

The Collective Identity of “Three Gorges Migrants”: Its Construction and Responses

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Abstract. By doing field work in a migrant village, this article explores the construction of the identity of “Three Gorges Migrants” among the people who have been displaced and relocated by the project of Three Gorges Dam in the political and social contexts of China, and examines migrants’ changing reactions and coping mechanisms during the past eleven years. It argues and proves that negotiation between the society and the state is absent in a country where policies are implemented in a top-down tradition, and “Three Gorges Migrants” have very little say about their identity.

Keywords: Forced Migration; Project Migrants; Collective Identity

1. Introduction

This article approaches the process of how the collective identity of “Three Gorges Migrants” has been constructed among the people who have been forced to leave their homelands by the project of Three Gorges Dam in the discourse of both the state and society. Over one million people have been forced to move by the national project of Three Gorges Dam since year 2000 in P.R.China. As an example of one of the top-down implementations in P.R.China, the Three Gorges Project offers a chance to inspect whether there is communication or dialogue between the common people – the migrants – and the state. Riva Kastoryano views the “negotiation of identities” as a model of development common to all democratic countries, “no matter what their definition of the nation and their principles of citizenship” (Riva Kastoryano, 2002). By comparing the international migrants in France and Germany, he underscores the importance of this citation and exploration since “its – (the state) – power to define a common identity, a sense of solidarity and loyalty consolidated within a single political community, is at stake” (Riva Kastoryano, 2002). Unlike the negotiation between the migrant community and the state in Riva Kastoryano’s cases, the migrants involved in the Three Gorges Project have had very little say about either the terminology of their identity or its affiliated contexts, e.g. status, compensation. Recent research also has a tendency to expose the efforts of the weak in fighting for their rights. Three Gorges Migrants, though, have gained little in their struggle for better situations, despite the fact that they have conducted protests and other activities. Actually, they cannot discard their identity and the images that adhere to it. All they can do is employ some strategies and coping mechanisms to change the image of this given identity. This article examines under what contexts the migrants have constructed and altered their responses and coping mechanisms towards the state, governments and the outside society.

The data for this article is drawn from one year’s field work in my field site called Dragon Village^{*}, a village built especially for the 703 migrants from Zhong County, Chongqing, Three Gorges region. This village, which was built on the land bought from the neighboring villages, was constructed in two months in Chen City, Hunan Province in 2000 just before the relocation.

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^{*} This paper uses the pseudonym Dragon Village and Chen City in order to protect the habitants.

2. Construction and responses to the identity

2.1 Political construction of the identity of “Three Gorges Migrants”

Undoubtedly, it is the state that entitled the 1.3 million people, who were forced to leave home by the national project, as “Three Gorges Migrants”. Li Peng, the premier of China then and also the chief proponent of this project, defined the resettlement of over one million people to be the most difficult part of this event (Chi Wenjiang, 1996). Before the commencement of the migration, the media had been full of praise for the migrants who were to give their native places, which were their birth places and foster mothers, all for this national project. In their words, migrants should be greatly admired for the so-called “Spirit of Three Gorges Migrants” (“*Sanxia Yimin Jingshen*” in Chinese), which should be emulated by the whole country. An exhibition praising this “Spirit of Three Gorges Migrants” had been held in Beijing and several other regions (Tan Ke, Li Qin, Juan Dong, 2006). The state and the media also spread the message that an amount of compensation would be distributed to migrants and they would be resettled in regions with better resources.

Who were to be the Three Gorges Migrants? In fact, residents in the Three Gorges Region had no choice. Officials in Chongqing and Hunan led a delegation to give people an early view of the receiving city in Hunan. The rural cadres and party members who were compelled to join in by government officials, and many ordinary villagers who just wanted to inspect the city and make decisions afterwards, were detained in Hunan and could not leave unless they signed the documents agreeing to move. Consequently, many people’s discontent and bad feeling was already present when they left for the new home.

Upon arrival, the migrants were very disappointed with the poor conditions in the new village and became angry about the unfulfilled promises like low floor height, far-away farming land, etc. The compensation turned out to be the thing they cared more about and the disputes over it directly induced the first protest in 2001, in which they expressed their doubt and discontent in a violent way. The local government handled it by using police force as well as negotiating with the leader and gave a tiny amount of land to each villager as compensation. It was then followed by a big campaign in which a large number of officials of the city were sent to encourage and physically assist the migrants with their farm work. This was almost the last time that the government showed any support to them. After that, the migrants themselves felt indifference and even unfairness from multi-level governments, which, accompanied by their failures during the protest and daily claims, left them with the message that the Three Gorges Migrants were viewed as too pugnacious and greedy. Every time they expressed resentment, government officials, including the secretary of the Hunan Province Party committee, kept out of it and tried to hide themselves behind cadres. From about 2005 to 2011, local governments consistently turned a deaf ear to the affairs of the residents of Dragon Village. The government of the town always passed over their duties to the Immigrant Bureau, claiming that residents of Dragon Village as Three Gorges Migrants should be supervised by this specific department.

During this process, the state, accompanied by its media and local governments, placed a collective identity on the residents of Dragon Village and treated them as a special group of people: “Three Gorges Migrants,” who once held honorable spirit in sacrificing themselves to the national project and moving voluntarily, and thus were highly praised, well compensated and sent to regions with better conditions by the state, but were too restless and unreasonable after relocation and should begin to live on their own in the future.

2.2 Social construction of the identity

The host society turns out to be another essential factor in drawing boundaries between Three Gorges Migrants and others and thus enforcing this collective identity. Though multiple contacts occurred between residents of Dragon Village and the neighboring villagers, there were always distinctions between them throughout the ten-year period of relocation. In the beginning, there were few possibilities for the host residents to make direct contact with the migrant neighbors because most of them had not decided to settle down in the new home. The major sources of information about them were the media, and some locally prominent events like protests and rumors among host villagers. In the perception of the local society, the migrant villagers were intruders into their homeland especially in the sense that they, as Three Gorges Migrants, were taken good care of by the state and governments from the message spread by the media. The

message that migrants were too greedy and abusing their privileges catered to their expectations and gave them some consolation for their jealousy. Meanwhile, it was a popular saying that the migrant villagers were rude and unreasonable, and they always assembled to fight or quarrel with host residents who could rarely get assistance from their fellow villagers.

As time went on, the contacts between the residents of Dragon Village and other neighboring villagers became more and more frequent. The men from these villages worked together in businesses such as construction, farming, and migrant work in other provinces; women went to the same several factories nearby; intermarriage also occurred between migrant villagers and their neighbors. However these closer communications with the migrant villagers did not reduce the distance between them and the host villagers. Rather, local residents tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of the people of Dragon Village. They called these villagers “Yimin Guaizi”. “Yimin”, the Chinese term refers to “migrants”, whereas “Guaizi” is a word from local dialect to express a sense of contempt and depreciation to outsiders. Very often, they simply called the migrants “Three Gorges People” (“Sanxia Ren” in Chinese). A fifth grade student, who has been studying in the elementary and secondary school of Tangxi Town, told me that one of their vice-principals usually called them “Three Gorges Guaizi” (“Sanxia Guaizi” in Chinese) in an impolite voice which made him unhappy.

For the host society, residents of Dragon Village are always Three Gorges Migrants, who once had the reputation as national heroes but have ruined it by their own hands, and thus have to learn the ways of living like the host residents, yet still have maintained prominent differences in many aspects.

2.3 Lack of negotiations & Other resorts

Right from the start, resettled people in this project were stuck with the identity of “Three Gorges Migrants” no matter what other various identities they had embodied, like Chongqing People, residents of a certain town or a village, people with different jobs, men or women, and so on. The whole country was using this term to distinguish them from others. Initially, they enjoyed the glowing image constructed by the state and were really proud of it. Most of the time, they asked for attention from the governments and more compensation in group actions. They dared to express themselves passionately. Many villagers felt themselves justified for any action of appealing for more compensation or attention. They believed that they deserved it as they were Three Gorges Migrants who sacrificed their small home to the big home—the nation (“Shexiaojia Gudajia” in Chinese).

However, with failed protests and steadily decreasing communication with the governments in the following years, they lost faith in the support and favor of the state. The indifference and insincerity of the governments prevented them from regarding themselves as privileged people. Rather, they were obliged to admit that they were not special persons that were offered assistance from the policy. Currently they would use a sarcastic voice when referring to themselves as Three Gorges Migrants, that is, most people call themselves “so-called Three Gorges Migrants”, indicating a distance between the verbal praise and real treatment.

Mostly, they profess themselves to be villagers of Dragon Village. But that does not mean they have cast off the title of Three Gorges Migrants. They are eager to exchange their disreputable image as Three Gorges Migrants. Cadres and many villagers are more concerned with how to act as a tame citizen rather than a law-breaker, as perceived before. In the conflicts with host residents nowadays, not only cadres but also ordinary villagers control their tempers well and keep calm. They admit that this would have been impossible several years ago at the beginning of resettlement. Cadres report to the upper-level governments that their villagers are well-behaved nowadays. Some villagers would even stop others who want to appeal to officials from any department of the government.

The changes in their attitudes and strategies towards their collective identity were further revealed in their daily lives. They tried hard to strengthen their personal network with host residents, which was essential for their financial and social development in this new region. They generally wanted to break down the distinction between them and were proud of having native friends. They still kept up a daily resistance to let out discontent and stress. Some households moved back to Chongqing; some parents sent their children back, for secondary school or high school education; they were fond of comparing everything in their new home

with their old one, in a nostalgic tone.

3. Conclusion

Effectively closed by positive media coverage, Three Gorges Migrants have little chance to ask for any more consideration that might be attached to this given identity. In this top-down implementation of state policy, they cannot negotiate with the state about the identity they want to present to outsiders or what support they desire, but instead alter their own attitudes and coping mechanisms, hoping that they, as new Three Gorges Migrants with fresh good images, can be praised again by the state and accepted by the host society. It is a seemingly endless journey, but migrants have to survive in the new home despite broken promises and constant struggles adapting to their given identity.

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5. References

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