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Huimin Deng, 'Drifting Peasant Workers: The Reflection of the *Hukou* System within the Chinese Cinematic Network'

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Drifting Peasant Workers: The Reflection of the *Hukou* System within the Chinese Cinematic Network

Introduction

The phrase ‘Chinese peasant workers’ refers to Chinese farmers who migrate to urban areas for non-agricultural jobs but remain in rural registered residency due to a household registration system [*hukou*] (Jin, 2011, p.70). This household registration system [*hukou zhidu*] divides urban residents and rural residents into different social groups with different rights and possibilities. Migrating between rural and urban areas requires an official permit from the authorities (Thelle, 2010, p.1043). Here I focus on the characters of Chinese peasant workers within Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and Chinese independent documentaries between 1992 and 2002. By doing so, I explore how the two newly-emerged Chinese film genres of the

1990s deal with the discourse of Chinese peasant workers within the *hukou* system. Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and independent documentaries have constructed a cinematic network in the criticism of the *hukou* system. This system has endowed peasant workers with a dual social identity, as both urban residents and rural residents, which leads to peasant workers' drifting fate between the 'urban' and the 'rural'.

After a three-year halt in economic reform following the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, the Chinese communist leader, Deng Xiaoping, re-emphasized the importance of the continuation of the opening-up and reform policy in the 'Southern Tour' in 1992. This continuation led to the rapid development of the national economy, especially in urban areas, which drove thousands of peasants to migrate to urban areas for their livelihoods (Berra, 2013). The reform of the state-owned economy in the 1990s resulted in the bankruptcy and privatisation of state-owned enterprises, which led to the unemployment of thousands of urban workers whose jobs used to be guaranteed by the state. Chinese urban governors had to confront laid-off urban workers asking for new job opportunities.

In order to reduce the urban employment pressure, urban governors took advantage of the *hukou* system to strictly limit peasants' migration to urban areas. The migration of peasant workers and the conservative policy of urban governors led to the intense relationship between peasant workers and the urban governors as well as urban workers in the 1990s. Such a condition did not change until 2002 when the Chinese Communist Party decided to protect peasant workers' rights in the name of 'the scientific outlook on development' [*kexue fazhan guan*] and 'humanity' [*yi ren wei ben*]. During this period, Chinese cinema—especially Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and independent documentary—paid much attention to the miserable working and living conditions of peasant workers.

To clarify the influences of the *hukou* system on the peasant workers' dilemma, I will discuss three feature films from Chinese Sixth Generation

cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise* (1998) and *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), and Guan Hu's *Mini-bus* (2000). I juxtapose these films with two Chinese independent documentaries: Du Haibin's *Along the Railway* (2000) and Zhou Hao's *Houjie* (2002). *Beijing Bicycle* and *Houjie* expose the link between job opportunities and peasant workers within the *hukou* system, whilst *So Close to Paradise* and *Houjie* explore peasant workers' paradoxical lifestyles within the commercialized urban environment, as well as the *hukou* system. *Mini-bus* and *Along the Railway* portray the alienation between peasant workers and urban governors, urban lower-class workers, and urban elites, and examine the social status of peasant workers within the urban social hierarchy.

This paper consists of three parts. In part one, I use *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) and *Houjie* (2002) to examine the influence of job opportunities on the urban-rural spatial movement within the *hukou* system; in part two, *So Close to Paradise* (1998) and *Houjie* (2002) allow me to consider the transformation of peasant workers' values after the migration to urban areas; in part three, *Mini-bus* (2000) and *Along the Railway* (2000) highlight the inferior status of peasant workers within the urban social hierarchy in which urban residents take priority over peasant workers within the *hukou* system.

From *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) to *Houjie* (2002): Peasant workers as the intersection of farmers and industrialized workers

The category of 'peasant workers' can be considered in at least two ways: villagers who leave rural areas for urban and farmers transformed from agricultural to industrial workers. However, the Chinese registration system [*hukou*] restricts such movement. In China, the *hukou* system divides urban and rural residents into different social groups with different rights, and migrating between rural and urban areas requires an official permit from the

authorities (Thelle, 2010, p.1043). It is extremely hard for farmers to become permanent legal urban residents. The unemployment of peasant workers and the subsequent semi-compulsory urban-rural movement, have generated a shared narrative strategy in Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and independent documentaries.

Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) is a feature film which shares similarity with Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) in terms of the narrative of searching for lost bikes, the unemployment issues of the urban lower class, and the concern of daily trifles of common people. However, the localization of *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) is conspicuous. Compared with *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) which focuses on the hard life of Italian urban lower class in the post-World War II, *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) pays attention to Chinese peasants as urban cheap labourers in the background of the uneven development between urban areas and rural areas in China's market economy reform. The film pivots around peasant workers, placing rural migrants in a market-oriented economy and emphasising the influences of the employer-employee relationship between farmers and urban residents. Wang Xiaoshuai has depicted the troubled career of a young peasant worker, Gui. Along with rural youngsters from the coast, Gui is hired as a bicycle messenger by an express company in Beijing. He and his colleagues are provided with high-quality mountain bicycles as well as uniforms to deliver messages to clients. Gui's bike is stolen, which almost leads to unemployment. At the same time, Jian, a middle-school student from an urban middle-class family, gets the promise from his father that he would be rewarded with a brand-new bike after he has passed his final exam with distinction. His father cannot keep the promise after his younger half-sister needs the money to attend an outstanding middle school. As a result, Jian steals the money to buy a bike on the black market, which turns out to be Gui's lost bike. Finding that Jian is riding his bike, Gui spares no efforts to get it back. The two youngsters eventually compromise, splitting the use of the

bicycle every other day. At the end of the film, the bike is broken in a violent conflict between street gangsters and Gui and Jian, and Gui is at risk of losing this job again.

The company uniforms and bikes transform the peasant youngsters from messy farmers to clean employees, initiating them into an industrialised factory machine (Gladwin, 2012, p.35). Gui initially works for the express company for free to afford the bike and his uniform. There is a formal, exploitative relationship between peasant workers and their urban employers. The young migrant Gui and his peasant colleagues thus belong to the urban working class, in the urban class hierarchy. However, they don't hold together when confronting the exploitation of capitalists, nor do they turn to labour unions for help. In *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), Gui's bike is stolen when he has nearly passed his employment's probationary period. In terms of job security, the 'loneliness' of peasant workers has been coded within an impossible mission, that is, searching for a lost bicycle alone within an enormous capital city. The 'unrelatedness' and loneliness imply that peasant workers constitute an urban lower class without unified class consciousness (Lin, 2002, p.268).

In China, urban areas are considered 'developed' and rural areas 'underdeveloped' because the *hukou* system endows urban residents and rural residents with different rights. Urban residents enjoy better education, medical treatment, pensions, working opportunities, and public welfare than those living in the countryside (Guo and Liang, 2017, p.778). Migrating from rural areas to urban areas, Chinese peasant workers can only look for jobs in the secondary labour market because they remain registered as having rural residency and cannot share urban residents' working opportunities. That is, they must take 'low-skilled jobs [which urban workers don't want to do] and suffer from unfavourable working conditions such as very long working hours, wage delay or defaulting, and poor, dirty and noisy work environment' (Mok and Ngok, 2009, p.242). According to the report of the All-China

Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), many rural migrants even have to work in the so-called ‘Three D Jobs’ (Schultz, 2015, p.51): that is, dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work. Therefore, they have become a new working class within an urban hierarchy (Mok and Ngok, 2009).

However, it is problematic to define peasant workers as a purely urban working class. At the end of *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) (see Figure 1), Gui’s bike is broken after a fight with urban gangsters. He hoists the wrecked bike on his shoulder and walks through the Beijing streets. The scene adopts slow motion, emphasizing the composition of the wounded youth, the broken bike, and the urban background. Jian Xu interprets the scene from the perspectives of globalization and urbanization: the wounded youth and wrecked bike may stand for rural authentic values (e.g. diligence and endurance) suppressed by the urban market economy; the juxtaposition of the traffic and the wounded youth implies that the authentic quality of peasant workers would impede the advancement of modern China (2005, p.445). As Lin Xiaodong and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill have stated, rural-urban migration has been a key element of China’s emergence as a rising power (2013, p.498). The combination of rural youth and the bike indicates Gui has become a part of the urban market economy as well as a component of Chinese modernisation. The wounds on such a rural youth and the broken bike in the background of the crowded urban streets thus indeed suggest that Chinese peasant workers have sacrificed much to survive the urban environment and that it is hard for peasant workers to keep up with the pace of China’s modernisation. However, by emphasizing the peasant workers’ suffering, brought on by urbanization and globalization, Jian Xu has reduced the peasant worker Gui to merely an urban lower-class worker, which means Chinese peasant workers’ social roles as peasants within the hukou *system* have been downplayed.

Unlike in much Western urbanization, China’s rural-urban migration means, on the one hand, that peasants migrate to cities and become

industrial workers and, on the other hand, that their social roles are still of peasants. The signification of Chinese peasant workers should be considered in the following two aspects: urban lower-class workers and peasants. It is hard to understand the living dilemma of Chinese peasant workers merely based on the urban class hierarchy in the background of globalisation without considering their spatial drifting between rural and urban areas due to the Chinese *hukou* system. In the last scene of Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), the wounded youth, broken bike, and urban background can be directly interpreted as suggesting the rural youth has lost his livelihood in the city. However, why would a rural youth tenaciously hold a 'broken bike' which stands for a lost job? What do work opportunities mean for peasant workers in the context of rural-urban migration?

Zhou Hao's independent documentary *Houjie* (2002) may help to interpret this final scene. It centres on a group of peasant workers who work at Houjie, a small town in Guangdong province. After the '9/11' terrorist attacks in the USA, industrial production at Houjie experiences a period of depression, bankrupting many local enterprises and causing the subsequent dismissal of peasant workers. In the scene captured in Figure 2, the camera first focuses on the man on the right, peasant worker *A*, who carries his suitcase, plastic pails, and lunch boxes. He asks the man on the left, peasant worker *B*, whether his lunch boxes should be thrown out before they leave. Then the camera pans from peasant worker *A* to *B* and *B* helps to smash *A*'s lunch boxes. The broken lunch boxes signify 'the loss of a job'. The broken bike and the smashed lunch boxes carry the same significance. However, *Beijing Bicycle* leaves the wounded rural youth and the broken bike as open-ended pictorial signs, based on which the fate of the urban worker, Gui, has been clarified, while the fate of the peasant, Gui, remains unreadable. *Houjie*, however, takes advantage of an informative cinematic context to expose what would happen to rural-urban migrants as both industrial workers and farmers after they lose their jobs. Considering the rural-urban migrants as

urban workers, the composition of the broken lunch boxes and the peasant workers represents the break in the connection between peasant workers and urban factories. In terms of peasant workers as peasants, they must go back to rural areas after their dismissal.

Such an interpretation is further strengthened by the next shot (see Figure 3) a peasant worker of a local factory, Sun Guiying, is complaining about the loss of her job. She is sad and does not want to leave the factory, her husband plays cards with a smile, saying they could go home and farm. The juxtaposition of the paradoxical couple clarifies the 'fate' of peasant workers: they must leave cities once they lose their jobs even if they are unwilling to do so. Although they could find more work in the city, they can never find a permanent situation due to their social roles as farmers. After his bike is wrecked in *Beijing Bicycle*, Gui confronts the same issue as Sun Guiying and other peasant workers in *Houjie*. As a result, *Houjie* provides additional signification for the last scene of *Beijing Bicycle*. The depressed Gui and the broken bike do not only refer to the loss of employment but also stand for the subsequent semi-compulsory, urban-rural spatial movement.

Due to the Household Registration System [*hukou*], career transition and geographic transfer are the primary stages of farmers' urbanisation. Farmers are permitted to earn money in cities, but it is hard for them to get urban registered residency. The definition of the social roles of peasants thus becomes complicated: 'in terms of occupation, they are industrial workers; in terms of social class, they belong to a transitional stratum from peasants to urban residents; and in terms of social identity, they are still peasants' (Liu, Dong and Wang, 2008, p.63).

The employer-employee relationship thus serves as the chief link between the rural population and urban space. Loss of employment, for a peasant worker, also represents the loss of mediation between farmers and urban space. As a result, spatial drifting between rural and urban areas becomes the fate of Chinese peasant workers and a social critique of the

hukou system. This drifting further prevents Chinese peasant workers from forming a unified class consciousness within urban space (Mok and Ngok, 2009, p.241), a significant aspect of the lonely peasant workers' existence.

From *So Close to Paradise* (1998) to *Houjie* (2002): Peasant workers at the intersection of rural and urban values

In post-socialist China, the foundation of Chinese culture has become a combination of Confucianism, socialist tradition, and capitalism (Tang, 1987). The introduction of a capitalist culture follows the pace of China's opening-up policy. The principle of this policy is that some people could get rich first so that they could help the poor to achieve a common prosperity, which contributed to and legitimised the subsequent uneven economic and cultural development. As a result, urban areas, especially coastal cities, experienced capitalist culture first, while rural areas (and even inland cities), to some extent, sustained Confucian and socialist traditions. The Chinese registration system differentiates urban residents from peasant workers in terms of working opportunities, education, pensions, and medical treatment, which results in the unfair competition between urban and rural workers. After peasant workers migrate to urban areas, they are involved in the communication and conflict between rural Confucian and socialist values and urban commercial culture. Unfair working conditions further challenge Confucian and socialist morality within a material urban context. The destruction of this value system has become a narrative strategy for Chinese Sixth Generation films, and independent documentaries to criticise the uneven development between rural and urban areas and the discriminatory rural-urban policy.

Wang Xiaoshuai's feature film *So Close to Paradise* (1998) depicts the transformation of rural values within a commercialised urban society.

Dongzi is a peasant who works as a ‘shoulder pole’ in Wuhan City, carrying things from one wharf to another. Gaoping, another worker and formerly a ‘shoulder pole’, wears a suit, smokes filtered cigarettes, and does business with a sinister gang. Giving him the appearance of an urban resident rather than a peasant worker. Gaoping has been cheated out of a small amount of money by a gangster, Su Wu. To find Su Wu, Gaoping kidnaps and subsequently falls in love with a Vietnamese singer, Ruan Hong. She turns out to be the ‘kept woman’ of Su Wu’s boss, who kills Gaoping at the end of the film. Dongzi remains at Wuhan City as a ‘shoulder pole’.

In this film, the peasant workers divide into two groups: labourers and gangsters. Dongzi and Gaoping are friends who live together, eat together, and shower together. The only difference between them is their career plans. Gaoping, to some extent, is the mirror of Dongzi in the evil, urban gangsters’ world. This coexistence creates an inexplicable image at the end of the film (see Figure 4). Dongzi leans against the wall of his room when Ruan Hong comes to find out what has happened to Gaoping. He smokes a filtered cigarette and wears Gaoping’s suit. The scene drives Jian Xu to ask whether Dongzi has changed from a hardworking labourer to a gangster (2005, p.442). Jian Xu’s question derives from the narrative of *So Close to Paradise*; that is, the juxtaposition of one rural-urban migrant as a lower-class worker and the other as a gangster. Such a mirror effect refers the peasant worker’s imitation of a gangster’s lifestyle (e.g. wearing suits) to the possibility of ideological transformation.

Zhou Hao’s documentary *Houjie* (2002) also juxtaposes diligent and depraved peasant workers. It uses a rural sex worker and industrial workers to present migrant workers’ ideological choices within a commercialised urban space. Li Li and her boyfriend Bin Bin rent a room in an apartment. Unlike other peasants who live in this apartment, they are without formal jobs, though they have urban life styles (e.g. going to nightclubs). To maintain their life of leisure, Li Li volunteers to serve as a *falangnü* [sex

worker] in a hair salon. The values of this couple are thus different from the industrial peasant workers. As the sub-letter of the apartment, the storyteller Tang Hongbing says to Zhou Hao, the documentary's director:

[Li Li and Bin Bin] pursue pleasure outside. Their daily payout, which may reach 50 yuan per day, is even much more than us. When they don't have money to spend, the girl finally has to go to that place [hair salon] to earn money. It is convenient and easy for girls to earn money there. Girls like Li Li are not accustomed to working in a factory. (Hongbing, 2002)

In this montage scene (see Figure 5), Tang Hongbing and the director Zhou Hao stay inside the building while Li Li and Bin Bin hang clothes outside. The storyteller and his subjects are separated by the doorway. When Tang talks about Li Li's job, he stealthily looks out of the door and seems to be afraid she may hear the conversation. The doorway, to some extent, becomes the physical and psychological obstacle between the two different types of peasant workers: those who work hard in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, and those who pursue an easy life with illegal or 'immoral' jobs. Li Li could earn around 4000 yuan per month during the economic depression doing sex work, while other peasant workers living in the same apartment earn no more than 300 yuan. In this sense, Li Li is to industrialized peasant workers in *Houjie* what Gaoping is to Dongzi in *So Close to Paradise*. Both Li Li (and Bin Bin) and Gaoping, as rural people, seek an urban lifestyle of pleasure. As a result, they lose 'productionism' and get stuck in legal and moral dilemmas (Gong, 2009, p.185). The juxtaposition of the peasant sex worker Li Li and the hardworking industrial peasant workers in *Houjie* (2002), and the juxtaposition of Dongzi and Gaoping in *So Close to Paradise* (1998) are thus similar in terms of narrative strategy. They convey the following signification: peasant workers face material desires in the context of a market economy, which challenge their values. At the same time, it is nearly impossible for peasant workers to live urban lifestyles in moral and legal ways.

When Dongzi wears Gaoping's suits and smokes a filtered cigarette, the competition between rural values (e.g. the spirit of enduring hardship) and urban values (e.g. commercial culture) shapes a paradoxical and dramatic iconographic composition of peasant workers, recognising the ideological conflicts of rural migrants within urban areas. Integration into urban areas can be a painful experience for peasant workers, sometimes driving them to hide their rural identities and change their ideology (Pellitero, 2010, p.97). It remains easier for privileged people to succeed in China's transformation from planned to market-oriented economy. Consequently, 'only the powerful, the well-concerned and the young can get rich gloriously' (Lin, 2002, p.272). As Maurice Meisner has suggested:

the post-Maoist Chinese bourgeoisie ... is a class that is in large measure composed of Communist officials, their relatives and their friends who were politically well positioned to take advantage of the new opportunities the market offered. (1999, pp.478-479)

Many underprivileged people, including peasants, must resort to illegal means to prosper in such a money-oriented society (Lin, 2002, p.272). Importantly, the working conditions of peasants are much worse than those of their urban rivals. Without an urban *hukou*, peasant workers cannot enjoy public services when they work in urban areas. They can only look for jobs in the secondary labour market, which means that they have to take low-skilled manual jobs with low salaries and unfavourable working conditions, such as long hours, wage delays, and dangerous environments (Mok and Ngok, 2009). They are, further, geographically separated from their rural welfare systems (Thelle, 2010, p.1044). Breaking the law and forgoing morality, to some extent, becomes a painful but effective way to achieve prosperity for peasant workers. The ideological transformation of Chinese peasant workers from productionism to mercenary hedonism, along with the conflict between

rural authentic values and urban commercial values, lodges a criticism of the registration system and the material desires brought by the market economy.

From *Mini-bus* (2000) to *Along the Railway* (2000): peasant workers as the intersection of ‘virtual urban builders’ and ‘official rural strangers’

The discrimination in the registration system does not only artificially limit peasants to lower-class work but also excludes them from urban political and cultural systems. The isolation of peasants has become another communal narrative code for Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and independent documentaries to criticize the prejudice against peasant workers within urban spaces.

Guan Hu’s *Mini-bus* (2000) constructs an enormous social network of peasant workers within an urban space. Liu Cheng Qiang and Gao Ming migrate from Shandong Province to Beijing to work as bus drivers. After they arrive, they are discriminated against by policemen because they don’t have temporary residence permits. They are allowed to work in Beijing legally after they receive official permission. However, local bus drivers want to drive them out of the city, damaging their bus and reporting their illegal working certificates to the police. Meanwhile, Liu falls in love with an urban girl, Li Juan, and Gao develops a short relationship with a peasant girl, ‘the little plait’. Unfortunately, Li Juan refuses Liu’s love after she finds a well-paid job in a big company and, at the same time, ‘the little plait’ leaves Gao to become a sex worker. In the end, Gao returns to the countryside in disappointment, but Liu remains in the city to pursue his ‘Beijing dream’.

For Liu and Gao, the transformation of social roles from farmers to peasant workers shocks them before and after they start to work at the mini-bus company. When they first arrive at Beijing West Railway Station, they

cannot find the bus company on the Third Ring Road. They thus turn to a policeman for help. The policeman, as an urban administrator, serves as a public service provider here. However, his role changes dramatically after the two farmers have formally transitioned to urban peasant workers. When a group of drunk urban youngsters at Lu Jiangang's restaurant attract the attention of policemen, Liu and Gao are frightened because they have no temporary residence permits. The policeman pays more attention to the two newcomers than the drunk youngsters. After Liu and Gao tell him that they are applying for temporary permits, the policeman thinks they are lying and takes them to the police office.

These different experiences indicate that the social role of peasant workers is the cause of the tension between farmers and city governors. Lu Jiangang, the boss of Liu and Gao, tries to protect his employees, grovelling to the policeman. The frame of this scene (see Figure 6) is oblique, which makes the policeman look taller than Lu although this may not be the case. In this scene, peasant workers, even peasant elites, are to city governors what mice are to cats. This frame highlights that the social role of peasant workers is, to some extent, troublemakers in the eyes of city administrators.

Urban residents, too, are estranged from migrant workers. Two types of urban residents are emphasized in *Mini-bus* (2000): the working class and the upper class. Liu Chengqiang and Gao Ming work as mini-bus drivers puts them in competition with local drivers. Local driver Datou tries to compete with Liu and Gao by discouraging people from taking their bus. However, their rural accents help them to win over customers. The fact they cannot speak with a *Beijing hua* (Beijing accent) is used to embarrass them by exposing their peasant identity, but passengers love their *jiaxiang hua* (rural accent) because it sounds funny. Their success further exasperates local bus drivers, getting the newcomers in various kinds of trouble, such as traffic accidents and legal issues. The migration of farmers to urban areas is a huge problem in the eyes of local workers because they are hard-working job

competition. Although peasant workers have virtually become part of the urban working class, they are competitive outsiders marginalized by local workers.

Urban elites are consumers of the transportation services provided by the working class, including migrants. Liu Chengqiang falls in love with an urban girl, Lijuan, who teaches English to senior managers of enterprises. Although Lijuan seems to be interested in him, she finally refuses to develop their relationship and no longer takes his mini-bus. The estrangement between them is not explained in the film, but the last scene (see Figure 7) could provide some clues. Lijuan stands on the balcony of the high-rise and looks at Liu, standing on the overpass. The camera regards Liu from the perspective of Lijuan, so that the tall, commercial mansion and Lijuan occupy almost two thirds of the frame, while Liu looks very small. The camera angle creates a sense of isolation and, at the same time, highlights the class difference between Liu and Lijuan. The rural-urban migrants are considered competitors, inferior workers, and potential troublemakers. They thus become the 'Other' (Schultz, 2015, p.52) that can hardly integrate into urban society. As Liu Chengqiang complains in *Mini-bus* (2000): 'we peasant workers can never become urban residents even though we make much money and wear beautiful clothes. We belong to the peasant workers forever.'

The narrative code which sets hardworking peasant workers apart from urban residents demonstrate the marginalisation of peasant workers in *Mini-bus* (2000). The same narrative strategy exists in Du Haibin's independent documentary *Along the Railway* (2000). *Along the Railway* serves as a good 'footnote' for the physical and psychological isolation of peasant workers within urban spaces. The documentary focuses on a group of migrant workers without stable jobs in the urban areas due to the loss of ID cards or residence permits. It is hard for these workers to go home because they cannot afford train tickets or still hope to find jobs in the city

to feed their poor, rural families. As a result, they drift along the railway and wait for opportunities to change their fate. They fight with other drifters for territory and steal food from local residents or sell well lids to the public to survive, and become trouble-makers in the eyes of local urban residents and city administrators.

Compared to *Mini-bus* (2000), the alienation between peasant workers and urban residents and governors is foregrounded in *Along the Railway* (2000). Estrangement is explored in crosscutting splits: the first shot shows dirty peasant workers looking for food in garbage bins along the railway, accompanied by the scream of trains. The next shot cuts to the streetscape, in which clean streets, high-rises, entertainment facilities, and commercial shops suggest the prosperity of the urban market economy. Messy areas along the railway and the prosperous urban cityscape expose the spatial separation between peasant workers and urban residents, further emphasising the marginalisation of peasant workers. Security guards in the train station complain that peasant drifters are a potential safety hazard to the train station, followed by scenery shots of the drifters rifling through garbage bins and wandering around the railway. The documentary cuts to an old man, a local resident, telling the cameraman that the peasant workers have stolen well lids from the road to sell for money. The crosscutting of interviews with city governors, urban residents, and drifting peasant workers generates the same narrative code as *Mini-bus* (2000), delivering the same *utterance*: that is, the conflict between depressed peasant workers and angry urban residents and governors. Urban residents regard the drifters as lazy, workshy troublemakers. At the same time, peasant workers complain that the *hukou* system deprives them of the right to work in urban areas due to the loss of their ID cards. The disdain of urban governors and residents for peasant workers thus stems from the *hukou* system and the urban class hierarchy in a globalised social context.

Mini-bus takes advantage of the temporary residency permit as the indicator to express the exclusion of peasant workers, whilst *Along the Railway* adopts the issue of ID cards to emphasize peasant workers as drifters. ID cards and temporary residence permits have different functions: ID cards decide the social status of Chinese citizens as rural or urban residents, while temporary residence permits determine urban residence rights. Both are derivatives of the household registration system [*hukou*] (Thelle, 2010, pp.1043-1046). They carry the same *utterance*: the different social statuses of peasant workers and urban residents. The official division between urban and rural residents artificially creates discrimination among Chinese citizens (Thelle, 2010). Urban residents enjoy better work opportunities and welfare and are safeguarded by city governors, while rural workers must take low-paid jobs and are at risk of being exiled to rural areas. By exposing the incompatibility between urban residents and peasant workers in both *Mini-bus* and *Along the Railway*, the two films show humanity to peasant workers in terms of their inferior social status within the discriminatory *hukou* system.

Conclusion

Between 1992 and 2002, Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and independent documentaries generated a cinematic accord to criticize the influence of the *hukou* system on Chinese peasant workers. This essay considers three aspects of this reflection on the *hukou* system: spatial migration, value transformation, and social status. The artificial separation of urban and rural areas has created political, economic, and cultural obstacles preventing rural migrants from pursuing urban citizenship. The subsequent dual social roles result in the fluctuation of peasant workers between urban and rural areas at the turn of the 21st century.

Images



Fig 1. At the end of Beijing Bicycle (2001), Gui carries his broken bike and is walking on the street.



Fig 2: In Houjie (2002), peasant worker (centre) smashing a red lunch box



Fig 3: In Houjie (2002), Sun Guiying and her husband.



Fig 4: In So Close to Paradise (1998), Dongzi leans against the wall while Gaoping's girlfriend is coming to him.



Fig 5: In Houjie (2002), Li Li hangs clothes with her boyfriend Bin Bin, while Tang Hongbin talks about their affairs.



Fig 6: In Mini-bus (2000), Lu Jiangan is grovelling to the policeman who wants to take his employees, Liu Chengqiang and Gao Ming, to the police station.



Fig 7: In Mini-bus (2000) Lijuan looks at Liu Chengqiang from the commercial mansion while Liu stands on the overpass.

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