violence, and cult-like money-making motives that had tended to be associated with the “grassroots.”

Next, by analyzing everyday life at GH and its mission statement, I argued that GH as an emerging civil sphere organization demonstrated a complicated case combining both private-oriented and public-oriented aspects. On a daily basis, GH became a place where migrant workers could temporarily stabilize their sojourning life by engaging in warm circles and sharing activities of common interest. GH’s popularity among the workers in its immediate catchment greatly lent to its political leverage as a bottom-up representative voice of the workers’ interest. Provision of daily services to its members, however, constituted only a part of GH in the professional sense of NGO work. Besides, GH’s leadership had increasingly learned to understand the overall political economic situations of the workers and consciously appealed to theoretical resources that could sustain its vision to effectuate social changes.

In early 2010, GH met a quasi-political crisis due to the pressure from down the line of ACFTU authorities who originally planned to eliminate GH. This crisis demonstrated the deeply entrenched distrust between the party-state and the emerging civil sphere. The fundamental issue involved the conflicting sources of legitimacy. The rise of GH as accepted by the workers
challenged ACFTU as the self-claimed sole source of legitimacy and in turn problematized ACFTU’s own legitimacy. In part due to the increasing influence of GH as a free association of workers, the ACFTU eventually adopted a moderate approach to the matter by allowing GH to exist along with the newly formed Station using some existent facilities that belonged to the local government. Through trial and error, amidst confusion and anxiety, the GH staff eventually embraced a proactive position so as to cooperate with the local authority in running the Station under the auspices of the local ACFTU. Further ethnographic inquiry revealed that although the official discourse defined the Station as totally under the control of the authorities, GH (now including both the old and the new homes) evolved a repertoire of sophisticated vernacular rhetorical practices that tended to resist the penetration of party-state power. The self-regulative and quotidian character of grassroots workers’ organization and participation in civil sphere activities was something the party-state and its surrogates could not easily supervise or control. Moreover, the GH leadership had devised a hybrid rhetorical discourse to frame the Station in line with the politically correct official discourse. In my analysis, such a hybrid character should not be dismissed as mere “face” work, but ought to be recognized as a vernacular rhetorical tactic that was aimed to solve the practical problem of “how to go on” (Willis, 2000, p. xiv) under real-world circumstances that the weak party had to strike up a delicate balance between survival, autonomy, and the maximization of emerging opportunities.
Chapter 6

Beyond the Futility of Labor: Migrant Workers’ Culture in an Emerging Civil Sphere

—“I... LOVE... Teacher... Xuduo....”
—“Wow, that’s beautiful falsetto!” Xuduo commented.
—“We... migrant... workers... under... the heaven... are... one... family....”
—“Great! You sounded like rock-n-roll.” Xuduo commented.
—[Hesitant and shy] “In... my... heart... [stopped in the middle of singing, giggling]....”
   The whole room was full of merry guffaws.
—“Never mind. Try one more time.” Xuduo encouraged.

The roomful of workers at GH were suddenly animated by the little singing game as instructed by Mr. Xuduo, one of the song singer-writers of the Beijing-based Home of Workers (BHW), who had come to visit GH to conduct a three-day-long workshop of music making in October 2010. In order to warm up the participants and give them a sense of music making, Xuduo asked each one to sing an impromptu tune of eight beats with whatever words came to his or her mind at the moment. I was a little bit nervous, my facial muscles shaking, because I was never a good singer, especially in front of a big crowd. But the workers soon began to enjoy the game, and improvised their tunes one after another in earnest. Xuduo improvised on his guitar to accompany the singing, made brief comments on each one’s performance, and encouraged everyone not to miss the chance. Although many workers had been fond of karaokeing, and GH’s repertoire actually included some of the favorite songs made by BHW, they never had a chance such as this to make their own music. Just moments ago, before the session began, some workers imitated the popular love songs from MTV shown on the screen, displaying superb resemblance in terms of vocal quality and gestures, as if they were the rock stars. But when it came to invent a tune by themselves, even the most extroverted workers had to hesitate a little before finding voice and lyrics.
“Music and poetry are not as mysterious as we used to think. An ancient Chinese saying goes that poems and songs are just what ‘the starved people sing about their food and the drudgers sing about their labor.’ It’s as simple as that.” Xuduo broached his topic by quoting one of the most famous Chinese sayings about poetics. Then he continued to talk about the fact that “we workers always have the desire to express ourselves, for example, when we become lonely or stricken by hardship in the cities of sojourn.” The mission of BHW’s art troupe, according to Xuduo, was decidedly oriented for the creation of workers’ art and culture. In the mainstream elitist culture, performers had to be judged by their mastery of technicality (and there were many shows that deceived simply by playing CDs in the background), vocal quality, and even physical appearances, etc., but for the workers, “we don’t want to be oppressed by such monopoly; instead we ought to learn how to express ourselves.” But in order for that, Xuduo said emphatically, “we need to show that we CAN express at all!”

This chapter will focus on the rhetorical character of emerging workers’ culture at GH, where workers gradually learned how to express and represent themselves through songs, dances, poems, stories, and other symbolic means of vernacular rhetoric. In what follows, the first section will map out the trajectory of workers’ cultural emergence in a contentious field by analyzing state policies related to workers’ culture. The puzzle here concerned the ways in which “workers’ culture” was being defined as a passive object of control and supervision, hence creating some rupture between official discourse and vernacular rhetoric. The next two sections will highlight labor as a fundamental factor of the workers’ human condition in which they aspired to transcend its futility and recognize its productivity. The first part explores the manifestation of the futility thesis, and the second part explores how the workers endeavored to

\[26 \text{e zhe ge qi shi, lao zhe ge qi shi.}\]
transform their lived experiences by recognizing the productive character of labor. In these two sections, which were pitted against each other, the fundamental theoretical concern has to do with the tension of the material and symbolic nexus in the workers’ efforts to come together in a space of appearance through vernacular rhetoric. In the end, it can be tentatively argued that such a space constitutes an emerging “pre-political” civil sphere in which the workers sought to preserve the authenticity of their lived experiences and, based on that, to express their positional values and civil judgment through largely aesthetic forms. Throughout this chapter, I will use “workers’ culture” instead of “working class culture,” not the least because my ethnographic work has shown more nuanced and often conflicting cultural orientations coexisting at GH at a less publicly accessible level of communication (see Chapter 7).

Workers’ Culture as an Object of Social Control

Since its inception, GH had caught the attention of some domestic researchers, and in their published literature, two arguments, one structural and another subjective, were particularly noteworthy. First, a sociologist Wang Xiaozhang, who conducted some cursory research at GH, called for a shift of theoretical perspective from the livelihood-centered “economic” framework to a “political” one that focused on issues of identity (2009). While this call was not new in comparison with Pun’s study of workers’ resistance (2005; 2009), it was noteworthy that Wang broached the sensitive issue of how the migrant workers’ identity as full citizens was defined not by who they were (i.e., born in the rural areas as peasant), but by “the forces rejecting their citizenship” (Wang, 2009, p. 134). A second argument advanced by Liu Chen, a literature professor at the Central School of CCP who paid a brief visit around the time when GH’s story started to circulate among the high officials in charge of workers’ affairs. Liu Chen’s maintained
that “through their cultural activities the workers had proved themselves as fully capable of integrating into urban life” (Liu, October 2011), although the notion of “urban life” could be interpreted either in an economic or political sense. Taken together, these two arguments represented the growing recognition of the workers’ political agency in struggling for their own economic and political rights.

In spite of such understanding, it seemed that the party-state had been trying to catch up with its measures to balance its control and reluctant acknowledge of the migrant workers’ rights. In the span of one month between September and October, 2011, the party-state issued two important political decisions that emphatically revealed its policies regarding the country’s cultural industry in general and migrant workers’ culture in particular. The first one was the resolution on the development of cultural industry and further reformation of cultural policies, passed by the sixth plenary meeting of the central committee of CCP, which took place (October 2011) on the eve of CCP’s transition of its central power to the next cohort of leadership in late 2012. This resolution set the tone for a series of reform measures and supportive policies with regard to the development of cultural industry. The document contained a special section briefly emphasizing the need to “culturally integrate the urban and rural societies… including the migrant workers” (Central Government, 2011b). As a matter of fact, this section should be read in connection with a more elaborate and special directive (issued about a month earlier) regarding “further measures to improve the work of cultural matters related to migrant workers” (Central Government, 2011a), authorized by three ministry-level administrative bodies, namely, the Department of Cultural Matters, the Department of Human Resources and Social Welfare, and ACFTU. This directive was supposedly the first of its kind that the party-state conceived in order to regulate “work of cultural matters related to migrant workers;” it set the tone of a series
of policy guidelines as directing migrant workers cultural activities “with the leadership of the government, the collaboration of enterprises, and the participation of social members” (Central Government, 2011a). Not coincidentally, “culture” figured prominent in all these party-state policies.

For the purpose of this section, I will conduct a brief policy analysis in an attempt to illuminate how the workers’ culture was defined as an object of social control. By “social control,” I followed Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng (experts on Chinese NGOs), who defined the Chinese state as an “authoritarian” one which viewed social organizations as the object of supervision due to their double facets of potentially challenging state authorities while providing some public goods to societal members (Kang & Han, 2008). Moreover, because the party-state’s resolution on matters of cultural industry was complicated and its impact remained to be seen, my analysis will be limited to the relevance of its implications for better understanding of the institutional discourses surrounding the workers’ emerging culture. Somehow relatedly, for instance, the party-state vowed to improve the nation’s “civic literacy” amidst its resolution to reform its cultural industry in a more market-oriented fashion, suggesting an intriguing question about the logical and practical connection (if any) between civic literacy and mass culture. The general observation I wish to make is that the party-state had demonstrated the political will to retain the notion of “socialist culture” as the grand narrative in which to integrate the value orientation of the entire society that grassroots workers had increasingly regarded as divided by class difference. In short, there was rapture between the official discourses and vernacular discourses with regard with the cultural orientations of the society. As will be discussed in the next Chapter 7, the social and rhetorical efforts of GH demonstrated bottom-up efforts to control the socialist historical legacy as well as traditional cultural resources in order to form the workers’
own cultural orientation and envision an alternative good society. Moreover, insofar as the workers’ culture was concerned, although the party-state showed signs to recognize what was termed “cultural rights” of the workers, its policies still largely objectified the workers’ culture as something to be controlled and their needs as something to be satisfied by organs of the local state and to some extent the employers. Also, as will be elaborated in the rest of this chapter, the workers appeared to be far more active and artful in framing their lived experiences (centered on the problem of labor) in resisting the futility of labor.

To begin with the policy analysis, it must be noted that the party-state resolution explicitly provided its own context in which the gravest social problems were identified as “the collapse of moral principles and trust in certain areas [of society] and the corruption of some societal members’ worldviews and values” (Central Government, 2011b). These problems were deemed so serious that the resolution continued to state that it “was most urgent to take up the challenge head-on to lead the overall trends of the society with the core value system of socialism and solidify the common ground of ethical consensus for the whole nation under the leadership of the CCP” (ibid.). As such, the resolution prefaced its document with the striking statement that “culture is the blood-like-indispensable legacy of a nation and is the spiritual home of the people.” (In the second part of the previous sentence, the notion of “spiritual home” (jing shen jia yuan) were rendered in the same Chinese phrase with the one chosen by the Grassroots Home to mean the “spiritual home” of the workers. Also, the alarming deterioration of the entire society into moral malaise, as identified by the party-state, was the same issue that GH had highlighted in a similar way of expression, albeit from a bottom-up approach.) The resolution continued to specify that such a spiritual home must be built upon “the unshakable principles of Marxism as adapted to the Chinese context and must be able to “include everyone in the common vision of
building a characteristically socialist country” (ibid.). To be fair, insofar as the point was to build a country “free, prosperous, and democratic” (according to the Constitution, see Central Government, 2004), there ought not to be any disputes or problems in a purely verbal sense. But as Chapter 7 will show, grassroots workers at GH had their own visions of a better society as well as their own interpretation of China’s cultural legacies.

Second, insofar “culture” was defined by the party-state resolution as the code word for “socialist values,” the resolution further designated that its party organs and all levels of government had the political responsibility to “assume leadership in cultural matters of the country” (Central Government, 2011b). The almost obvious inference here was that the party-state avowed to still control the cultural orientation (e.g., values) of the people by adhering to its “Marxian principles.” Further, relatedly, under such political responsibility, the government should satisfy the “cultural needs of the people… [in part] by building necessary infrastructures to be equally shared by all the people” (ibid.; also see the official commentaries appended on the same web page). Again, relatedly, in the co-issued special directive regarding workers’ culture, the local governments where the migrant workers sojourned were designated as the “responsible entities to protect the cultural rights of the migrant workers and satisfy their cultural needs” (Central Government, 2011a). To be fair, the directive provided some guidelines for improving infrastructures for workers’ benefits and potentially increasing specialized budgets for cultural matters related to migrant workers. While this might be good news in terms of allowing more social space (i.e., opportunities and freedom) for the workers’ cultural activities, the political implication here was that the party-state intended to continue to lead the migrant workers in terms of their cultural orientation (the party-state’s official language, if literally translated, was “cultural work related to ideology of societal members”). The obvious tension from these
policies in question was the anxiety over the legitimacy of the party-state’s official discourses of a nationally coherent and stable “socialist value system” in a society that had become increasingly “diverse” in terms of cultural orientations (Liu, October 2011). As a matter of fact, it was ironic that the directive skewed toward its emphasis on workers’ “cultural rights” – which it claimed to have been neglected so far – by making a cursory mention of the necessity to protect the workers’ “labor rights, political rights, and social rights” (Central Government, 2011a). Although “cultural rights” could be construed as valuables in their own terms, what the workers such as those at GH really meant by “culture” were their own public opinions and demands for labor rights, political rights, and social rights. Whether the party-state’s cautious steps to allow more free space for the workers’ cultural activities carried increasing political leverage for the workers as a coherent social group is an intriguing question that must be reserved for future exploration.

Third, taken together, the policies in question treated the workers’ culture as an object to be regulated and subtly supervised, their cultural needs as something to be satisfied by the local governments that still sounded patriarchal, and their cultural orientation as something to be incorporated into the party-state’s “socialist value systems.” The fundamental problem, however, was that the political economy of the country had so drastically changed that the nominally “socialist” ownership of modes of production has been shaken. As a result, the “socialist value

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27 Despite the fact that economic ownership in China is rather murky, party-state official statistics showed that from 1980 to 2010, the proportion of state-owned enterprises (including state ownership of shares) of total societal assets dropped from 90% to 45% (Lv, 2012). According to a foreign estimate made in 2006, the proportion of China’s growing private sector might increase up to 60% of the country’s total GDP in recent years (Meyer, quoted in Knowledge@Wharton, 2006), whereas according to a domestic report by China’s political coalition attached to the party-state, the private sector (including foreign-invested enterprises) had already taken up 65% of GDP in 2005. According to China’s national statics of 2008, the ratio between the sizes of populations of employees in non-private and private sectors in urban areas was 60%: 40% (He, 2012). However, it was reported that the national statistics deliberately covered only 15% of the labor market, excluding an unknown but huge number of
system” had seemed to lose its material basis. As GH’s mentor (also a fervent cultural critic) Liu Laoshi argued, the essence of culture was “who’s representing which class, who’s acquired what interests” (Liu, 2010, personal communication). In the same vein, the BHW’s founder Sun Heng argued in a 2011 pamphlet that “obviously there is class stratification in China, a fact that many people do not want to face; under the influence of capitalist culture and as a result of China’s historical legacy28, middle-class China consciously avoids the topic of workers’ predicaments, fury, and contention; for them, it’s ok to discuss concrete issues, but not class issues” (BHW, 2011, p. 88). In light of these grassroots opinions, it should be clear now that the party-state’s contention for a coherent “socialist value system” was problematic due to the social structural division of the nation along the class line.

Another fundamental problem with official policies was the objectification of workers’ culture, as implied in the official discourses, as passive needs to be only satisfied by the authorities and as something deficient to be removed as remedial measures. At first glance, such a deficient and passive model of culture appealed to the commonplace assumptions that the migrant workers were not well-educated, lacked cultural activities, and were spiritually impoverished. But such assumptions disguised the root causes of the migrant workers’ cultural situations. In a pamphlet (BHW, 2011, p. 54) prepared for a migrant workers’ cultural exhibit, the Beijing Home of Workers characterized China’s capitalist culture in terms of several destructive consequences:

*It propagates the illusion of success as the result of rugged individualistic hard work*

migrant workers who worked in the private sector (Liu, 2010), thus significantly underestimating the size of workers’ population in the private sector.

28 “As a result of China’s historical legacy” is a euphemism that is really polysemic. A crucial point, however, is due to the fact that the Chinese intellectuals have been silenced or even punished for their siding with and speaking for the oppressed.
It makes people temporarily escape from and forget about reality, and paralyzes the worker’s spirit and disarms their will.

It is fetishism in material wealth, denounces the value of labor, and cracks down the workers’ self-esteem.

Further, the pamphlet defined the migrant workers’ culture as being part and parcel of “the blood and sweat we shed [as the result of laboring]” (BHW, 2011, p. 53), which, in theoretical terms, meant the migrant workers’ lived experiences that revolved around labor. “Are the workers low-quality who are capable of building skyscrapers?” BHW’s founder asked this artful question in a recent interview (Sun, 2011d). Clearly, such a grassroots self-understanding of the workers’ culture reflected “negative thinking,” as Marcuse (1964, p. 123) would argue, as a form of resisting the alienation of the workers’ authentic experiences. As the following sections would show, the workers had proven themselves far more active, creative, and competent in grasping the reality of their social existence through songs, dances, performance, and other forms of vernacular rhetoric.

In concluding this section, first it must be acknowledged that the policies in question did suggest positive signals of allowing the migrant workers more freedom to engage in cultural activities of their own choice. Meanwhile, the policies indicated a series of official measures to control the workers’ cultural orientation, especially through the supervision of the local governments (including the ACFTU local branches) and socialist education. However, insofar as (and just because) culture was defined as the constellation of ideas, values, and views with regard to what ought to constitute the truth of social reality, culture could hardly be controlled by administrative measures. A brief review of the popular grassroots view of workers’ culture indicated a sharply different picture of how the workers interpreted their own culture. Unlike the official notion of “a harmonious society,” the workers understood the Chinese society as more divided by the class line because the socialist political economic foundation of egalitarianism
had eroded. Also unlike the passive objectification of the workers’ culture (along with the official designation of local governments as the political authorities over the workers), the workers had been endeavoring to prove themselves as not passive, deficient, and silent, but socially active, rhetorically competent, and politically vocal.

Futility vs. Productivity: The Problem of Labor (Part 1)

About a month before I was due to exit the research site (in late July, 2011), I planned to conduct a final round of interviews with workers at GH, but one of the most fascinating stories of migrant labor came up during an unplanned conversation with Yanming. My first impression of Yanming was a taciturn young man who enjoyed reading during his spare time. He was first introduced to GH about a year ago by one of GH’s part-time staff members, who happened to come late one morning for the staff’s routine meet-up. The “penalty” for being tardy, according to the staff’s mundane rules (for these few weeks), was to randomly select an unacquainted worker in the neighborhood and give him or her a quick earnest introduction of GH in hopes of recruiting him or her as a new member. Yanming was introduced to GH through this process. Like some of the relatively mature worker-members of GH, he soon became a diligent volunteer who willingly offered his time and energy for chores and tasks like setting up the iron-pipe stage, fundraising, security watch during performance nights, and post-event cleaning up. Because I also worked as a volunteer on such occasions, Yanming and I quickly became casual friends; we were able to do some small talk while on duty but not long conversations until he happened to sit down by my side one evening in the summer of 2011.

“Would you like to listen to my stories?” Yanming asked me politely. I said “of course.” For the next hour and half, Yanming shared his encyclopedic stories with me, punctuated by
lighthearted chuckles, sighs, and thoughtful silence from the both of us. He would occasionally
stutter, with a little shy smile that reminded me of the indelible marks from my own rural
childhood. In good humor, though, he would fast forward past the points where the details might
be too harsh to share. I started off by asking when he became a migrant worker, and then for
most of the time refrained from interrupting him except for a few encouraging words here and
there and occasional questions for clarification. (I did chat a bit with him in the process, but these
trivialities were edited out for the sake of brevity.)

Before I became a migrant worker, I studied with a master carpenter as an
apprentice in my home village, but only for a month or so. The master was superb; he
would whip his pupils with a stick, literally. That was actually a good occupation, but
I was too young to know that I wanted to stick to it. So I left my home village [in an
inland province] at barely 18 [to go to a coastal province]. My first job was as a
fisherman.

Me: Really? (We both chuckled.) It was dangerous, wasn’t?

Yeah. On a fishing boat out to the sea. Every day I was sailing back and forth through
waves. When the overwhelming windstorm came, I had to crawl on the deck in my life
vest. It was scary, especially when I was aboard a small boat at the beginning…. I
was the only one of the crew who was unmarried. I ate and slept on the [big] boat
offshore to take care of it. When we didn’t need to unload the catches at the seaport,
the boat must be anchored offshore in order to protect its bottom from being damaged
by the rocks. It’s one of the toughest jobs I ever had. But I was young and had great
physical strength for it. Despite that, I was cheerful and lighthearted, unlike now...
(He sounded troubled, and didn’t quite finish his sentence.)

Afterwards, I quit the fishing job. It was too exhausting. I happened to see some job
advertisement from a so-called rubber-tire manufacturing plant, which claimed to use
sea kelp as raw material. So I applied for the job. I was told it’s easy and would make
700 yuan a month. They drove me in a van all day long deliberately round and round
on the roads, until we finally reached somewhere deep in the mountains at dusk. It
turned out to be one of those illegal brick-making factories that would later be
exposed by the media. I was transferred to the black-hearted boss who tipped 200
yuan to the driver. I realized I was cheated. I had nothing with me except my clothes.
That’s the beginning of my job as a coolie for two months.

(We both sniggered, Yanming semi-detached and slightly comic, and I sympathetic
with a lingering sense of disbelief.)
I was forced to make bricks in the daytime, and was given a trash-like cotton quilt to sleep with among other workers. We fed on cabbage soup and steamed bread for breakfast, cabbage soup and noodles for lunch, and cabbage soup and steamed bread for supper. I had a growing desire to escape, but they had armed security guards watching over us. About a mother later, I made up my mind to escape one night as I got up to go to the toilette.

Me: Did you succeed?

I didn’t. I did run away as far as the nearest town. It was in the middle of night, and the town seemed like a dead place. I thought I was safe. But I was wrong. They had their insiders in the town. I was captured and sent back to the factory. They locked me up in a small room, and four guys began to beat me. My mouth was bleeding. Afterwards, a woman threw a towel and a basin at me, saying, “Don’t you ever think of running away. Clean up yourself.” I didn’t dare to run away again. But from time to time someone else would take the risk. One time a runaway young man was captured and almost beaten to death; they broke one of his legs.

Two months later, the police and a work team of people of three governmental departments raided the factory. We were allowed to quit and leave as we wished. When the police interrogated me, I didn’t dare to admit that they had abused me and beaten me, because I still feared the police and the work team were the boss’s people. Anyway, I was freed and went back to the county city nearby. Dozens of fellow workers also went there; they petitioned at the governmental office of grievance hearings (a.k.a., xin fang ban) and demanded their wages be paid. They petitioned for many days, but didn’t get any response. They had to stop petitioning in vain, because living and eating started to become a problem for them. They came to my rental, a small room within muddy walls, which cost only 35 yuan (about $5) a month back then. I prepared some food for them, and shared my “kang” (a bed-like structure built with bricks and mortar upon the ground, as is typical in Northern China) with them. The bed was too narrow, and we had to lie on our backs in the bed width-wise.

Me: Had you ever thought of going back home for good?

I did go back home once for the first three years, but soon afterwards I left for the outside world again. My village was very poor. When I was small, we didn’t even have enough to eat. In the springtime we ran out of flour and the only staples were boiled yams. We had a cellar where the yams were preserved over the winter.

Me: (I was surprised about the hardship.) But that was not very many years ago, wasn’t it?

It was about 13 years ago when I first left home [to become a migrant worker.]... A few years later, I went further south to Guangdong Province. My childhood friend told me it’s easy to find a job there. It was around the year of 2003. As a matter of fact, there were many rip-offs in the job market. It’s not easy to find a real decent job. I migrated from one town to another to look for jobs for several months. I had
borrowed 100 yuan from my friend, but at one point I had to pay some deposit in order to get a job. So, I ended up being broke again. As I needed to move on to find another job, I couldn’t afford the 7 yuan bus fare. So, for that distance (about 30 miles), I could only walk from town to town day from dawn to dusk every day, stopping by factories to ask about job availability. My shoes had holes at the bottom.

Me: Where did you sleep these days? (I was curious.)

I slept in the public parks by roadside. When I reached the major township where I had relatives and folks, they could hardly recognize me. (Chuckles.) I was too shy to speak up to borrow some money from them. I spent a few nights at a relative’s rental, but could no longer bear the cold shoulder they gave me. So again I needed to look for a place where I could sleep and eat. Finally I approached a mechanics shop in the nearby small town, and asked them to allow me to work for them. I said, “I don’t need any payment. Just give me a place where I can eat and sleep free of charge.” So I got the job. You could see the factory’s logo board if you walked down the road leading to that town.

A few months later, the mechanics shop got in trouble. The police came to arrest the employees. The police claimed that they were doing a routine check of people’s IDs and temporary residential cards. I sensed there was something wrong. So I told the police that I was not one of the employees. They police took some away, but spared me. The next time the police raided the shop and arrested some employees, I happened to be absent from the scene and therefore was spared again. It turned out that the boss was connected with the mafia and involved in dealings of stolen cars and drugs. The gangsters stole all kinds of super cars, like BMW, Benz, and Audi. The boss was sentenced to 3 years in prison. I was out of work again.

(Silence)

I finally found a job at a factory that manufactured springs. I started as an apprentice without any payment for the first three months. I had no money. I only used laundry detergent power for bathing. I worked hard and was willing to do all kinds of nontechnical chores. At one point the whole area was in an emergency situation as the deadly SARS (severe acute respiratory syndromes) was rampant. I carried the heavy spraying machine to disinfect all the three 8-storey buildings by climbing the stairs. The team leader was happy with my performance and asked me how much I wished to earn ideally. I said “1200 yuan,” thinking to myself that I could save 1000 per month after spending just 200. The team leader said that was not a very ambitious goal at all — “you will get it.” (Chuckles.) So six months later, I started to make 1200 a month. (Chuckles.) The team leader and the manager recognized me with high praise. I moved on to a more technical job where I began to learn some real skills.

Over the four years at that factory, my wages were raised a few times and stayed at 2700 until I left. The managers were all involved in a complex web of kinship and interpersonal relationships, so much so that some employees were actually the managers’ relatives and earned more than we did, even though they didn’t have to do
real work. Several workers and I were angry, and went on a strike to demand raised wages. We asked for 500 more per month, which meant our wages would be boosted to the same level as those who did nothing but punched their attendance cards every morning and afternoon. The managers only agreed to pay 200 more, and the case went up to the boss, a foreign businessman. We threatened to resign if our demands were not met. To our surprise, the boss approved our resignation requests! So I was out of work again. (Chuckles.)

Me: Was that how you ended up coming here [in Hangzhou]?

Sort of. After that, I went to a factory that specialized in manufacturing the machines used to make springs. One set of the spring-making machines was sold to someone here in Hangzhou, and as a technician I came along with the machines to work for the new owner.

I saved some money, and was able to go back home more frequently. I got married, and had a child. The year before last year, my wife and child were actually here with me for a while. But my child was often sick. So I had to send them back home. I wish I could go back home too, but there was little I could do to make a living in my hometown. Here at least I had a job. After spending four years here, I came to like Hangzhou somehow. I feel I can have a better chance to survive in here than in Guangdong. This city has a rich culture. When I first came here, this area was more rural-like. People were better off than folks in my hometown, but the scattered cottages looked similar with my home village. The biggest downsides were the lack of access to healthcare for my family and education for my child.

Me: You mentioned that you quit the job recently, didn't you?

Yes. I bought a spring-making machine so that I could run it to fulfill some work orders by myself. I’m fed up with my boss. I was his only employee, and worked day and night to make money for him. Once the machines were running, I had to eat and sleep on the shop floor to monitor them. When I was off duty, I could come over to work as a volunteer at our Home, but who knows when the boss will call you to work overtime. He would say all kinds of dirty words to curse me. I’m fed up with him. I’ve tolerated him for 4 years. Normally I didn’t rebuke him and just kept silent, but he regarded me as an idiot and said all these disgusting words to me....

Me: (As Yanming stuttered for a moment, I had a feeling that the psychological blows inflicted on such a hardworking young man were far greater than the physical pains he had endured like a camel for all those years. No wonder he mentioned earlier, with a subtle fondness, that he was normally cheerful and lighthearted on the fishing boat, even though that was a tough job.) Have you ever lost your temper?

I had a huge fight with him and then quit the job. I spent 80,000 of personal savings to buy a spring-making machine for myself. But soon after I wired the money, I heard bad news from home. My mother was diagnosed of terminal breast cancer, and my father had a serious stroke and was paralyzed. I had to go back home to take care of
them for a while, and spent 50,000 or so over medication and surgeries. But I had to come back here to figure out how to move on. Someone from a nearby town called me recently and was interested in hiring me. So I may consider accepting his offer by leasing my labor and my machine to him. I really don’t have that much capital to start my own business.

We were both lost in thought for awhile. I didn’t know how to comfort Yanming after he disclosed all these episodes. Perhaps being together with him at the Home was the best thing I could do, as I did. There were other workers around, not listening to us but playing with some musical instruments. I was glad such was Yanming’s choice of a place to have the conversation, and I felt we were not lonely here. Meanwhile, I was curious about the economic factors of the machine that he had already purchased. So I broke the silence by asking how soon he thought his investment could pay back in terms of pure profits. About this technical question (and I was sure it was a familiar one for him), Yanming’s mood seemed to brighten up again, as he estimated that a half year’s full-load operation would make enough money to recover the costs, which seemed to be a fairly short payback period. He was a little bit excited to continue to explain to me that his machine was really versatile in making all kinds of fine-tuned springs as components of cell phones, toys, and many exported industrial products. I felt that he really invested much of his hope in the machine.

I recounted Yanming’s personal narratives as an extended example of migrant workers’ lived experiences, in which labor figured at a fundamental level. In what follows, I will first elaborate on the tension between futility and productivity of labor (Arendt, 1958) as a fundamental component of their human condition, and then develop an account of how the workers’ emerging culture revolved around a fundamental theme or motive to transcend the futility of labor and to frame the workers’ lived experiences in more meaningful ways. Throughout, I will draw my ethnographic evidence from the songs, performances, writings,
conversations, participation observation, and other symbolic meanings at and around GH. As a whole, it can be argued that the social and rhetorical creativity of workers’ culture at GH could be better appreciated and understood by appreciating and understanding the material and experiential foundations of migrant workers. In a sense, they endeavored to transform themselves from laborers to rhetors.

To begin, the futility of labor was manifested in (and as a result of) the spatial displacement of migrant workers. As one of the dramatic examples of migrant workers, Yanming was uprooted from his rural home and became a laborer, who, as the free market economy presupposed, was physically and individually free to commodify his “labor power” in the Marxian sense of being capable of producing surplus. The conflation of the laboring person and the weighty machine constituted a “second persona” for Yanming that portrayed his identity in the vast ocean of the country’s developmental waves; this was a most striking epitome of how the laborer was turned into an instrumental component of political economy, to be only temporarily fixed in a geographical location where capital flowed. As Zygmunt Bauman points out when discussing the social conditions of the modern working class, the new industrial order led to the separation of the laborer’s productive activities from the rest of life’s pursuits (2000, p. 141). The migrant worker’s life was that of a sojourner; the fulfillment of his or her “real life” (with family members in the countryside or the slightest hope of being able to settle down in the city) had been perennially delayed. Furthermore, the short-term, informal, or illegal employment of labor, along with the arbitrary prevention of the “peasant-workers” from getting accepted as legitimate local residents, threw the laborer into a precarious world lacking the social conditions for mutual trust or commitment (see Bauman, 2000, p. 148). Although such a condition was not restricted to migrant workers in particular, the workers’ labor was futile, as if they were
hopelessly “enslaved by necessity” (Arendt, 1958, p. 83; also see chapter 3). I say “as if” because the migrant workers aspired to transcend the futility of *animal laborans* so as to become “human after all… with a free and healthy soul” [Xu] by making their own culture. This will be discussed a bit later in this section.

There were numerous songs from BHW’s albums that depicted and reflected the migrant workers’ everyday experiences at the workplace, and at GH whoever was on duty would play these songs (among others) out loud in the afternoons, instead of sentimental popular love songs. For instance, “every day I’m manipulated to rise early, my life fixed on the assembly line on a shop floor without distinction of day and night” (A3, “Industrial Zones”). Or, take the “elevator girl” for an example, who was preoccupied with the robot-like operation of pushing the control buttons on a daily basis, most of her time shut from sunlight and invisible from the elevator users (A3, “Elevator Girl”). Some lyrics sarcastically portrayed the migrant workers’ disillusionment at “the” city, which “resembled a paradise seen from afar, looked like a bank as you approached it, and was really like a prison once you arrived there” (A3, “Here We Work as Migrant Workers”). In an extreme case, a particular song titled “Song of Life” (A1) was dedicated to a young migrant woman worker, a victim of discrimination who killed herself by jumping off the train during her trip to work in a certain city far away from home. This particular song was also dedicated to the victims of suicides in early 2010 at Foxconn.

The futility of labor was further reinforced in the workers’ disadvantaged life in a rampant consumer culture. (This, in turn, was related to the other component of futility that had to do with the fragmentation of time for the migrant workers, as will be discussed shortly.) In an ironic song from BHW’s repertoire, the singer recounted his conversation with an actual worker named “Brother Biao” who “said he was homesick after drinking a little alcohol after a 13-hours work
that day, musing over the question why those fashionably dressed well-to-do people looked down upon us? …Don’t they know whose labor has kept them alive?” (A1, “Brother Biao”). In a song about urban culture (A3, “City Life”), the laborers are described as being hailed as “cheap but durable commodity, [in a city] hawking European-like high-class lifestyle, hawking the mirage of ‘Super Girls’ and lottery, hawking their desires and illusory advertisement” (A3, “City Life”). At GH, Xu and his colleagues were particularly worried about the encroachment of workers’ spare time by gambling machines (slot machines), gambling-like card games, and indecent web materials. Likewise, Xu had lamented the fact that the workers “felt an endless vacuum of meaninglessness, after they spent their meager savings right away in the city [where they had just earned them].”

Labor tended to be futile for a further reason that the migrant workers’ time was consumed in a rather fragmented way. As indicated in the brief history of GH, not long after Xu decided to quit his job in order to concentrate on the founding of GH, he would go back to the factories to visit fellow workers and found them complaining as always. “We are just working except eating and eating except working,” they told Xu. GH members like Guanghui (see Chapter 5),

29 The “super girls” were young female contenders participating in pageant-like entertainment shows appealing to a wide range of audiences.

30 The gambling machines were nicknamed “tiger machines,” which were decorated by images of voluptuous female figures and installed in many eateries and restaurants in neighborhoods such as that of GH. In a newspaper article with the striking title of “Tiger Machines Eat up Workers’ Blood Sweat Wages,” the reporter found that it’s very common for a gambling worker to lose 50 yuan in a stretch at the machine, and there had been tragic cases of workers whose losses totaled at tens of thousands yuan (for each) (Shang, 2010).

31 On GH’s website, there were some archived survey results from 237 voters who were asked to answer how many hours they worked every day (Grassroots Home web, 2010): Only 37 of them self-reported eight hours or less, while more than half of them (n. 125) reported 12 hours or more. Although the validity of these statistics could not be verified, self-reports from many workers at GH, such as Yanming, Guanghui, Xu and his wife, Xiaolong and his girlfriend, Zhao Heng, Ah Tang, Xiaocui, and Cheng Chunhao, etc. confirmed a fairly consistent pattern of working overtime every day. A noticeable exception (or irregular work schedule) would be a few workers who worked on more or less mobile jobs, such as delivery and repairing work. For the purpose of this project, the
Yanming (see above), and Xu’s wife were all real-life examples of the heroine named Xiaoyu in the opening play where she had to work overtime till 10 PM or even later. Meanwhile, workers who lived collective dorms designated by the factories would often spend the evenings and mornings in a frenzied way to fight for an opportunity to use the bathrooms, shower rooms, tap water for washing clothes, and quick meals. (As most workers only had one day off every week [mostly Sundays, but sometimes rotating], organizing activities for a maximum number of participants became constantly difficult, hence mostly evening sessions, as one could imagine.)

A serious consequence of the futile character of labor was the denial of workers’ lived experiences. Although GH promoted the slogan of “labor is glorious” publicly, the metaphor itself was destabilized by the lurking sentiment that, as Lao Wei told me bluntly, “Who would truly enjoy laboring all the time in this society?” When Lao Wei and I chatted at the concrete playground outside GH’s new facility, there happened to be a commercial promotion demonstration going on in the nearby Ping-Pong room, where the speaker was making a fiery and mesmerizing speech to glamorize the teaching materials of fast memorization skills in front of a packed crowd of parents (probably 100 of them, some with their school children). Lao Wei and I watched for a while through the window, couldn’t bear the sweaty warm airflow flooding in our direction any more, and walked away. Lao Wei continued to make his point that the rampant spreading of “successology” (science of success, usually in the form of frenzied intensive training courses) had encouraged such a popular mentality that the migrant workers’ “unsuccessfulness” was reduced to the result of personal and psychological attributes. As long as one didn’t succeed – and most migrant workers didn’t by standards of settling down in the cities shared “structure of feelings” (Williams Raymond), as manifest in the workers’ lived experiences, were regarded as more qualitatively significant than quantitative nuances.
with property ownership and full residential status – the psychological impacts were tremendous ego-devastation in addition to the reality of deprivation.

When the workers did have some spare time, they lacked an active life that would approach anything “public” had they not been involved at GH. First of all, obviously, they had to get enough rest, sleep, and food in order to go to work the next day. Before joining GH’s activities, Yongmin (an air-conditioner repair worker) told me that after supper he would normally doze off in his bed in his tiny dorm room, sometimes unknowingly leaving the TV set on for the whole night. One of the commonest words that workers used to describe their life without GH was “tui fei,” which could be translated into English as a status of life of being bored, depressed, self-disillusioned, hopeless, and/or wasted. Some relatively mature workers (e.g., Little Sichuan) would work on odd (manual) jobs during his spare time to make some extra money, but the spare time would be deprecated for those with limited low-level skills, which were not valuable commodity in the gray-income market.32 Another worker, Jiang Min, told his “pre-GH” story in which he described himself as a “petty hooligan” who liked to hang around in bars during his spare time.

Such was the human condition of migrant workers hinging precariously upon the futility of labor, leading them into intimate contact with displacement, deprivation, fatigue, low spirit, disillusionment, rejection, discrimination, financial or psychological insecurity, work-related diseases or injuries, and/or lack of confidence (the list could continue). As the opening play, Yanming’s story, as well as Chunmei’s tragic death (due to overtime work) realistically and dramatically portrayed, the working body embodied the working time that was controlled by the impersonal clock (cf. Castells, 2000/2010, chapter 7), which was really the surrogate of

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32 By gray-income market I mean the characteristically-Chinese opportunities to make extra income by virtue of one’s skills, expertise, and/or social networking during one’s spare time.
industrial capital that had regulated the huge population of Chinese migrant workers across such a vast geographical scale that hundreds of millions of them could not share holidays, weekends, and leisure time with their family year after year (e.g., Yanming’s stories above; also see Chunmei’s case recounted in Chapter 5).

Futility vs. Productivity: The Problem of Labor (Part 2)

If labor was so futile, at least seemingly so in the capitalist culture in China, how could the workers transcend it or frame their lived experiences in more meaningful ways? I said “seemingly” in the previous sentence because the futility thesis of labor was far from being cut and dried. The various aspects of futility I have discussed are largely seen through the objective “realist” (Hariman, 1995) lens of the migrant workers’ cultural self-representation and self-accounts, which can fuel further rhetorical exercises of dissoi logoi, depending on the frame of reference in which they were used as raw materials to produce new meanings. From the perspective of GH (e.g., recall what the sociologist had said about GH in Chapter 4), the fragmented use of spare time and displaced lived experiences posed a great challenge to organizing the workers in meaningful and coherent ways. For example, I was personally baffled by the responses from several workers who asked to show them some “shooting and violent” videos during GH’s weekly showing of films (usually on Thursday evenings). While I try to refrain from making any value judgment about workers’ cultural assumption, GH as a self-claimed advocate of “healthy culture” (Xu) clearly wanted to push for a different orientation (e.g., regarding the selection of appropriate films to be shown).

The brief history of GH showed how its leadership had evolved its attitude and value orientation to build the workers’ culture more positively. Before the staff articulated their core
values in the succinct, powerful, and revealing words of “self-reliance and mutual aid and perseverance till the end of time” (zi zhu hu zhu ,zi qiang bu xi), actually perennial thinking and rethinking of the migrant workers’ human condition had been going on in order to squarely hammer upon this accepted version. As early as the year of GH’s web-based forum in 2006, Xu made a list of eight value-terms (e.g., hardworking) that looked more like work ethic codes of a “good” worker for the factories and companies. Meanwhile, in 2006, Xu was more focused on remedial efforts to “remove” what was supposed to be the deficiency of the workers, such as lack of sanitary habits, lack of physical stamina, lack of perseverance, and lack of urbane etiquette and “civilized” lifestyle. Generally speaking, it had been common at labor groups like GH to talk about how to rebuild the “confidence” workers, and as a consequence, the provision of remedial services for them had become a somewhat standard practice. Meanwhile, GH’s historical documents indicated that Xu and his colleagues had since its inception gradually learned and realized that the seemingly impoverished workers didn’t really lack anything. They discovered what had been so obvious but not noticed about their own capacities!

In his characteristically lucid way, Xu, when commenting on GH’s efforts to promote the eight-hour principle, disclosed what he took to be the secret motive of capitalist culture: “When some people have the time to rest, it’s inevitable that some other people won’t find the time to rest.” Was that not obvious? Often with unadorned language, grassroots workers often could articulate what had been so obvious but unnoticed (or disguised) about the social truth of the world in which they sojourned. This reminded us of Augusto Boal’s comments on the genius of the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, who “discover[ed] the obvious” (Boal, 1998, p. 128):

[T]he workers and the peasants did not see the wage, holidays nor the right to schooling and health for their children. The workers did not see the time to rest. The hungry, the time to eat. The poor, the time of deliverance from poverty. (ibid.)
Thus, it can be argued that, on top of the seemingly transparent representation of the migrant workers’ lived experiences, such cultural raw materials provided opportunities for them to become their own observers and imaginative critics. The key lies in the recognition and rediscovery of their social and rhetorical productivity, for which the productivity (instead of futility) of their labor was a material foundation, an analogy, and a persuasive argument. This shall be elaborated as follows.

First of all, a preliminary list of the various types cultural activities taking place in the name of GH will help to show the richness of their “symbolic work” (Willis, 2000, p. 69), no matter how crude they might appear. Here the notion of “work” is in line with Arendt’s argument that, despite the reification and instrumentalization of labor,

“if the animal laborans needs the help of the homo faber to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men [sic] need the help of homo faber in his highest capacity, that is, the help of artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all.” (1958, p. 173)

Throughout the years, GH workers had enriched its growing repertoire of activities that covered a wide spectrum, which included but were not limited to:

- Workers’ theatre (e.g., the play as documented in the Prologue)
- Singing workers’ songs
- Sign-language dancing
- Workers’ costumes (fashion) show
- Preparing, sharing, and distributing the articles for the Grassroots Magazine
- Workers’ composition contests
- The Grassroots Lectures series that allowed outstanding members to lecture their fellow workers
- Occasional roundtable discussions and debates (participants were mainly workers, sometimes outside experts might be invited)
- The Grassroots Interviews series that provided a public stage for migrant workers to tell their own stories and musical works

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33 Sign-language dancing is the use of sign language to translate sometimes roughly and perform the lyrics of a song.
Interviewing and visiting workers at the shop floors
Photo essays about manual workers like natural gas bottles deliveryman
The Literary Interest Group’s activities, including reading out loud ready-made short stories and middle-school texts
Annual and seasonal performance shows, such as GH’s anniversaries, Mid-autumn festivals, the New Year’s Day, and the Chinese Spring Festival

Plus more community-oriented activities, sometimes sporadic, such as:

- Neighborhood-wide badminton contests entirely organized by worker volunteers
- Neighborhood cleaning up
- Visiting seniors at the local caring house
- Volunteering at local public events
- Voluntary care-taking of migrant workers’ children (especially during summer breaks)

Again, it had been a process of trial and error that GH gradually focused on activities that resembled what I would follow Willis to call “symbolic work.” At GH the workers also had opportunities to study basic computer skills (taught by fellow workers), and to some degree received sporadic paralegal support (not very professional and often not successful) with regard to labor rights issues. Suffice it to say that the workers who participated in community services or member-oriented services were more often than not the same as those who enjoyed cultural activities at GH (although each worker might have his or her idiosyncratic interests and for many of them spare time was often limited); as such, they formed an intricate and vibrant web of symbolic meanings, interpersonal relationships, coordinated actions, and sometimes just loose coupling (e.g., whoever available would be needed to do chores at GH).

The seemingly disorderly life at GH was in fact an ongoing orderly achievement of migrant workers (some of them coming to town by chance and leaving for good), who nevertheless stabilized a common sense of belonging and association through what A. O. Hirschman would call “social energy” (Hirschman, 1984, esp. chapter 4; also quoted in Kleymeyer, 1994, pp. 31-32). The aforementioned successful fundraising for poverty-stricken sick fellow workers suggested ample evidence that GH workers were capable of highly coordinated social actions.
Meanwhile, insofar as “culture” had its own content and meaning that was not strictly restricted to the pragmatics of action, it could also be argued that the seemingly hybrid cultural manifestations at GH implied something that grassroots development workers would term “cultural energy…[which] is called forth by cultural expression and action back upon that expression to reshape it and perpetuate it” (Kleymeyer, 1994, pp. 31-35). Cultural activities that were not specifically community-action-oriented (i.e., mainly for recreational purposes, such as music making) would give rise to or make it possible for coordinated action; likewise, the process of mobilization and coordination for practical purposes (e.g., fundraising) would also enhance workers’ cultural energy by boosting their cultural repertoire and reinforcing their core values, ideas, and values[^34].

When workers came together at GH, they could reclaim or reaffirm the authenticity of their lived experiences, which had been largely denied in the mainstream culture. For example, when the GH staff tried to select movies that were based on migrant workers’ life, they found that even the very few available titles were performed by minor film stars who did not really have any experience working and living as an migrant workers. Online, there had been some sources of poetic and critical writings by and for the migrant workers, and Xu himself was an example. Back in 2006 when Xu was still preparing to launch GH as a “real-world” organization, he would share and discuss work- and life-related experiences with fellow workers online. In a way that contradicted the surface meaning of complaining, the very fact that workers’ problems were

[^34]: A case in point was the successful fundraising efforts for Huang Genlin, as mentioned in Chapter 5, which really was fondly recalled as the golden time of GH as their common home. On the other hand, attempts to coordinate fundraising in some other cases (e.g., the quarrels among the staff with regard to the “Spring Mother Case,” see Chapter 7) might turn out to be counterproductive to the cultural coherence of the GH group. That, in turn, entailed tremendous rhetorical craftsmanship for the staff to repair their chasm and rein the organizational culture back to track. On this account, then, there might not be any deterministic relationship between cultural and social energy, which would better be conceived of as coevolving.
shared candidly could be interpreted as a way of affirming their common existential world. In vivid language, e.g., Xu wrote about all kinds of bodily pains he and his fellow workers had in the garment factory. In the excerpt below, the title was from the original.

The Pains of Garment Factory Workers

Migrant workers normally stay inside the factories, sheltered from bad weather or scorching sunshine. This sounds like a commendable occupation. No wonder there are always young men and women who want to learn how to make garments [so as to find such jobs], and this has made tailors’ trainings a hot and profitable business.

But when you personally enter a garment factory as a worker, sit down [at the sewing machine], and work there for 6~12 months, you are bound to feel the pains that garment factory workers have felt.

Pains Type 1: Eyes

How miserable the eyes of the workers are! For as long as the workers have to work, their eyes have to endure the impact from the florescent lights. When you get sleepy, you must strain your eyes wide open in order to continue your task…. To have a good sleep, that was reportedly the last wish of Gan Hongying, a garment factory worker who died [from fatigue of overtime work]. If you look around, you won’t find a single worker whose eyes are not covered with bloodspots.

Pains Type II: Stomachache

More often than not garment factory workers have stomach problems, because they are forced [by money and/or by the boss] to continue to work while his or her food is still in the mouth and not yet fully digested …. They spend about 5 minutes only in eating each meal!

Pains Type 3: Buttock Pains

People normally don’t understand how one can cause pains in the buttocks simply because of sitting on the stools. But that’s true of garment factory workers. Most of them have two large scars in the buttocks due to a perennially seated position [in order to work]. Especially in summertime, the spot is soaked with sweat where you sit on the wooden stools. The pain in their bruised skin is indescribable.

Pains Type 4: Female’s Health Problems

Some garment factories provide accommodation for married couples. As a matter of fact, however, each couple’s room is located in the same big room with other rooms, only separated by curtains. As a result, sanitation is always an unsolved problem. Many female health problems are caused by such conditions.

Pains Type 5: Pains in the Fingers
Not very many garment factory workers have not been hurt by sewing needles in their fingers. What would you do if your finger is pierced through by a needle? If you never worked in a garment factory, you probably won’t believe this is the way they treat the injured fingers: Pick the needle out with a pair of pincers, dip the injured finger in the lubricant oil (in order to disinfect and stop bleeding), and then go on with the work!

Am I too cruel in having to reveal all these types of pains of the garment factory workers? Who knows how long these pains will continue into the future!?

It must be noted that this seemingly merely “objective” piece was already an artful work in several aspects. First, Xu actually demonstrated his folk method of collecting and cataloging all those details of lived experiences from fellow workers. In a sense, he was a mundane auto-ethnographer by living as and reflecting on the life of a migrant worker. Second, apart from the striking facts told in a candid manner, another salient rhetorical feature of this piece was to invite the audience/reader in empathizing with the lived experiences of the workers. Third, the embodied experiences, as retold Xu, assumed an intimate and somatic standpoint where he could claim to authenticity and truth. A few years after this was written (in 2006), the workers at GH would have a chance to talk about the impact of working overtime during a series of roundtable discussions (in early 2011), during which such kind of “raw materials” could be reused and reinvented (e.g., the opening play). It is interesting to note that, apart from seeking solutions (which did not emerge in a feasible form), Xu pushed the participants to first focus on personal descriptions or stories of their true experiences. “Explaining such phenomena would be the job of sociologists and economists,” Xu told his followers. “What we need to do first is to resist stylized ways of words and expressions so as to tell our own stories!” (“Doing theory or fashionable literary works is not the kind of expertise we workers have,” Xu said during another occasion when editing the contributions to the Grassroots Magazine.)

The sense of authenticity was important if viewed in the overall cultural orientation of the workers’ social and rhetorical practices. Xu, after attending the NGO training program in Beijing
(2007-2008), talked to his staff that “we need to distinguish our grassroots culture from the capitalist culture, which is driven by profit-seeking, glamorizes consumption that is destructive and almost suicidal, and judges everything by the standards of money.” The material foundation of the vernacular rhetoric the workers would employ to define their own culture rested on acknowledgement of the authenticity of lived experiences. Throughout GH’s brief history, the coming together of migrant workers at GH was paralleled by recounting, reflecting upon, and reinventing their lived experiences. These stories were important to their group identity.

Although the image of common “family” or “home” is unlikely to exhaust all the meanings that GH did/could help nourish for every individual worker, part of the general argument here (as extended from Chapter 5) is that this image became a metaphorical framework of acceptance where every worker, who to some degree suffered a sense of rejection. The constituting image of GH conveyed a sense of familial regard and respect that accompanied a sense of belonging to something larger than each individual. In sharing stories and aspirations and burdens, they recognized each other’s existence. Indeed, one of the favorite songs that GH members would play at their Home was titled “Remember That Year (When I Left Home)” made by BHW, which was an autobiographic account of home-leaving and home-sickness with fond memories of the home village, blooming peach trees, caring mother, and beloved fiancée.

Together, the workers could do many things, as they did. They transformed their complaining to questioning, self-denial to self-expression, and isolation to solidarity. As quoted in the beginning of this chapter, Xuduo appealed to the Chinese classical notion of poetry [and music] as what “the starved people sing about their food and the drudgers sing about their labor,” so as to demystify the elitist connotation of “culture” and to raise the workers’ consciousness through discovering and reflecting upon what was obvious but had been disguised about their
human existence in the world. As part of the productions of Xuduo’s workshop, the workers at GH made the song “Why” (“Together let’s think about it…”), as appended at the end of the play in the Prologue. Indeed, the workers were characteristically straightforward in songs that posed a down-to-earth question, “Why is it that the laborers in all ages have created history and wealth but eventually nothing belonged to us” (A5, “Some Day”)? Through talking and other symbolic meanings (e.g., photographing fellow workers’ living and working experiences), the workers transformed the hidden or private aspects of their human condition into quintessentially public ones. They were forming what Arendt would term a “space of appearance…wherever men [sic] are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government” (Arendt, 1958, p. 199, emphasis added).

Together, the workers discovered what had been so obvious but unnoticed or disguised about their human condition. The key lay in the productivity of their labor, instead of futile efforts to make ends meet. Several songs from GH’s repertoire (made by the BHW art troupe and circulating among labor organizations around the country), for example, represented the workers’ self-assertion of the “glorification of labor,” which was in essence to recognize the productivity of labor, instead of futility. As Sun Heng, the founder of BHW and colleague of Xuduo, suggested during a visit at GH, the workers sensed the fundamental contradiction in the social reality that “the construction workers of those fancy homes cannot afford any of their own; medical technologies and services have been greatly improved but the workers lack adequate medical care; the national educational system has reportedly boasted of its world-class standards, but our children are not allowed to receive quality education” (Sun often repeated the same script, see BHW, 2011, May 1 festival video). In the song titled “The Migrant Workers Are the Most
"Glorious" (A1) the singing group followed a typical laborers’ chanting tune (with forceful rhythms of seven beats per line) \(^{35}\) to make their point. The song began with the repeated chanting of the first three lines, and its masculine vocal effect (even including the female singers) embodied a sense of physical and symbolic strength as “we” stood by each other:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Laborers! Laborers! Most glorious! Hey!} \\
\text{Laborers! Laborers! Most glorious! Hey!} \\
\text{Laborers! Laborers! Most glorious! Hey!} \\
\text{It’s we who constructed the high-rise buildings,} \\
\text{It’s we who built the magnificent roads,} \\
\text{It’s we who do the dirty \(^{36}\) and tough jobs,} \\
\text{We lead an upright live with dignity,} \\
\text{We earn honest wages with sweat and strength.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

... 

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Laborers! Laborers! Most glorious! Hey!} \\
\text{Laborers! Laborers! Most glorious! Hey!} \\
\text{Laborers! Laborers! Most glorious! Hey!} \\
\text{We are the laborers of a new era,} \\
\text{We are the creators of a new world,} \\
\text{Hand in hand, shoulder by shoulder,} \\
\text{We live with honor and dignity under the heavens.} \\
\text{We march forward in great courage on the earth.}
\end{align*}
\]

While there was much worth analyzing (e.g., the association of virtues with wage workers) in the song, the fundamental thesis remained to be the workers’ affirmation and glorification of labor as productive, not futile. More specifically, the workers made the assertion that they not only possessed the human agency of creating the material world where the fruits of their labor lasted in real time and real places (see Figure 13 below; also cf. Arendt’s notion of “work”), but also positioned themselves on the right side of history which was to unfold as the result of their own making. The rhetorical style was mainly realist (see Hariman, 1995) in the sense that the

\[^{35}\text{The metric pattern is not exactly recreated in the English translation of the lyrics. For the original sound tracks for this song and others to follow in this paper, please refer to their online mp3.}\]

\[^{36}\text{Here "dirty" literally means manual jobs that involve unclean tasks, such as dishwashing at restaurants, apparently not denoting that the jobs are immoral.}\]
workers were portrayed as capable of seeing through social reality and articulating historical truth in a crystal-clear way, without the pretension of urbane decorum. This, however, does not mean that the song was totally transparent communication or pure persuasion. The vernacular rhetorical meaning, as evoked here, is the appeal to labor as the fundamental anchor of moral dignity.

In another song titled “Ode to the Laborers,” which adapted a Korean folk melody like a marching song, the lyrics were similar but encompassed more symbolic elements starting with the workers’ shared lived experiences (or “structure of feelings”) of migrating across the country, as Yanming did:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We’ve left families and friends behind,} \\
\text{To travel on a road of battles,} \\
\text{To wander around the country to make a living,} \\
\text{To struggle for our dreams.} \\
\text{We’re not the have-nots;} \\
\text{We’ve got wisdom and hands;} \\
\text{We’ve built big roads, bridges, and skyscrapers.} \\
\text{We don’t care about the winds and storms.} \\
\text{We don’t idle for a second.}
\end{align*}
\]
We don’t mind shedding our tears and sweat,
We march forward with our heads held high.
Our happiness and rights
Shall only come from our own making.
Laborers have created the world,
Laborers are the most glorious.
From yesterday to today to the end of time –
Laborers are the most glorious.

The song was made to be performed by a group of workers to have the best effects. Like a script, the song (among other musical pieces) created an opportunity and space in which the workers could personally engage (with real bodies and voices) for singing and acting together. Xuduo, while visiting GH, taught the workers the simple eight-parts hand gestures to accompany the eight-beats rhythm while he led the singing of the whole group (see Figure 14, above). While at GH, I observed their performance on many occasions. They sang it at as a welcoming ritual for the officials of the provincial bureau of labor welfare who visited GH on the National Day (October 1) 2010 and offered several boxes of used books, magazines, and fans as holiday gifts. They sang it as a “thank you” at the end of a series of lectures on Chinese traditional culture given by two professors from a local college (with some of their students as volunteers). The song had been so familiar and well-practiced for the workers that they only needed a little cue from Xu or someone else in the room for, them to stand up and sing it in unison as a symbolic greeting, as stylizing the moment, as something they collectively had and would gladly offer to balance their side of the moral scale of gift-giving. The song itself was formless, and yet the singing partook of a ponderable existence as it momentarily filled the room with the workers’ human vocals and the sounds from accompanying trumpets. The human relational field suddenly was transformed at such a game-changing moment: The workers in the audience became speakers; they broke their passive silence; they who were served by some of the privileged
(albeit superficially, with such superficiality gladly and gratefully received by the workers, yet with the unsaid question as to what else everyone could do to make change possible) privileged themselves as the voice of historical inevitability. With the song they issued a call of conscience, a belief that “from yesterday to today to the end of time” glory be unto the laborers.

Figure 14. Xuduo (of Beijing Home of Workers) led the singing group of workers As they performed hand gestures at a fundraising event, November 2010

The notion of “glorious labor” was a cultural metaphor, almost a euphemism. It was reminiscent of the socialist legacy under the leadership of Mao, when the grassroots laborers were honored publicly and had a much higher political status. While GH’s efforts to re-root its culture and agenda in history would turn out to be more complicated than its surface (to be discussed in Chapter 7), suffice here to quote Liu Ming who equated socialism as “the ism of the working people.” In essence, the emerging workers’ culture as manifested in GH (and beyond), in order to transcend the futility of labor, implied necessary spiral moves that eventually would orient toward an ideal (politically and institutionally guaranteed) civil sphere in which the laborers would be accepted as full citizens in free speech and association. The necessity of the existence of such an ideal civil sphere was implied in the overtone of workers’ vernacular voices
at GH (and beyond GH, the emerging civil sphere in China deserves further serious research). In GH’s facility (the “old home”), there was a banner on the wall (beside the logo wall) that reproduced a quote by the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao: “Respect for labor, respect for the value of labor, is the fundamental moral principle of our nation” (which circulated widely among labor groups, see BHW, 2011, p. 65). This statement suggested a political will (or promise) not to abandon China’s socialist legacy, which, according to the Constitution, still defined the state as “the People’s Dictatorship led by the working class and based in the peasant-worker coalition” (Central Government, 2004). As a matter of fact, the Constitution also guaranteed liberty of association and free speech. The country’s social reality, however, was contradictory. Leading economists like Yasheng Huang characterized China as “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” (Huang, 2008), owing its recent economic boom largely to the urban-eschewing policies since the 1990s. More tellingly, domestic leftist critics made a similar and more infuriated argument that China’s development had been parasite on the “colonization” of peasants and migrant workers (originally peasants too), sacrificing their economic independence and innovativeness (Li, 2011).

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Here, the above two side-by-side sections have come in a full circle to the political economy of the entire country, and labor, being tapped as the source of wealth, had figured at the various levels of the migrant workers’ human condition in which the futility thesis resided in tension with labor’s productivity. Labor tended to be futile in the sense that the workers’ human existence tended to be reduced to a mere instrument (“living labor,” as Marx would argue) of the instinctive motive to meet the needs of metabolism and to reproduce itself. The life of migrant workers was displaced, deprecated, and fragmented in a world where labor “[could] not be easily
conceived of as the ethical foundation of society, or as the ethnical axis of individual life”
(Bauman, 2000, p. 139).

But why not? Why couldn’t the migrant workers become better humans than what was
perceived of them and have “free and healthy souls” if they were in every aspect of humanity no
different from their compatriots? In coming together in speech and action, they started to
rediscover the productive side of the coin (labor) that had been denied. Here, speech was
generously conceived of as the vernacular rhetorical practices employing not just formal
speeches, but also songs, dances, poems, plays, and etc. As such, the workers transformed their
fragmented life into associational, cultural, public, and somehow spiritual human existence,
although these aspects were intertwined. As such, they formed an emerging “space of appearance”
in which the narratives would ultimately point to (if not yet approaching) an ideal civil sphere to
affirm full citizenship and humanity. In light of that ideal, GH’s efforts might be construed as
only temporary at the least and processual at the most. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, GH as
a social place in itself was temporary and unstable, while the historical roots of GH’s dreams had
to be found elsewhere.

In essence, the existence of GH made it possible for the workers to affirm the authenticity
of their lived experiences as migrant workers, pains and aspirations alike, and endeavored to
define themselves as socially and rhetorically capable of living a meaningful life. In a poem
composed for the International Labor Day celebration, the workers emphatically included the
following lines from several ready-made poems by fellow workers from other parts of the
country:

_We’ve kept silent for too long!_
_Now it’s time for us to speak,_
_As a new era is turning its page!_
_Let’s build spotlights for ourselves!_
Let’s build our own stage!

... Let’s build a podium to uphold our spiritual torch!
Let’s hold onto our hope!
Let’s keep ourselves strong!

Conclusion

This chapter started with a brief policy analysis regarding how the workers’ culture was defined by official discourse as a passive object to be controlled, supervised, provided for, and incorporated into the official doctrines of socialist value system. This value system was conceived as an urgent response to the perceived alarming disintegration of the country’s overall social trust, not the least due to the excessiveness of free market economy. While the officially recognized “cultural rights” of the workers might lead to more open space and vibrancy of workers’ organizations in the future, the official notion of “culture” tended to be trivialized as technological matters, as such “having access to and being able to afford TV programs, films, concerts, dancing, and singing, just like the urbanites do” (according to a recent official TV commentary, Xinhua.Net, 2011). The workers’ culture, as emerging from workers’ self-organizations, represented the growing grassroots awareness of the erosion of the socialist political economic basis of egalitarianism, and thus encouraged alternative views of what were the true causes of the country’s social malaise. Insofar culture involved values, ideas, and views of social reality, it could hardly be controlled by administrative measures; nor would the cultural “negative thinking” be contained by the overpowering official discourses.

Overall, the lived experiences of workers were structured by displacement and instrumentalization due to the capitalist motive. Labor, the source of wealth, became the workers’ bondage and was severed from meaningful connection with their family life and community. In a
culture of consumerism, the migrant workers increasingly felt deprived, marginalized, and rejected. Labor tended to lose its meaning as the basis of moral virtues (e.g., honesty and courage). The emergence of workers’ culture, however, challenged the futility of labor as the foundation of human condition, and rediscovered the productivity of labor as the material basis of the authenticity of the workers’ lived experiences. By sharing, rethinking, and representing episodes of such lived experiences, the workers endeavored to come together in a space of appearance. The cultural activities, such as story-telling, singing, dancing, and performance of workers’ plays, provided great opportunities for workers to do something together, affirm the human existence of each other, and effectuated the rise of their social capital (e.g., trust and the capability of acting together). In such symbolic work, the workers tried to represent themselves in aesthetic forms, which in turn assumed a sense of permanence to counter the erosion by their fragmented experiences of time, space, and the laboring body. Such a space resembles what Havel would call “a pre-political” realm, where “living within the truth” confronts the regime’s lie in either intellectual, spiritual forms or simply mundane, quotidian manners (Havel, 1986, p. 65). In this sense, the working’s emerging culture emphatically points to a nascent civil sphere in which they aspired to express their civil judgment in their collectively informed vernacular rhetorical forms. In the process, it can be argued that the workers formed what Raymond Williams (see Kirk, 2007, p. 41) would call “the ethic of solidarity.”
Chapter 7
Dreaming in a Borderland: Social Imaginaries at Grassroots Home

For GH, the year of 2011 began with uncertainty. Although the tension with the local authorities had temporarily eased, the staff, as well as the core volunteers, was exhausted. The Grassroots Magazine remained unregistered, and the account book was full of technical errors and holes – these two factors, if exploited by the authority, would suffice to doom the self-organization. The Chinese Spring Festival (in the middle of February) meant a frantic week for the migrant workers to leave the city for a brief reunion with their families in faraway villages across the country. It was a time of bittersweet relaxation, but for Liu Ming it meant something more. For the second half of the past year, he had neglected and practically gave up his garment-selling co-op project in order to concentrate on orchestrating the fundraising efforts. The fundraising had been a great success, but he found himself broke. He had promised to earn 200,000 yuan (30,000 USD) as soon as possible to improve his financial situation and soften his relationship with his young family. But his plan would never materialize, and his quest (financial and otherwise) would be interrupted by an invitation to go to Beijing by Liu Laoshi, who, as Liu Ming and Xu’s mentor (based in Beijing), had sensed GH’s imminent difficulties and decided to send one or two experienced colleagues to join and strengthen GH’s staff.

Half way on his trip by train to Beijing, Liu Ming heard the bad news: Liu Laoshi was fatally injured in a traffic accident as he stepped off the home-bound long-distance bus from Beijing to Tianjin (about a 3-hour ride). After a few days in coma, Liu Laoshi passed away. The tragic news came barely a week after Liu Laoshi paid a visit at GH and delivered a compassionate talk to the workers. “He was choked up in his speech for a long minute, with tears in eyes, saying he felt sorry for not having done anything for the great working people.” GH
members came together again, this time to mourn and honor the man who had stood by them. The sorrow at the loss was palpable, as tens of thousands of students, workers, and peasants across the country wrote blog posts or held vigils honoring the man who had led a quiet movement of rural reconstruction and workers’ cultural reorientation.

During his visit at GH, Liu Laoshi had a prolonged talk with the key members at GH. “It’s like …him sensing some light of hope in the tunnel of despair,” Xu recalled, “Teacher Liu said that GH presented a great opportunity… [in part] to explore solutions to China’s rural predicaments, [not only in villages, as we have been doing so far, but also] here among migrant workers in urban areas… ‘Build a people’s commune, where we the workers can flourish.’ These are the last words Teacher Liu left with us. I understood him saying, in effect, that we as workers are doomed to fail by individualistic efforts, while we can only survive and thrive as a whole. We must come together, so that we won’t be marginalized or excluded!” Refocusing on GH’s current situation, Xu continued with a concerned tone, “Now that we are materially better off [than when we struggled to launch the organization,] unfortunately our spirit has weakened. I want to clarify one more time that there is no ‘leader’ here at GH. We are all brothers and sisters. What we have been doing is neither a ‘movement’ nor a ‘revolution.’ There is nothing unspeakable about what we are trying to do. Let’s stick together and just do it.”

Toward the end of the memorial session, everyone stood up to sing the song titled “Che Guevara,” which was popular among trainees participating in the events and programs directed by Liu Laoshi. Although I had heard this song on various occasions, I had never been so impressed by its mixed mood of profound contemplation, heroic resolve, and tender feelings for the fallen soldier. About three months before, I had gone to Beijing in preparation for a conference, and used the vacant bunk in Liu Laoshi’s dormitory room at the university with
which his NGO network was affiliated. A week later, I met him again at the conference on the theme of indigenous culture and rural development, in tandem with the opening ceremony of a rural community college project at an historic village in the southeastern Chinese coastal province of Fujian. After the conference, Liu Laoshi and I joined a group of attendees to tour at another rural reconstruction project, which was also initiated by the Yen Center, a sister organization with Liu’s LSCRR. As I have been a member of the Yen Center since 2004, I felt a natural sense of camaraderie with Liu Laoshi. It was a rare occasion for us to relax and enjoy the magnificent waterfalls hidden in the green hills, a part of yet-unspoiled rural China where, despite industrialization, pollution, as well as internal immigration and dislocation of peasant-workers, life (human and wild) had been going on with little change for centuries. The wordless natural beauty formed a sharp contrast with the sufferings and injustices that we witnessed or heard in villages and factories and cities every day. Such were the “two sides of the coin,” as Guevara would say to his travel mate during his famed adventures through the impoverished yet stunningly beautiful countryside in Latin America.

Here are the lyrics of the song, translated into English:

Who has lit the distant skies at dawn,
So that thousands of years of darkness shall fade today?
Perhaps there will be light here sooner than expected,
We hear the call from you: Che Guevara.

Who has directed my eyes to the shining stars,
So that the heart shall overcome vanity and falsehood?
Seeking a home at the crossroad,
We see the departing shadow of you: Che Guevara.

Who has led us onto a new journey,
With the idea of justice crystal-clearer than ever?
The road ahead awaits new footsteps,
We shall follow your lead: Che Guevara.

Who has risen and shall never fall,
And is one with the blooming flowers on the earth?
With a revolutionary will more steadfast than ever,
We are resolved to be like you: Che Guevara.

My heart is set to letting the red flag wave forever,
Taking over your gun, marching toward the battleground.
Singing this song of mine, I have the strength to carry on.
Along the road you travelled, we see where it’s leading beyond.

It was a solemn moment. The “I” became the “we” in singing. Inspired by the occasion, the young men and women promised to stick together to make their organization a better place. A female worker said she was most impressed that Liu Laoshi never looked down upon the grassroots people, and Liu Ming called him “a true communist.” It was also a fragile moment. Some of the workers actually never heard of Liu Laoshi or read about his writings, and a relatively new member who had attended the meeting with Liu Laoshi candidly questioned how GH could inherit his legacy if GH workers continued to lack unification. Xu tried to encourage the whole group by making some final remarks: “Not long ago, Teacher Liu said the ordinary working people were the reason for scholars to exist and struggle for a common purpose. He said the hope of our nation remained in the grassroots people like us who upheld confidence and idealism despite hardship. Today, all I want to say is that Teacher Liu is the source of our inspiration and strength for our efforts to meliorate our country’s rural problems and migrant workers’ predicaments.”

The tragic loss of the leading comrade, albeit incidental, served as a wake-up call of sorts. It precipitated GH’s launch of sustained collective learning as a way of overcoming the staff’s critically low morale and moving the organization forward by bettering teamwork, theoretical equipment, and practical guidance. Everyone was tired of internal quarrels, so much so that Lao Wei (sent by Liu Laoshi a few weeks earlier) scolded, in effect, “Stop crappy disputes if we are here truly for the cause of workers’ welfare!” It was time to move on. During the time of my
participant observation, GH staff held regular learning sessions for about ten consecutive weeks, each taking a full day, in which we discussed materials of theoretical and practical relevance and volunteered self-critique of his or her work and thoughts. We actually took turns to personally select – and encourage others to contribute – study materials in advance, and each was responsible to lead and facilitate a particular week’s discussion. We somehow came upon the notion of building a “learning organization” (Peter Senge) by trying to integrate learning habits into weekly discussions as well as day-to-day work.

Here I have come in a somehow roundabout way to delineate part of the context in which to discuss the workers’ social imaginaries that the workers tried to conjecture up through historical and cultural resources. It is worth recalling that, according to Charles Taylor, “social imaginaries… extend beyond the immediate background understanding which makes sense of our particular practices… [and involve] a wider grasp of our whole predicament, how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups” (Taylor, 2007, pp. 172-173). The memorial gathering to honor the lost comrade, for instance, constituted an epideictic moment as GH suspended its everyday work to try to repair its fragile community and to revive its unification by remembering, reflecting, and realigning with its common dreams. It offered a glimpse into how GH generated its cultural orientations from resources of historicity that extended beyond immediate concerns and quotidian copings. While everyday work at GH tended to be centered on what Ricoeur would call a “space of experience” (quoted in Hauser, 1999, p. 111), other moments (e.g., GH’s group study sessions) called for illumination on a “horizon of expectation” (Ricoeur, quoted in Hauser, ibid.), or in Xu’s own words, “the necessity of idealism for GH’s survival, instead of treating idealism as some luxury.” As Lao Wei suggested during the staff meeting (see Chapter 5), apart from GH’s daily services, the
foundation of its cause entailed an all-round grasp of socio-historical circumstances and macroscopic thoughts.

In what follows, I will provide ethnographic accounts of three different cultural orientations, namely the socialist legacy, the traditional culture of love, and the agrarian dream, as manifested in GH’s vernacular rhetoric. Each cultural orientation tended to have its “use value” in GH’s everyday practice and meanwhile implied a certain vision of a better society.

“The Red Army Was Not Built Strong from the Outset…”

The average GH member was in his or her 20s or early 30s. Born in the unfolding reform era, they apparently didn’t have any personal experiences with the country’s pre-reform socialist history under Mao. While it was not clear how individual workers might get to learn at least something about the socialist tradition in personal ways (e.g., through talks with parents at home), there seemed to be both positive and negative usages of the socialist tradition during GH’s daily work. Either way appeared to be textually fragmented, but both could be regarded as the workers’ rhetorical efforts to conjure and control the lingering historicity of the origin of the People’s Republic.

Negatively, the young workers lamented the loss of socialist dreams as a way to critique social malaises in China. For instance, in informal online chat-rooms, the GH members often circulated anonymous postings, such as the following catchy and emphatic one (i.e., gossiping):

Those who fought for the country are gone,
Those who protected the country are old,
Those who managed the country are corrupt,
And those who sold the country are rich;
The plain people are generally poorer and poorer,
The officials are spending more and more public money for private use,
Whereas the common people suffer more and more hardship in life;
It’s for the purpose of an equitable society that Chairman Mao led the poor people’s revolution. It’s not for the purpose of the aristocratic life of people’s servants and elites that hundreds of thousands of people died as martyrs; Chairman Mao fought for the country on behalf of the working people, not for the purpose of allowing the people’s servants and interest groups to occupy the resources of the society.

Meanwhile, the traditional kind of realistic criticism of capitalism, often found in old Chinese-language junior high-school textbooks, resurfaced as great resources with which the workers grew their social understanding and reflection, now that they were old enough to have tasted the reality of Chinese society. During spring 2011, the GH literary group came up with the idea of reading old texts out loud as a form of group activity, including “The Diamond Necklace” and “My Uncle Jules” by Maupassant. From the outset the group leader was afraid the activity plan might not work out, but it ended up really well, revitalizing the one-time dispirited group. The workers had trouble writing up coherent and engaging stories about/by themselves (often they were better at telling stories orally), but they became more active in picking up roles to read the ready-made texts. Somehow, they found their voices in these fictional foreign figures. The kind of social problems once judged unfair and cruel by socialist orthodox had already become social realities in China, ironically. Recalling the poem “Silesian Weavers” (by Heine) learned in junior high school, Xu conversed excitedly with me about his new article (right off the printer) on “the perennial lie of ‘fair pay’ law”:

My teacher told me, a long time ago, that the Silesian capitalists were so cruel that their employers were forced to work hard for 13 or 14 hours a day.... Today, my fellow garment-factory workers had to work equally long hours. How could this be normal? How could it be defensible that their labor was still voluntarily? (Now it’s like, blame yourself for the long hours because you voluntarily wanted to work more to get better pays. Isn’t that fair enough?) But that was a lie.”
Then Xu explained to me why it was a lie. In a way reminiscent of Engel’s straightforward summary of Marx’s discovery of the secret of wage labor under capitalism, Xu told me that the workers might indeed get some increase of their total wages by producing more items per day, but the more items they produced, the less per-item (monetary) value went into their payrolls. That was the secret key to the lie, simple and plain. He could not believe that the “fair pay law” was rectified by the State Department almost 30 years ago. He had seen through this lie all too well, as he had been through that kind of hardship and his wife was still working like that way, often unable to get back “home” until 10 pm. “Perhaps my words were too incisive…. Recently I told the TV station that ‘shame on you who claimed that the industry suffered labor shortage (i.e., the truth is migrant workers began to resist working under such ruthless conditions).’ I should be more careful about my word choice.”

More positively, the socialist tradition, broadly conceived, might provide the workers the cultural resources with which to think of new possibilities about the society. As Liu Ming said when he started to get involved in GH, socialism was simply considered as “the working people’s ism.” Likewise, Xu argued that the key lied in the “establishment of an economy based in the workers’ collective ownership.” Politically, in a more blunt way, Li Lei verbalized the open secret that “the Constitution is pretty straightforward [about the legality of free association], but the government lacks self-confident, to the extent that it is afraid of your [workers’] potential to cause troubles.” This echoed the equally blunt response from the municipal authority that “even though GH was and still seems benign, there is no guarantee that it will remain so in the future.” That meant deep distrust between the party-state and the emerging civil society. As discussed in Chapter 5, GH had learned to adapt its public discourse in alignment with the party-state’s official discourse lingering with socialist terms, but how to interpret the country’s
socialist legacy became a contentious issue. During the May 1 (International Labor Day) and May 4 (China’s Youth Day) commemorations, the dominant official theme of national celebration was “Follow the Party Forever,” especially targeting the current generation of youth. “That’s what the Party liked most,” Xu told me in a fleeting comment, “It wanted the youth to just follow its doctrines.” In reality, however, grassroots workers had their own celebrations, such as the show presented by BHW’s art troupe of workers. The show was broadcast online, and when I asked one GH member what he walked away with, he gave me only a brief reply, “[it means] workers are not liberated yet.”

In China’s modern history, the working class was supposedly the base of the vanguard party, and, in coalition with the peasantry, had fought for the birth of the socialist republic. Although there had been speculation about the “imminent demise of socialism” as a useful term to guide the direction of its society (Dirlik 2005, p. 247), the lingering socialist legacy was more than just cosmetic. In 2006, the State Department made an announcement that the migrant workers ought to be designated and lauded as “new workers,” i.e., as an integral part of the entire populace of industrial workers, and their labor ought to be respected, as it had been thorough CCP’s tradition (see Liu, March 2011). This history, however, only received cursory mention in the celebratory editorial piece published in the May 1 front page of the CCP-sanctioned People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao), which maintained its ideological convention on the International Labor Day to lavishly laud “the working class” (People’s Daily’s term) for their contributions to “socialist modern construction” (Renmin Ribao, 2011, p. 1). The revolutionary and political background was replaced by an economic vocabulary. However, the migrant workers’ yearning for spiritual belonging was echoed in a sympathetic article which attempted to recuperate the Marxist tradition. A CCP Central Party School professor, as surveying labor groups including
GH and BHW, wrote in an internal periodical (circulating among high officials) that “according to Karl Marx, ‘the proletariat, not wishing to be treated as canaille, needs its courage, its self-reliance, its pride and its sense of independence more than its bread’” (Liu, March 2011, p. 23, original emphasis in Draper, 2007). The author continued to evoke an Marxist insight that “the migrant workers need teach themselves and improve themselves so as to become what Engels called a class for itself... commanding its own interests, principles, and independent worldview, and in antagonism with the haves, hence moving the development of the state forward” (Liu, ibid.). Clearly, the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the socialist and Marxist tradition was a contentious issue.

Meanwhile, in circumstances like the July 1 celebration of the Party’s founding, there was local reverberation of singing revolutionary songs (a.k.a., “Red Songs”), apparently initiated in the overtly left-leaning city of Chongqing. “As long as the plain people wanted to sing these songs voluntarily, instead of being forced to do so, it’s fine,” workers at GH told me so, although their enthusiasm was apparently low. For workers like Li Lei, however, the nostalgic sentiment was more palpable, as he often hummed the tune memorializing Chairman Mao, “Nothing is brighter than the red sun, and no one is dearer than Chairman Mao, for the light of your great thoughts always brightens my soul.” “The true communists, if any, would really want the workers to raise their consciousness and allow them learn the revolutionary history,” Liu Ming would agree with Li Lei when the staff had a casual talk on the eve of the CCP anniversary on July 1, 2010.

Indeed, in GH’s cultural repertoire, one of Xu’s favorite songs was titled “Ode to Motherland” (ge chang zu guo), which was composed on the eve of the People’s Republic’s first

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37 This quote appears in Chinese in Liu (March, 2011). The English rendering used here is based on Marx-Engels Werke (vol. 4, p. 200), as quoted in Draper (2007).
national day (October 1, 1950) and had been popular for official (political) ceremonal occasions. A familiar old song dubbed as the “second national anthem,” “Ode to Motherland” especially impressed Xu when he heard while attending as a grassroots representative the 2010 annual convention of All-China Youth Federation, a certain semi-official political coalition attached to the CCP-sanctioned Youth Union. Xu was so excited about the occasion as to text his grassroots family members about his great aspiration to link GH’s cause with the grand vision of China’s peaceful rise. The song, with grand music and lyrics, enshrined the People’s Republic as the fruit of the heroic revolution for independence and liberation, and honored a peace-loving people’s vision for “prosperity and flushing” led by Mao.

While the revolutionary history in general is a topic beyond the scope of this report, it was noteworthy that the GH staff somehow utilized historical resources to gain practical and theoretical insights. The sustained learning sessions were omnivorous, taking advantage of sources ranging from the Manifesto of the Chinese Communist Party (1921) and Mao’s early writings during the revolutionary years, to various analyses of current affairs, critiques of consumerism, and case studies of best practices in NGOs. The GH staff was particularly attentive to a recent, publically accessible commentary on the historical lessons to be learnt from the collapse of the Soviet ruling party (Dai, 2011). In a politically correct tone, the piece made a rather banal argument that the Soviet failure had much to do with the negligence of building a coherent value system, a predicament that China and its ruling party, despite rapid economic growth, could by no means shy away from. Avowed to follow “the Marxian worldview and methodology,” the article smuggled in its liberal fixer stressing the values of “happiness, freedom, love, and democracy.” The subtle pressure on the party-state for liberal reform notwithstanding, the historical lesson was alarming to the GH staff for practical concerns, as they
realized that “[just like the ruling party,] it’s urgent for us to foster the core values for our organization, so that by heart and soul we can unite as many workers as possible.”

During the study sessions, the GH staff was amazed to rediscover that “the Red Army was not built strong from the outset … but eventually gained its strong foothold” (Xu). Indeed, the headaches bedeviling the communist-led revolutionary army during its formative were almost like a historic mirror in which the staff grasped a better view of their own organizational problems. In 1929, Mao wrote what might look like a handbook of do’s and don’ts to tackle what he identified as strands of “wrong thoughts” circulating in the young army, barely two years old at that time. On Mao’s list, the GH staff found two items particularly relevant as to GH’s own problems: naive militarist mentality and subjectivism. As for the first item, the NGO equivalence would be that, although services were indispensable, the burden to do so might lead to a myopic “mercenary” mentality (i.e., services for services’ sake only), especially if they did not stick to or improve their political sensitivity as to GH’s role in the overall political economy of the country (see Chapter 5 on Lao Wei’s comments). For the second shortcoming, the GH staff walked away with the lesson that, in practice (i.e., decision-making), they should not be blinded by their personal biases from reaching out to fellow workers or comprehending the overall political situations. The Red Army was of course not an NGO, but its historically tested “spirit” inspired the GH staff with a truly indigenous sense of self-organizational “best practice” through what the GH staff recognized as a process of “reflection and improvement through ongoing struggles.”

In concluding this section, GH’s self-study of the socialist tradition was significant in several ways. As with many local NGOs, GH was unique and unprecedented in terms of its self-designated mission, without much ready-made experiences or how-to guides to rely on. Nevertheless, the socialist tradition served as a great reservoir of historicity that the GH staff
could identify with and reinterpret in their own contemporary terms. While the party-state’s official discourse tended to pay only lip service to the revolutionary or radical components of its own history, the GH staff discovered and appropriated this part of history to critique the excess of capitalism and to admonish themselves against the historical pitfalls in which the Red Army and the Party had been caught. There tended to be a sentiment among workers that the party-state had failed to deliver the socialist dreams for which the revolutionary soldiers had died (e.g., Zhengwang), and in a more positive light, the GH staff seemed to have learned a lesson of “historical materialism” that the migrant workers’ hope in part lied in the basis of collective ownership (e.g., the people’s commune). In practice, GH had yet to look for contemporary precedents of workers’ socialist enterprises (e.g., the case of Mondragón, see Cheney, 1999/2002), whereas workers’ emerging culture (see Chapter 6) tended to appropriate socialist themes (such as old “Red Songs”) to mobilize migrant workers and symbolize solidarity.

Given the fact that the emerging generation of migrant workers were displaced from the countryside and socio-politically and culturally marginalized, it would be fair to argue that the socialist legacy offered them a reservoir of cultural memories and historical resources in which to speak and act from the vantage point of China’s founding ideals. the grassroots workers’ endeavors to rediscover and (re)appropriate the lingering socialist legacy could imply a contentious field in which they needed to control such historicity.

“If we gave up the [socialist] tradition, what could we make of ourselves” (Li Lei)?

“I’m Sorry, Confucius….”

On a chilly mid-November morning in 2010, pedestrians along one of the busiest streets in downtown Hangzhou (within the area of the Hangzhou Plaza) noticed something unusual: a
small and shaky figure, his face covered with a green triangular scarf, one hand holding up an ugly T-shaped piece of cardboard, and the other hand dragging a black box of loudspeakers rolling behind him, was slowly cutting across the flow of crowds to go to the sidewalk, while a wrinkle-faced countryside woman was reluctantly following him, her hands clumsily grabbing a guitar. After the two settled down and briefly exchanged some words, the woman started to vocalize some trembling words, hardly following the tune set forth by the masked man. He continued to encourage her by pointing, line by line, the handwritten lyrics on the cardboard, while the woman tried hard to raise her shaky and nervously suppressed voice to catch the tune:

If I get old and... destitute someday...
Please bury me... on a spring day...
As beautiful... as today...

Rigidly, but almost certainly in a heroic gesture, the woman wiped her tearful face with her sleeves, and tried to continue the rehearsal of the song. More and more pedestrians stopped out of curiosity and circled around the scene. A few moments later, broadcast journalists and cameramen would come to catch the “breaking news” and interview the seemingly confused woman, the funny guitar still in her rigid hands. Financially desperate, she was determined to save her seriously ill, 26-year-old son by drawing public attention to the case. The song had been sounding across the country recently, not only due to its allusion to the hopelessness of migrant workers (it was originally written by a popular singer/writer, and was performed by a pair of migrant-worker singers), but also because the CCP secretary of an inland province had reportedly endorsed it as a way of raising awareness about social problems. Now the mysterious appearance of this peasant woman, in the wake of the song’s national popularity, grabbed the interest of the media and aroused curiosity of the general public.
The masked man seemed to be trying to help the woman, mother of a migrant worker Yang Debiao who had been suffering fatal aplastic anemia and would have all his life-saving medication suspended if he couldn’t raise 400,000 yuan (60,000 USD) as soon as possible. Without a properly signed labor contract in place, he didn’t have health insurance to cover his medical costs, and the municipal philanthropic authority had refused to help on the grounds that he didn’t have any paper proving his legitimate status as a regular worker in this particular city. The mother said she was willing to do anything to save her son. Inspired by the theme of the song, she was quickly dubbed as the “Spring Mother.”

A few days earlier, around the dim corner of the 12th-floor hallway in the hospital where Yang was in treatment, the same masked man and the peasant woman appeared together, as captured in an amateur video circulating online, sitting on the bench as if negotiating about something. The man said to her in an increasingly harsh tone, “Now we’ve no way out except this one! No way except this one…. Will you do it or not? What else can a person like you do in order to save your son?” The woman was silent, her face hidden in darkness. “Is there anything more important than your son’s life? It’s just meowing for a second! Isn’t that easy?! Mama, be brave! Mama, be braver! …. [the man’s voice became quivering] Come on…. ” The woman hesitated in silence, finally imitated the meowing of a cat for two or three segments into the mp3 recorder in the man’s hand, and walked away warily, ashamed. As if this was not enough, the video was captioned: “…. WEIRD ENCOUNTER AT THE HOSPITAL! …. A MAN IN DISGUISE WAS CAPTURED WHILE FORCING AN OLD MOTHER TO IMITATE MEOWING OF A CAT…. THIS SHAMELESS MAN… WHAT WAS HE UP TO?” Almost overnight and over the following days leading to the street singing scene, the video became viral,
accumulating hundreds of thousands of viewers online and many comments (negative or sympathetic) about this “shameless man” and his mysterious motivation.

As broadcast news continued to cover the “street singing” news, the identity of the masked man was soon revealed. He was Liu Ming of GH. In both scenes, he was coaching the mother to do something weird to make news, or “hyping” as many viewers soon discovered. He actually asked a friend to videotape the hospital corridor encounter, and someone else to call in to inform photojournalists about the street-singing performance. In retrospect, while users of both TV and the Internet were still heatedly debating the ethics of Liu’s conduct (e.g., against the mother’s “free will”), Liu Ming was keen to push his fuzzy plan forward, step by step. The viral video triggered a controversy that would later be taken over by broadcast media investigating the case; the provincial TV station jumped to cover the news; their program was relayed by scores of others media. The unfolding case caught the municipal CCP committee’s attention, while the original migrant workers’ duet of the “Spring” song was being contacted by Liu Ming and would soon agree to join a fundraising performance show to be held a month later. Local business owners were called upon to participate in and support the fundraiser, college students were excited to work as volunteers, while migrant workers at GH started to busy themselves rehearsing the “Spring” song as part of their repertoire. The series of efforts to help the great “Spring Mother” turned out to be a tremendous success.

This immediate context for Liu Ming’s conscientious struggle may reveal something more profound about the cultural resources that the workers had to grapple with.

Liu Ming was a man of action known for his ability to “play cards by my own rules” (Liu Ming chatting with me on a bus ride). By the time he started to get involved in GH a few years
ago, Liu Ming had begun contemplating a “folk theory” of grassroots efforts to having their own
voices heard. With respect to what he called “true grassroots type of hyping,” Liu wrote,

*When the grassroots people didn’t have any better resources at their disposal, the only choice was to jump out of the Internet, like springing from a joker box. We had to think about this [method]: Is it good or bad? What are the grassroots people really up to, for all such kinds of hard-fought efforts? What was the cause behind the grassroots adoption of such jocular tactics? So, I’d say to those Internet gurus, please don’t simply take our performance as ridiculous…. Hyping is not the patent of top-notch professionals…. In order for the grassroots to gain strength, we need to do hyping, too. We know too well that grassroots life is full of hardship. All we want is to try our best to make the life of brothers and sisters a little bit easier…. To be a hero [through hyping]? That’s too weighty a name for me. I’d probably prefer being a joker, which would make my life a lot care-free….*

A joker Liu Ming was certainly not. While tactics like the “street-singing” and “meowing” episodes turned out to be effective folk methods of the weak, he had a fair share of psychological struggles and moments of vulnerability. When the “meowing” episode was first exposed he was worried about its potentiality to backfire might hurt the reputation of GH, which was still in a shadow boxing game with the local authorities. When strolling like a beggar-singer in the bustling downtown for hours, Liu Ming confessed that his eyes were full of tears as he passed the urban crowds. “I’ve got my old mother at home, just like Yang’s. Behind every migrant worker, there is a mother just like the “Spring Mother,” ready to sacrifice so that her son may live…. How could I do that to her? How could I possibly do anything like that to my own mother? But that’s the only way we might hope for. We must do it …even though my heart was bleeding.”

Pressing forward with his folkish public relations plan, Liu Ming was nevertheless remorseful and wanted to repent. He hunted for a printed copy of Confucius’s portrait, but in vain (he had wanted to go to the hospital and kneel in front of the portrait, in public, to show he was “sorry”); he eventually downloaded a digital copy of Confucius’ portrait and posted it on his blog, where he wrote that in his dreams he was kowtowing to the Chinese Saint and Master
Teacher, three times with his limbs surrendered on the ground, for what he did to the poor mother. He also wanted to disclose what had been really on his mind, so as to justify what he had done. He narrated one of China’s famous ancient stories of filial love – what might be called the archetype of his “meowing” episode. It was a parable:

During the ancient period of Spring and Autumn, Tan Zi was the king of the Tan Nation. His parents were getting old and suffered vision loss. Tan Zi was sad and worried. He heard that deer milk would serve as wonderful medicine to cure his parents’ eye diseases. So he set out to seek it in the forest. He disguised himself in deer furs, so that he could sneak into the deer herd and found a nursing deer to milk. Unfortunately, a hunter happened to be around and mistook Tan Zi for a game. When the hunter was about to shoot his target that was Tan Zi, Tan Zi hastily disclosed himself as a human being, and explained to the hunter about what he was really up to. The hunter was truly moved by Tan Zi’s love for his parents, gave Tan Zi plenty of deer milk as a gift, and helped him get out of the forest safely.

“I want to try my best to find such a generous hunter,” Liu Ming said to me when he shared my bunk a few days after the incident. The night was chilly in my simple dorm room, but the bed was warmer due to the presence of my friend. In a subtle way to switch the roles of mother and son, Liu’s contemporary version of the parable might sound humiliating. I comforted him by saying that as long as the mother agreed, not by force, “theoretically” it would be ok. But I did not have the kind of language to either rationalize or dismiss Liu’s case. “There has to be something in this world that we shall not do,” Liu Ming said to me, “I didn't tell the mother about my whole plan. I actually had some meowing sounds recorded to be played back, so that she didn’t have really to do the imitation….” In order to catch the attention of the general public, he had created a contemporary parable where human apathy was such that it was easier to critique (Liu Ming’s performance, for instance) than to simply do something to save life. Like Tan Zi in the ancient story, someone like the mother (and in a large sense Liu Ming) would sacrifice whatever necessary in order to save a young man’s life. In fact, the “meowing” episode was
painfully ironic and desperately intended to persuade. It begged the question: Can a person do something out of pure love, instead of finding some good reason to do so (or, not to do so)?

That question cannot be answered in the limited space here, but this somehow convoluted anecdote pointed to Liu Ming’s fundamental logic of love that had often been at odds with other staff members at GH. As to fundraising efforts for Yang Debiao, Xu was anxious and cautious about any potential threat to GH’s existence due to the highly visible activities involving GH’s name, which the local authorities had warned against. For the beginning few months prior to Liu Ming’s “go-it-alone” efforts, the fundraising efforts were not very successful, which Xu attributed to the fact that “Yang was not a member of GH and thus the workers didn’t feel emotionally motivated to be involved.” As to the other two key members, Li Lei claimed that he was preoccupied with his own duties, while Liu Heng was not as much an initiator as a follower (a good one, too, with great logistical abilities). Under such circumstances, Liu Ming felt unfair, isolated, and lacked team support. He wished the GH team had worked together in a more aggressive and cooperative way to save the poor worker’s life. In retrospect, he summarized the series of events by admitting that he started to doubt and question the so-called notion of “NGO” meant for public good. He didn’t buy the argument that, technically, because the NGO staff was preoccupied with their organizational duties it was ok to let go the life of a dying worker. For Liu Ming, since GH had been formed as a self-organization fighting for the welfare of the migrant workers, it would be inconceivable to ignore this emergent case. In the wake of his “meowing” performance art, Liu Ming had to distance himself from GH by resigning from his staff position sadly (albeit temporarily). He was keen to act, even if he had to go it alone, and now he had no alternative but to succeed.
Thus, Liu Ming’s experience presented an interesting case where cultural assumptions played a big role in GH’s efforts to coordinate social action. Liu Ming’s case challenged the organizational boundaries that constrained what could be done. He had great imaginations, which resisted being institutionalized; that is, he challenged the professional aphorism that an effective and efficient NGO was defined by what it shall not do. In Liu Ming’s reflection, GH’s organizational setup might even turn around against its self-proclaimed mission for the common good of the migrant workers. Meanwhile, as to how to arouse public attention, Liu Ming’s appeal to the idea of filial love emerged not only as a powerful rhetorical tactic, but also as a sure (if hard-fought) indicator of the vitality of traditional culture. Migrant workers, college students, small business owners, local residents, performers (including the famed Duet of Migrant Workers, as aforementioned), media professionals, and even workers and residents from outside the city either came to donate money or voluntary time; people from all walks of life were mobilized around the central theme of helping out the brave “Spring Mother” to save her son’s life. Praised fondly by his colleague Liu Heng as the “Steve Jobs” in the NGO community, Liu Ming’s great ideas and performance art led to a series of successful events with great collective impacts.

Influenced by Chinese traditional culture, Liu Ming could be interpreted as an emerging embodiment of a cultural orientation that was different from and often in tension with his colleagues. As accounted in Chapter 5, Liu Ming adopted something like an “anything goes” approach by regarding engaging the local authorities as a positive move compatible with GH’s organizational goals. In terms of tactics, it was hard to assess his malleable approach in comparison with the more militant or cautious ones that his colleagues would prefer. (This was the way NGO work unfolded itself, moment from moment, contingent upon available resources,
local judgment, and improvisation in the ever-changing contexts of uncertainties and opportunities.) In a more fundamental sense, however, Liu Ming constantly challenged the cultural assumptions of his colleagues with regard to serving the GH members and interacting with the outside world. He did so at the risk of being characterized by his colleagues as “being too easily inclined to make a compromise at the cost of principles.” Their argument escalated during an evening study session in July, 2010, when the staff had sat down to review and reflect upon GH’s mission statement again. Here is a portion of the meeting at its impulsive moments:

(The group had been arguing back and forth about the word choice between the more discriminative “peasant-workers” and the more neutral “fellow workers” (direct English rendering from the Chinese gong you, meaning “worker-friend”) in GH’s mission statement that aimed to “Let the migrant workers live with happiness and dignity.” But the discussion quickly burst into quarrels about the implications and assumptions behind these terms as well as GH’s organizational focus to “serve” the workers.)

*Liu Ming:* People regarded “peasant-workers” as the weak group. I told them that being a peasant-worker didn’t mean they were weak.

*Xu:* (calmly) I’d say, as a socio-historically rooted term, “peasant-worker” is not improper... After all, that was a reminder of the social circumstances when Grassroots Home was founded.

*Li Lei:* “Fellow worker” is a more neutral term, which is the one we normally use now.

*Liu Ming:* So what? Are we replacing all the “peasant-workers” with “fellow workers”? Ten years later you may want yet another term to replace “fellow workers.” What is the point of just changing the terms? Had Xu been a college graduate like Sun Heng (who was a college-educated music teacher before he went to Beijing to establish the left-leaning Home of Workers), instead of a peasant-worker, I wouldn’t have joined Grassroots Home in the first place.... What’s the point of changing the term without changing our mindset?!!!

*Liu Heng:* Well, even though we preferred the more neutral term “fellow workers,” we do need to always remember that we at GH are primarily serving those young peasants coming to work in the cities. In practice, we need to specify who our clients are. For instance, there are those who came to the cities to earn 1,000 to 2,000 yuan (154~308 USD), and those earning 5,000 to 6,000 (769~923 USD). Which group should be our focus? Perhaps the first one?

*Liu Ming:* Why do we have to separate them into different groups? Everyone coming to GH needs to receive our “service!”
Li Lei: We are not separating them! Don’t you understand? We are talking about whom to focus on, as our priority! Moments ago, Brother Xu already specified it....

Liu Ming: No need for a focus! No need for any priority!

Li Lei: What are you talking about? Are you going to serve all the Chinese people?

Liu Ming: In my view, there is no need to separate them arbitrarily! We cannot discriminate against one group over another! We cannot single out some and leave others alone! If we limit ourselves to a particular small group of clients, is there any difference between us and [the logic of] the so-called Party?!

Li Lei: (yelling angrily) But at present! You don’t even understand our organizational priority! I don’t care if you go to serve all the Chinese people! Even the President! But at present! (yelling) Cannot you have some common sense?!

Liu Ming: (yelling back) I have a lot of common sense! More than those ignorant college students! College-educated, huh? They forget they are also migrant workers! They become arrogant with a piece of paper [diploma] in hand. They like to just stand by and do nothing! What the heck is such elite education leading to? They gotta be re-educated here at GH!!! They think they are descending here to SERVE the workers! No! We workers are SERVING them! (That is, the workers are teaching the students about social realities from the grassroots perspective.)

Li Lei: (feeling hurt, retreating) I,... think I’m not fit to continue this talk. I got a college diploma. I feel Liu Ming was targeting me... I, ... quit this discussion....

Liu Ming: (continues with less exaggerated tone) In reality, it’s fair to say there are some workers being under-trodden. Fact! But that’s not my point! When I first met Brother Xu, I’d already made my point clear! In order to make changes happen, we cannot count on changing the vocabulary! I offered a two-part strategy. First, people like Mingjie and Li Lei have abilities, and don’t look down upon us – these people we need to include in our big family, as a coalition. But! -- Listen! -- Nothing guarantees they are part of our big family. We should never have that kind of illusion. Second, there are those wretched -- they didn’t do well at school! Yet they are arrogant! They are squandering their life! We need to help them stand up by promoting self-reliance, mutual-aid, collective-strengthening, and perseverance! Just like some of our grassroots family members have been doing! (almost sobbing with affection) I’m so happy for them....

Xu: (breaks silence) ...There is little doubt about what you just said, Liu Ming...

Please.... We are just talking about which group to focus on. For instance, when we advocate for the reduction of overtime, we’re primarily concerned with the grassroots workers, rather than the white collars....

Liu Heng: So, I don’t see any big difference between our views. We are all trying to serve the same....

Liu Ming: (almost lost control, cutting off Liu Heng) NOT serving!!! NOBODY is serving anybody!!!
Xu: (trying to control himself, slowly, almost stutter) Well, suppose, I have 12 hours, a day, when I am awake, I gotta decide how to spend my time, right? I admit I've spent most of my time taking care of Chunmei's concerns, instead of her boss.

Liu Ming: EVERYONE is equal, my dear comrades! (Xu inserted “Then I have to admit I was on the wrong track…”) We are building Grassroots Home for the greatest goals. We cannot be constrained by funding limits. If we're really serious about our goals, the entire wealth of the nation may come in our way. Do you really think things will get better if we just focus on the workers of 1,000~2,000 yuan (154~308 USD)? The more we SERVE them, the weaker they become. What they need most is equal opportunities, and that’s what we are fighting for! But how about those of 5,000 yuan (769 US), 6,000 (923 USD)? Or the bosses?! Or the well-dressed professors, elites?! It's these people who looked down upon the grassroots people. They put the grassroots people in disadvantages. These pompous people – they are the REAL weak!

Xu: (calmly) We need to reach out to these people...

Liu Ming: Not reach out to them! Brainwash them! They cannot simply come to Grassroots Home with the idea of SERVING the workers...

Despite Liu Ming’s frustration and difficulty to articulate, this hot-tempered, long-winded meeting betrayed the strife between Liu Ming and his colleagues. First, Liu Ming’s disagreement with GH’s organizational focus reflected something more fundamental than a matter of tactical preferences with regard to GH’s organizational environment. During everyday work, he constantly reminded GH colleagues (and me, too) about how not to “reject” anyone on the ground that he or she did not belong to the cohort of workers deserving GH’s “service,” or on the assumption that he or she was one of the strong who did not need any help. In a typically aphoristic way, Liu Ming said of himself, “I stand up strongly in front of the strong, and stand weakly with the weak.” He wanted to include everyone in the process of change. Liu Ming’s insights were alarming. He cautioned against judging outside resources (as such sympathetic college professors and white collars) simply by their potential instrumental values as means to get things done for GH. In an email in response to Xu’s public speech proposing a set of technical solutions to the predicaments of migrant workers, Liu Ming wanted to push the argument even further. He wrote,
We’ve seen that the Beijing Home of Workers has been doing much better than us in getting the workers organized. Indeed, we can learn a lot from them. However, a class-based culture for the laborers is just one of the many types of human love, and it tends to brew hatred. [For GH], we must stand on an even higher point, where we can get a better view of global problems as essentially human problems, and where we may get a better sense of the Chinese culture of love as the ultimate root of a harmonious society.

Second, Liu Ming’s observations painted an even more sophisticated picture of the role of the workers in pushing forward GH’s organizational goals. Liu Ming pointed out an almost self-evident but easily-forgotten fact that by restricting GH’s work to local services for the workers it would be even harder to change the overall structures of the Chinese society. China’s social totality has been such that, change-making had to involve the “brainwashing” of the seemingly strong, according to Liu Ming. Liu Ming broached a crucial question as to how there could be some common ground of reconnection and dialogue between the so-called elites and the workers. In practice (e.g., Liu Ming’s evocation of filial love), China’s traditional culture seemed to provide rich sources for rhetorical inventions that would be able to involve people from different social strata and backgrounds. From time to time, supportive professors, small business owners, and local residents praised GH as “doing good deeds” or “doing Buddha’s deeds.” For Liu Ming, however, that was not enough. As his metaphorical use of the “Xi Yang Yang Sheep” suggested, it seemed that Liu Ming sensed the fundamental affinity and dialectical relation between the weak and the powerful, and in order to effectuate change, the two camps must be transformed by each other in order to transform themselves. Although Liu Ming (in his Grassroots Lecture presentation) acknowledged and lamented the fact that some grassroots workers had internalized social discrimination and the “weak” mentality to the extent that they looked down upon themselves and just squandered their life, it might be argued that he still envision GH as a place where the strong were supposed to be transformed by the “grassroots spirit.” Liu Ming
personally endeavored to “empty” himself (i.e., humbleness) so as to establish authentic relationships with everyone, and his performance art was just a radical example to show that even the poor and weak could participate in a transformative act of love.

In conclusion, this section revealed an emerging cultural orientation at GH that coexisted (somewhat uneasily) with the aforementioned socialist tradition. In order to save the hospitalized worker, Liu Ming’s street performance art was not only a desperate gesture, but also a purposeful act appealing to a time-honored fable of filial love. Liu Ming’s “go-it-alone” approach challenged GH’s organizational boundaries defining “what ought not to be done.” In this his rhetorical practice directly challenged what Burke would call “the bureaucratization of the imaginative” (1937/1984, p. 225). He aspired to treat everyone equally, no matter rich or poor, and to transcend the class-based workers’ culture that could brew hatred. He clearly sensed the irony that a service-based approach might make the weak even weaker, and radically imagined GH as a locus where everyone could be transformed into a change-maker.

Green Villages & Blue Cities

“Tell me, Teacher Wang, where would you go in order to make a living? The village, the small town, or the county?” Ah Tang directed the question back to me, emphatically. We were sitting across the worn-out conference desk at GH one evening, while Xu’s two children were playing around. For a fleeting moment, the scene, with the childish noises and dim light, reminded me of my childhood days, having aunts and uncles and sometimes drop-in neighbors around during one of those cozy chatters after supper in my rural home.

“Well, it all depends…” I was caught off guard and hesitated to answer. Our casual conversation had been going back and forth about the exhaustion from working overtime in the
city and the meager profits of farming at home. Another worker had thrown in some comments like, “That’s the nature of capitalists, who would even crack the bones in order to suck the marrow.” In spite of that, we somehow started to converge on the reverie of how lovely it would be to be able to work somewhere near one’s rural home and come back from work every day to stay with his or her family. As the night fell upon the village, and the ducks and hens came back home, a home-made supper was ready. The country road was extending at the back of my mind…. But Ah Tang’s question threw me back to reality.

“I know, I know…. If my hometown could just barely catch up with the development of the outside world, I wouldn’t have given up my family life to come here. Right?” Ah Tang made a point that he was “not that dumb” when it came to calculating the pros and cons. He reasoned that even if he had to pay around 400 yuan (64 USD) for his monthly rental here, he would earn a bit more than working somewhere near his hometown. “After all, I get paid month by month here, but as a farmer I wouldn’t get cash until after harvest.” Moreover, he continued, “If we quit our current jobs and all go back home, the factories and rental dorms here would collapse. All along, the municipal authorizes here have counted on them for taxes.”

“Can it be changed?” I asked, referring to the staggering rural-urban imbalance of development.

“Impossible! The government doesn’t care about us!” Ah Tang said.

I attempted to push the conversation further by saying something like “maybe we shall care about ourselves.” But Ah Tang began to stutter, and shied away from talking about his hometown. So I decided just to let the conversation flow freely. Meanwhile, Xu had been somehow listening to us while working on his computer, as was often the case with open
communication at GH that everyone could hear or join. He looked up and said to me with a subtle smile, “Cheap labor…that is the best gift the government can offer to capitalists.”

It was during this kind of small talks that I gradually learned about Xu’s big dreams. In their intimate understandings of this perilous world, the workers were political economists in their folk ways, touching upon China’s rural problems which indeed constituted the nation’s single most paramount challenge, despite its glamorous outlook of economic growth. Given the fact that there were almost three million migrant workers sojourning in this city (vs. five million legitimate urbanites), they did not need the local media to tell them that it would be virtually impossible for most of them to settle down here with a decent job and affordable housing. Instead of seeking solutions (if any) in vain in a place where the workers were stuck, the real roots of the problems lay in the vast countryside, although from there, money, resources, and human capital were pumped out in the one-way processes of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. To be able to even think of their home villages as a good place to live, however, the workers had to first imagine that there was a “possibility.” Xu argued for a change of mentality:

“The poor rural areas are rich in essence, since the resources haven’t been destroyed. We can work together to make our home countryside a paradise on earth…. Green villages, blue cities – that is my dream for our beloved nation. The urbanites may want to enjoy the excitement and vibrancy in the bustling cities where they live, and meanwhile the villagers can have unspoiled peace and serenity in the countryside. People may flow back and forth between the cities and villages, but they should by no means do so at the cost of others’ lives.”

“Speaking of space, it troubles me that rich urbanites can freely go to the wide open countryside for whatever purposes, but there are so many obstacles preventing the villagers from entering the cities.” I noted the spatial discrimination when following upon Xu’s talk one evening at GH.
“I had a plan, a radical one,” Xu said.

In tandem with the founding of GH in the city, Xu had been contemplating on a rural demonstration project in which his hilly home village would be surrounded by three (symbolic) isolation belts, so that (1) all fossil fuel vehicles, (2) chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemicals for agricultural purposes, and (3) detergents and other daily-care pollutants ought to be banned from entering the community. Within such protection, the village would be reborn as a wonderland. “Just like Grassroots Home as a spiritual home is so attractive under the circumstances of societal degradation of morality, an eco-village as I planned would be a charming thing because nowadays people are getting more and more worried about food safety,” Xu reasoned. Dubbed as the rural version of GH, Xu’s plan was designed (1) to revitalize the village by organizing cultural activities for and by villagers (most the elderly, women, and children, as well as returning migrant workers), and (2) to establish rural co-ops that would be responsible for marketing organic produces, fair-trade handicrafts, and eco-tourism. His plan went so elaborate as to even suggest every organic egg be labeled with the time and date of its being lain and to have video cameras installed as a way of broadcasting to the interested consumers what was going on the farm.

Finally, in a way parodying the 2010 Shanghai World Expo slogan “Better City, Better Life,” Xu designed a tagline for his project – “Better Countryside, Better World.” Xu’s plan

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38 Xu’s parody of the Expo slogan coincided with my critique of its distortion of the original source in Aristotle’s Politics. The Chinese version of the slogan, if translated literally, should read “the city makes life better” (cheng shi rang sheng huo geng mei hao), instead of the official English version “Better City, Better Life.” Thus, the Chinese version makes a definitive claim that “the city makes life better,” but a critical question arises as to “whose city makes what kind of life better for whom?

An honest assessment of the history of China’s post-1949 industrialization concludes that the era of Mao produced two major legacies, namely, 2000-3000 billion yuan (308-462 billion USD, not historically adjusted) worth of assets (of agriculture, industry, and real estate) and a rigid social structure of rural-urban divide; these two factors would become the political economic stage for the drastic reform era (since 1979) which saw the booming of cities (Wen, 2004, chapter 3). These huge assets were accumulated through extraction of the labor productivity of a population
had been inspired by – therefore need to be better understood in the context of – the emerging movement of rural reconstruction led by pioneers such as his late advisor, Mr. Liu Laoshi. For the past ten years, rural reconstruction workers and volunteers had been working closely with peasants in their efforts to protect village land, revitalize local communities, establish co-ops, and/or transit to community-supported agriculture (CSA) and organic practices. Back in 2007–8, Xu participated in the rural reconstruction training program directed by Liu Laoshi. Through such networking, Xu learned about alternative possibilities of rural development. In his diary, Xu recalled how he was fascinated and enlightened during a field study at an organic cotton field operated by a certain Teacher An:

**Some trainees heard that last year Teacher An’s cotton crops survived the impacts of cotton bollworms, which were disastrous in the surrounding areas. They wondered how he made it.**

that was largely (80%) peasantry, but during the reform era, these assets were redistributed unevenly by denying the original contributions made by peasants as well as millions of industrial workers (Wen, 2004, p. 11). Further, as discussed in Chapter 2, the peasantry and migrant workers were further denied equal rights to economy, education, and politics due to urban-eschewing policies and rural-urban barriers.

In my analysis, the slogan (Expo, 2010) truncated and manipulated Aristotle’s original saying in *Politics*: “A complete community constituted out of several villages, once it reaches the limit of total self-sufficiency, practically speaking, is a city-state. It comes to be for the sake of living, but it remains in existence for the sake of living well” (Aristotle, 1252b27-29. See Aristotle, 1998, p. 3). The first issue of interpretation has to do with the notion of the villages’ “total self-efficiency.” According to Simpson (1998), Aristotle “evidently means that it [a village] is self-sufficient both for life and for good life” (Simpson, 1998, p. 21). Historically (all estimates according to Thorley, 2004, pp. 28-30), Athens in the fifth century BC was largely rural, in which only 20% (50,000) of its total population (250,000) lived in the urban area; of these urbanites, only about 3,600 were adult citizens, or about 12% of its total adult citizen population (30,000). That means the majority of its citizens lived in rural areas, not mentioning the large number of slaves. The Expo slogan is misleading in terms of these historical facts.

According to Garver’s interpretation of Aristotle’s political thought, “the function of the *polis* is to allow human beings to live well” (Garver, 2011, p. 8). By replacing “*polis*” with the popular term “city,” the Expo slogan discarded the original Aristotelian sense of a “political community” where its perfection, or the attainment of its ultimate goal of “happiness,” is predicated upon the civic virtues (chiefly cultivated through education) of its free citizens, who “share in deliberation and judgment” (Simpson, 1998, p. 234). Even if we give the slogan the benefit of the doubt for its reference to the restricted socio-economic sense of urbanization, it still fails to acknowledge the hundreds of millions of migrant workers who are sojourning in the cities but lack full citizenship. In a political sense, then, the slogan mirrors its own ironic myopia in referring to Aristotle, who actually argues that “it [nature] must, in giving humans speech, have made them for what speech itself is for, namely life in the city [*polis*]” (Simpson, 1998, p. 23; also see Garver, 2011, chapter 6), whereas the voices of the migrant workers and peasants are excluded from the underlying assumptions of the slogan.
Teacher An said, “Ah, the cotton bollworms... I don’t think they are pests. As a matter of fact, they don’t like feeding on cotton plants. They do so only when we have killed all the other weeds and insects living on the same land. The cotton plants aren’t really tasty for them, but they have nothing else to eat. My solution is therefore to allow them to enjoy ‘buffets’ in my field. Then my cottons are saved.

In Teacher An’s eyes, Mother Nature is full of wonderful treasures. We [the trainees] asked many questions, which must have sounded silly to him.

For he said: “Let every individual form of life live well in nature, and then you don’t even need to have your produces inspected with organic standards.” As a matter of fact, his crops never went through any certifying processes. But already consumer demands have exceeded what he could supply. Everyone trusts his products.

He continued to say he never used herbicides. “Herbicides smell terrible. If as humans we cannot bear such things, how can the land bear it? Also, herbicides would kill ants that would otherwise help you by eating weed seeds.

Teacher An loved the land. He loved nature.... “The land is our friend. We cannot keep getting things from a friend without us giving back.”

At this point, I couldn’t help but asking him a question that has troubled me all the time. I wanted to hear his opinion about the problems of industrialization.

In a straightforward way, he told us that industrialization is lifeless, whereas nature is full of life. “As humans, can we industrialize ourselves at the cost of other living creatures?”

“But I heard that industrialization is inevitable and there is no turning back. Do you mean such a popular view is wrong?” I have been pondering upon this question by myself all the time.

This time, Teacher An didn’t answer directly. He said, “Just think about the increasing number of natural disasters. The tsunamis would give us the answer. The earthquakes would give us the answer.... More often than not, we only see the catastrophic results, but turn a deaf ear to the sobbing of Mother Nature.” Eight days after this conversation, we heard the sad news that Sichuan Province was struck by horrible earthquakes....

“Gandhi said, ‘Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed.’” Teacher An told us. He is a peasant, a wise one. The spiritual message he sent is really the organic food that our souls need most.

Despite the minor detail that the casual relationship between natural disasters and industrialization was perhaps in the doubts (Xu might be deemed as making a rhetorical appeal via narrative believability), it was most noteworthy that as a grassroots leader, Xu had dared to
dream an agrarian dream in which to move beyond the exploitive project of urbanization and industrialization and to imagine an alternative social and moral order. Time and time again, Xu cautioned his colleagues at GH that “we are fighting not merely for the welfare of migrant workers, but for the sake of our whole nation where everyone ought to be equal.” To switch to a different and all-encompassing (if not grand) narrative, Xu seemed to have find his voice in this growing agrarian dream in which to reconcile political differences and social strata and to transform the nation into a place of “green villages and blue cities.” In an early version of his plan, Xu recalled a classical Chinese story, learned from junior high school, about how a fisherman, upon losing his way along a stream, happened to discover a “paradise-on-earth village” secluded in the depth of a remote valley. Xu said:

*A paradise like that village is of course something everyone desires. But many people just wanted to hunt for it, and if found, just loot it. That way, had there been ten thousand paradises, ten thousands of them would have been destroyed. Why is it that nobody wanted to create such a place? Actually the villagers created such a wonderful place after fleeing terrible wars. (In a sense, we are now far better off than them.) Why cannot we also make one?*

“Let bygones be bygones!” Xu said aphoristically, reminded me of Mandela’s famous sentence after he stepped out of the prison. “There is no need to debate. There is no need to get angry. We never wanted the urbanites to repay anything. All we hope for is they don’t forget our common agrarian roots and stop discriminating against us….”

It is time to reconcile among the people, urbanites and peasants, on this land that is only one. It is time to reconcile with this land, concrete as well as muddy, among the people that are only one.

**Conclusion**
This chapter starts with the theoretical assumption that, beyond coping with and understanding of its immediate settings on a daily basis, GH as an emerging civil sphere organization might involve certain wider efforts to evoke, grasp, and (re)invent cultural and historical resources in order to model or orient its social relation, action, and imageries, which would ultimately suggest a certain vision of a better society. This chapter reveals that GH staff had chiefly drawn on three resources, namely, the socialist legacy, the traditional culture of love, and the agrarian dream.

The socialist tradition tended to provide a vantage point from which its cultural memories could be rediscovered to critique the excessiveness of capitalism, and the historical lessons of the Red Army and CCP remained as useful resources of endogenous practical wisdom and strategies for collective action. Although China’s ruling Party seemed to be drifting away from the socialist legacy, and despite the fact that China’s pre-reform history was extremely complicated, socialism still seemed to avail an egalitarian vision of the Chinese society from the perspective of grassroots workers.

The traditional culture of love was advocated by Liu Ming in order to deal with GH’s organizational environment and to transcend the antagonism and hatred implied in the class-based socialist worldview. Liu Ming wanted to avoid the pitfall that GH’s service-based remedial approach would perpetuate the conditions that had made the subjugated weak. Instead, his appeal to something approaching universal love led to a self-imposed challenge that would call on everyone to be a transformative agent.

By appealing to an emerging agrarian dream, Xu had come up with an all-encompassing narrative that would transcend the rural-urban divide. Given the fact that the majority of migrant workers could by no means settle down in the cities as full citizens, the hope might instead lie in
the vast countryside from which they had come. Thus, GH’s quest for the migrant workers’ bright future had come full circle by replanting its dream of universal love in a real place, instead of the illusory habitat of the rural-urban borderland where they had sojourned.

The “borderland” not only refers to the actual rural-urban fringe as a result of China’s political economic structures, but also serves as a metaphor for the migrant workers’ marginalization and displacement due to the lack of access to or control of historical and cultural resources. With regard this problem, the three emerging cultural models could be construed as the migrant workers’ rhetorical efforts to seek a real place for their social imageries. Despite the spontaneity and irregularity of GH’s everyday work as a grassroots NGO, these imageries might continue to intertwine with each other, inform practical strategies and tactics, and potentially evolve into a more coherent and stable program for social change during the course of what Xu’s late mentor, Liu Laoshi, called “a social movement without using the name ‘movement.’”

The prospect that these emerging cultural models might converge (or clash) was especially intriguing. To the extent that these cultural models involved differing fundamental beliefs about principles of social relationships and directions of future action, clashes among the “bearers” could turn destructive to GH’s leadership. Their destructive potential would require practical wisdom for coordination on a common ground. Despite their disagreement with regard to practical tactics and strategies, the ethnographic accounts in this chapter can be read against the grain to arrive at a tentative conclusion that these social imageries were accompanied by what Hauser calls “moral vernaculars” (Hauser, 2006 & 2012). First of all, Liu Ming rejected the idea that there was no such thing as “unconditional love.” In the internal rotating diary (among the staff members and me), Liu Ming wrote about why he ended up accepting the assignment to
revive workers’ participation at GH and the new Station in spite of having had a bitter relationship with his colleagues who (in his view) failed to support his fundraising efforts:

_Since the first day I joined GH, my ideal has been inspired by my innermost feelings for this populace (migrant workers). I chose to lead such a life [of devoting myself to GH’s cause] as it originated from my innermost joys. In my heart there is no hatred, only love…. If the heart harbors hatred, sooner or later hatred will come back against the self. All I have been doing here at GH is due to nothing else but love...._

During these stressful days, Liu Ming would often take down from GH’s small bookshelf a copy of the Chinese traditional scripture named _Principles of Being a Good Pupil_ (di zi gui), and read out the rhythmic passages to himself when he had some time to take a break. In the booklet, one particular sentence fitted in with what he said in the diary about love: “How commonplace it is for me to love my parents who have loved me first! How truly honorable would it be for me to love my parents even though they might detest me!” (Read: replace “parents” with “colleagues” or “workers”)

Likewise, even though Xu seemed less keen to return to such traditional sources, he would also appeal to a similar sense of conscience that would guide one’s action by some innermost principle of what ought to constitute the good and right. In an open letter posted online, Xu, being frustrated by numerous interview questions about “why” he tried so hard to organize GH, rejoined ironically,

_“If you are a person with good conscience, please don’t keep asking me WHY I’m doing what I’m doing! Before doing anything good for the public, do we have to find tons of reasons first?! If so, that would be very pathetic for our society!”_

It can be argued that what both men were seeking to speak was “a thick sense of moral vernacular that is constituted performatively” (Hauser, 2008b, p. 443; also see Hauser, 2006 & 2012), and Xu found his version in the agrarian dream. In addition, although the socialist legacy seemed to be rather diffused in GH’s everyday practice, the evocation of the Republic’s founding
ideals could also be regarded as a brand of moral vernacular to express the migrant workers’ egalitarian dreams. All these three cultural resources were available raw materials for rhetorical invention leading to locally situated and communally comprehensive discourse, and it remains to be seen how they converge or clash in the future.
Chapter 8
Toward an Emerging Civil Sphere and a Rhetorical Ethnography

This project has been an extended case study of a Chinese migrant workers’ self-organization, namely, Grassroots Home, with particular reference to the trajectory of vernacular rhetoric and an emerging civil sphere. In this concluding chapter, I would like to accomplish three tasks. First, I will summarize the major findings from my ethnographic work. Second, I will discuss more general implications of this research for further understanding and potentially engaging China’s emerging civil sphere. Third, I will reflect on several methodological issues pertinent to my ethnographic study of vernacular rhetoric and an emerging civil sphere. Overall, I hope this research may contribute to a systematic and interesting understanding of the rhetorical contours of the complex of meanings developed through the associational and cultural life and social imaginaries of a truly remarkable grassroots organization that had been nourishing the seeds of hope for China’s emerging civil sphere.

The Vernacular Voices: Grassroots Home Revisited

In Chapter 1 (Prologue), I invited my readers to encounter the vernacular voices of migrant workers by introducing a short play written and performed by volunteers at GH. In a noisy neighborhood where the workers sojourned, through theatrical performance their voices not only sent a message that the workers had begun to question what had been taken for granted about their human existence, but also presupposed highly artful and sophisticated social coordination behind the scene that had made the performance possible. Symbolically, the workers emerged as a collective protagonist “we” on the stage of an emerging civil sphere, or so they self-claimed in the emotional and heroic recital of a workers’ poem (excerpted toward the end of Chapter 6) at
the end of the show. Furthermore, the workers’ performance was pitted against the local ACFTU official’s clichéd speech praising the workers’ “contribution to the socialist construction of the country,” which could be construed as performance of a political sort (propaganda), thus foreshadowing the tension between vernacular rhetoric and official discourse.

The next scene in Chapter 1 switches from the vibrant performance in the neighborhood at night to the daytime when one could better realize what the surroundings looked like. The ethnographic account was meant to map out the cultural geography where GH (the workers’ self-organization behind the play) was located by directing the readers’ view from atop the balcony outside the dorm room of Xu, the founder of GH. From the balcony Xu and I (and the readers) could see the ground-level entrance of the workers’ “spiritual home” (GH) right across the lane, suggesting a different social space than his un-homelike dorm room. The dorm room was just one of the tens of thousands of tiny residential spaces in the immediate neighborhood where migrant workers led a displaced life at the bottom of the country’s political economy. In recent years, drastic economic development had brought about unprecedented changes to the urban-rural landscape; however the uprooted migrant workers could not settle down or obtain full citizenship in the urban areas. In a sense, the stories of GH were about Xu’s (and his followers’) quest for a place where they could nourish a dream of a better society, a dream that could be realized in a real place.

In Chapters 2, I paused to delineate the theoretical orientation of this research. As one of the handful of workers’ voluntary associations nationwide, GH emerged in the large context of intensified labor-capital conflict in China (Silver & Zhang, 2009) as well as perceptible conflicts between society and the party-state (Xinhuanet, 2011). In spite of the fact that China had maintained its status as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, the human costs,
economic inequality, social discrimination, and political marginalization imposed upon the migrant workers (in the range of 250 million) had reached unprecedented magnitudes in the past decade. In order to protect their rights and interests, the migrant workers across the country had begun to resort to increasingly sophisticated forms of collective actions (CLB, 2012). However, the official ACFTU had increasingly failed to deliver its promise to represent the grassroots workers, and the party-state policies were such that workers’ free associations independent of the ACFTU system were prohibited and hailed as a challenge to the party-state control of power. The central issue, officially framed as “migrant workers’ assimilation into the cities” but short of using the term “citizenship” (MCA, 2012), had essentially evolved from the concerns of *homo economicus* to increasing demands for full citizenship in an authoritarian state that “had not yet caught up with its own rhetoric of law and rights” (Solinger, 1999, p. 289; also see Wang, 2009). As such, GH presented a rare opportunity to observe and understand how social members came together in speech and action in order to create an emerging civil sphere and to resist the excessiveness of the market economy and party-state power.

My discussion of “civil sphere” purposefully avoided the difficulty of separating the concept of civil society from that of public sphere, as well as the difficulty of directly applying these theoretically-loaded concepts in the Chinese context. Rather, for the practical purpose of this project, “civil sphere” is defined from a bottom-up heuristic perspective as an ongoing social and rhetorical accomplishment of something approaching group solidarity and civil judgment about public issues. This working definition is founded on a crucial recognition of the (re)production and (re)invention of society as fundamentally rhetorical and its social members as rhetorically active (Hauser, 2008a; also cf. Cintron, forthcoming, chapter 2), instead of being entirely determined by structures or being treated as sociological dupes. Moreover, as an ongoing
accomplishment, the social and rhetorical practices constitutive of a “civil sphere” were analyzable in terms of social members’ rhetorical *techné* and folk methods that simultaneously contributed to what I would call “mundane constructivism” of a web of meanings and relations.

In Chapter 4, I continued my ethnographic accounts by presenting an historical sketch of GH’s growth from its embryonic form as a web-based forum to a real place where workers could freely associate with each other in cultural activities. While this founding story provided the local context in which the major research questions were explored, it was also interesting in its own right, as it recorded the intimate ways in which GH’s founders encountered, interpreted, and rhetorically responded to the Chinese migrant workers’ predicaments at this point of history. I reconstructed this brief history on the basis of GH’s archives, the past issues of *Grassroots Magazine*, the online diaries of the founder Xu and founding member Liu Ming, my conversations with them, and the self-introductory short videos and fliers of GH. In writing, I tried to refrain from making any unnecessary comments, except where I needed to explain the larger circumstances. I meant to let the founding members speak for themselves by incorporating extensive quotes and memories and highlighting the endogenous self-understanding of the GH project. From the ongoing perspectives of the practitioners (e.g., Liu Ming’s search for a collaborative project and his rejection of a pure commercial model of his would-be NGO), the founding of GH was a process of trial and error, rather than anything predetermined. Therefore, in retrospect, GH staff’s portrayal of their organization ought to be understood as a process of “mundane constructivism” that had salient rhetorical meanings. Sometimes, GH’s plain style might disguise its character of being artfully constructed; for example, one of its favorite quotes – “One Home, One Dream” – might sound like a mere assertion, but actually it was tailored from the slogan of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Despite ongoing uncertainties, the GH staff came
across the pivotal storyline as “imaging the dream, building the dream, and realizing the dream,” and defined the founding of GH as “the growth of one man’s dream into one group’s mission.” Such a narrative structure served as an apt example of vernacular rhetoric (concise, visually vivid, and orally memorizable aphorisms in this case) that resonated and circulated among grassroots workers.

Actually, Xu had planned to compile what he called “an oral history” of GH as part of its second anniversary celebration (on November 23, 2010) by interviewing former GH members and supporters, but his plan did not materialize. Some of its earliest members and supporters had migrated into various parts of the country, and it was extremely difficult to reach them for interviewing. The enthusiasm for writing GH’s own history, however, echoed its Beijing-based sister organization BHW’s elegant aphorism that “without building our own culture we won’t have our own history, and without building our own history we won’t have our own future.”

Given the potential monopoly imposed by official discourse (see Chapters 5, 6, & 7), the writing of grassroots microhistory could be understood as part and parcel of GH’s vernacular rhetoric to preserve the web of alternative local meanings and moral imaginaries. Likewise, it might be gauged that Xu had incisively articulated a folk theory of narratives by aspiring to “[recognize] grassroots wisdom and [spread] vernacular voices” (cao gen zhi hui, min jian sheng yin) – a phrase emphatically printed on the cover of Grassroots Magazine. Clearly, this reminds us of Walter Fischer’s theorizing of narrative as to “recognize permanence and change, culture and character, reason and value, and the practical wisdom of all persons” (Fischer, 1985, p. 357), whereas in the case of GH Xu’s, folk theory was not so much a matter of philosophical contemplation as an emergent character of everyday rhetorical practices and self-reflection.

39 In Chinese pinyin: mei you wo men de wen hua, jiu mei you wo men de li shi; mei you wo men de li shi, jiu mei you wo men de wei lai.
The next three chapters (Chapter 5, 6, & 7) have offered ethnographic accounts to address the three research questions. In a very general sense, this ethnography reveals the lively vernacular voices of a group of migrant workers who had gradually aligned with and self-organized around their emerging leaders at GH in creating their own social space that maintained its autonomy from party-state power, producing their own culture that evolved a web of meanings around the productivity and dignity of labor, and nourishing their own societal visions that sought to reinvent cultural and historical resources. As a whole, it can be argued that these social, cultural, and imaginary dimensions constitute the general contours of an emerging civil sphere in China, which somehow defies simple separation between the private and the public, and the society and the state, and which almost certainly contrasts with official discourse in grasping the country’s social reality. In what follows, I will summarize my major research findings by revisiting each research question.

Research Question 1: How did GH workers come together in their associational life, secure its survival, and maintain its autonomy through their vernacular rhetoric and folk methods, especially along the dimensions of relating to the local state, the market, and other potential “uncivil” factors?

In Chapter 5, I began with reiterating my theoretical assumption that GH ought to be understood not as a static a priori entity but as an ongoing accomplishment by social actors through their social and rhetorical practice. I first analyzed the polysemic character of the notion “grassroots” as was used in GH’s title. In order to make the very idea of an organization like GH imaginable and attainable at all, GH’s founding members had to distinguish it from the “uncivil” notions of mob mentality, violence, and cult-like money-making motives that were often associated with the “grassroots” in general. Both Liu Ming and Xu were wary of the potential of
perpetuating the grassroots workers as the weak due to the discriminative collective nouns used to name them. They wanted to make their own meanings.

The pivotal metaphor that served GH’s purpose of self-description and imagination was “home” or “family,” which on the one hand denoted the warm circles in which grassroots workers interacted with each other and shared friendships locally, and on the other hand alluded to a bottom-up aspiration to national solidarity (“All migrant workers on the earth are one family…”). A further look into GH’s internal deliberation on its mission statement revealed an even more complicated picture of the self-organization, in which the leadership had increasingly learned to understand the overall political economic situations of the workers in particular and the nation in general and consciously appealed to theories and thoughts that could sustain its vision to effectuate social changes. As a whole, it could be argued that GH gained its political leverage by virtue of its popularity among migrant workers, built its social capital by promoting self-reliance and mutual-aid, and aspired to transcend its service-oriented professionalization of NGO work by advocating social change. In a way echoing the theoretical assumptions of this research, GH, as actually imagined, practiced, and self-portrayed, could hardly be reduced to any single-dimensioned category.

In early 2010, GH faced a quasi-political crisis due to the pressure from ACFTU authorities who originally planned to eliminate GH. This crisis demonstrated the deeply entrenched distrust between the party-state and an emerging civil society. The fundamental issue concerned conflicting sources of legitimacy. The acceptance of GH by the migrant workers affirmed its legitimacy in de facto constitutional, social, moral, and professional (NGO) senses. As a consequence, GH challenged ACFTU as the self-claimed sole source of legitimacy, and in turn problematized ACFTU’s own legitimacy. In part due to the increasing influence of GH as a free
association of workers, the ACFTU eventually adopted a moderate approach to the matter by allowing GH to exist along with the newly formed official Volunteers’ Station using some existent facilities that belonged to the local authorities. Through trial and error, and amidst confusion and anxiety, the GH staff eventually embraced a proactive position so as to cooperate with the local authority in running the Station nominally under the auspices of the local ACFTU.

Further ethnographic inquiry revealed that although the official discourse defined the Station as totally under the control of the authorities, GH (now including both the old and the new homes) evolved a repertoire of sophisticated vernacular rhetorical practices that tended to resist the penetration of party-state power. The self-regulative and quotidian character of grassroots workers’ organization and participation in civil sphere activities was something the party-state and its surrogates could not easily supervise or control. Moreover, the GH leadership had devised a hybrid rhetorical discourse to frame the Station in line with the politically correct official discourse. In my analysis, such a hybrid character should not be dismissed as mere “face” work, but ought to be recognized as a vernacular rhetorical tactic that was aimed to solve the practical problem of “how to go on” (Willis, 2000, p. xiv) under real-world circumstances that the weak party has to strike up a delicate balance between survival, autonomy, and the maximization of emerging opportunities.

Research Question 2: How did GH workers make something approaching a distinctly workers’ culture through vernacular rhetoric?

This chapter started with a brief policy analysis regarding how the workers’ culture was defined by official discourse as a passive object to be controlled, supervised, provided for, and incorporated into the official doctrines of socialist value system. This value system was conceived as an urgent response to the perceived alarming disintegration of the country’s overall
social trust, not the least due to the excessiveness of free market economy. While the officially recognized “cultural rights” of the workers might lead to more open space and vibrancy of workers’ organizations in the future, the official notion of “culture” tended to be trivialized as a technological matter of accessing cultural facilities or a matter of socio-demographic administration. The workers’ culture, as emerging from workers’ self-organizations, represented the growing grassroots awareness of the erosion of the socialist political economic basis of egalitarianism, and thus encouraged alternative views of what were the true causes of the country’s social malaise. Insofar culture involved values, ideas, and views of social reality, it could hardly be controlled by administrative measures; nor would the cultural “negative thinking” be contained by the overpowering official discourses.

Overall, the lived experiences of workers were structured by displacement and instrumentalization due to the capitalist motive. Labor, the source of wealth, became the workers’ bondage and was severed from meaningful connection with their family life and community. In a culture of consumerism, the migrant workers increasingly felt deprived, marginalized, and rejected. Labor tended to lose its meaning as the basis of moral virtues (e.g., honesty and courage). The emergence of workers’ culture, however, challenged the futility of labor as the foundation of human condition, and rediscovered the productivity of labor as the material basis of the authenticity of the workers’ lived experiences. By sharing, rethinking, and representing episodes of such lived experiences, the workers endeavored to come together in a space of appearance. The cultural activities, such as story-telling, singing, dancing, and performance of workers’ plays, provided great opportunities for workers to do something together, affirm the human existence of each other, and effectuated the rise of their social capital (e.g., trust and the capability of acting together). In such symbolic work, the workers tried to represent themselves
in aesthetic forms, which in turn assumed a sense of permanence to counter the erosion by their fragmented experiences of time, space, and the laboring body. Such a space resembles what Havel would call “a pre-political” realm, where “living within the truth” confronts the regime’s lie in either intellectual, spiritual forms or simply mundane, quotidian manners. In this sense, the working’s emerging culture emphatically points to a nascent civil sphere in which they aspired to express their civil judgment in their collectively informed vernacular rhetorical forms. In the process, it can be argued that the workers formed what Raymond Williams would call “the ethic of solidarity.”

Research Question 3: How did GH members envision alternative modes of civil society by (re)discovering and (re)inventing cultural resources that they might control to some degree?

This chapter starts with the theoretical assumption that, beyond coping with and understanding of its immediate settings on a daily basis, GH as an emerging civil sphere organization might involve certain wider efforts to evoke, grasp, and (re)invent cultural and historical resources in order to model or orient its social relation, action, and imageries, which would ultimately suggest a certain vision of a better society. This chapter reveals that GH staff had chiefly drawn on three resources, namely, the socialist legacy, the traditional culture of love, and the agrarian dream.

First, the socialist tradition tended to provide a vantage point from which its cultural memories could be rediscovered to critique the excessiveness of capitalism, to relearn the endogenous practical wisdom and strategies for collective action, and to avail an egalitarian vision of the Chinese society from the perspective of grassroots workers. The founding ideal of the People’s Republic remained to brew a unifying dream in which the migrant workers could realize their dreams of human flourishing and full citizenship. Second, the traditional culture of
love was most adamantly advocated by Liu Ming in order to deal with GH’s organizational environment and to transcend the antagonism and hatred implied in the class-based socialist worldview. Liu Ming wanted to avoid the pitfall that GH’s service-based remedial approach would perpetuate the conditions that had made the subordinated weak that they were. Instead, his appeal to something approaching universal love led to a self-imposed challenge that would call on everyone to be a change-maker. Insofar as power relation was concerned, Liu Ming seemed to embrace what Kenneth Burke would call a “true irony” or “humble irony” which recognized “a sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one needs him, is indebted to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him within, being consubstantial with him” (Burke, 1954, p. 514). Finally, by appealing to an emerging agrarian dream, Xu had come up with a third all-encompassing narrative that would transcend the rural-urban divide. Given the fact that the majority of migrant workers could by no means settle down in the cities as full citizens, the hope might instead lie in the vast countryside where they had come from. Thus, GH’s quest for the migrant workers’ bright future had come in a full circle by replanting its dream in a real place, instead of having any illusion for the rural-urban borderland where they sojourned.

In addition, it can be argued that, in evoking the three emergent cultural models, the social actors were seeking “a thick sense of moral vernacular that is constituted performatively” (Hauser, 2008b, p. 443; also see Hauser, 2006). The social imageries were rooted in cultural and historical resources that offered the raw materials or rhetorical topoi for (re)inventing and (re)articulating locally situated and communally comprehensive discourse for a better society. In other words, these social imageries were part and parcel of GH’s efforts to (re)root the hope of migrant workers in historical, cultural, and geographical places, instead of being continually marginalized in a hopeless borderland. Taken together, these three emergent versions of social
imageries might continue to intertwine with each other, evolve, and inform practical strategies and tactics during the course of what Xu’s late mentor, Liu Laoshi, called “a social movement without using the name ‘movement.’”

The Vernacular Realm: Implications for China’s Emerging Civil Sphere

As a microcosm of China’s emerging civil sphere, the case of GH is unique in terms of its demographic character, leadership, geographical location, and the circumstances that triggered the local authority’s responses. In this sense, the migrant workers’ lived experience and local knowledge as reported in this ethnographic work are irreducible, but duly valuable for their voluntary contributions to and participation in GH as something like a social laboratory. In a more general sense, though, research findings from this project may have some implications for theorizing, understanding, and potentially engaging China’s emerging civil sphere.

First of all, this research suggests the theoretical fecundity of what may be called the “vernacular realm” in studying China’s emerging civil sphere from a ground-up perspective. By the “vernacular realm,” I mean a field of practice marked by the formal and symbolic properties of vernacular rhetoric, folk methods, local knowledge, cultural resources, and materials that are more or less stable and constitutive of the webs of meanings and relations leading to an emerging civil sphere. As my ethnographic work has shown, the vernacular realm is where the practical artfulness, resilient human agency, and lively social imaginaries may emerge in locally situated, communally comprehensible, and theoretically analyzable ways. Because “societies are active and their activity is to produce themselves” (Touraine, quoted in Hauser, 2008a, p. 236), such self-production, in my opinion, is a function of and based in what social members have already had in terms of materials, symbols, and structures. This is especially true when the very notion of
“civil sphere” and its related terms are not ready-made in such a transitional country like China. As suggested in my ethno-graphic work, in order to freely associate and discuss issues of mutual interests, the very idea of GH (here as a representative anecdote of an emerging civil sphere and thus logically sharing certain attributes of the generic “civil sphere”) must be invented and imagined as possible and persuasive, especially by defining it against incivilities such as money, mob mentality, violence, secrecy, and party-state control (the list may continue according to local conditions), which all have social, political, cultural, and historical meanings, implications, and potential consequences specific to the Chinese context. Therefore, just like the opening play performed by migrant workers, there are two movements or plots unfolding at the same time. The first one is the vernacular voices of the social members’ collective yearnings and civil judgment through a repertoire of symbolic means ranging from the aesthetic, performative, and affective to the more or less formal, coherent, and active (in the rudimentary sense of being ready to act). The second one is the perennial process of self-learning, studying relevant state regulations, policies, and laws, trying to get local organizations registered, organizing grassroots members, coordination, mundane public relations efforts, and self-reflection that clears the obstacles and set the stage for civil sphere activities. The second movement highlights the significance of background practice, coping, and understanding with regard to the emerging (normative) principles of civil engagement and public opinion, in part because in China the emerging civil sphere is not yet institutionally guaranteed and the arbitrary use of party-state power remains to be an imminent threat. In turn, the first movement is persistently enacted and reenacted among real people in a real place not only to keep their vernacular voices alive but also to sustain and enhance the “stage.” Together, the two movements are intertwined and constitute the two sides of the same coin, i.e., the vernacular realm.
The conception of the “vernacular realm” is particularly useful for studying China’s emerging civil sphere due to the fact that China does not have historical precedents or benchmarks in terms of civil society or public sphere. It is interesting to note that what the major theorists of civil society and public sphere have taught us is in one way or another based in an historical or ideal-typical framework of reference, be it the Athenian democratic ideal for Arendt (1958), the rational-critical use of reason for Habermas (1962/1989), the classic idea of res publica for Sennett (1976/1992), the Tocquevillean tradition of civil engagement for Putnam (2000), and poetic world-making for Warner (2002), who is probably an exception since he defines “a public” as the function of the reflexive circulation of discourse over time and space (but he does not tell much about the sociality of real social members). While in principle I do not object to using these theoretical resources in the Chinese context, I am wary of their background understanding of the “stage,” i.e., the institutional settings of liberal democracy, which is not available in the Chinese context. Liberal democracy, after all, is largely predicated upon a theoretical model of man and woman as autonomous individuals in a “state of nature,” whereas a fundamental truth about human nature and politics is that “in the beginning was the group” (Alford, 1994, 1).

More specifically, to the extent that GH has some general implications for an emerging (middle-range) theory of civil sphere, the Chinese society’s relationship with the party-state may need reconsideration, especially if we remind ourselves that the liberal-individualistic sense of rights may have presupposed an a priori point of reference to curtail the excess of state power. Indeed, in the Chinese context, the party-state has shown distrust for and excessive control of the migrant workers’ free association, but from the bottom-up perspective of the grassroots workers, they are also pressing the state to do more (not less) to protect their rights. Therefore, there
seems to be a dialectical process in which the more autonomously a civil sphere can survive and thrive, the more political leverage its members may gain in order to engage the state for potential changes. Moreover, it is probably ironic that a once-collectivist state (e.g., see the historical comparison of China’s labor policies of the collective and reform eras by Guo, 2010, chapter 7) has turned round to resist the collective associations of the people. A telling anecdote from my ethnographic fieldwork is the remark made by the leaders of the ACFTU local authority, who, during a pre-“move” meeting with Xu and his colleagues, asked Xu to quit GH and find a proper job since he “had a wife and two children to take care of.” Disregarding its folly and insulting, this remark inadvertently reveals the fact that the party-state is actually not just dealing with a simple aggregation of individuals, but an elaborate web of interpersonal relationships and moral commitments that constitute a “family.” A quick review of GH’s story-telling process (see Chapter 4) suggests that it weaves a social web of friends, colleagues, folks from the same hometown, wife and husband, boyfriend and girlfriend, sympathetic volunteers and supporters and by extension their friends and teachers (I am somehow personally located at this point of the web), and beneficiaries of GH’s fundraising efforts and by extension their grateful families and friends, etc. As a whole, GH resembles a constellation of what Elijah Anderson would call “primary groups” and “extended primary groups” (Anderson, 2003), although the focus of GH is not on social stratification but a self-regulated process of aligning with its organizational goals.

As a whole, GH’s appeal to “self-reliance, mutual-aid, collective-strengthening, and perseverance till the end of time” has a communitarian component in which “the communities are independent sources of value and there are communal duties and virtues distinct from duties to others qua their abstract humanity” (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 9). The empirical validity of this communitarian component is affirmed by two antitheses proposed by an officially-approved
professor with regard to the emergence of GH and how to govern it (Pan, 2011). Recognizing the GH founding members’ capacity of organizing, leading, and speaking for grassroots workers, the professor likens them to the “grass-tips” (i.e., something like “grassroots elites”) instead of “grassroots,” and suggested a) they be absorbed as potential candidates for positions in municipal official positions, and b) the outstanding few of the grassroots workers be converted from their memberships with traditional associations of townsmen (sojourning in the cities) and the “western mode of “interest groups” to “modern residents” of the host cities (Pan, 2011, last paragraph). The overtone is alarming as well as revealing in the sense that a) grassroots leaders are essential in social mobilization and ought not be severed from their followers (Xu posted a message online that his “heart is grassroots forever” in English!) and b) individualistic motivation for upward social mobility may disturb the emerging coherence and solidarity of migrant workers’ associations, such as GH, which have already a big headache in dealing with the fluidity of its “floating members.” In short, the theoretical lesson here is that the vernacular realm provides a crucial window to the folk concepts and local practices with regard to society-state relationship that may be defined not necessarily in liberal-individualistic terms, but communitarian moral terms.

For example, the notion of “vernacular realm” tends to differ from a static understanding of what constitutes a civil sphere. Recently, for example, the China Media Project based in Hong Kong University published an online article with the sensational title “China Bans ‘Civil Society’” (Bandurski, 2011), particularly referring to a recent nationwide propaganda directive banning the term ‘civil society’ and a conspicuous drop of its usage (gong ming she hui) in Chinese media. Whether or to what extent the terminology would matter in the case of China must be discussed elsewhere. However, insofar as GH is concerned, it can be argued that the
grassroots workers indeed had their own vernacular terms (“All migrant workers on the earth are one family”) to define their historical conditions, to name their self-regulated association, to describe their values and dreams, and to orient their future action. In this sense, banning the actual terms of “civil society” and related words may not have the intended consequences at the grassroots level.

Regarding the society-state relationship, the GH case suggests a far more cooperative and artful approach adopted by grassroots social members. Unlike Eastern European countries (Moore, 2001; Béja, 2006), the GH case suggests that secrecy may turn back to defeat a grassroots organization’s own purposes, not the least because secrecy would undermine GH’s accountability as a publically known NGO. The possibility of political coercion is a component of background understanding of bottom-up NGO work; for instance, a similar labor group in South China was under the surveillance of the party-state and has been banned by force at the time of writing. Even though publicity might carry its own risks (as the quasi-political crisis had attested), it may be in the workers’ genuine interests to widen organizational influence and to reach out for a maximum of supporters. In part to minimize public risks, GH adopted the politically correct language of official discourse (the new “Station,” “integration into the cities,” and workers’ “cultural rights,” etc.), which not improvised a common ground for society and state to define the current situations, but also accomplished something concrete for the workers. This common ground is an improvisation—a rhetorical invention, if one will—for complicated reasons. Almost two decades ago, when the notions of civil society and public sphere just began to become fashionable, China Studies scholar Richard Madsen proposed to focus on “the moral and cultural dimensions of contemporary social transformation… in a post-Communist [China where the CCP] is ideologically dead [and] can no longer plausibly claim to represent a historical
vanguard.” He continued, to stay in power it [the CCP] must adopt economic policies that contradict its basic principles” (Madsen, 1993, pp. 183-184). Similarly, more recently, China observer Arif Dirlik predicts the “imminent demise of socialism” as a useful term, since this empty term has already lost “the power to guide the direction of” a society aspiring to an emancipatory vision with a new mode of production (2005, p. 247). While no one knows for certain how long the party-state will continue publically to stick to its socialist discourse, it appears that rhetorical change is not imminent based on the CCP resolution mentioned in Chapter 6. The Party’s avowal to further develop and popularize Marxist principles with “Chinese characteristics” suggests that the prevalent official (institutional) discourse must be understood as a symptom of actually existing social order before being dismissed as the cause of disease.

Moreover, my ethnography at GH suggests that the socialist legacy at least still partially appeals to grassroots workers who had been struggling to position themselves culturally to critique the excesses of the market economy and to imagine a more egalitarian society. The space of appearance of the migrant workers not only predates but also presupposes an ideal state that may redeem its egalitarian promises and institutionally guarantee a civil sphere in which the working men and women can realize their full citizenship. This presupposition tends to further complicate the society-state relationship, since the party-state’s “emptied” socialism is now put to a test. (A related question has to do with whether or to what extent the Chinese leftist elites could win the support of the mass workers.) Meanwhile, the GH case clearly indicates that leaders of grassroots workers had been learning, exploring, and reinventing their vernacular terms and social visions in order to reach the widest audiences and to paint an alternative blueprint for the nation’s development. If the emergence of the officially ACFTU-controlled
Station has indicated anything, it is that the party-state had been quick to absorb into its own system the quasi-political forces that had been emerging from the grassroots level of society, which in turn may bring change to its dominant structure, however slowly. In essence, the central issue is the (re)production and (re)invention of society, and it is worthwhile to remember Charles Taylor’s caution against what he calls “subtraction stories,” in which social change in modernity is explained by “human behaviors having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge” (2007, p. 22). It remains to be seen how the socialist legacy, the traditional cultural sedimentations, and the agrarian dreams may contribute to the imagined and actual social change in a transitional China.

Also, on a macroscopic level, China’s rural-originated migrant workers may be regarded as one of the world’s largest indigenous groups that were uprooted from their native land and thrown into an increasingly globalized political economy, indeed an epic human phenomenon that had never been seen in China’s history. The magnitudes of China’s social problems and its increasingly globalized political economy may dwarf the GH case as a fragile molecule of emerging civil sphere, and the long march toward any significant social change may overshadow it as a mere temporary accomplishment. Given this paramount situation, however, GH’s moral courage and human agency figures even more prominently. Since its inception, one of GH’s fundamental principles has been to resist condescending philanthropy, and in cultural practices it has been struggling to transcend the remedial treatment of migrant workers as culturally deficient. Furthermore, the emergence and survival of GH tends to demystify the notion that the workers were incapable of organizing themselves or coordinating actions, a deceptive prejudice that tends to associate the grassroots with mob mentality and violence propensity. Although not all workers at GH are as seasoned organizationally as their leaders, they are capable of aligning
with and organizing around GH’s core values. Moreover, their leaders have evidently grown in rhetorical and political sophistication despite their low socio-economic status and often limited educational background. They are not trouble-makers. In acts as in dreams, they have called for a more just and trustful society more audaciously than those who had a vested interest in the inequitable system. In this sense, GH epitomizes the pedagogical function of the civil sphere in which the migrant workers can teach themselves the necessary skills as citizens responsible for the fate of their own life and their own country. As GH’s talents policy suggests, this self-regulated organization is meant to provide opportunities for potential talents and leaders in the populace of migrant workers to emerge upon the call of important occasions.

Finally, the question of China’s democratic prospect has been lurking in the discussion of GH so far. Without entering yet another theoretically loaded area of debates regarding the relationship between civil society and democracy, suffice it to reiterate the general recognition of three roles of civil society as breeding social trust, mediating different interests, and training civic skills (Lipset & Lakin, 2004, chapter 4). If this general insight provides a guide, it is almost certain that China’s democratic prospect would be inconceivable without the due participation of migrant workers in the country’s social, political, and economic decisions. By extension, as long as the majority of the young migrant workers will have to return to the countryside to settle down in their local communities, the social rhetorical skills and democratic ideas they can learn at urban-based free associations like GH potentially will play a significant role in the self-governance processes that have been experimented with for the past few decades (cf. Liu, 2009). It is generally speculated that the party-state may (or may not) serve “an activating” function to legitimate and implement “top-down” structural changes leaning toward democratic potentials (Heberer, 2012). GH’s encounter with its crisis suggests that the party-state control of society is
anything but monolithic. It remains to be seen how the party-state institutions and policies will co-evolve, no matter how slowly or unpredictably, with the growth of China’s emerging civil sphere. However, to the extent that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916/1997, p. 87), any structural changes in China’s potential democratization would be incomplete or nonviable at all without the flourishing of autonomous and self-regulated associations such as GH, where hundreds of millions of workers ought to have access to civic education above anything else, long before everything else may (or may not) get ready. For the grassroots workers as well as the pro-democratic elites, the prudent words by Yan Yangchu (James Yen), the pioneer of China’s rural reconstruction movement almost a century ago, still ring true and are worth noting:

_As the Chinese term reconstruction implies “change and build,” what are the things we should change on the one hand and what are the things we should build on the other hand? How to strike a balance? We respect the traditions of the people, and one of the things we must always bear in mind is that while we aim to create a new society, we must not forget we are doing it with an old society. (Yen, quoted in Buck, 1945, p. 38)_

In the last analysis, it is fair to argue that the vernacular realm matters. It is a realm of human existence in which the imaginative and creative go hand in hand with the rhetorical and critical. The case of GH demonstrates that migrant workers can come together in action and speak in locally intelligible moral vernaculars. For them, it can be argued that the vernacular realm encompasses a moral order preserving the productivity and dignity of labor, a sense of love and belonging, and social imaginaries in a not-so-ideal world. “The upright people shall not worry about their crooked shadows,” according to one of the favorite idioms of one of GH’s enthusiastic volunteers. Unlike the notions of “the second culture” and “second consciousness” (Skilling, 1989, esp. Chapter 7) in the Eastern European case, the vernacular realm of the
migrant workers at GH can be better dubbed as one of “first culture” and “first consciousness” in which they aspire to authenticity and human conscience.

The Vernacular Lessons: A Rhetorical Ethnographer’s Reflections

In fall 2010, when GH members started to use the new facility of the Station, I would walk with some worker(s) from the old facility to the new one in early evenings to attend whatever activity that had planned for the night. We would walk the main street congested with milling crowds and more than a hundred sales stands (see Figure 4 in Chapter 1). Once, Hongwei and I walked together. He winged into a roadside convenience store, methodically purchased 10 yuan (1.5 USD) worth of 5 lottery tickets, and redeemed a previous lottery ticket winning of 4 yuan (60 cents). He was cheerful this evening as he bought two bottles of ice tea with the prize money, treating me to one, and struck up a conversation. He told me how sometimes construction workers where he used to work would become violent when confrontation occurred between workers and management. We then talked about GH’s relationship with the new Station, and he said the workers just needed to “chan mo tou” with the local authority, as they did. I did not catch the meaning of that verb in his colloquial expression, and asked for his clarification. He told me that it was a dialectical term from his hometown, which could be translated as “deliberately procrastinate” (in order to eventually gain some advantage in negotiation).

At that point it dawned on me that the migrant workers had really different lived experiences than I did. Doing ethnographic fieldwork in my native province, I could have taken for granted the ordinary local settings where the migrant workers sojournered. Unlike what Michael Agar reminds researchers of regarding the mystique of ethnographic experiences as “a communication problem” in his book The Professional Stranger (Agar, 1996, pp. 57-58), one of
my initial challenges was how to sensitize myself in a deceptively over-familiar field where I did not feel like a “stranger.” To do so, my conversation with Hongwei served as one of the many enlightening moments during my fieldwork when I learned from the workers at GH about their self-organization, their culture, and their aspirations. In this final section, I wish to use “vernacular lessons” as a metaphor for the ongoing learning process to which my ethnographic work, as a knowledge-making process, was indebted. I will exercise “empirical reflection” (Herzfeld’s term, 2001; also see Davies, 1999) in a spiral way regarding 1) the migrant workers as competent rhetors, 2) the performative character of vernacular rhetoric, 3) my involvement as a rhetorical ethnographer, and 4) my ethnographic work as a process of knowledge-making and the question whether “the subaltern can speak” (Spivak, 1988).

The first lesson, as suggested by my conversation with Hongwei, was the challenge to recognize the seemingly uninteresting migrant workers as rhetorically competent subjects in their own right and their actions as socially and culturally artful. Malinowski, in his preface written for his Chinese student’s ethnographic work on the Chinese peasantry (Fei, 1939), called on anthropologists to conduct serious field research about the culturally, socially, economically, and politically significant and large populations around the world, instead of pursuing a “romantic escape from our over-standardized culture” (Fei, 1939, pp. xv-xvi). China’s migrant workers were certainly not Melanesian Trobrianders, and romanticizing seemed out of the question. On the contrary, at a first glance, the migrant workers appeared homogeneous, familiar, and no less “standardized” than the Chinese mainstream culture, from which there seemed no escape. The methodological challenge, therefore, was to become sensitized to an open-ended repertoire of vernacular rhetorical practices (such as story-telling, personal photos, and songs) to understand and appreciate the richness of ordinary culture. It must be immediately pointed out that the very
notion of “ordinariness” is potentially misleading because it may suggest the social members’ “uninterestingness” and “uninterestedness” (Garfinkel, 1967, chapter 1), “a lack of internal social differentiation, a social homogeneity” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 89), as well as the absence of “eventfulness” and the threat of “normalization… [to] the common, the familiar, the low, the sites from which we humans might reach a more intimate relationship with nature, [with others], and with ourselves” (Dumm, 1999, p. 21). In order to move beyond this all-too-general sense of “ordinariness”, I believe that the notion of “inventiveness” or “creativity” (Willies, 2000, p. 106; Hauser, 2008b) remains to be a viable and integrative (i.e., both theoretically and methodologically) to sensitize a researcher’s “ethnographic imagination” (Willis, 2000) and “capacity to be surprised” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 175). So, to briefly revisit the methodological challenges just mentioned, I will draw examples from my ethnographic accounts to illustrate this methodological lesson I have learned:

- Regarding the “uninterestingness” of the ordinary, one useful strategy is to focus on folk methods, folk concepts, and vernacular rhetoric as the interesting (and more or less stable) formal properties of everyday practice even though the content of praxis may be potentially trivial, e.g., Xu’s casual remark that as migrant workers they do not want to be “pitied” (Chapter 5).

- Regarding the “uninterestedness” of social members (in reflecting upon the background practice and circumstances themselves), one useful strategy is the commonly used “member’s diary,” which in my case was the GH staff’s “rotating diary” (Chapter 7) initiated by themselves. Along with many other instances, the diary provides an opportunity for social members’ self-reflection, especially when some “breach” happens (e.g., GH’s crisis).

- Regarding the illusion of “social homogeneity,” it turns out the individual workers’ encounter stories (Chapter 4) with GH have provided a window into everyone’s unique experiences as well as the commonality in how their narratives were woven into GH’s pivotal storyline.

- Regarding the “lack of eventfulness,” the situations at GH were somehow complicated. First, as an unfolding process of story-telling and history-making, some events might (and will continue to) be unpredictable and to some extent uncontrollable, e.g., GH’s quasi-political crisis. My experience is to keep
documenting plots and themes that are potentially unfolding, to make a decision at some point about their relative priorities, and not to make any premature judgment about the state of affairs. Second, as a voluntary association, GH shares a common concern of NGOs to deal with lethargy and fatigue. For the purpose of this project, one important finding is that the staff did have a great sense of self-improvement through study sessions (Chapter 7), in which I participated and observed. Third, insofar as rhetorical practice is eventful, it is useful to catalogue the major topics emerging from everyday conversations, discussions, debates, and quarrels. For instance, a perennial rhetorical topos at GH has been revisiting, discussing, elaborating, potentially revising, and debating its mission statement (Chapters 5 & 7). To observe, participate in, and document the naturally occurring (even though diffused over time and space and persons) vernacular rhetoric surrounding a rhetorical topos of particular interest has proven fairly useful and revealing.

- The notion of “normalization,” attributed to Foucault, can be summarized very briefly as “the institutionalization of the norm, of what counts normal, indicat[ing] the pervasive standards that structure and define social meaning” (Feder, 2011, p. 61). For the purpose of this project, it is essential not to take the migrant workers’ human conditions and lived experiences as natural and normal as defined by official discourse (e.g., “contribution to socialist construction”) or as sedimented into the background which appears “so obvious that no-one has seen” (Boal, 1998, p. 128). In this regard, the vernacular lesson I have learned from the migrant workers is that they demonstrated an emergent critical awareness of their own “natural” conditions through what may be called “mundane dramatism” (following Kenneth Burke). A case in point is one of GH’s literary group meetings (see Chapter 6; also see Figure 15 below) in which Xu asked the participants (in small groups) to generate literary ways (e.g., stories) of describing a particular issue of the migrant workers’ predicaments (e.g., the problems arising from living in the hostel area). At the beginning of the group activity, some participants appeared to be talking about the issues in such an emotionally charged way that they offered radical plans to ameliorate their social situations. Sensing these plans to be wishful thinking only and beyond the workers’ capability (i.e., in my analysis, these plans are anonymous in terms of lacking specific understanding of what social agents would be responsible to and capable of implementing), Xu tried to bring the group activity back to track by saying, to the effect, “Explaining such phenomena would be the job of sociologists and economists….What we need to do first is to resist stylistic ways of words and expressions so as to tell our own stories!” The he encouraged the participants to collect, imagine, and compose their own stories as the result of the prevalent social conditions plaguing themselves as well as their brothers and sisters. In the end, for example, some workers came up with an outline of a tragic story about a terrible fire that broke out in an overcrowded and hazardously substandard hostel building. Through such dramatization, the workers became the observers of their own human condition that is anything but “natural” or “normal.” In short, what I learned from them is an emerging repertoire of endogenous reflexive practices.
that question what is given and avail members’ creativity (free from structural constraints).

Figure 15. Workers at GH during a literary interest group session composing stories of migrant workers’ life (November 2010)

While the first lesson as a whole affirms the rhetorical competence and artfulness of the workers, a related methodological issue, namely the preferred level of analysis, needs to be justified. If every individual worker is recognized as an irreducible and rhetorically articulate subject, what is the relationship between the individual and GH? In retrospect, I believe I have treated GH as an ongoing accomplishment, a kind of “membership category” (Chapters 2 & 4), which is represented by its key members’ efforts to create, organize, sustain, construct, and protect a collective “home” in a real place (Chapter 5), while the stories, anecdotes, remarks, and comments of its common workers served as supporting evidences for a fuller understanding what GH had maintained its autonomy, created its culture, and envisioned a better society (e.g., Guanghui’s story in Chapter 5). Therefore, I believe GH as an ongoing rhetorical project is the level of my analysis, and this in turn implies the contributing factors may involve multiple “units of analysis” – for instance, GH’s stories (Chapter 4) are essentially a network of meanings and
interpersonal relationships and the cultural resources (in Chapter 7) are essentially enacted through events and actions.

The second vernacular lesson, more specifically, had to do with the performative and more often than not oral character of vernacular rhetoric. One day in early October 2010 (after I just resumed my fieldwork), I wrote in my research journal, “Today, my listening nerves were strained because so many workers and visitors were just talking during the meeting and when they took a walk afterwards to take a look at the new facility of the Station, still talking on their way!” The singing, dancing, quarreling in staff meetings, fundraising events, everyday chattering, and so forth flowed in random directions, and none of them were properly documented by GH members themselves. In my experience, watching as a bystander in a public situation resembles what Irving Goffman calls “conversation parasitism” (Goffman, 1963, p. 157) which may turn out to be counterproductive to the purpose of a rhetorical ethnographer. The traditional rhetorical scholar, with his or her ears used to the habit of the eyes of textual readings, may find it difficult to attend to the intersubjective meanings that are available only among active participants. In general, to the extent that ethnography is considered as “writing about culture” and the idea of “participant observation” is central to fieldwork, the underlying visual tendency of epistemology (see Herzfeld, 2001, pp. 34-38) may lead to methodological discomfort, difficulty, or displacement of other sensory perspectives, or distortion in ethnographic experience of vernacular rhetoric. The performative character of vernacular rhetoric is such that the ethnographer had to be appropriately involved in it in order to navigate the local settings and the flow of meanings. As Aaron Hess has rightly pointed out recently, “to simply witness the creation of rhetorical texts would be insufficient in gaining a thorough understanding of how localized logics of justice [as an instance of vernacular rhetorical practice] are developed” (Hess,
Hess further demonstrates the principles of what he called “critical-rhetorical ethnography” informed by four elements of rhetorical theory. His recommendation essentially means conducting ethnography through the performance of the rhetorician who ought to 1) become an advocate to 2) directly participate in vernacular communities (as well as the collection, preparation, and representation of data) inventively, 3) to be able to examine the kairotic moment to identify timely and appropriate speech and action, and 4) to engage in exercises of phronesis as to how the critical-rhetorical ethnographer develops and learns the practical wisdom of the organization (Hess, 2011, emphasis added). In practice, while my ethnographic experiences tend to coincide with certain ingredients of what Hess recommends, the focus of my vernacular lesson here is more generally focused on how to “perform” participation observation appropriately in order to understand vernacular rhetoric.

My revelation in this regard can take as its starting point the fleeting moment when I was talking with a group of migrant workers at Xiao Long’s newly initiated branch of GH and I suddenly realized, out of the corner of my eyes, that Zhao Heng had already backed away from our group and played at the computer by himself far away from us. The lesson is a familiar one for students of communication, but my point is a sociological as well as methodological one that, insofar as vernacular rhetoric is performed, addressed, and dialogic (Conquergood, 1992/2010; Hauser, 1999, pp. 8, 104), the process of listening can be construed as a synecdoche to mean not only just listening with the “ears,” but the involvement of the whole person in a process of simultaneously grasping background settings and practices as well as emphatic and/or critical engagement of the ongoing flow of vernacular meanings. At GH, a host of activities (e.g., singing, dancing, reading out loud, staff meetings, and etc.) involve what Walter Ong would call “oral psychodynamics” (Ong, 1982/20002). A case in point is the play (Chapter 1), whose
performance in the noisy setting of the neighborhood provided a sensuous experience of what Ivo Strecker would call “genius loci” (“spirit of place”), or “the feeling for local realities” (Gross, 2009, p. 66); moreover, later on I learned from GH’s monthly newsletter that during subsequent literary group meetings the participants suggested further addition to and revision of the script to include more scenes of migrant worker’s working conditions. My ethnographic experience, therefore, is that self-reflection (i.e., introspection) turns out to be not viable especially during moments of intense flow of meanings, symbols, objects, feelings, and people, because that means I may lose my grasp of what is actually going on. Instead, I sense it is through something like an “art of listening” that the shared background understandings and practices are tacitly digested and registered through the rhetorical ethnographer who can appreciate the situated “sensuous meaningfulness” (Willis, 2000, p. 27) and grasp the “indexicality” of social practice (Agar, 1996, p. 58).

By extension, the art of listening in doing ethnography entails the ability to dialogize vernacular rhetoric, whether it is oral, written, or by other symbolic means. My point is as simple as that the art of listening is essentially a survival technique in order to determine in an ongoing flux of discourse, objects, and persons an appropriate way to rhetorically respond (“to prepon,” see Hauser, 1999, p. 53) and navigate a field of intermediacy and contingency. In essence, the vernacular realm that I discussed in the previous section is a field of human practice in which we cannot afford trading the hope of alternative possibility and potential change (thus requiring indetermination and uncertainty) for a world of absolute certainty dictated by clockwork-like laws. Doing so would result in purely total passivity (e.g., taking order from the powerful) and the decay of human imagination.
When I listened to Xu talking about the party-state policies or watched him reading the newspapers before GH’s morning work meeting began, I found that his remarks and comments would often involve some response to quotes, events, political jargons, national leaders’ recent speeches, and other discursive pieces that he would deem pivotal in order to make sense of the ever-changing situations (local and national). In other words, the vernacular is often engaged in a virtual dialogue with the official, the institutional, and the seemingly unchangeable.

As for written communication, GH’s work-related documents, as well as its Grassroots Magazine, could be deemed as written texts in which words appear to be stabilized. In actuality, however, there had been much oral deliberation and background interaction; the wording in written texts was often temporary, flexible, unfinished, or just provisional. Such indeterminacy, on one hand, reminded me of the notion of “unrealized intentions” that had also been latent among social members (e.g., GH had a great proposal to organize a second Grassroots Festival), while on the other, it prompted me to pay more attention to the background practices that actually made its cultural performances possible. The seemingly simple and plain style of vernacular rhetoric might divert the ethnographer’s attention from its artfulness. For instance, GH’s logo (see Figure 16 below), consists of the signs of the star and the moon, which was jokingly dubbed by a GH member as Libya’s national flag! The lesson here was that GH members seemed to be quite competent at employing whatever “available means of persuasion” (symbols, resources, genres, designs, folk methods, tactics, etc.) in order to make and remake their meanings. An ethnographic-minded rhetorician must be wary of establishing any direct “correspondence” between an isolated symbol and its meanings, essentializing symbolic forms, or unduly presupposing vernacular rhetoric as a monologue.
A third vernacular lesson has to do with my ethnographic roles. For a good part of my fieldwork, I did not realize I had been “naturally” addressed as “Teacher Wang” until some newcomers (migrant workers) cautiously murmured something like “who was the Teacher in here?” Through the tone, I realized that my relationship with them suddenly changed, especially in the Chinese stereotypical sense that I was supposed to do the talking and they listening, or that even if I asked them some questions they were supposed to answer as students. That was not fair, and was part of the reason why I ended up not conducting formal interviews. The beauty of GH, nevertheless, is that it is self-regulated and homelike, and therefore no one is obliged to treat others as “guests,” nor should ever wish to be treated as “guests” (Li). So I gradually made friends with GH workers, volunteered to do some chores, and at some point, even pooled money equally to share meals (lunches and dinners) with them. At the beginning of 2011, however, my “identity” issue came up again as Liu Ming explicitly problematized what he explicitly called “elitist correctness” in his response to the draft of GH’s strategic plan prepared by Xu (Lao Wei was talking about this same plan, although addressing different issues, as documented in Chapter 5). Liu Ming wrote,

[Regarding team building...] The core values of GH must be assimilated by everyone, so that we can march forward together. But in actuality, Xu has run ahead of others, and attributed others’ lagging-behind (i.e., lack of progress) to their lack of self-awareness. Moreover, today Xu even unreflectively mentioned that his developmental
plan ought to be built around the center of Lao Wei, Mingjie, and himself. That is a dangerous state of mind, for it seems to me that Xu has formed the idea that Mingjie and Lao Wei are the leading force and [the direction] they lead is the correct one. But it must be recalled that when Li Lei first joined us, Xu made a similar assumption that it’s only Li Lei who could handle the task of team building for us, [but he turned out to be incapable of reaching out to the workers.] But that [in my view] was a decision based on his [Xu’s] partial and intuitive understanding only. [As a result,] Xu neglected himself [as a leader] and neglected Liu Ming who had marched with him since GH’s beginning, neglected Liu Heng and Qian Yan (who joined GH after quitting their jobs recently), and neglected Xinhua, Li Jun, and other members of the GH Workers’ Self-management Committee – all of them were outstanding family members of GH emerging out of the populace of migrant workers. The proper development of these talents was the key [to GH’s success]. As long as these talented workers stop self-despising and we maintain great team spirit, they can grow with GH. As for Lao Wei, Mingjie, and Li Lei, I do appreciate the ways they handle things, but they might unknowingly position themselves as the “correct elites.” Didn’t they? [Insofar as I can see,] they did, since what I – Liu Ming – considered “correct” was dismissed as single-minded stubbornness – that was actually because my views often posed challenges to those of the “correct elites.” …Well, this is what I have been thinking to talk about for a long time. On the one hand, our fellow workers must not look down upon themselves, and on the other hand, we must not reject “elites.” Also, our “elites” must not pose as “elites;” they must mingle with workers and learn from each other. This, I believe, is the best way to move GH forward to improve the capacities of workers.

Regardless of the impact of different personalities upon daily work (as Liu Ming and Xu later realized) as well as the clash between Liu Ming and Li Lei with respect to team building and the fundraising events in late 2010 (for Yang Debiao), I took Liu Ming’s comments seriously. In terms of formality, I asked my GH friends to call me “Mingjie” instead of “Teacher Wang.” I continued to occasionally do something for GH within my own capacity, but as a weak facilitator behind the scenes at best (e.g., I suggested some reading materials for the literary interest group, which worked well). As a matter of fact, in many ways I was no better than my GH colleagues in dealing with daily activities (e.g., organizing singing group) as well other demanding tasks (e.g., fundraising and coping with local authorities). As a self-organization of migrant workers, it is essential to respect and encourage the workers’ initiative and self-confidence. Later, Xu took the
opportunity in writing the internal rotating diary (among the staff members and me) to clarify some misunderstandings regarding his strategic plan and my role, and Liu Ming in his diary entry used his typically inspiring words to call on “everyone of us all elites” to stick to the core values and mission of GH. After successfully mobilizing a new cohort of core volunteers at the new Station during the first half of 2010, Liu Ming and his colleagues led GH to a new stage of active and productive state. Afterwards, he embarked on a journey to his home province to initiate a new Grassroots Home in the capital city there.

The great perseverance of my GH friends as well as the great self-sacrifice they made touched my heart. More theoretically, Liu Ming’s problematization of “elitist correctness” made me realize that although conceptual knowledge (often of “the expert”) may be used to justify action (or non-action) in a seemingly persuasive way largely due to the “expert’s” influence and ethos, what grassroots practitioners valued most is the command of practical wisdom and moral courage to actually take action. In the same vein, it must be recalled that when conceiving the idea of GH, Xu acknowledged that he had heard about expertly views regarding the necessity of establishing workers’ self-organizations; to his dismay, however, rarely anyone had taken action by the time he made up his mind to do so. (Also note the disappointing story Xu told about the radiocast host who turned out to be the “wrong person” that the migrant workers had trusted and relied on [Chapter 4].) No wonder Xu doubted whether “the so many beautiful theories we heard of have ever accomplished anything” (Chapter 4). He claimed, “Theory is harmful and action first!” (It must be immediately noted here that Xu was not making any over-generalized claim about “any” theory being “harmful;” rather, by speaking in that way, Xu was making very specific arguments about things, events, and actions in a world of contingencies at GH.) From a bottom-up perspective, there is real difference between what theoretically ought to be done and
what practically can be done, and the grassroots members seem to primarily concerned with the latter. The lesson I have learned is that social members’ actions are essentially goal-oriented, consequentiality (instead of detachedness) is part and parcel of their local knowledge of the unfolding horizon of practice, and vernacular rhetoric (such as the reflections practiced by Liu Ming and Xu) can offer a vital window into the their practical logics.

Last but not least, the fourth vernacular lesson is that the grassroots self-understanding of theoretical knowledge and concepts has made rethink ethnography as a way of knowledge making. The practical, action-oriented, often tactical, and eclectic (hybrid) approach to words and symbols has unsettled my original conception of knowledge. When Lao Wei asked me what my “expertise” was, I felt so vulnerable that I could not answer his question properly. His question was asked in the immediate context of GH where I was supposed to do something in line with its mission to help meliorate social problems. What could I do? I could not just be content with sweeping the floors at GH. Liu Ming often said such inspiring words as “Mingjie, just like anyone else, could spend a lot more energy to shine!” Gradually, toward the end of my fieldwork at GH, I began to learn how to work better with my grassroots colleagues. One way was to write an analysis that linked the GH’s associational efforts to the increasingly popular official discourse of “innovation in social organizational management,” a phrase that sounded like a euphemism referring to the evolving society-state relationship. In that essay, I highlighted the GH workers’ capacity for ongoing learning in action, self-regulation and management, as well as the importance of grassroots participation in any successful implementation of policies. The article was published in CCP’s municipal official journal of theory attached to its office of public policy research.
Moreover, through my involvement in the Grassroots Lecture Series (see Chapter 3 for a brief discussion), I have realized that education is a promising field where the workers can participate as active agents and meanwhile the bottom-up critical approach can permeate and potentially bring change to the process of scholarly knowledge-making that had increasingly lost its connection with the social reality of the disadvantaged groups. In May 2011, I invited two professors (husband and wife) from a local college to offer four lectures in which the migrant workers were involved in interactive activities pertinent to the topics of Chinese traditional culture and personal growth. After the first lecture, I asked the professor for his feedback. He replied:

_That was a very unique experience, a cherished opportunity indeed. I needed to design my lecture in such a way as to appeal to and relate to the workers. I needed to pay attention to the technicality of my language and put it in intelligible, everyday terms. I needed to adjust my style of teaching [as I worked among the workers.]... Among the migrant workers, they have their own language and meanings, which I need to understand.... China’s higher education has tended to build high walls around itself, whereas we [teachers and students] really ought to go to the people, to learn about social problems, and do something for the common good._

This reminds me of Paulo Freire’s emphasis on a dialogic model of education and knowledge-production instead of the monopoly of banking model (Freire, 1968/2000); as Augusto Boal so elegantly puts, in this dialogic process of education, the teacher and student learn together: “I taught a peasant how to write the word ‘plough,’ and he taught me how to use it” (1998, p. 128). As such, toward the end of my ethnographic work, I saw the beginning of more action-oriented approach that can help to promote “coalition consciousness” and build “cultural partnerships” with and among the social members. Chela Sandoval, author of _Methodology of the Oppressed_, called for “a mixture in the appropriation of ideas, knowledge, and theories, arguing that the mixture reflects the necessary reality of surviving as a minority or Other…[since] mixing is the methodology of survival for the oppressed” (quoted in Chilisa,
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2012, p. 24). Here, to make a quick correction of wording, the Chinese migrant workers are not a minority group, nor do they have to be. They are the indispensable part of a population that aspires and endeavors to become full citizens responsible for their own fate and the fate of their country. Therefore, as suggested at the end of the previous section, the migrant workers’ access to and participation in equal educational opportunities (e.g., civic education) will be a touchstone of China’s democratic prospect.

So, my reflexive exercise comes in a spiral way back to the question of subjectivity behind the vernacular voice. To dub Spivak’s provocative question (1988), Can the migrant workers speak? It is probably ironic that in the editorial of the May 2011 issue of the supposedly progressive (and official) periodical Chinese Workers (attached to ACFTU), the anonymous commentator calls on the Chinese intellectual to “tell the Chinese workers why they are always disadvantaged... [and] where their hope lies” (Editorial, 2011, last paragraph, emphasis added). As my ethnography suggests, the migrant workers do not need to be told why they are disadvantaged, since they have a fairly good idea about what is wrong with the country and where their hope may be found (Chapter 7). What the migrant workers truly need, as it seems to me, is Liu Ming’s notion that everyone ought to – and can – become a change-maker instead of positing himself or herself as “servicing the workers” (Chapter 7). If the burden is on the migrant workers (but is it?) to 1) mobilize fellow workers and 2) persuade the elites, then the question “Can they speak well?” is clearly a practical one instead of a philosophical one. As for the first part “mobilization,” my ethnography shows that they are good at it and are proving they are “capable of self-regulation and self-management” (Xu).

As for the second part “persuading the elites,” my major critique is that the migrant workers’ rhetorical practice has a component of what might be called “the dream for transparent
communication” (Aune, 1994, p. 33), as James Aune has critiqued Marxism’s tendency to deny its own rhetoricity. More specifically, some of the self-reflexive remarks by the three members of GH’s staff tend to form an interesting triangle with each one representing a drastically different view of rhetoric. According to Xu, as quoted in the previous paragraph, the notion that “good conscience” does not need any explanation is just an emotional rebuttal to the pretension of the journalists who kept asking the same kind of self-evident questions. For Liu Ming, his “street performance art” represents another end of the rhetorical spectrum where the matter of “conscience” is most dramatically and radically performed. Therefore, it seems that both these two views of rhetoric face the same challenge as to how to further explore the social, cultural, and rhetorical energy of moral vernaculars (Hauser, 2006; Cintron, forthcoming; Kleymeyer, 1994) in ways that can reach out to the widest potential audiences. The third view of rhetoric, somehow represented by socialist-minded Li Lei and some of the workers’ songs (Chapter 6), is a realist style that, according to Hariman (1995) and Aune (1994), claims to objective seeing and implicitly or explicitly dismisses other discourses as inferior vehicles of knowing social reality. Similarly, according to Frank Lentricchia (1983), the rhetorical challenge herein would be whether the socialist-realist has a “privileged mode of persuasion available to it… [that is] morally pure” (Lentricchia, 1983, p. 35). Granted, the critique I have presented here is only cursory and theoretical. Since theoretical knowledge has to be transformed into practical know-how and tested in local actions, the burden of doing such rhetorical criticism is essentially on how the critic can engage in a certain “cultural partnership” (aforementioned) with the migrant workers and in turn reflection and reformulation of the terms and theories of rhetorical criticism, instead of dwelling upon theoretical speculation.
In the last analysis, in writing this ethnography, I have been reluctant and unable to put a definitive ending to the GH stories. As a whole, this work has tried to maintain a balance between theoretical abstractions and the irreducible lived experiences and vernacular rhetorical practices of the migrant workers. As I understand according to Spivak’s painstaking arguments (1988), the efficacy of criticism is largely a function of the critic’s *ethos*, and the critic’s job is mainly to provide a space for the vernacular voices. For the purpose of this project, I have extensively quoted the migrant workers’ speeches, conversations, quarrels, and stories, so that my readers may directly hear what the workers had to say. Further, my rhetorical analysis has functioned as a certain mediator between the vernacular voices and their potential audiences who may be interested in the implications of the vernacular voices in a larger context. In this I may have a certain privilege as a rhetorical ethnographer, but my readers are invited to read my writing critically and form their own opinions based on my ethnographic accounts.

In the end, insofar “care” lies at the very heart of human knowledge-making and sufferings are never irrelevant to us according to the world’s profoundest ethical teachings (see Peters, 2001, p. 271; Max Van Manen, 1990, p. 6), I must confess that I do care about the fate of the migrant workers as well as the entire nation in an increasingly globalized world. In this, I have probably made myself vulnerable as a rhetorical ethnographer and the balancing act that I had to perform has been a delicate one. Care is probably not a systematic method of research, but without care, learning about and knowledge of local human existence would be difficult. Moreover, while care is probably not a sufficient justification for criticism, criticism without care would lose much of its true prowess. In this sense, the migrant workers, who care about their own fate more than anyone else, seem to be teaching themselves as adequate critics in their own right, as their vernacular voices have suggested. Ideally, then, the rhetorical critics or critical ethnographers
probably can better their craft by engaging an ongoing dialogue with the polyvocal realm of the vernacular.
Chapter 9

Epilogue

Several months after I left GH for Boulder in late July 2011, I logged onto my Internet instant messenger one day and received an offline message sent by Xu. As another year was ending and the Chinese spring festival mood was picking up across the nation, Xu remained at GH to take care of its daily work as well as the planned end-of-the-year feast for fellow workers who were unable to return home for family reunion. Then Xu relayed to me what his five-year-old son, Little Jin-gui, had said of me:

Hi, Mingjie,
You’ve been a big influence to my Little Jin-gui. He mentioned you many times since you left, such as:
“When will Teacher Wang come back?”
“I want to study for a Ph.D. too. And go where Teacher Wang has gone.”
“When I grow up and land in American, will Teacher Wang be already too old?”
He said he wondered how much your appearance has changed.

Inadvertently, I neglected Little Jin-gui, as I shouldn’t, by relegating him to a blind spot of my fieldwork. I still vividly recall the evening when Xu and his wife celebrated Little Jin-gui’s fourth birthday (in October, 2010) in their tiny and shabby dorm room. Some workers, friends, and I had gathered to share the moment climaxing with the boy’s coveted birthday cake. Zhong Sheng, one of GH’s first members and most devoted supporters, fondly recalled how preciously tiny the boy was when Xu was just starting up the organization three years back. Time flies. As everyone in the room started to taste his or her slice of the cake, I hastened to snap a photo of the children: The shy boy nested himself against the wall at the inner side of the (only) bunk, while his 9-year-old sister, despite the rare delicious temptation, was helping her brother to get the very first bite of the cake to his little greedy mouth. The boy was too young to comprehend what his
working mother, brave father, and caring sister had been doing for him. He was just starting to form his first impressions and imaginations about what it was like to be grown up, about China, and about the rest of the world. Like any child, he had a growing curiosity for learning, yet too young to know whether or to what extent his rural birthmark, the same of his parents, would determine the fate of his dreams. May the boy and the girl grow up to become proud of a country where they will not be judged by the place of their births, but by “the content of their character” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

At the beginning of this report, I have presented the workers’ play, in which the innocent childhood of the little girl (apparently with Little Jin-gui as the archetype) had clashed with the structural logic of the workplace, i.e., symbolically speaking, the adult world of inequality and social discrimination. The image of the child, with his or her innocent voice and vision, played a further, transformative role in Xu’s inspiration for GH’s theme song, titled “The Star and The Moon.” As recognized by the GH members, the “Star” symbolized hope and the “Moon” the workers’ dreams. Through the eyes of a five-year-old, the political economy of China’s rural-urban geography seemed to fall apart. Led by the child’s voice, the song envisions China as a better place to live, a place no longer divided by invisible lines.

Let this song be the constant reminder of the vernacular voices of grassroots China.

The Star-and-Moon Song

Voiceover of a little girl (daughter):

Mama and I have made a promise. At dusk every day, I will stand on the bridge at the village entrance, and she at the lofty balcony in the city. This way we two can watch the moon and count the stars together. Guarded by the moon and the stars, I won’t be sad for wishing her to be here, and she won’t be sad for being homesick....

Female vocal:
The tender moonlight,
Is my endless thoughts for home,
Guarding you, day and night.
The moon and the stars in the urban skies,
As if you were by my side.

Male vocal:

The bright starlight,
Is my unwavering strength,
Upholding my struggle for dreams in a distant city.
With the power of love,
My dreams take wings.

Together:

With love we have power.
With dreams we have hope.
Struggling for dreams, guarding for love,
Happiness is soon here to stay.

Female vocal:

The pure moonlight,
Lights up my sweet dreams,
Of good health & peace, harmony & beautiful reunion.
The great divide shall be filled,
Between rural home and urban home.

Male vocal:

The beautiful starlight,
Glowed with our blissful hope,
That millions of families shall enjoy reunion,
Across rural China and urban China,
Where the same moon and stars shall shine.

Together:

With love we have power.
With dreams we have hope.
Struggling for dreams, guarding for love,
Happiness is soon here to stay.
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