Eric Florence, "*Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices,* by Wanning Sun," *The China Journal*, no. 79 (January 2018): 134-137.

Subaltern China is the first systematic, exhaustive study of rural migrant workers' cultural politics in post-Mao China. Sun Wanning combines a rich ethnography, communications studies, and media analysis with elaborate but always clear the- oretical scholarship on subaltern politics, the politics of recognition and of voice and visibility to interrogate the specific features of subaltern politics in post-Mao China.

Sun delves into the cultural politics of rural migrant workers' self-representation through the mediation of a wide array of cultural practices (poetry, literature, film, photography, etc.). Highlighting the fact that rural migrant workers are being spo- ken for and represented by a great number of people and organizations, from the Party-state to journalists, urban elites, and grassroots organizations, Sun shows the complex ways in which rural migrant workers engage with these narratives and how they participate in a diversity of institutionalized forms of mediation of their experiences (43).

Most of the important information was gathered between 2010 and 2012, through a quantitative survey of 1,300 migrant workers in Beijing and several other sites in China, including Suzhou and Shenzhen. Sun also interviewed both rural migrant workers and activists at grassroots organizations, where she made extensive eth- nographic observations. One of the merits of Sun's approach is that she deliber- ately does not reify the migrant workers, conscious that this is a highly differen- tiated social category across lines of sociocultural levels, gender, class, and so on. In dealing with migrant workers' "self-ethnographic descriptions," she decided to treat these representations in many instances on an equal footing with her own ethnographic observations, "on the epistemological grounds that ethnographies are also 'genres' as much as other literary forms" and that both are socially con- structed (49).

The book has four parts. In part 1 (chaps. 1–2), Sun describes the main themes, research questions, and approaches of the book, and also provides a nuanced ac- count of how the identity of migrant workers as subalterns is constituted. She high- lights a key epistemological assumption that runs through and gives coherence to the book: that in order to provide a valid account of political subjectification, it is necessary to combine sociology and the political economy of labor along with the cultural politics of migrant workers—that is, their use of new media and how they engage with hegemonic regimes of cultural representation.

In part 2 ("Hegemonic Mediations; Subaltern Politics; and Cultural Broker- ing"), Sun dwells, in chapter 3, on the struggles by construction workers to make visible their claims for justice through the mainstream media. She describes the complexity of a politics of protest that goes through a "particularly embodied in- stance of the politics of presence" and of visibility (71). Sun documents how the media, workers, the Party-state, and economic forces all intervene in news mak- ing, bearing in mind the government's political motive of "social harmony" and "political stability" as well as the need to satisfy the interests of economic forces. Chapter 4 depicts how migrant workers are represented in the mainstream com- mercial cinema and explores workers' reception of these films as well as their view- ing habits. Reflecting on rural workers as a class identity, she notes that "while a subaltern consciousness may indeed be formed through active and creative en- gagement with the production and consumption of media products," the advent of this consciousness remains deeply dependent on improvement of their socio- economic conditions (113).

In the first chapter of part 3 ("Subaltern Politics"), Sun compares mainstream documentaries with independent documentaries, the latter being informed by "an ethics of acknowledging systematic injustice and social inequality . . . rather than party-state sponsored melodies of social harmony and political stability" (131). She eloquently describes the politics of cultural recognition pervasive in the

depic- tion of workers in CCTV documentaries, as "giving visibility without legitimacy and rhetorical recognition without economic and political substance" (123). The two chapters (7–8) of part 4 ("Cultural Brokering") deal with questions pertaining to "dagong [migrant worker] literature," how to define a real "subaltern perspective" in writers' standpoints, and the features of "subaltern literature." In these two chap- ters, Sun draws on a wide range of Chinese scholarship and the work of literary crit- ics to document the debates centering on the status of dagong poetry in relation- ship to elite or mainstream literature.

This dense and rich volume deserves more space than a book review allows. I would like, however, to highlight three features of Sun's study. First, the book pro- vides a vivid account of the increasingly diverse and dynamic forms of cultural representation of migrant workers and of the changes in their production, circu- lation, and consumption. Sun provides a useful genealogy of this cultural politics, against the background of the legacies of the Mao era. She documents the first literary forms about workers' experiences toward the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, including the cultural brokering by cultural and intellectual elites as well as a number of cultural institutions (the Shenzhen Cultural Bureau, research centers, literary festivals, etc.) in fostering and shaping dagong poetry and literature. In sketching the transformations in the modes of cultural representation of migrant labor, she highlights the increasingly visual forms of self-representing and being represented, as more and more workers started to turn to the Internet and social media. She notes how this has made possible a much greater circulation of cultural practices by migrant workers. Dagong poetry and literature date to the late 1980s onward and focused chiefly on factory life: the young authors hailed initially almost exclusively from southern China's factories. With the digital turn and with the increasing role of mediation by grassroots organizations, other categories of migrant workers started to engage in cultural practices such as writing, photog- raphy, filming, and so forth. The book sheds light on the subtle ways in which rural migrant workers through inventive cultural practices have been able to "in- sert themselves into the symbolic order and make moral and political interven- tions in the field of public culture" (243).

A related key issue discussed in some detail is "digital political literacy." Sun examines the technological capabilities of workers and how this has had an im- pact on political socialization and the forging of a working-class identity. She high- lights that shaping such an identity and workers' capacity to gain visibility is in- creasingly dependent on "an effective interface of the two spheres" (179). In her conclusion, Sun notes that her study sheds light on the constraints that a frag- mented subaltern politics faces in post-Mao China. She qualifies the process of "formation of a subaltern consciousness" as an "uneven, local, partial and patchy process" and talks of "a spectrum of subalternity and graduations of subaltern consciousness" (249).

Second, Sun explores the cultural practices fostered and organized by grass- roots organizations. Sun shows how activists at these organizations try to balance their need for greater visibility, which entails closer relations with mainstream me- dia and elite cultural brokers, with their endeavors not to be co-opted by the main- stream media. Nongovernmental organizations have accumulated practical knowl- edge about the appropriate level of visibility they strategically should aim for. In some cases, they prefer to play down their media visibility lest they attract too close attention from the Party-state, while in less politically loaded circumstances they may try their best to use specific platforms to reach a larger audience. The recent sudden media visibility of the "I am Fan Yusu" affair lends weight to such an argument—that a difficult balance marked by some degree of unpredictability has to be struck by migrant workers and by activists at grassroots organizations.

Third, in her concluding chapter Sun touches on a paradox: that while rural migrant workers often lack class mobility, a sense of hope as to their future is still widespread, even if fragile. She notes that such an aspiration for an improvement in their own or their children's condition is at once a key component of migrant workers' agency and a core element of neoliberal governmentality that fosters and shapes deeply individualized aspirations (249). The exploration of such a politics of hope is particularly complex since there is a strong overlap between people's individual categories of expression and

mainstream or state-sponsored categories. Through vivid documentation of the cultural practices migrant workers engage in, the book offers useful insights into the dynamic tension between workers' hopes and aspirations to improve their lot and another core dimension of migrant work- ers' politics of identity and cultural representation—that is, their sense of disillusion- ment, discrimination, resentment, and anger. Workers' everyday cultural practices cannot help but engage with mainstream and Party-state-sponsored core values— from being co-opted, accommodating, ironic, to utter rejection—but at the same time the book underlines the Party-state's resilience, its wide range of institution- alized forms of intervention, and its capacity to monitor the grassroots social and political dynamics.

Subaltern China is a major contribution to the study of the cultural politics of migrant labor in post-Mao China. It should become a must read for graduate stu- dents and scholars in the fields of cultural studies, political anthropology, and contemporary China studies.

Eric Florence
French Centre for Research on Contemporary China, Hong Kong