Sensebreaking, sensemaking, and identity enacting: A qualitative study of Chinese migrant workers' social identity trajectory

Yuerong Zhou[1], Jing HUANG[2*]

[1]School of Foreign Languages and Business, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, China.
[2]Department of English Language Education, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.

Corresponding author: Jing HUANG (*Email: jphuang@eduhk.hk*)

Abstract

This study examines the dynamic construction of migrant workers' social identity in urban Chinese workplaces through an inductive qualitative approach involving 121 participants across a variety of sectors. The research identifies a tripartite identity framework consisting of the comparison self (reference groups and role models), the relational self (laoxiang, friends, and workplace), and the reflexivity self (life planning, mianzi, and guanxi). It further demonstrates three developmental pathways: threat-focused survival strategies, opportunity-focused skill development, and closeness-focused belonging-seeking behaviors. The findings reveal how the dagongzhe identity emerges through the ongoing negotiation of multiple social positions and help organizations to better understand how migrant workers might think, feel, behave in different life phases. This study contributes to the literature on social identity, personal identification, and organizational behavior, particularly in the context of low-income and low-status groups navigating transitions and constant strains. It also offers practical implications for stage-specific policy interventions, organizational HR practices, and community-based cultural mediation programs aimed at improving the workplace well-being of migrant workers.

1. Introduction

Actors come to define who they are within their individual organizational settings. As in other recognized occupational domains, Chinese migrant workers undergo sensemaking, which prompts them to form new "situational identities" based on their urban work and lifestyle Qin, et al. [1]. Wang [2] asserted that *"dagongzhe"* is the manifestation of an accurate

understanding of this enormous social group. Thus, in this paper we name *dagongzhe* identity as the social identity of migrant workers. Within sociology and organization behavior studies, scholars increasingly seek to unpack the identity construction processes of Chinese migrant workers. In the sociology stream, researchers distinguish migrant workers as those caught between being a rural citizen and an urban worker—a social quasi-identity [3]. The unfinished process of proletarianization deepens migrant workers' sense of becoming incomplete and inadequate [3] which prevents the completion of the individualization process of disembedding-re-embedding [4]. This causes emotions such as hopefulness and aspirations to a pecuniary return, social mobility, and a "modern" lifestyle in an urban area Zavoretti [5]. Berlin [6] contends that for working people, the demand of labor is based not just on the alienation of the means of production(*savoir-faire*), but also the means of living a good life (*savoir-vivre*). Although researchers acknowledge the quasi-identity, psychological strains and psychological distress among migrant workers [7] our understanding of how migrant workers construct their social identity after their transition from a rural area to an urban area remains limited. Whyte and Im [8] regards China as a dormant volcano and migrant workers may be, "the colossal hidden threat to China's future social stability". Thus, research on migrant workers is of highly significance for deepening our understanding of migrant workers' well-being and China's sustainable social-economic development.

In organizational behavior stream, scholars including Gui, et al. [9] used the acculturation model [10] to examine migrant workers' social identity, whereas others including Afridi, et al. [11] simply chose *hukou* (official household registration) or the lack of hukou as a proxy variable for Chinese migrant workers' social identity to test the effects on their well-being. However, we argue that both methods are questionable. We are skeptical about whether the acculturation strategies model is applicable to Chinese migrant workers. Multiple variances in one or more categories may exist, and contextual variables such as the socioeconomic status, resources, and the local community in which Chinese migrant workers settle, should be considered [12]. This paper intends to map all related factors, and answer the calling for a closer scrutiny of Chinese migrant workers' identity construction work. It examines the interplay between the migrant workers' day-to-day negotiations, the accumulated understanding of a whole life experience, and their struggles with multiple demands and life goals. Drawing on an inductive, qualitative study, we aim to develop a coherent theoretical model of *dagongzhe* identity. We also explore how the components of *dagongzhe* identity interact with each other in a synergistic manner. We introduce migrant workers' identification trajectories of how their identifications have evolved: threat-focused personal identification (PI) for fulfilling their need of uncertainty reduction when they are regarded as the newcomer in their dagong life; opportunity-focused PI for fulfilling self-enhancement when they have a clear and efficacious sense of self; closeness-focus PI when they tend to be "their own boss" for fulfilling the belonging.

2. Social Identity and Identity Construction Work

Identities are the various meanings attached to an individual by the self and others. These meanings can be based on the social roles that a person holds (social identities) or on personal, idiosyncratic characteristics that the individual displays and others attribute to him or her based on his or her conduct (personal identity) [13, 14]. Identities are manifold, mutable, and socially constructed, but coexist within a self that integrates the diverse experiences into a whole [15]. Individuals' social identities are meant to satisfy important needs and values such as self-esteem, security, and belongingness [16, 17]. That is, individuals want to feel good about themselves, and one way that many people attempt to accomplish this is to associate with collectives.

Individuals also value a sense of security against threats to their interests and well-being. People often obtain this security by associating themselves with others who share their interests and care about their well-being. Individuals have a strong need to relate to and be accepted by others Baumeister and Leary [18]. Hogg and Terry [19] claim that the central role of social identity is to reduce uncertainty and encourage a sense of belonging. Through social interaction and the internalization of collective values, meanings, and standards, individuals come to see themselves somewhat through the eyes of others and construct more or less stable self-definitions and a sense of self-esteem. Thus, social validation sharpens and strengthens self-definitions and self-esteem [20].

Identity construction is the process by which individuals come to define who they are. Identity construction consists of a broad range of identity motives, like coherence and distinctiveness, and is often applied to the long-term "building" of an identity [21]. Scholars have argued that multiple motives drive identity construction on three levels: individual, relational, and collective Brewer and Gardner [22]. Cooper and Thatcher [23] theorized that individuals with a collective self-concept orientation might be strongly motivated by belonging and a reduction of uncertainty. The key outcome of identity construction at the individual level is identification—the extent to which one internalizes a given identity as a definition of self [24].

A job title, a team goal, and a department's function can be easily stated, but how individuals see or hope to see themselves and how they enact and shape their identities are not as easily defined [21]. China's migrant workers helped build modern China, but research on how these migrant workers see themselves and how they construct their social identity has remained scant. This study addresses the following central research question: How do migrant workers construct their *dagongzhe* identity?

3. Research Design

This study adopted a narrative approach to explore how Chinese migrant workers construct their *dagongzhe* identity. Narrative approach is featured of the injection of imagination and human involvement in the construction of a story to address the ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity, and dynamism of individuals. It is well suited for the study of subjectivity and identity. Narrative is inherently multidisciplinary and is appropriate for a qualitative inquiry that aims to capture the rich data within stories. Stories do not reflect the world "out there" but are constructed, rhetorical, and interpretive [25]. Stories are presumed to provide a holistic context that allows individuals to reflect and reconstruct their personal, historical, and cultural experience [26]. Stories are also uniquely suited to make sense of ambiguous or equivocal situations because they selectively distill fragmented or contradictory experiences and information into coherent portraits [14]. Importantly, from telling a story about the self, a sense of self emerges [27]. Storytelling allows for the study of hidden narratives that permeate an organization, and especially for the study of marginalized living stories, as it thus recognizes and gives voice to the voiceless [28]. People live and understand their lives in story form, connecting events in a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end [29]. In this study, we encouraged participants to tell their stories in three phases: life before dagong, dagong life, and future life plans. The narrative approach was adopted to obtain both migrant workers' retrospective and real-time accounts of their experiences and the phenomenon of theoretical interest.

4. Research Context and Data Sources

Migrant workers are rooted in an official household registration (hukou) system that shapes the overall distribution of the Chinese population, both rural and urban. They are permitted to work in urban areas as temporary migrants, but they are denied urban hukou entitlements. Rural migrant workers have been barred de jure, but not de facto, from living in urban centers by the hukou system and by class barriers that prevent migrant workers with meager wages from settling in urban communities [30].

Data originated from our research fieldwork trips during 2016-2020. 91 migrant workers from a variety of sectors were interviewed. To capture diversity, the migrant worker sample varied in terms of age group, gender, place of origin, occupation, and place of work. These migrant workers worked in second- and third-tier cities (Zhongshan, Jiangmen) or first-tier cities (Shenzhen) of Guangdong, one of China's economically advanced regions. All three cities are located in the Pearl River Delta - the popular destination for migrant workers, and the industries in which our sample worked range from manufacturing to services. To ensure a smooth site entry and to establish a good rapport with all research participants in the long term, the research team provided free human resource management training to the factories involved in this study and offered seminars to the executives and founders of the factories who might find the management advice from the research team useful.

Before conducting interviews with the migrant workers, we first usually held group discussions with the management teams (general managers and administration departments) to explore job challenges that middle management teams faced when dealing with migrant workers in the factories located in Zhongshan. These pre-interview discussions helped us clarify some of the issues concerning personnel matters and better understand migrant workers' dagong experiences.

In order to achieve a triangulated perspective on the complex process of dagongzhe's identity construction, in-depth interviews were also conducted with multiple related parties in Shenzhen who were often involved with migrant workers' dagong lives (totally 30 individual interviews): the factory management staff (15 interviews); community police officers who maintained direct contacts with migrant workers (4 interviews); the labor bureau officers who often mediated labor disputes between migrant workers and factories (3 interviews); nongovernmental organizations, civil affairs officers and community center officers who provided psychological and organizational support to help migrant workers' families (8 interviews). Interviewing these related parties offered us an insider perspective to appreciate the real life circumstances of migrant workers. For instance, one of our interviewees was involved in dealing with the 11 cases of suicide1 happening some years ago. She shared her insider observations and views regarding how the young migrant workers reacted and felt after the tragedy happened in the workplace.

In summary, our research fieldwork, extending over a prolonged period of five years, ended with 121 face-to-face in-depth individual interviews in total (91 with migrant workers, 30 with related parties). The interviews with the factories' migrant workers were conducted in the factory offices and were organized by the human resources department or administration without their presence or interference. Most interviews were semi-structured with a list of questions to be asked in a certain order and later more unstructured when the researcher (interviewer) became more familiar with the research settings and research participants. These formal interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The participants' words, repetitions, and behaviors (crying, smiling, and gestures such as playing with their keys and mobile phones) were recorded with notes. The more informal unplanned interviews and conversations were not recorded, but notes were made immediately afterward.

Our study used multiple data sources. The first author of this paper has an ownership position in a small factory in Shenzhen that manufactures the original equipment for a Japanese firm. Her position gave her an exclusive opportunity to observe the migrant workers' behaviors and gain direct experience while interacting with some of the workers. In addition to making direct observations of the migrant workers, we observed virtual chat rooms and social media to understand how migrant workers talked, what they were interested in, and how they responded to social media trends. Rich archival documents were also examined, such as the case studies of Foxconn, the annual work reports of the Labor Bureau of

---

1 11 migrant workers committed to suicide by jumping from the top of a factory building in 2010.

Shenzhen, the "Bluebook of Work Relationship" (Shenzhen), meeting memos of basic salary discussions, and regulations of migrant worker training centers, etc.

5. Data Analysis

We use the grounded theory approach to analyze the data for two reasons. First, the aim of this paper is not to test a hypothesis about an objective reality but to generate theoretical insights about how people subjectively interpret reality. The grounded theory approach is highly appropriate for generating a new theory [31, 32]. Second, identity is a subjective self-representation of precisely the type of phenomena for which grounded theory is most suited [33].

We began our data analysis by writing memos on a broad list of codes to match an open, exploratory study design [34]. These memos naturally led to abstraction and ideation [35]. During the early stages of memo writing, our attention was drawn to several insights. For instance, a reference group was not a citizen group but rather people with proximity to the migrant workers who were seen as linked to the migrant workers' identity.

Our memo writing occurred formatively throughout the research process, guiding the interview progression rather than being a summative activity carried out after data collection. The strategies of holistic versus categorical approaches and content versus form were used for coding [36]. In a holistic analysis, the life story is represented in a narrative and is considered as a whole, with sections of the text interpreted with respect to other parts. A categorical analysis uses coding strategies to abstract sections or words that belong to a category. The dimension of content versus form refers to a reading that concentrates on either what is told or how it is told. One of the authors read the data line by line, seeking similarities and differences among the categories, and thereafter developed a list of preliminary and sample concepts such as "in-group comparison," "proximity," "tentative self," and "filial piety." Examining the data and the literature, the three dimensions of identity construction emerged —comparison identity, relational identity, and reflexivity identity.

Both authors then spent six weeks discussing the codes and their meanings, which were entered into an emergent coding dictionary to guide and facilitate subsequent rounds of coding. Discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. For instance, one author initially coded a concept as "respect." The other author was hesitant to use "respect" because, in his opinion, "respect" was a Western word that did not reflect the deep structure that underlay the migrant workers' words. The literature on Chinese culture studies gave us hints, and we eventually identified "mianzi (face)" as the right theme. Many social scientists have noted that the Chinese language includes some indigenous concepts that are frequently used to define the appropriateness of interpersonal arrangements [37]. Because this study is unique to the Chinese setting, the use of common Chinese terms such as guanxi and mianzi to suit the Chinese social context is important for authenticity. We employ the two-order approach developed by Gioia, et al. [38] to establish a *dagongzhe* identity construction model (analytical framework) as shown in Figure 1 which contains examples of themes (illustrated by typical data extracts), first-order concepts, and second-order concepts.
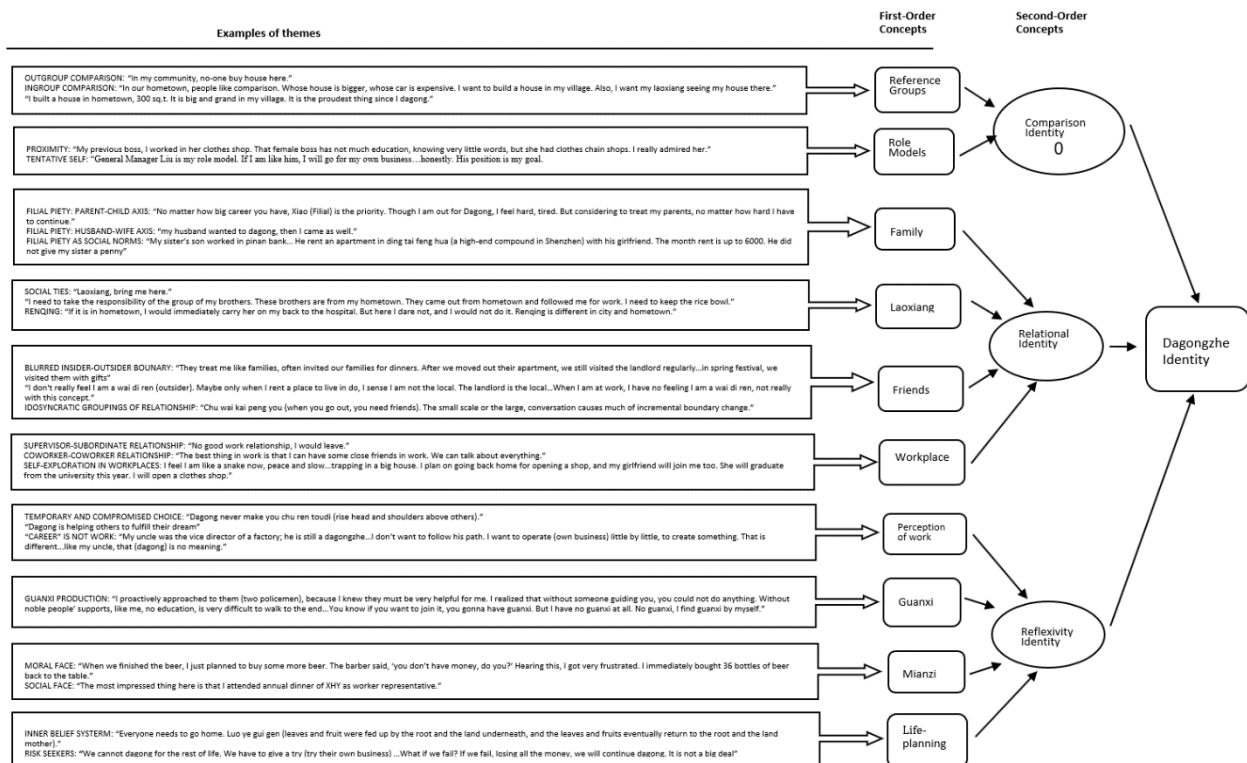

Figure 1.
Dagongzhe identity construction model.

6. Findings
This section presents the *dagongzhe* identity construction model by demonstrating not only the "deep structure" in the concept but also the "deep processes" in the relationships. The *dagongzhe* identity construction model consists of comparison identity, relational identity and reflectivity identity.

6.1. Comparison Identity: Reference Groups, and Role Models
The migrant workers unconsciously categorize themselves into their communities, which comprise close relatives, laoxiang, and school classmates at the basic levels of physical similarity, proximity, and shared fate. Their self-categorization process reflects strong psychological bonds. Our data indicate that the migrant workers are inevitably affected by in-group behavior and life choice:

I would not buy an apartment here in Shenzhen. In my community, no one buys properties here. My uncle brought me here. He would rather spend almost a million building a house in his hometown, but not buy an apartment in Shenzhen. (#79Taxi driver 1, male, 40-year- old, from Hunan)

People like laoxiang or their relatives, who were early migrants to the cities, shape the late-comers' investment decisions and set the investment directions among migrant workers. Moreover, the in-group influence is reflected in their social process, including perceived risk and their need for social approval. Winning intragroup members' approval spurs them to strive, as "low power group people are more likely to intend to enhance their collective identity" [39]. In the course of work/role transitions, peer approval shapes their collective identity and becomes increasingly valuable to both individuals and groups.

Migrant workers actively observe others' work and behavior and select role models to make sense of how a person thinks and acts:

My previous boss, a female, in whose clothes shop I worked, has not had much education, and knows very few Chinese characters, but she has a chain of clothes shops. I really admire her. (#18FCQ, female, 25-year- old, from Yunnan)

Relevance and attainability are the attributes that determined their selection of role models. They take comfort from people who share similar demographic and social characteristics. Such similarities give them much perceived relevance and psychological closeness, which make them feel that what their role model is doing is attainable and not far from their own current lives. Stemming from the reference group, role models serve to form their self-appraisal capabilities and set their lifestyle prototype and create the aspiration that represents the ideal self for migrant workers.

6.2. Relational Identity: Family, Laoxiang, Friends and Workplace
Migrant workers must provide income for themselves and their families. Beneath this economic incentive, however, a deeper sentiment underlies their "dagong" life choices. One participant explained,

No matter how big a career you have, xiao (filial piety) is the priority. Although I left home for dagong, I feel that life is hard and tiring. But considering my responsibility to my parents, I have to continue, no matter how hard it is. (#60ODE, male, 38-year-old, from Sichuan)

Filial piety, particularly the parent-child axis, is not just a realization of duties and obligations, but also a kind of conformity. Being a filial son or filial daughter is an acceptable social accomplishment. Migrant workers tend to act primarily in accordance with the anticipated expectations of others and social norms rather than with their internal wishes or personal attributes.

Laoxiang, a connection by geographical origin (e.g., being born in the same village), means there are shared dialects, customs, and lifestyles that often accompany people throughout their lives. Laoxiang represents the strong social ties of migrant workers that result from a combination of frequent interaction and reciprocal exchange for expressive and instrumental purposes, high intimacy, and mutual trust. Most of our participants said that "laoxiang have brought me here."

All of my teammates are my laoxiang, and we are like brothers. I brought them out here for work. Sometimes I feel I have a big responsibility for them. (#90ZD, male, 30-year-old, from Hunan)

As newcomers to cities, migrant workers rely on laoxiang bonds to adapt to the city life. In the job and life domains, laoxiang are considered the top resources and life companions, a "network capital". Another aspect of laoxiang is "renqing" representing a resource that one can present to another person as a gift in the social exchange process, or a set of social norms that one should follow to get along well with others [37].

A 50-year-old taxi driver's story illustrates how "renqing" worked:

The hometown is full of renqing … Here, Shenzhen is different. My neighbor is a family. We don't very often communicate with each other…my neighbor's shower equipment was leaking electricity… the woman was unconscious. I said to her son, "hurry up, get the management office staff here." After 10 minutes, the management office staff came and sent the woman to the hospital… If it were in my hometown, I would immediately carry her on my back to the hospital. But here I dare not, and I would not do it here. Renqing is different in the city and my hometown. (#80Taxi driver 2, male, 40-year-old, from Hunan)

Renqing rests in laoxiang. Among laoxiang with a high degree of intimacy, high trust is fostered during frequent interactions. Thus, it is more likely that migrant workers and their laoxiang will exchange renqing in their interpersonal networks.

Like all people, migrant workers maintain multiple relational selves that exist at varying levels of specificity. They do not passively accept their natural social roles. They are open to other idiosyncratic groupings of relationships and actively

build multiple facets of their identity. Some migrant workers live with less clear insider–outsider boundaries in the urban area. A 37-year-old migrant worker in a Japanese factory shared his story:

They treated me like family and often invited us for dinner. After we moved out of their apartment, we still visited the landlord regularly…During the Spring Festival, we visited them with gifts. (#30 YP, male, 22-year-old, from Hunan)

The migrant workers' life journeys consist of self-discovery via interactions among people and shifting networks of relationships. Such self-discovery is more salient in Shenzhen. Shenzhen—often referred to as a "migrant city"—has very few local citizens. Migrant workers who live in an open city environment are less likely to have a sense of local/nonlocal identity:

"I don't really feel that I am a wai di ren (non-local/stranger). Maybe only when I rent a place to live do I sense that I am not a local. The landlord is the local…When I am at work, I have no feeling that I am a wai di ren, and I have nothing to do with this concept." (#88XHW, male, 28-year-old, from Hebei)

Before our field study, we presumed that economic income was the first consideration for migrant workers because, after all, they moved to an urban area with a clear goal of making a living. Our participants in our study changed our belief:

Two things: one, whether you work happily; second, how the pay is like. If you work unhappily, there is no need to work there. No matter how good the pay is. But if you work there happily, though you earn a bit less, there is no problem. (#39XGS, male, 26-male-year, from Guangxi)

Two types of relationships determine migrant workers' happiness in the workplace: the supervisor–subordinate relationship and the coworker–coworker relationship. The migrant workers call their supervisor "lingdao" ("leader", someone with power). In this supervisor–subordinate relationship, a strong hierarchical meaning that reflects high power distance prevails. From the relationship with supervisors, they acquire the job expectations, and sometimes maybe a feeling of competency and autonomy. The coworker–coworker relationship is also a big part of the migrant workers' lives, as "the happy thing is spending time with colleague…" (#54NZJ, female, 23-year-old, from Guangxi). Working together involves reciprocal and dual benefits, so migrant worker groups tend to develop mutual expectations, familiarity, and empathy, which in turn lead to a nuanced, trusting relationship. Company colleagues can buffer their work pressure and provide social support.

6.3. Reflexivity Identity: Life-Planning, Guanxi and Mianzi

A female migrant and her husband who have worked in Shenzhen for 10 years became accustomed to the working life in the busy, modern first-tier city, but they perceived such a life as "wandering". "Serving only others" or "working for others" was her simple perception of dagong.

Being a boss can make you more money…You don't need to do things for yourself because the work is done by your staff. It is like you get people to develop the business, and then the money is yours. (#23LW, male, 32-year-old, from Henan)

Some young migrants might be more ambitious. They had not initially considered going after a career for themselves, but the idea emerged over time after day-to-day dagong. EYF shared his thoughts:

People can't dagong for their whole life…I am still young. Even if I fail (in trying my own business), at least I have tried. But if you have always worked in factories, even if you are a manager or director, you are still a dagongzhe. (#13EYF, male, 25-year-old, from Hubei)

Being a boss is the ideal self because it means that they would have their own careers. Their career ideas are not grand, ranging from opening a clothes shop, small hotpot restaurant, or barber shop, to a small rubbish collection business, but they regard these businesses as careers. In their eyes, a career is not work, because work is "working for others". "Go home, do our own business" is a preferable consequence after the migrant workers' years of negotiation, revision, and reconstruction of their lives in terms of changing their individual circumstances or mindset. Such life-planning is derived from their inner belief system, "Everyone needs to go home. Luo ye gui gen (the leaves and fruits eventually return to the root and the mother land)." (#66, male, 19-year-old, from Yunnan)

Thus, migrant workers have mixed thoughts and feelings toward their dagongzhe identity—an "ambivalence". They may accept it: "I am a dagongzhe." They may disregard or avoid their dagongzhe identity and consider themselves as neither city citizens nor rural people. They may reject their dagongzhe identity: "I would not say I am a dagongzhe. Today I am working here in this factory. Tomorrow I may be somebody like a boss." (#14, CB, 21-year-old, from Sichuan)

These reflexive senses might lead migrant workers toward a certain future, in addition to life planning, and we must also consider "guanxi (relation) production" in relation to reflexivity identity.

When I was 22 years old, I really wanted to join the military. You know that you need guanxi. But I have no guanxi at all. No guanxi. I found guanxi by myself…I went directly to the vice president of the recruiting team and said to him, "I will give you what you want. I just want to be enrolled." …I really had no alternative way to do it. (#35LJB, male, 34-year-old, from Sichuang)

From this migrant worker's story, we can see how someone with limited social capital can build up a valuable network connected to the power structure. Very often, Chinese guanxi involves a third party through which people can connect with a powerful group. Realizing they have no guanxi networks and no valuable middlemen for help, the migrant workers create their own "tool kit" for their "guanxi production."

Mianzi (face) is essential for guanxi development and maintenance. Two types of mianzi can be abstracted from the interviews:

The barman said, "You don't have money, do you?" Hearing this … I immediately bought 36 bottles of beer for the table. (#66WC, male, 19-year-old, from Yunnan)

This is an example of how one migrant worker protected his moral face. The moral face is the social evaluation of one's moral character, and the baseline for one's personal integrity. People in a low power group care more about face, not only their moral face, but also their social face:

The most impressive thing for me personally here is that I attended the annual dinner of XHY as the workers' representative. (#46LW, male, 32-year-old, from Henan）

Migrant workers attempt to obtain mianzi by successfully performing their specific job roles and thus being recognized by others. Being named on the honored worker board or being rewarded as an excellent worker brings great social value and pride for the migrant workers. Zheng mianzi (earning face) is the status one obtains from the personal qualities and strengths and via the nonpersonal factors of wealth.

7. Discussion

7.1. Three Paths of Personal Identification

By recognizing that migrant workers in organizations have multiple needs that are simultaneously or sequentially salient, we can examine ways in which various components of dagongzhe identity interact. We articulate three types of interaction processes. We define this process as, "personal identification trajectory". When migrant workers first enter the dagong life course, they may experience powerlessness, anxiety and fear, causing them to identify with people in proximity to them. This identification is driven by the need for reduction of uncertainty which we defined as, "threat-focused personal identification (PI)". Once they become skilled workers, they identify with their supervisor or their boss in seeking to fulfill the self-enhancement which we defined it as, "opportunity-focused PI". After years of dagong life, when migrant workers start their own business venture, their personal identification turns back to their small life circle, their closeness relationship in seeking to fulfill the belonging which we define it as, "closeness-focus PI".

7.2. Threat-Focused PI: Sensebreaking in the Early Dagong Life

Entering urban workplaces as newcomers, migrant workers encounter powerlessness, the need of reducing anxiety threats and the fear that they may not identify with others in organizations or communities. They lack a clear and efficacious sense of self, feeling lost in demands of the circumstances. They identify with laoxiang or friends in organizations or communities with an aim for reducing their anxiety and seeking the need for uncertainty reduction. Identification with seemingly laoxiang or friends in the urban areas is for gaining ready-made identity attributes, e.g., sophisticated work skills, learning how to deal with supervisors and co-workers, and urban life styles, etc.

They put the most stock in information and interpretations provided by their peers and supervisors because they are familiar with the proximal situation and represent the organization and its expectations. Such personal identification is considered compensatory. Migrant workers identify those in proximity to them, attempting to fill a knowledge deficit and quell the associated threat. In addition, in the lens of structural embeddedness perspective, migrant workers evaluate whether they have a good job in the urban areas, based not only on their income or position in a technical division but also on non-economically determined social networks that cut across work places. In this sense, we term this process as, "threat-focused personal identification" in which migrant workers make self-adjustment in early stages of their dagong life in urban areas.

7.3. Opportunity-Focused PI: Sensemaking-in the Middle of Dagong Life

Consciously or unconsciously, migrant workers engage in prospective thinking in order to construct an interpretation of reality which we regarded as the process of sensemaking. Migrants try to anticipate and make sense of the probable future. They compare their current life to that of peers, family members, or managers. They unintentionally and unreflectively find themselves becoming like others. Over time, migrant workers tend to have a reasonably clear and efficacious sense of self but see an opportunity to enrich that future. For example, one participant (#38, male, 28-year-old, from Sichuan) admired his director's effectiveness in leadership and working with clients and thus identified with the director to enhance his skill set. On the organization side, factories which employ migrant workers, utilize sensegiving through providing role models who represent the prototypical role attributes. Some migrant workers make deliberate attempts to think, feel, and act like their role model as their future work self. Role model represents migrant workers' future work self that embodies what one would like to become, and reflects migrant workers' hopes and aspirations in relation to work.

To identify with their role models, such as their bosses, managers, or someone successful in their business, they are seeking to fulfill their self-enhancement. This is a supplemental process through which they address a discerned identity by perceiving a sense of oneness with their role models thereby internalizing the role models' identity attributes. Migrant workers project themselves into their role models and capitalize on an opportunity to enhance themselves. This path is supplemental and this process tends to be associated with positive effects. We consider this process as, "opportunity-focused personal identification".

7.4. Closeness-Focused PT: Constructing an Identity Narrative

Migrant workers are obsessed by two main questions: "Go home or stay in urban areas"; "Dagong or having their own business". Guided by these two life courses which are full of contradictions, migrant workers move back and forth between urban life and rural life. "Go home, do our own business" is an informed decision after migrant workers' years of negotiation, revision, and reconstruction of their life in terms of alteration in their individual circumstances or mindset. From "the prospect theory", when people are in a condition of loss, they are likely to be risk seeking. Most likely migrant workers see themselves in the "loss" condition, even though they might accumulate relatively handsome savings after

years of hard work in urban areas. Due to lack of sustainable social capital and high unemployment risk perception [40] when migrant workers are bound to start their own business, they turn to seek help from their direct ties, families, and acquaintances such as laoxiang and friends. Mutual experiences and close relationships provide a strong foundation for closeness-focused PI, which is presented as a high-quality relationship, or a relationship involving recurring interactions that are characterized by vitality, and mutuality. When migrant workers work in cohesion to earn a living, such a close relationship is perceived as high level of trust, responsiveness, self-disclosure and loyalty with low levels of instrumentality. Close relationships meet migrant workers' need for belonging, providing benefits such as social support, positive affect and companionship and self-expansion.

To identify with individuals from their direct or strong ties, migrant workers' closeness-focused path PI is instrumentally rational, ego-oriented, as well as economically and socially oriented. During closeness-focused PI process, the economic action and social action are intertwined. In summary, migrant workers' three paths of personal identification (PI) discussed above can be illustrated in Figure 2:
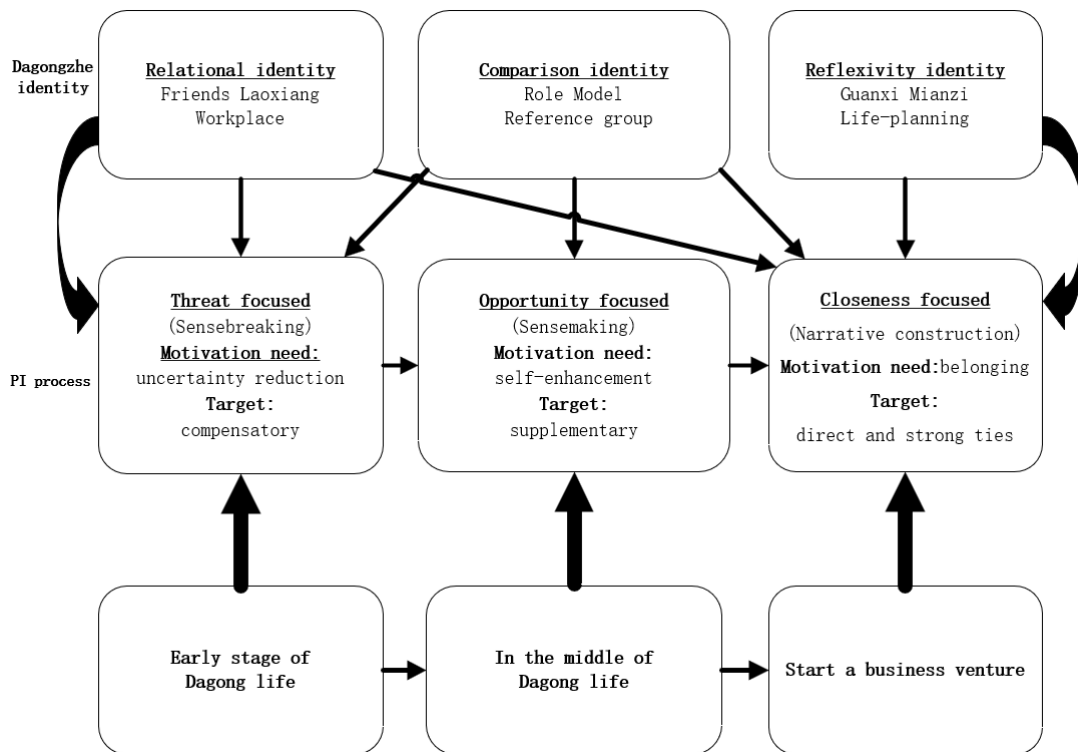

Figure 2.
Migrant workers' three paths of personal identification (PI).

8. Conclusions and Implications

Although dagongzhe have been regarded as the economic engine driving China to become "the factory of the world" [2] their social identity remains vague. This study employed the narrative approach to articulate the *dagongzhe* identity construction model by revealing the dynamic and conflicting identity construction processes in the organizational setting. The model integrates many previously disparate facets of identity research and thus allows us to see the links between important constructs, ranging from individual needs to situational factors and from cultural influences to intrapsychic conflicts. The study contributes new knowledge to the field in four aspects outlined below.

First, previous studies focused on externally oriented identity work and the actions people undertake to preserve their image with others [41]. Our study looks outwardly and inwardly to unpack the "black box of cognition," with which individuals work internally to build their identity, along with complex and various socially intertwined factors. Our inquiry reveals that although migrant workers have been working in urban areas for years, their reference groups remain the same, that is, people in spatial and/or social proximity. Our findings reveal that lower-status, less powerful members accept that power is distributed unequally and that they are more likely to take organizational sensebreaking and sensegiving at face

value. We have witnessed that migrant workers place considerable stock in social validation from their supervisors and managers.

Second, seeking mianzi and guanxi production in self-reflexivity is reflected in the attempts of dagongzhe to achieve their ideal self, that is, having their own business that consequently brings about the reproduction of their identities. "Dagong" is not "a career" but "work." Migrant workers travel back and forth in life contradictions, thus revealing the *dagongzhe* search for a "DIY biography" in a process full of conflicts, ambiguities, and paradoxes. The various components of the three identity construction dimensions are seen as the forces that function to direct *dagongzhe* to various lifestyles and life choices. These vary among contexts, with different timelines and distributions in opposing directions, to create the "inner instability of identity." We provide a dynamic perspective of the ways in which migrant workers construct their *dagongzhe* identities by responding to multiple demands and life goals within their inferior social positions. This paper answers the call from a growing stream of literature to link role transition and identity processes [42-45] and thus capture the dynamics of life's alternating periods of identity stability and change [46].

Third, the broad literature has been criticized for its inadequate exploration of the ways in which individuals construct identities in resonance with their cultural context and make choices when their occupational identity is misaligned with their desired self [21]. Our study tackles these limitations while contributing to our deep understanding of the poorly examined process of constructing a situated and socially validated sense of self [21]. Greater attention was devoted in this study to the ways in which cultural forces affect identity dynamics. The specific components of the three dimensions in the dagongzhe identity model indicate that Chinese Confucian culture plays a vital role in shaping migrant workers' identities. The cultural context serves as the material of identity construction work for *dagongzhe*, and it also creates contingencies in the importance of the attributes of the narrative process. Rooted in Chinese Confucian cultural tradition, relational identity is chronic and fundamental because it provides the textual meaning that helps migrant workers to define themselves, whereas comparison identity and reflexivity identity are more variable as the environment changes. Our study echoes the concept proposed by Granovetter [47] that economic action is embedded in the structure of social relations in modern industrial society.

Forth, this paper explores how the components of *daghongzhe* identity interact with each other in a synergistic manner. It contributes to the literature of identification in organization behaviour. The outcome of the complex interaction between migrant workers' identity components is represented by three types of personal identification in migrant workers' different life phases. We introduce migrant workers' identification trajectories of how their identifications have evolved, from threat-focused PI, to opportunity-focused PI and finally to closeness-focused PT. Our theoretical model helps organizations to better understand how migrant workers might think, feel, behave in different life phases.

Qualitative research is often criticized with respect to generalization and transferability. In terms of the empirical setting, the flux of Chinese migrant workers to cities is a unique social phenomenon in the world labor mobility market due to the hukou regime and other legacy settings. As such, these migrant workers' identities might differ greatly from work identities found in other cultures and countries. Similarly, Chinese migrant workers are regarded as a low social status group, and their identities share few similarities with professional identities. Thus, our dagongzhe identity model might not apply to higher socioeconomic domains. The data collection was conducted in south China; however, China is a large country, and its regions have great differences in terms of culture, social norms, and subjective perceptions of the social position of women. For instance, Gao, et al. [48] find that religious institutions create spaces to accommodate migrant workers' quest for everyday subjectivities. Thus, geography might play a significant role in identity construction. Future studies should explore variations among the regions of China and investigate gender differences in identity construction. Future studies might also investigate differences in the identity construction of the new generation versus the old generation of migrant workers.

In this study, we found that the reduction of subjective uncertainty and the desire for self-representation are salient. Unfulfilled identity motives cause migrant workers to pursue their ideal selves, with the primary aim "to have their own business." Future studies should unpack the dynamic interplay between sensebreaking (from dagongzhe to an entrepreneur), sensemaking, identity enacting, identity construction narratives, and social validation. Furthermore, future studies should examine whether migrant workers' emerging sense of self aligns with their salient motives, and how the individuals' changes affect behavior, cognition, and the impact on job-related outcomes.

Our research shows that the *dagongzhe* identity is conceived as a multiplicity of "I" positions. We provide explanations of the dynamic inconsistency and tension of the dagongzhe identity, and through these explanations we can see how migrant workers integrate their multiple psychic realities. Future studies should also investigate which components of identity are strongly upgraded versus suppressed. Our study serves as a starting point for future studies to investigate interactions between various mechanisms and dimensions of identity and to investigate which components of social identity influence various job-related outcomes. In summary, research on China's migrant workers, especially of ethnographic and narrative nature, will deepen our understanding of migrant workers' personal growth and well-being as well as the country's sustainable development in terms of economics and society.

References

[1]   X. Qin, P. W. Hom, and M. Xu, "Am I a peasant or a worker? An identity strain perspective on turnover among developing-world migrants," *Human Relations,* vol. 72, no. 4, pp. 801-833, 2019.

[2]   H. Wang, *Two kinds of new poor and their future: The decline and reconfiguration of class politics and the politics of the new poor. In: Liu CH and Murthy V (eds) East-Asian marxisms and their trajectories*. London: Routledge, 2017.

[3]   N. Pun and L. Huilin, "Unfinished proletarianization: Self, anger, and class action among the second generation of peasant-workers in present-day China," *Modern China,* vol. 36, no. 5, pp. 493-519, 2010.

[4]   H. Yan, *New masters, new servants: Migration, development, and women workers in China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

[5]   R. Zavoretti, *Rural origins, city lives*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.

[6]   S. Berlin, "Cultures of labour: Aspiration, developmental futures and the materiality of memory after Chinese economic reform," *Social & Cultural Geography,* vol. 25, no. 10, pp. 1533-1553, 2024.

[7]   S. Ren, J. Zhang, and D. A. Hennessy, "Psychological strains and psychological distress among Chinese rural migrant workers," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal,* vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 231-241, 2018.

[8]   M. K. Whyte and D.-K. Im, "Is the social volcano still dormant? Trends in Chinese attitudes toward inequality," *Social Science Research,* vol. 48, pp. 62-76, 2014.

[9]   Y. Gui, J. W. Berry, and Y. Zheng, "Migrant worker acculturation in China," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 598-610, 2012.

[10]   J. W. Berry, "Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation," *Applied Psychology,* vol. 46, no. 1, pp. 5-34, 1997. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x

[11]   F. Afridi, S. X. Li, and Y. Ren, "Social identity and inequality: The impact of China's hukou system," *Journal of Public Economics,* vol. 123, pp. 17-29, 2015.

[12]   S. J. Schwartz and B. L. Zamboanga, "Testing Berry's model of acculturation: A confirmatory latent class approach," *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology,* vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 275-285, 2008.

[13]   B. E. Ashforth and F. Mael, "Social identity theory and the organization," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 20-39, 1989.

[14]   H. Ibarra and R. Barbulescu, "Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 135-154, 2010.

[15]   R. Baumeister, *The self. In: Gardner GL (ed.) The handbook of social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

[16]   M. Pratt, *To Be Or Not To Be: Central questions in organizational identification." in D. A. Whetten, & P. C. Godfrey (eds.), identity in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998.

[17]   H. Tajfel, *Social categorization, social identity and social comparison in differentiation between social groups, edited by Henri Tajfel*. London: Academic Press, 1978.

[18]   R. F. Baumeister and M. R. Leary, "The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation," *Interpersonal Development,* vol. 117, no. 3, pp. 57-89, 2017.

[19]   M. A. Hogg and D. I. Terry, "Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 121-140, 2000.

[20]   B. E. Ashforth and G. E. Kreiner, ""How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 413-434, 1999.

[21]   B. E. Ashforth and B. S. Schinoff, "Identity under construction: How individuals come to define themselves in organizations," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior,* vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 111-137, 2016.

[22]   M. B. Brewer and W. Gardner, "Who is this" We"? Levels of collective identity and self representations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* vol. 71, no. 1, p. 83, 1996.

[23]   D. Cooper and S. M. Thatcher, "Identification in organizations: The role of self-concept orientations and identification motives," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 516-538, 2010.

[24]   B. E. Ashforth, B. S. Schinoff, and K. M. Rogers, "I identify with her,""I identify with him": Unpacking the dynamics of personal identification in organizations," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 28-60, 2016.

[25]   C. Riessman, *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993.

[26]   P. B. Gill, "Narrative inquiry: Designing the processes, pathways and patterns of change a," *Systems Research and Behavioral Science: The Official Journal of the International Federation for Systems Research,* vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 335-344, 2001.

[27]   P. Ricoeur, K. Blaney, and D. Pellauer, *Time and narrative*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1988.

[28]   G. A. Rosile, D. M. Boje, D. M. Carlon, A. Downs, and R. Saylors, "Storytelling diamond: An antenarrative integration of the six facets of storytelling in organization research design," *Organizational Research Methods,* vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 557-580, 2013.

[29]   T. Sarbin, *Narrative psychology, the storied nature of human conduct*. New York: Praeger, 1986.

[30]   D. Solinger, *Contesting citizenship in urban China: Peasant migrants, the state, and the logic of the market*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

[31]   I. Dey, *Grounding grounded theory: Guidelines for qualitative inquiry*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1999.

[32]   K. Locke, *Grounded theory in management research*. London, UK: Sage, 2001.

[33]   B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. London, UK: Aldine Transaction, 1967.

[34]   O. Obodaru, "Forgone, but not forgotten: Toward a theory of forgone professional identities," *Academy of Management Journal,* vol. 60, no. 2, pp. 523-553, 2017.

[35]   B. Glaser, *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978.

[36]   A. Lieblich, R. Tuval-Mashiach, and T. Zilber, *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications, 1998.

[37]   K.-k. Hwang, "Face and favor: The Chinese power game," *American Journal of Sociology,* vol. 92, no. 4, pp. 944-974, 1987.

[38]   D. A. Gioia, K. G. Corley, and A. L. Hamilton, "Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology," *Organizational Research Methods,* vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 15-31, 2013.

[39]   J. F. Dovidio, S. L. Gaertner, and T. Saguy, "Commonality and the complexity of "we": Social attitudes and social change," *Personality and Social Psychology Review,* vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 3-20, 2009.

[40]   A.-x. Zheng and H.-b. Zhang, "The structure of unemployment risk perception among migrant workers in China: An exploratory mixed methods study," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal,* vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 169-198, 2021.

[41]   G. E. Kreiner, E. C. Hollensbe, and M. L. Sheep, "Where is the "me" among the "we"? Identity work and the search for optimal balance," *Academy of Management Journal,* vol. 49, no. 5, pp. 1031-1057, 2006.

[42]   B. Ashforth, *Role transitions in organizational life: An identity-based perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

[43]   H. R. F. Ebaugh, *Becoming an ex: The process of role exit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

[44]   H. Ibarra, "Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation," *Administrative Science Quarterly,* vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 764-791, 1999.

[45]   H. Ibarra, *Working identity: Unconventional strategies from reinventing your career*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2003.

[46]   B. E. Ashforth, S. H. Harrison, and K. G. Corley, "Identification in organizations: An examination of four fundamental questions," *Journal of Management,* vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 325-374, 2008.

[47]   M. Granovetter, "Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology,* vol. 91, no. 3, pp. 481-510, 1985.

[48]   Q. Gao, D. Yin, H. Zhu, and X. Chen, "Lived religion under neoliberal transition: Work/leisure and migrant workers in Shenzhen, China," *Social & Cultural Geography,* vol. 22, no. 8, pp. 1122-1142, 2021.