# LIFE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG MIGRANT WORKERS IN SHENZHEN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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# Life Experiences of Young Migrant Workers in Shenzhen: Implications for Social Work Practice

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# CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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# Abstract

This study aims to understand the life experiences of young migrant workers in Shenzhen, China and to draw implications for social work practice. Despite extensive literature on the impact of domestic migration and the labour market in the Chinese Mainland, limited attention appears to have been given to interpreting the life transformations, strengths and hopes of young migrant workers. In addition, the narratives of young migrant workers in the previous studies suggest that their interaction and collaboration with researchers are underestimated. More importantly, young migrant workers' socio-psychological needs both as individuals and as a group demand more attention from the helping professions, particularly social work.

Following a participatory research paradigm, the author conducted a qualitative inquiry into the life experiences of young migrant workers. A narrative approach was applied to data collection and analysis. Observation, interviews with key individuals with whom the young migrant workers interacted and community stakeholders were triangulated to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the research. During his one-year residential stay in CD town (anonymized) in Shenzhen, the author collaborated with nine young migrant workers (six male and three female) in the narrative interviews.

All participants constructed a rich narration of their past and present meanings of life.

The young migrant workers had not simply gone through a multitude of transitions from adolescents to adults, school to work, rural to urban. Analysis of their individual narratives, but which shared some common characteristics, revealed four dominant themes in a concentric circle: a) the inner circle is "identity bonded with family"; b) the middle circle is "livelihood with health concerns"; c) the outer circle is "connection to urban and others mainly through work"; and d) "facing the future" as a fourth theme that links up all circles. However, it was noticeable that their narratives included limited reference to their future lives. This revealed that they needed support in developing appropriate life planning to deal with the uncertainties of personal, family and social change.

The study further discussed the dimensions of life experiences of young migrant workers in the context of rural-urban divisions in China that discriminate against them. From mere survival to trying to secure a decent life, young migrant workers had experienced transformations in their physical, social, cultural and emotional world. Their common expectation was to promote the economic and social well-being of their families and themselves. Their changing identities, experiences, consumption attitudes and life values dominated their decision-making.

To inform the practice, the new and young social workers in Shenzhen should firstly establish confidence as peers and facilitators; also, they should develop cultural and political competences while working with young migrant workers. Considering the resilience of young migrant workers as their core strength, it is important for the social workers to further transcend the "helping" role to that of "supporting" and "empowering". They can create rapport, provide emotional support and assist young migrant workers in life planning. Furthermore, they can co-facilitate with young migrant workers in community building. Within an ecological consideration, they can also mobilize community stakeholders and other professional helpers to help young migrant workers to overcome the challenges of their life transformations in urban China.

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# Chapter One

# Introduction

## 1.1 Context of the Research Problem

In contemporary China, over one hundred million young migrant workers have left their rural homelands (National Health and Family Planning of the People's Republic of China, 2013). Most of them are low-income earners who are mainly working in the manufacturing, service and construction industries in China's industrial regions. When China becomes a substantial player in world affairs, young migrant workers are still confronting oppression in the global production and consumption system. Therefore, this study aims to enhance the global understanding of social justice and social exclusion from the young migrant workers in the particular socio-political and economic context in China. How do they secure an adequate livelihood despite disadvantages in their family background, social capital, education and occupation? How do we capture and understand their concerns, frustrations, hopes and dreams? While there have been previous studies on China's migrant workers, the study concentrates on interaction and narration of the post-1980s generation of

young migrant workers aged between twenty-four and thirty-three working in Shenzhen.

Shenzhen is a special economic zone symbolic of the past thirty years of rapid development in China. It is a predominantly Putonghua-speaking migration city in Guangdong province; a popular job destination for people from all Chinese provinces; a port in close proximity to Hong Kong. Of special interest in this study is not only young migrant workers' life trajectories, identities, meaning-making and hopes, but also the support they have received from their family, peers as well as social workers. Although this study is grounded in the particular social, economic, political and cultural context in which these young migrant workers live and work, it aims to draw an important global implication of understanding young migrant people—the way it shows the hardships, success, relationships and aspirations that play out is similar as young people elsewhere in the world (e.g. India, Eastern Europe) who leave their rural homes to come to cities in search of a better and more affluent life.

## 1.2 A Link between Young Migrant Workers and Myself: So Different and So Common

While there are many differences between my situation and that of young migrant workers, yet I also have much in common with them, as a

fellow member of China's post-80s generation. I realize that I have more privileges—the opportunity to attend university for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies (including the opportunity to study outside China); the support of a middle-class family, and the potential to participate in policy advocacy in China. However, I am aware of the similar confusion and frustration shared with young migrant workers, regardless of our different life trajectories:

"Where do I come from?"—as a young man born in the 1980s and the only child in my family, I grew up in a rural village in Guangdong province, south China (which is merely a two-hour bus ride from Shenzhen). In the past ten years, I "travelled" to many places—from south to north China, from East to West in the United States and currently living in an international city—Hong Kong. If you ask me where will be my "next stop" in life. I am not able to answer you because I am a "traveller", always on a journey in pursuit of a better life. I believe that young migrant workers share similar experiences: we live, work and move in many different places, but we may feel unsettled; we keep searching for opportunities to improve our life, but we realize that seizing the dream of upward social mobility is never easy.

"What are the significant memories in my life?"—when I was little, my parents always told me that I had a better and happier life in comparison

with their “tough life” (艰苦的生活) during the Cultural Revolution in China. I still remember that my father brought me to the main entrance of the best middle-high school in town every time we travelled from our rural village in the countryside. And he told me that he would feel proud of me if I studied in this school. He made a joke—“*if you do not get into this school, you will end up looking after the cattle in our village*”. I remembered this and I obtained a place at the school when I was eleven. I was very happy at that time because I could become a little “resident” in the city—a place with many people and no cattle. This joyful beginning of a new life chapter in the city may be shared with many young migrant workers—we are trying our best to “escape” from rural villages. However, we are gradually struggling to “establish” a decent livelihood in the city.

“Why and how do I live with hope?”—since I chose social work as my major in college, I have researched and practiced social work as my career. If you are confused by my persistence in social work, I will reply that it can make a difference to the daily life of the poor and the underprivileged. Having a curiosity for searching for “what are the hopes and dreams of our young people?”, I have worked as an intern counsellor, a project assistant in the United States and a researcher in Hong Kong, focusing on social work with marginalized young people. Together with young migrant workers, we encounter similar difficulties and experience common frustrations. We are

living with uncertainties in respect of health, work and life regarding personal, family and social change. We are striving to find a decent job and a better life. However, I believe in the hope which can be shared with young migrant workers in our journey of "life travelling".

## 1.3 Rationale for the Study

### *1.3.1 Emergent social issues faced by young migrant workers in China*

Young migrant workers have become the largest sector of China's workforce (All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 2010). They face challenges from the perspectives of education, health, work and living. There are two significant personal and social dilemmas for them. The first is that they are marginalized in the urban welfare system, in which there are different entitlements for residence holders and non-residence holders in education, health care and social security (Chan, 2010; Whyte, 2010). Invariably those who do not have residence status enjoy inferior entitlements. There are insufficient social resources to protect their work benefits (Liu, 2010; Pun & Lu, 2010), to relieve the financial burden of health care or to provide them with housing subsidy or support (All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 2011). The second dilemma is that they are becoming the new "working poor". Their inferior levels of education and underprivileged social status have trapped them as urban low-income

earners (Tsinghua University Research Group, 2012; Wang, 2012). However, it is necessary to highlight that young migrant workers are typical of young people everywhere: they have inner strengths and they desire social support as well. They are significant in their own right. In addition, they are potentially an important political force that may influence the future social development in China.

### *1.3.2 The role of social work: some initial thoughts*

Any attempt to address the social issues faced by young migrant workers must consider the interconnected social, economic, political and cultural systems of Chinese society. Obviously, their social and psychological needs as individuals and as a group demand attention. As a burgeoning helping profession, social work should have a key role that can positively impact on this vulnerable population. Internationally, social work embraces the mission of releasing social tensions by means of individual assistance and collective change (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). In China, social work is financially supported by the government and politically serves for the government in maintaining the social stability (*weiwen*, 維穩). Therefore, it is restricted in promoting collective and social change. How can social workers in China work with the context and provide support for young migrant workers? At the same time, how can the social work profession develop a comprehensive and thoughtful response to the

personal and social needs of young migrant workers? The study will explore and discuss the role of social work in working with young migrant workers.

## 1.4 Overview of the Study

### *1.4.1 The academic entry points*

Regarding the increasing numbers of studies on young migrant workers in China, I would like to highlight two significant thoughts in practice and research. First, writing is an active pursuit to tell participant's stories. Pun (2005) considered her practice and research as a process of supporting young migrant workers. She focused on raising public awareness of the hardship and struggles they encountered. Secondly, good social research demands attention to participants' life experiences and interpersonal relationships. Wang (2012) articulated the basic aspirations of young migrant workers: they desire dignity, decent jobs, reasonable and timely pay; they share a common dream of living together with their families. Standing on their "shoulders", I have endeavoured to conduct a qualitative investigation with young migrant workers that goes beyond interpretation and interaction to identify implications for social work practice.

### *1.4.2 Research questions*

The study focuses on the narratives of young migrant workers in terms of their life trajectories, strengths and hopes in the specific social, economic,

political and cultural contexts of contemporary China. There are three main research questions: a) “How do young migrant workers narrate their life experiences?”; b) “How do they construct the meanings of personal development and social relationships?”; c) “What are the implications of interpreting the life experiences of young migrant workers for social work practice?”.

### *1.4.3 People and place of the research*

Generally, the term “young migrant workers” refers to the young people from China’s rural areas, without higher education qualifications, working in urban areas, aged between sixteen and thirty-three years (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). I adopt this definition and focus on the post-80s generation young migrant workers (those born between 1980 and 1989) in Shenzhen. I have nine research participants. All of them have lived in Shenzhen for more than three years and have experienced multiple problems relating to family, health, work and life. They have different life trajectories but they impressed me with a common aspiration to achieve upward social mobility. They have hopes and they want their dreams to come true.

Shenzhen was chosen as the location for my field study. It is a migrant city and a popular destination that hosts young migrant workers from all over China. Being a special economic zone that adjoins Hong Kong, it has

also become a social work “laboratory” of cross-border collaboration in the Chinese Mainland (Hung, Ng, & Fung, 2010; Shen, 2008; Yuan-Tsang, Chan, Ip, Wong, & Ho, 2009). It has developed professional social work by recruiting supervisors from Hong Kong and implementing social work programs and services initially developed in Hong Kong. More importantly, many pilot social reforms (e.g. to the household registration system, the urban health care system and the labour unions in the enterprises) are being undertaken in Shenzhen. It is in this context that Shenzhen suits me well with my position as a postgraduate student in Hong Kong and enables me to access the necessary information to facilitate investigation of research, policy and practice relating to young migrant workers.

### *1.4.4 Research methodology and procedures*

The study focuses on understanding the life experiences of young migrant workers within a participatory paradigm. I followed Riessman’s narrative approach (Riessman, 1994, 2005, 2007; Riessman & Quinney, 2005) to collect and analyse the data. The research procedure also emphasized an equal and action-oriented interaction. Interview transcriptions were recorded in their entirety and were analysed line by line in terms of the contexts, contents, forms and omissions (Riessman, 2007) of the young migrant workers’ narratives. Discussion of findings were triangulated with different methods (Denzin, 1989) including observation,

participation, analysis of the written narratives (e.g. stories, poems, songs and videos), analysis of images and videos, interviews with key individuals with whom the young migrant workers interacted and stakeholders in the local communities. Critical reviews and comments from academic peers were also used to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the narrative approach (Mishler, 1990; Riessman, 2007).

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis contains nine chapters. Chapter one briefly introduces the significance of the social issues of young migrant workers, my interest in the topic, rationale and overview of the study. Chapter two reviews and synthesizes the theoretical, knowledge and practice gaps regarding young migrant workers in China. In chapter three, the research paradigm and implementation of the study are introduced. The research findings are elaborated and interpreted in chapters four, five and six—the structural and interactional contexts of narrative approach; the main contents of the participants' narratives. In chapters seven and eight, the life experiences of young migrant workers and social work interventions with this population are elicited and discussed. Chapter nine summarizes the study in terms of the conclusion, contributions and reflections, .

# Chapter Two

# Literature Review

Contemporary social theories, bodies of knowledge and social work practice provide a wide pool of information, thoughts and arguments about young migrant workers in China. It is important to remember that they are not simply migrants or workers, but they are also young people. We normally take for granted our cultural perception of young migrant workers as those who are under-educated and unfortunate. However, their voices make an essential contribution to understanding the "real" picture of their lives. In this chapter, I will review the English and Chinese literature related to young migrant workers. I will also try to identify the gaps in relevant theories, knowledge and practice.

First, existing studies of young migrant workers predominantly follow either a sociological or a psychological track. Scholars use the evidence and findings to interpret trends relating to this group of young people. However, they seem to underestimate the essential discussion of the impact of "becoming young"—not only biological maturity but also social and mental development (Furlong, 2009). Accordingly, I will review the related debates to identify theoretical gaps in understanding young migrant workers. Secondly, perspectives from youth studies and social work may shed light

on the interpretation of the life experiences of young migrant workers in China, thus pointing out the gaps in knowledge about the personal development and social relationships of young migrant workers. Thirdly, by reviewing the social welfare system, social work development and existing social work programs and services for young migrant workers, I will further identify the practice gap of working with them.

## 2.1 Young Migrant Workers—Who are They? What are Their Circumstances?

### *2.1.1 Who are the young migrant workers?*

Young migrant workers are a specific group of rural migrant workers in China. Historically, they are the third generation of rural migrant workers since China took steps to release the restriction of domestic migration in the late 1980s (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012). Politically, they are defined as a significant urban population to which more public attention should be given (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2010). Many scholars have compared the motivation for migration, incomes, living conditions and socio-economic statues of the third generations of rural migrant workers in China. They argued that young migrant workers are more aware of urban citizenship and have higher expectation of career

development than the previous two generations of internal migrant workers in China (Cai, Liu & Wan, 2009; Liu, 2006; Pun & Lu, 2010).

Young migrant workers are officially named as "new generation of migrant workers" (*xinshengdai nonminggong*, 新生代農民工), who are young men and women from China's rural areas, born after the 1980s, have not receive university education and have worked in the urban areas for longer than six months since 2009 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). Eighty-five per cent of this population comes from poor villages or townships in China's countryside (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011); they grew up in a better living environment than their parents. Access to the information computer technology has changed their ways of communication and interaction (Cheng, 2010); in 2010, there is around 84.87 million young migrant workers in urban China, representing 58.4 per cent of the country's total rural migrant workforce (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011); their average monthly income is 1,748 yuan (equal to around 290 US dollar), which is only 57.4 per cent of average income of urban residents who are employed by the same enterprise (All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 2010).

### *2.1.2 What are the circumstances of young migrant workers?*

In 2010 ten young migrant workers employed by Foxconn in Shenzhen committed suicide sequentially by jumping from their dormitories in the

factory complex, thus focusing international public attention on young migrant workers in China (BBC News, 2010). They were believed to have been "killed" by the cold-blooded and high-intensity production process (Pun, Lu, Guo, & Shen, 2011).

Young migrant workers have become not only a major sector in the workforce, but also a large social group that could impact China's social reforms (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2010). An increasing number of young migrant workers have been forced to live and work in the cities in order to seek better opportunities for survival and development (Feng, 2010; Hu, 2012; Pun & Lu, 2010). Meanwhile, when so many young people leave the villages and desert the agricultural labour force, rural areas and traditional agriculture are at risk of being abandoned (Jian & Huang, 2007; Pun, Lu, & Zhang, 2011). In the cities, the current generation of young migrant workers faces much more complicated challenges and social problems than those experienced by the previous generations:

***(1) Health issues***

Most young migrant workers are not protected by health insurance (*yiliao baoxian*, 醫療保險) (Cai *et al.*, 2009; Mou, Cheng, Zhang, Jiang, Lin, & Griffiths, 2009; Yip, 2010). Few of them can afford medical care because of the expense (Liu, 2010; Wang, 2010). Mentally, with better

education, they have higher expectations than their predecessors of work and life in the cities. However, they encounter apathy and indifference in their workplace (Lu, 2013; Pun *et al.*, 2011). Being marginalized, they are exposed to risk of depression, anxiety and anger (Wong, He, Leung, Lau, & Chang, 2008; Wong & Song, 2008). Some cannot find a way out, some are pessimistic about the future (Wong & Leung, 2008), and therefore a feeling of emptiness and loss is common among young migrant workers (Liu, 2010; Lu, 2013).

***(2) Identity issues***

Most young migrant workers experience an identity crisis, being neither a rural peasant nor a city resident (Cheng, 2010; Liu, 2010; Pun *et al.*, 2011). They are unwilling to return to their rural homeland unless they can find a job opportunity that offers a higher income and better benefits (Feng, 2010; Hu, 2012). Facing financial and employment pressures, many young migrant workers experience stress about establishing a family and fulfilling their family role (Wong *et al.*, 2008; Wong & Song, 2008). More and more young migrant workers use internet and mobile phone network to communicate with their friends (e.g. fellow villagers, fellow workers). In the virtual community, they are welcomed by their friends but are excluded by other social groups, and receive little respect from the dominant groups in society (Cheng, 2010).

***(3) Work issues***

Working hard but getting low pay is a common source of discontent among young migrant workers (Liu, 2010; Pun & Lu, 2010; Shenzhen Dagongzhe Migrant Worker Centre, 2013). With disappointment and dissatisfaction, many young migrant workers quit their jobs, and a few of them have even tried committing suicide—and some of these have been successful (Chan & Pun, 2010). Meanwhile, they are financially vulnerable because their employment is on a short-term basis (usually no more than six months) (Tsinghua University Research Group, 2012; Pun & Li, 2012). In addition, they experience difficulties in protecting their labour rights—it is hard for them to negotiate with their employers on reasonable and timely pay (Liu, 2010; Pun *et al.*, 2011), and difficult to ensure a full compensation payment in case of occupational injury (Jing & Ma, 2012).

***(4) Issues of living***

Most young migrant workers have limited opportunities to secure urban household residence (*chengshi hukou*, 城市戶口) because of China's restrictive population policy (the purpose of the policy is to use the '*hukou*' household registration system to segregate rural and urban residents who have different social welfare, health care and education benefits entitlement; this policy also enhances the government's control in the mobility of the population). They experience difficulties in obtaining suitable medical care,

education for their children, and housing in the cities (Chen, 2010; Tsinghua University Research Group, 2012; Yip, 2010). In terms of family life for young rural migrants, those who are single, face barriers in finding a marriage partner, and those who are married face difficulties in raising their children (Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2009). In the cities, most children of young migrant workers can only attend schools for migrant children (*mingongzidi xuexiao*, 民工子弟學校), which are privately-owned with very limited resources, which cannot attract good teachers and provide adequate educational supports to students (Liu, 2010; Wang, 2010; Zhang, 2009). Most young rural migrants despair of being able to afford a permanent place to live in the cities (Wang & Wu, 2010; Zhu, 2007). They also struggle to pay the increasing cost of renting a few square feet of living space (Shenzhen Dagongzhe Migrant Worker Centre, 2013; Wang, Wang & Wu, 2010).

## 2.2 Theoretical Gap of Researching Young Migrant Workers

As mentioned above, many young migrant workers encounter new challenges in moving from their rural homes to settle in an urban environment: facing personal and social issues related to health, identity, work and living. Thus, this section will firstly review the literature on

migration. Then, it will analyse the current theoretical approaches of researching young migrant workers in China. It will discover the influence of internal migration, production and community on young migrant workers' lives.

### *2.2.1 Studies of migration in the West*

Focusing on English language publications, Western scholarship dominates the theoretical and practical discussion of migrants and migration. International migration is a process of people's resettlement in a new place or country in order to achieve better income and living conditions (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, & Taylor, 1993). Migration may be either voluntary or involuntary. One pioneering sociological study on the life experience of migrants is Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918) study of Polish immigrants to Western Europe and the Boston area of the United States. They focused on the narratives of migrants who maintained social connections with their home country, experienced difficulties and made adjustments in the host communities (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). Studies of migrants to developed countries started to burgeon in the 1950s (Massey *et al.*, 1993). One theoretical argument concerning migration is that it comprises part of the assimilation process of becoming a "modern man" within the framework of Western democracy and capitalism. The common "characters" or "standards" of a modern man are: being independent,

educated, civilized and actively engaged in the negotiation of public affairs (Massey *et al.*, 1993, p. 433).

The theory of integration introduced a new debate to explain how migrants become accustomed to the new cultural and political environment of the host community (Kilbride, Anisef, Baichman-Anisef, & Khattar, 2004; Yan, Lauer, & Chan, 2012). Meanwhile, the discussion of second generation young migrants in developed countries has emerged: they grew up in the hosted countries with financial foundation of their parental generation, but they still face language and education barriers. Their socio-economic status is similar to that of young migrant workers in China—who have better education and living conditions than their parents, but yet to have reached similar career achievement as the local counterparts (Yan *et al.*, 2012). However, the studies and theoretical discussion of second generation young migrants are mostly based on studies of migration in the context of Western society. It is questionable whether the theories and methodologies generated in the West can be directly transplanted to the study of young migrant workers in China.

### *2.2.2 Rural migrant workers in China: differences and commonalities*

Migration is a worldwide phenomenon, but it has a specific meaning in China—the word "migration" is mostly applied to rural residents who move to the cities either for a temporary or permanent period of their life (Xu,

2010). Migration occurs within the country's borders between rural and urban regions. Most rural migrant workers never obtain city household residence. They are unable to enjoy the same social insurance, health care, child education and housing benefits as residents of the host communities or cities (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012; Whyte, 2010). They share common characteristics of being oppressed and marginalized from the mainstream society (Liu, 2010; Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012; Xu, 2010).

Social studies of rural migrant workers in China began in the early 1980s. Previously, internal migration from rural to urban areas was prohibited by the government (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012). Internal migration in China has now become a popular topic for understanding the country's contemporary social development (Cheng, 2010; Liu, Chen, & Dong, 2009). Pun and Li (2012) articulated the origins of internal labour migration in China—in the 1980s, the economic development of urban China required a workforce that could only be supplied by rural labour, but even nowadays it fails to provide them social insurance and urban benefits. Difficulties experienced by rural migrant workers reflect the nature of social injustice, and the enlarged division of the rural poor and the urban rich. The essential characteristics of the social issues (e.g. financial and social insecurity, difficulty of accessing health care, difficulty of obtaining affordable housing and education for their children in the cities) faced by

rural migrant workers reflect the tension of distribution of public resources (Pun & Li, 2012).

Up till now, no consensus has emerged regarding the definition of rural migrant workers in China, people who work in the cities but retain rural household residence. In recent years, the rural-urban divisions regarding household income, health care, education for children, social welfare and public facilities have increased (Liu, 2010; Pun & Li, 2012; Whyte, 2010). Many migrant workers are stereotyped as countrified, uneducated and low-class (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012). As a consequence of their low social status and low family income, rural migrant workers could be considered as an underprivileged working class in China (Pun & Lu, 2011; Pun & Li, 2012; Shen, 2006). Since it is politically incorrect to do so, China's officials deny the use of "class" to describe the social group of rural migrant workers. Nevertheless, they are on the bottom rung of the social hierarchy in contemporary China (Feng, 2010; Li, 2004).

### *2.2.3 Perspective of migration and integration*

The direction of sociological studies on rural migrant workers in China has shifted since the 1980s. Some early sociological studies borrowed Western social theories, in particular, the "push" and "pull" theory, to explain the social phenomenon of migrant workers (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2012). They asserted that agricultural labour surpluses in rural areas

provided the “push”, and the availability of higher incomes through working in the cities provided the “pull”. In the mid-1990s, however, the “push” and “pull” theory was challenged by other researchers, because it provided insufficient analysis of the subjectivities, collective actions and daily life of migrant workers (Cheng, 2010; Li, 2004; Shen, 2006).

A large number of scholars then applied Western modernity theory and assimilation theory to study rural migrant workers in China. They considered that rural migrant workers need to be modernized and assimilated into urban life. These researchers conducted large-scale quantitative studies in Beijing, the Yangzi River Delta and the Pearl River Delta (Cai *et al.*, 2009; Qian & Huang, 2007; Zou, 2009). These studies seem to represent the mainstream policy concerns related to rural migrant workers: to understand the general situation of their urban living, working conditions, personal identities, family backgrounds, financial situation, rationales for migration, social insurance and community integration (Liu, 2006; Liu & Chen, 2007; Qian & Huang, 2007; Wu & Xie, 2006; Zou, 2009). However, their theoretical arguments are questionable: is it necessary to manage and control rural migrant workers as the floating population? Is urban civilization (*shiminhua*, 市民化) the best way to solve the related social issues of rural migrant workers?

### *2.2.4 Perspective of labour and conflict*

Another group of scholars perceived the same social issues differently; they interpreted the social circumstances of rural migrant workers from the perspective of labour-conflict (Cheng, 2010; Shen, 2006). Some argued that Chinese migrant workers are not "migrants" according to the Western concept, because they are floating between rural and urban areas. They comprise the bottom rung of the social hierarchy (Li, 2004). Some scholars went further and articulated the concept of "class" to locate rural migrant workers within the capitalist production and consumption regime of the market economy (Pun & Lu, 2011; Shen, 2006). They argued that migrant workers are disrespected as the "screws" and "tools" of the labour-intensive production process. Migrant workers are "alienated" and have lost control of the "means of production". They experience exploitation by the employers (no contract, no insurance cover, overwork, unfair pay), but they are able to develop individual and group strategies to claim labour rights protection (Lee, 1998, 2007; Pun, 2005; Pun *et al.*, 2011; Shen, 2006; Solinger, 1999).

Besides analysing migrant workers within the context of the production process, some scholars also discussed the re-production process of consumption and how it helps the further exploitation of migrant workers within the capitalist system. With the trends in global mass consumption of spending more on leisure, products and goods, migrant workers choose to

work in the factories not only for the wages, but also for the greater consumption opportunities offered by urban living (Ma, 2006; Yu & Pun, 2008). They are placed in the dilemma of being exploited by employers but still work for them, partly for the satisfaction of consumption (Ma, 2006; Zheng, 2007). Capitalism entices workers to consume, and compels them to work in order to consume more (Yu & Pun, 2008).

In summer 2010, Pun and her colleagues conducted a collaborative research study with young migrant workers employed by Shenzhen Foxconn. They pointed out that young migrant workers are subject to "half-proletarianization" (*banwucan jiejihua*, 半無產階級化) (Pun *et al.*, 2011, p. 123), they have no choice but to work in the urban factories because of the economic disadvantages associated with agricultural employment (Pun & Lu, 2010). The land owned by rural farmers is no longer a secure property, but they cannot easily settle in the cities because of the high price of housing and other living costs (e.g. schooling for children and health care) (Chan & Pun, 2010; Pun & Li, 2012). Therefore, beyond civilization, young migrant workers confront exploitation and oppression in production and reproduction.

### *2.2.5 Perspective of community and connection*

By conducting their studies on migrant workers from a geographical and cultural perspective, some scholars focused on rural communities as a

key field to understand migrant workers. They focused on migrants' places of origins—the rural areas—and learnt about their connections with rural homeland (Liang, 2010, 2013), lives after they had returned from the cities (Bai & Song, 2002; He, 2010); gender inequality (Murphy, 2002) and entrepreneurship (Démurger & Xu, 2011; Mohapatra, Rozelle, & Goodhue, 2007). In their homelands, migrant workers, as rural residents, face the three major problems of rural communities (*sannong wenti*, 三農問題): a) rural agriculture farming is economically disadvantaged; b) rural areas face barriers in promoting sustainable development; c) rural farmers are financially and socially insecure (Wen, 2000; 2005). Some rural young people have returned to their home towns after working in the cities. However, many of them faced difficulties in working in agriculture or running a business (Démurger & Xu, 2011; Mohapatra *et al.*, 2007). They felt disempowered in political negotiations with senior villagers and some expressed dissatisfaction with the boredom of rural life from which opportunities of consumption and entertainment were absent (He, 2010).

Besides the rural settings, other scholars focused on cities as a living space and the internet as a virtual community for migrant workers. They pointed out that migrant workers reconstructed their social identities by communication and interaction in the living space and the internet (e.g. QQ, an online chatting software) (Cheng, 2012; Chu & Yang, 2006; Law & Peng,

2006; Peng, 2008). By using technology products (e.g. cell phone, computer), they can keep abreast of fashions and new thoughts in the cities (Ma, 2006). With the convenience of making phone calls and sending text messages, it is easier for them to connect with their families and friends (Cheng, 2010). The physical and virtual living space provides another important angle for the analysis of young migrant workers—to understand their changing patterns of interaction and communication.

### *2.2.6 The theoretical gap: how young migrant workers narrate their life experiences?*

By synthesizing the above studies in terms of the migration-integration, labour-conflict and community-connection perspectives, I can draw an original picture of work and life of young migrant workers: a) without a university-degree, they have to work in labour-intensive industries in which they earn low wages; b) they are individualized young men and women but are labelled as trouble-makers in the urban communities; c) growing up in the 1980s, the start era of China's "open-door" economic reforms, they are aware of their civil rights and they are able to obtain wide-ranging information from the internet. In the workplace, they may collaborate with others to protest when they feel threatened; d) they prefer a free-and-joyful urban lifestyle.

However, the theoretical studies of young migrant workers may underestimate their blurred identities and their own narratives of experiences of moving to the cities, working in the labour-intensive industries and living in an urban community while maintaining connection with their rural homes. They are not only urban citizens or factory workers, but also sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, and who dream of pursuing a better life. How do they narrate their life experiences? What are their memories of their rural past? How do they experience transitions from rural to urban life? What are their plans for the future? The comprehensive answers to these questions are currently unknown, but are significant for understanding their individualization and socialization. In the meanwhile, it is necessary to recognize the interaction between young migrant workers and the researchers. How do young migrant workers present themselves to the researchers? How do researchers perceive the contexts and contents of the young migrant workers' lives? Interaction between the two parties may play a significant role in further interpreting the social issues faced by young migrant workers and the changing dynamics of their lives.

## 2.3 Knowledge Gap in Understanding Young Migrant Workers

Contemporary knowledge of young migrant workers in China seems to focus on understanding the impacts of becoming a "migrant" or a "worker" but neglects the discussion of "young" as a crucial life period in their personal development and their relationships with family and wider society (Furlong, 2009; Sharland, 2006; Wyn, Lantz, & Harris, 2012). Accordingly, theories of youth studies (transitions theory) and social work perspectives (agents of change, collaborative relationships) will be used to provide a more contextual and reflective way of interpreting the life dynamics of young migrant workers. The following discussion will also identify connections and their limitations between Western knowledge and its application in the Chinese context.

### *2.3.1 Studies of the life of young people: from the 'classics' to contemporary debate*

Few previous studies have highlighted being "young" as a crucial life period of personal development and social relationships for young migrant workers. In common with other young people, they experience changes and face challenges in the biological, psychological, family, social, and cultural contexts. The study of young people is multi-disciplinary (Furlong, 2009; Wood & Hine, 2009; Wyn & White, 1997). From G. Stanley Hall to Erik

Erikson and Anna Freud, modern study of young people has focused on the biological and psychological perspectives (Furlong, 2009). They have to go through six stages—with specific conflicts of identity and behaviour—of the life cycle (Erikson, 1968). Although Erikson's life stage theory was developed in the context of studying human development that spanned all ages in Western society, it provides a means of linking the life experiences of young migrant workers from childhood to their later life.

Contemporary youth studies are dominated by two dimensions: a sociological path and a psychological path (White & Wyn, 2008). The sociological approach focuses on interpreting young people's life experiences in their historical, socio-economic, cultural and geographical contexts (Whyte, 1943, Wyn & Harris, 2004). In contrast, the psychological approach conceptualizes young people's cognitive development and social behaviour by advancing Erikson's theory of life stages (Arnett, 2006). It dominates the clinical and social services for at-risk young people, who are categorized as problematic individuals due to their developmental deficits in certain life stages (Wyn & Harris, 2004). Since the mid-2000s, the analysis of young people's personal and social issues has been characterized by reference to either their developmental stages in the life course (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) or their transitions in relation to specific social, economic and cultural backgrounds (Bynner, 2005). To bridge this dualistic

approach, Tanner and Arnett (2009) combined these two perspectives. They argued that young people, as "emerging adults" in terms of the life course perspective, are dealing with biological, psychological and social development simultaneously (Tanner & Arnett, 2009, p.40). I agree with this argument: young migrant workers also go through the life transitions with the cohesive elements of human development and social functioning.

In addition, it is crucial to connect the concept of "emerging adulthood" with the life model, developed by Germain and Gitterman (Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Gitterman & Germain, 2008). That focuses on understanding the ecological, social and cultural context of the life trajectory of young people. It also highlights the impacts of life turning points and traumatic events on their later life (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Therefore, interpreting the lives of young people may need to shift from a binary psycho-socio to a multi-faceted discussion that takes account of development, experience and interaction.

Accordingly, it is necessary to interpret the lives of young migrant workers in China by taking full account of their human development and social functioning. These young rural people are living away from their home towns and their families. In common with young people in Western developed countries, they may go through the same critical period of emerging adulthood—they may be aware of their physical growth, identity

changes and social integration. To further understand their subjective change into emerging adulthood, I will review youth transitions theory.

### *2.3.2 Studies of the transitions of young people*

Youth transitions theory questions the psychoanalytic view of transitions that locates young people into discrete life period categories (Wyn & Harris, 2004). In contrast, young people are not only subjected to age-based development but also engage in self-negotiation and adjustment in the context of social and institutional change (Wyn & White, 1997). Building on the empirical studies of different generations of young people in Australia, youth transitions theory identifies the need to understand young people's personal and social changes in particular historical and cultural backgrounds (White & Wyn, 2008; Wood & Hine, 2009; Wyn *et al.*, 2012; Wyn & White, 1997). The three main points of the theory that may shed light on the study of young migrant workers in China are outlined below:

(1) "Transitions" is a dynamic social process that includes young people's experiences of family, schools, social class, gender and the labour market. Young people have different experiences due to their personal, family, social, economic, political and cultural differences. However, the transitions experienced by young people share some universal characteristics regardless of the young people's different backgrounds (Wyn & White, 1997): such as to receive compulsory education, to be protected by

laws, to face legal restrictions and to live within a globalized world. The differences and commonalities of transitions provide important information for understanding the changes experienced by young migrant workers—the socialization process can influence their lives.

(2) Young people interact with society through their self-interpretation as a social generation (e.g. subculture, a meaningful life, work values) and self-negotiation of transitions to adulthood (White & Wyn, 2008). The boundary between adolescence and adulthood is seen as blurred and fluid (Health & Cleaver, 2003). It also means that life transitions made by young people do not constitute a linear biological process. Instead, transitions may involve crossing the age boundary back-and–forth through continuous self-negotiation (Wyn & White, 1997). Youth transitions theory highlights the subjectivity of young people through interpretation of their identity change and self-negotiation. It provides important insights into how young migrant workers self-negotiate the transitions to adulthood.

(3) "Transitions" of young people can move in two divergent directions: they either become excluded as a result of insufficient support or integrated as a result of receiving appropriate support (Wyn & White, 1997). Many scholars have argued that education is a key factor for avoiding marginalization (Furlong, 2009; White & Wyn, 2008; Wood & Hine, 2009). An increasing number of studies in China argue that young migrant workers

could integrate to urban society by getting sufficient vocational training or education (All-China Federation of Trade Unions, 2011; Cai *et al.*, 2009; Shenzhen Trade Union & Shenzhen University Research Group, 2010; Zou, 2009). However, raising young migrant workers' educational level or enhancing their professional skills is restricted by their financial capability and lack of leisure time. In addition, other essential support (family support and social support) is discussed in the following sections.

### *2.3.3 Young people and the family*

Youth transitions theory posits that young people's pathway to adulthood is impacted by connection, interaction and support. Without sufficient family and social support they may be unable to integrate into the mainstream society (Furlong, 2009; White & Wyn, 2008; Wyn *et al.*, 2012). Besides education, the family relationships are also an important supportive factor for the successful transition to adulthood (Wyn *et al.*, 2012).

In the West, many youth studies highlight the importance of understanding young people's interdependence with their family within post-modern society (Furlong, 2009; Jones, 2005; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Pusey, 2007; Wierenga, 2009; Wyn *et al.*, 2012). First, parents and adult children may provide financial support to each other as a buffer from the economic crisis (Jones, 2005; Schneider, 2000). The socio-economic advantages can be transmitted from parents to their children in terms of

receiving education and finding jobs (Bagnall, 2005; Gillies, 2000; Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Lahelma & Gordon, 2008; Pusey, 2007; Turtiainen, Karvonen, & Rahkonen, 2007; Wierenga, 2009). Secondly, young people may need emotional support from their family even if they live independently (Lahelma & Gordon, 2008; Wyn *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, young people can contribute to their family by providing emotional support and caregiving to their parents and siblings. However, their roles and responsibilities in the family are fluid and may change dramatically, depending on their personal and social development (Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Schneider, 2000).

In China, young migrant workers generally have strong family ties—which is not only a cultural expectation (Yan, 2011) but also necessary for social survival (Chang, 2008; Greenhalgh, 2010). Young migrant workers and their parents are still constrained by a traditional family structure characterized by loyalty and responsibility. Besides having intimacy with their parents, young people from rural families develop relationships with siblings, other relatives, village fellows and friends (Yan, 2011). Regarding the increasing autonomy of rural young people (e.g. choice of education, work and place to live), they carry their parents' expectations to live a happy life and to become successful of working in the cities (Greenhalgh, 2010; Wang, 2008). More important, young migrant

workers, who are living in the cities, seem to maintain a close connection with their rural families: they may send money back home if they have extra savings and they may need the help from their parents to take care of their children (Wang, 2008; Yan, 2011).

### *2.3.4 Young people and society*

The above discussion of young people's life transitions and family relationships provides important knowledge that contributes to understanding human development and social functioning of young migrant workers. Nevertheless, youth studies may overlook how to approach young migrant workers and recognize their capacity for change. Social work offers a complementary perspective that highlights the importance of understanding the inter-subjectivity between young migrant workers and the researchers (social workers), their mutual interaction and collaboration to overcome difficulties and crises that they may face in their lives. The social work literature provides two significant insights for building knowledge about young migrant workers:

#### *(1) Constructing young people as agents of change*

Young people become responsible for promoting their own rights (Sharland, 2006; Wyn & White, 1997). Although few social work studies have focused on understanding how young people integrate the social change to their personal development (Sharland, 2006). They could be

considered as active agents who are able to implement structural and social change in their daily life (Ferguson, 2001, 2003; Sharland, 2006). The concept of habitus is a key factor in understanding young people's interaction with a particular social environment and power structure in their living environment (Bourdieu, 2002; Garrett, 2007). The habitus in childhood also could impact their later life (Bourdieu, 2002; Ferguson, 2003). Another concept is that of life politics. It suggests that people have to live in a post-traditional order by facing the dilemma of self-actualization within political and cultural restrictions (Ferguson, 2003; Sharland, 2006). Accordingly, young migrant workers could be agents of change. They have the capacity for critical reflection and action. However, they may face restrictions in making choices.

***(2) The collaborative and reflective partnership with young people***

Collaboration has becomes a popular approach to working with young people compared to the traditional problem-solution approach in social work. From Freire (1973) to Touraine (1988), social workers are encouraged to develop a dialectic relationship with the oppressed population (Guo & Tsui, 2013). Collaboration offers the possibility of reducing power imbalances and provides space for young people to voice out their needs and hopes (Robb, O'Leary, Mackinnon, & Bishop, 2010; Sharland, 2006). Young migrant workers, similar to other young people on the margins, prefer more

sense of freedom in deciding what job they want to do and how they want to be treated (Greenhalgh, 2010; Hannan, 2008; Pun & Li, 2012). Therefore, collaboration with young migrant workers can facilitate understanding of their circumstances and expectations.

In addition, social workers are encouraged to be the reflective practitioners in their work with marginalized people (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Guo & Tsui, 2010; Schön, 1983). Bourdieu (1984) argued that every individual is located in a concrete objective structural position, which processes its own social resources and capital (Bourdieu, 1984). It is impossible to understand young people's social behaviours merely from the perspective of the researchers. What is required is critical reflection on the structural relationships that influence the perception of people's life situations (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Guo and Tsui (2010) further argued the importance of empowerment: "*social workers should support the attempts of people to enhance their strength by resisting and even subverting power relations instead of forcing them to be rehabilitated according to middle-class values and behaviours*" (p. 238). Therefore, involvement with young migrant workers could be both collaborative and reflective so as to better understand from where they are and who they are.

### *2.3.5 The knowledge gap: how do young migrant workers construct the meanings of personal development and social relationships?*

As discussed above, there are multiple dimensions in personal development (e.g. transitions, change of life) and social relationships. Young people could receive support from their family and from society. However, in the case of young migrant workers, how they construct their personal development and social relationships is still unknown. In addition, do they merely go through transitions from rural to urban living, from being student to worker and from adolescence to adulthood? What meanings do they make of these changes in their lives? The current knowledge gap in understanding young migrant workers provides a further incentive for researchers to establish a collaborative and reflective partnership with them in order to investigate their life experiences.

## 2.4 Practice Gap of Working With Young Migrant Workers

### *2.4.1 The "context" of practice with young migrant workers: social welfare and social work development in China*

#### *(1) Social welfare development in China*

In order to understand social work practice with young migrant workers in China, a critical reflection of the most relevant social institution—the social welfare system, which is deeply rooted in the

combination of “new rationality” and “old values” under China’s rapid economic development is necessary (Tsui & Chan, 1996). Accordingly, China’s social welfare system is shifting from a family-oriented and collective-bound caring system to a differentiated welfare system based on individuals’ social status (e.g. household residence and occupation) (Deng & Meng, 2009; Wang, 2009). The traditional caring system aims to strengthen family functions—to provide care and protection for the family members (Tsui & Chan, 1996; Wang, 1998).

After the establishment of socialism in 1949, social welfare reform in China has been characterized as a transformation towards a “multi-faceted welfare package” (*shehui fuli*, 社會福利), which included “social insurance” (*shehui baoxian*, 社會保險), “social services” (*shehui fuwu*, 社會服務) and “social relief” (*shehui jiuji*, 社會救濟) (Croll, 1999; Schwartz & Shieh, 2009). It provided a unique occupational welfare system for workers employed in urban work units (*danwei*, 單位) who enjoyed the benefits of “labour insurance”, “allowances and subsides”, “collective welfare” (such as free entry to schools and hospital) and “in-kind distribution” (Lee, 2000). In contrast, the peasants could enjoy the welfare benefits such as low-priced cooperative medical care and services in the rural production units (*shengcan hezuoshe*, 生產合作社).

However, since the mid-1990s, the social welfare system has shifted from occupational welfare to a dual-system following the closure of the urban work units and the rural production units (Deng & Meng, 2009; Schwartz & Shieh, 2009; Wong-Lai, 1995; Yan, 2011). On the one hand, the system combines market-directed and state-directed social welfare provisions (Dou, 2006; Yan, 2011). The state still takes care of the neediest population such as orphans and people with disabilities, while other social services (e.g. medical services, education) are shared by the State, the market and individuals. On the other hand, urban and rural residents are entitled to different social benefits according to their *hukou*. While the employees of the State (e.g. civil servants and employees of state-owned enterprises) still enjoy occupational welfare such as housing subsidies and health allowances, rural migrant workers have insufficient social benefits in the cities where they have moved—lacking housing subsidies, health care coverage and access to adequate education. Although they are still entitled to the social benefits available to rural residents, it is difficult for them to access these benefits while they are currently living in the cities (e.g. physical distance and lack of a rural-urban cooperative social benefits network) (Chen, 2010; Li, 2010; Whyte, 2010).

These welfare reforms have resulted in further challenges for young migrant workers. Lacking eligibility for urban social benefits, they face

major financial burdens of the housing, medical care and children's education. Many employers are unwilling to provide them basic work benefits (e.g. housing subsidy, medical insurance, paid holidays) (Pun & Yuen-Tsang, 2011). In the event of requiring emergency hospital care, they need to borrow money from family members, relatives and friends. Meanwhile, they are likely to have to carry the financial burden of taking care of aging parents because of the inadequacy of the rural cooperative medical scheme (e.g. poor health care services, insufficient reimbursement for hospital care) (Jing & Ma, 2012; Mou *et al.*, 2009).

***(2) Social work development in Shenzhen, China***

Some social work elements (e.g. care for the needy community support) are embedded in the long history of social development in China. However, the idea of modern professional social work is one borrowed from the West. The definition of social work in China is different from the West—it is an administrative social service led by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*minzhengbu*, 民政部) and executed by officially registered non-profit social service agencies (Wang, 1998). Meanwhile, China's social structure, culture and polities have a significant impact on the development of social work—social work serves as a complimentary part of the top-down administration, while the demand of the needy and the supply of social work services are restricted by policies and public resources (Chan, Ip, & Lau,

2009; Ku & Wang, 2011; Leung, 2011; Shi, 2006; Tong & Liang, 2012; Tsang & Yan, 2001; Yan & Tsui, 2007; Yip, 2007; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002).

In Shenzhen the rapid development of social work has benefitted from government-led purchases of social services-firstly government departments (e.g. judicial authorities, education institutions) provide social work positions (*gangwei shegong*, 崗位社工) or the entire social services in the community (*shequ fuwu*, 社區服務) by inviting public bidding from the registered non-profit social services agencies. In 2007, Guandong Bureau of Civil Affairs (Shenzhen is one city in Guangdong province) implemented a pilot social work project in Shenzhen. In the same year, Shenzhen government started to promote the human resource development of social workers and social work services. Its "One Plus Seven Documents" (1+7 文件) emphasized provision (e.g. salary scale) and supervision of social work to support the new intake of social workers. It helped the formulation of the social work system in Shenzhen.

Frontline social workers and social work managers in Shenzhen are the "pioneers" of professional social workers in the Chinese Mainland. Many frontline social workers were recruited from amongst recent newly graduates of the social work programs across China. A majority of social work managers were promoted from the frontline services in Shenzhen, who

merely have one or two more years frontline experiences; some were recruited directly from the graduates of the Master of Social Work programme, however, these graduates have insufficient frontline experiences. Because of the lack of adequate expertise in the Chinese Mainland, social work supervisors have been recruited from Hong Kong. However the heads of the social work administration units (e.g. civic bureau, social work agencies) and policy makers are not social work trained and have been criticized for having insufficient understanding of the nature of social work (Mo, 2013).

Most of the social workers in Shenzhen are required to meet the high workloads as required by the government—take the social workers in CD town for instance, each year, a community social worker needs to take up at least five cases, to run at least four groups and to organize not less than twenty community events (e.g. promotion of health information). Many of them are overwhelmed by such a heavy workload (*yingzhibiao*, 硬指標). With limited practice experience, many young social workers have questioned the effectiveness of their efforts to help their clients.

In addition, there has been rapid development of social work education and professionalization throughout China. Social work was not undertaken for much of the socialist era in China and only re-emerged following the 1980s' economic reforms. Currently there are 211 undergraduate

programme and 32 high diploma programmes in the Chinese Mainland, with a mission to train 1.45 million social workers by 2020 (Ministry of Civil Affairs the People's Republic of China, 2012). However, trainings for social work services for migrant workers seem to be underestimated (Social Work Research Centre in the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2010). In 2006, China embarked on the process of professionalization of social work in terms of establishing qualification examinations, registration, positions, associations and membership (Leung, 2011). However, there has been limited discussion about how social workers in China handle the issues of blurred professional identity and accountability while they work in the frontline. How they develop capacity to work with young migrant workers is still unknown.

### *2.4.2 Burgeoning social services for young migrant workers*

There are many social services for young migrant workers in the Chinese Mainland. To further identify the practice gap, I summarized four types of social services with social work elements (please refer to *Table I*). In fact, the credibility and sustainability of some services are questionable (many data are second-hand). They may only borrow and copy names and procedures from the West, but the effectiveness and sustainability of these programs need to be further evaluated. After all, the reviewing process is

still valuable to understand the limitations of the relevant social work practice with young migrant workers.

*Table Ⅰ: Current social work services for young migrant workers in China*

| **Category** | **Social work services** | **Examples** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Community-based services | Psychological counselling; personal and family support; group work; interpersonal relationship training; provision of recreational activities. | Jiaxing City "Care for Soul" Community Support Centre; Shenzhen Pengxing (鹏星) Social Work Service Centre |
| 2. Corporation-based services | Group work; psychological counselling; crisis intervention; employee life support; and individualized services | Dongguan *Yue Yuan*'s (粤源) employee care centre; Shenzhen Foxconn (富士康)'s social work services for the workers. |
| 3. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) | Western standard EAP products: employee counselling; career planning; crisis intervention | Employee Assistance Programs initiate by Beijing Normal University; EAPs Consulting; Beijing Psycho-Chestnut Global Partners, Inc. |
| 4. Services and campaigns of labour NGOs | Legal services; psychological counselling; education in labour law and rights; occupational health, safety and skills training | Chinese Working Women Network (CWWN, 女工關懷); Shenzhen Institute of Contemporary Observation (深圳勞工觀察); Shenzhen Hand in Hand *Shouqianshou* Social Service Centre (手牵手). |

Community-based and corporation-based social work services appear to be more conservative, since their services are more counselling-oriented

and avoid addressing labour conflicts. The Employee Assistance Programs in China are largely experimental projects currently and do not yet function consistently (Xue, 2009). In contrast, labour service programs aim to protect the young migrant workers' labour and civil rights by providing "*legal service, psychological counselling, education about labour law, occupational health and safety and skills training, and social venues for recreational activities*" (Zhang & Smith, 2009, p.78). However, the services and programs provided by the labour NGOs are limited by political restrictions and resistance on the part of the private corporations (Pun & Yuen-Tsang, 2011; Zhang & Smith, 2009). In addition, social workers experience difficulties in developing collaborative labour protection campaigns with young migrant workers, because of the latter's fears of recriminations from their employers (Pun & Yuen-Tsang, 2011).

It is interesting to observe the change of the Chinese Working Women Network (CWWN) to Hand in Hand (*Shouqianshou*, 手牵手) in Shenzhen (two labour NGOs provided by the same group of organizers), which have provided labour-assistance services to two consecutive generations of migrant workers. Compared to the CWWN's uni-directional services, the multiple service approaches of Hand in Hand highlight volunteerism, interaction and collaboration between young migrant workers and the social workers. However, their experience of service provision highlights the

difficulties of promoting their work because of the political restrictions. In sum, the above counselling-oriented and labour-oriented social services for young migrant workers mainly focus on dealing with their current "problems", without addressing issues relating to long-term livelihoods, including sustainable living, stable employment and family formation.

### *2.4.3 The practice gap: how to improve social work involvement in the lives of young migrant workers?*

The above review of the social welfare system and the development of social work in Shenzhen, China illustrates that young migrant workers are still excluded from social protection and welfare benefits. As a group of professional helpers, many new and young social workers have no experience in working in the frontline. They do not know how to help young migrant workers, both of them experience changes of life in the new environment of Shenzhen. In addition, the psycho-social needs of young migrant workers seem to be misidentified—many social work services do not meet what they need; what they need from their own options are still unknown.

Furthermore, social work agencies and social work practitioners face dilemmas in positioning their services and programs in the political and cultural background of China. In the meantime, social services for young migrant workers seem to focus on helping out of emergencies and crisis

intervention. Social workers seem to ignore the prevention and empowerment with consideration of young migrant workers' family and community. Therefore, I further question how the young social workers can become more involved in the life of young migrant workers in Shenzhen.

## 2.5 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter firstly located the personal and social issues of young migrant workers. From the West to China, selected studies of migrant workers were reviewed from the perspectives of migration-integration, labour-conflict and community-connection. The theoretical gap was further identified as the life experiences of young migrant workers who face personal and social issues of health care, work, education and living. At the same time what are the impacts of researcher-informant relationship to the quality inquiry. Knowledge of youth studies, family studies and social work perspectives were connected to the understanding of the personal development and social relationships of young migrant workers. The knowledge gap was further identified as the need to construct their life experiences from their own perspective within the context of a collaborative and reflective relationship. The last part of the chapter reviewed the development of China's social welfare system and social work and the impacts on the lives of young migrant workers. Contemporary social

services for young migrant workers were categorized and critically analysed in terms of their implications and limitations. This chapter concluded by identifying a gap in practice as to how social workers can become more involved in the lives of young migrant workers in Shenzhen.

# Chapter Three

# Research Methodology

The above gaps in theory, knowledge and practice in respect of researching, understanding and working with young migrant workers mainly indicates: a) there are comprehensive relationships and dynamics among the young migrant workers, the relevant people in their lives and the researchers, and thus investigation of subjectivity of young migrant workers is important for understanding how they handle the personal and social issues; b) the life experiences of young migrant workers is both culturally-bound and interactively-bound, which may have unique characters comparing to their Western peers; c) the practice framework should go beyond problem-solution interventions to collaborative actions that re-present the real needs of young migrant workers.

Therefore, to inform social work practice with young migrant workers, a research methodology that can integrate construction, interaction and cooperation is needed. Consequently, I followed a participatory research paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) to initiate my investigation of the life experiences of young migrant workers. I conducted various methods under the qualitative inquiry that consists of a narrative approach (Riessman, 1994, 2007) and other "triangulation" methods including observation, analysis of

written narratives (e.g. stories, poems, songs and videos), analysis of images and videos and interviews with key individuals with whom the young migrant workers interacted and stakeholders in the local communities.

In this chapter I will firstly present the research objective and questions, and then I will consider the participatory research paradigm and the rationale for utilizing a narrative approach as the main methodology. Next, I will elaborate the research procedures in respect of recruitment and background information of the research participants, narrative interview (data collection), transcript writing (data collection), narrative analysis (data analysis), and triangulation methods (supplementary data collection and analysis). Consideration of trustworthiness (or validity), credibility (or reliability) and ethics of the research will be discussed in the last part of the chapter.

## 3.1 Research Questions and Objectives

The main objective of the study is to promote the psycho-social well-being of young migrant workers through social work intervention. To achieve the goal, I will elicit and interpret the life experiences of young migrant workers. Furthermore, I will discuss how to improve social work involvement in the lives of young migrant workers.

The research questions contain three integral themes and subthemes:

**(1) How do young migrant workers narrate their life experiences?** It contains three sub-questions: a) What are their memories of their past in their rural home land? b) How do they experience the changes from rural to urban residence, from student to worker and adolescent to adult? c) What are their expectations and hopes for the future?

**(2) How do they construct the meanings of personal development and social relationships?** This research question includes: (a) What is the meaning of personal development to young migrant workers? (b) How do they consider their social relationships (relationships with their families, peers and other people who are important in their lives)?

**(3) What are the implications of interpreting the life experiences of young migrant workers for social work?** This question considers the discussion of: a) How do the social workers in Shenzhen better help and support the young migrant workers? b) What are the difficulties faced by the social workers who work with young migrant workers? c) What are the strengths and limitations of social work interventions?

## 3.2 The Participatory Research Paradigm

The participatory research paradigm highlights a collaborative construction between the participants and the researchers of reality and meanings of the research topics (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). It matches my

inquiry with young migrant workers regarding how they perceive their subjective life experiences based on our research interaction. Compared with the other four paradigms (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism) in Lincoln and Guba's formulation (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 195), the participatory paradigm is well connected with the nature of the study in three key respects: a) ontology, young migrant workers are considered as the key "authors" of their own life experiences; b) epistemology, it is necessary to build up a cooperative relationship between young migrant workers and myself so as to better understand their life experiences; c) methodology, young migrant workers and I work together to construct their life experiences. An expanded discussion of ontology, epistemology and methodology as regards the participatory paradigm will be outlined below:

### *3.2.1 Ontology: the subjective reality*

It is important to interpret the subjective reality (identities, experiences and hopes) of young migrant workers while comparing to many existing investigations of their objective circumstances. It can be interpreted through understanding of their individual participation in the social, economic, cultural and political structure (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). It may be easier to draw conclusions regarding "yes-no" or "right-wrong" in relation to the social issues faced by young migrant workers by using quantitative methods.

However, it is necessary to consider their own perceptions of their lives. In this study, young migrant workers participate in the specific structural context of Shenzhen—a location embodying both modernism and post-modernism (Ma, 2006). They may develop many new responses to the life challenges in Shenzhen. Therefore, knowing why and how they react to specific life situations can facilitate valuable reflections—to understand the influence of a mixed modernist and post-modernist society to the individual ways of living of young migrant workers.

### *3.2.2 Epistemology: the cooperative relationship*

The relationship between the young migrant workers and myself as a researcher is considered to be a cooperative one. The young migrant workers are not passive informants but were encouraged to become active participants in the study. A study that simply followed the positivist or post-positivist model may easily fall into a cycle of using the pre-determinative concepts to examine the "problems" of young migrant workers and then reinforcing unsuitable services or programs. In contrast, social work research should embrace participation and collaboration with them (Bell, 2011). In addition, the interpretive and collaborative nature of qualitative methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994)—enabling the young people to voice out their needs when collaborating with the researchers—can be an alternative to break this cycle.

### *3.2.3 Methodology: the person-centred and action-oriented approach of inquiry*

With a commitment to build a relationship with and promote the personal and social development of young migrant workers, I prefer the person-centred and action-oriented approach to investigate the life experiences of young migrant workers. By putting aside any presumptions about their life circumstances, I prefer to let young migrant workers be their own "authors" to re-present their life experiences that are meaningful to them (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). I want them to be aware of their own strengths and values through facilitating an action-oriented research process (Lit, 2010; White, 2007). In the meanwhile, my dualistic role as a researcher and a participant enables me to witness how they provide rich information of their lives. Furthermore, action-oriented inquiry also makes use of language, shared experiences and reflection (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) between the young migrant workers and myself in order to enrich the interpretation of information.

## 3.3 Rationale, Advantages and Importance of a Narrative Approach

Regarding the participatory paradigm adopted for the study, Riessman's narrative approach (Riessman, 1994, 2007) was applied as the

main research methodology to collect and analyse data (or information). The particular rationale, for selecting a narrative approach to facilitate the collaborative inquiry of the life experiences of young migrant workers and its advantages and importance are discussed below:

### *3.3.1 Rationale*

The narrative approach (Riessman, 1994, 2007) was selected in the light of its history, the focus of the study and the limitations of other research methods:

There is a historical connection among marginalized people, the narrative approach and social work research. Since social work embraces the language-base nature, the narrative approach provides a good fit to elicit the participants' vocalisations of their life situations and experiences (Wells, 2010). The narrative approach has been widely applied to the study of particular life experiences of marginalized people (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Atkinson,1990; Bold, 2012; Bruner, 1986; Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawaska, 2004; Elliot, 2005; Fraser, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010; Riessman, 1994, 2007; Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Robb *et al*., 2010). It has also become an approach for social work researchers to analyse the rich nature of interaction and reflection between participants and researchers (Dominelli, Strega,

Walmsley, Callahan, & Brown, 2011; Fraser, 2004; Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

There are different social science methodologies for studying young migrant workers and related social issues. For instance, using questionnaires to investigate their rural-urban situation, family and work situations; using quantitative measurement to explain and predict their health or mental health conditions; using ethnography to observe and interpret social issues they faced. These methodologies are chosen in light of the specific research questions and the purpose of study. However, they may not be adequate to assist me in interpreting the identities, experiences and hopes of young migrant workers. A methodology such as the narrative approach is meaningful to my study because of its focus on collaboration and co-authorization between participants and researcher, as well as participants' subjectivities and their meaning-making of life experiences (Riessman, 2007). Furthermore, other methodologies may overlook the reflections and relationships between the researcher and informants, which are highlighted in the narrative approach. Reflection and relationships are significant for informing humanistic social work practice (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2007).

Correspondingly, a narrative approach matches the focus of my study—interpreting the life experiences of young migrant workers. First, it is necessary to start from where they are and who they are. The narrative

approach is appropriate for this task since it emphasizes respect and equal partnership (Riessman, 2007). It helps to create a comfortable research settings where the participants can exchange emotional support and life information with the researcher (Lit, 2010). Next, as a foundation for providing care, concern and support, narrative approach helps to understand the comprehensive inner feelings of young migrant workers. The narrative approach applied in this study differs from narrative therapy, the former emphases on both the process of empowerment and analysis of personal narratives, which the latter focuses on therapeutic intervention. Previous studies may have underestimated the process of relationship building. Some scholars began to highlight the importance of respecting young migrant workers and responding with actions—research is not a one way extraction of information, but it is a process of providing help and support (Pun *et al.*, 2011; Wang, 2012). Accordingly, the narrative approach provides me more opportunity to build rapport and emotional support with young migrant workers (Lit, 2010; Riessman, 2005).

### *3.3.2 Advantages and importance*

The major advantages of the narrative approach are: First, it is an experience-centred qualitative approach that applies combined methods of anthropological field observation, action-driven interviews and multi-layered data analysis (Riessman, 1994; 2007) to re-express,

re-construct and re-present particular life experiences of young migrant workers. Secondly, it collects and analyses cohesive, sequential and meaningful transcripts of personal narratives in terms of oral, written, visual and archival formats (Riessman, 2007). It helps to provide a full picture of the life trajectory of young migrant workers. In addition, by analysing the contexts (e.g. structure, interaction) of the narratives, it can connect their individual changes in the life with the structure and social dynamics.

The narrative approach is also important for drawing out social work implications: a) it can create a new way to challenge the traditional top-down approach of researching and practicing with young people (Lit, 2010; Robb *et al.*, 2010), therefore I can better understand their experiences of changes in their lives; b) it can help formulate a practical guide to approach, connect and become involved with marginalized young people; c) it can invoke in young migrant workers' self-awareness of their strengths and values by facilitating empowerment-bound interaction (Riessman, 2007).

The above discussion of the rationale for, and advantages and importance of the narrative approach demonstrates its unique value for understanding the life experiences of young migrant workers. The next session will further deliberate the research process including how I implemented the narrative approach in my qualitative investigation.

## 3.4 Recruitment and Background Information of the Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to confirm the location for the study and recruit research participants (Rich & Grey, 2005; Riessman, 1990). Shenzhen was selected as the main field of the study for studying young migrant workers for the following reasons:

(1) Shenzhen is a rapidly developing migrant city and a popular destination that attracts many young migrant workers from all over China. It provides a model of economic development model that other cities and locations may emulate. In addition, Shenzhen has over 13 million population including a majority of the non-local residents come from different provinces and minority groups. Therefore, understanding the life experiences of young migrant workers in Shenzhen may contribute to understanding the future of young working generation in developing China.

(2) Shenzhen is a social work laboratory of China. Many social reforms have been piloted in Shenzhen (e.g. social work development, *hukou* system, health care system and labour union system). Lessons learnt from experiences in Shenzhen are likely to have implications elsewhere in China. Furthermore, to narrow the focus, I selected CD town (pseudonym) as the prime location for recruiting research participants, mainly because the majority of young migrant workers work and live in industrial towns in

Shenzhen, such as CD town. Compared to downtown Shenzhen, it provides affordable rent (around 100 to 200 yuan for a one-bedroom apartment), food and transportation (a flat fare of 2 yuan throughout the area), thus posing fewer economic barriers for young migrant workers to establish a sustainable livelihood.

After conducting the pilot study, I have narrowed down my research target group–to select young migrant workers who had been in Shenzhen for more than three years, because it is likely that this would have provided them with rich experience of living and coping strategies. In addition, I selected those "young" men and women who were from the post-80s generation, aged between 24 and 33 years, either single or married, and had grown up in rural villages or townships either in Guangdong province or other provinces in China.

I did not set limit of the sample size. Recruitment of the informants was sequential. After conducting the first interview with the first participant, I started to interpret the richness of information I received. Starting from the second interview, I began to compare and identify commonalities and differences inside the contexts and contents of the participants' individual narratives. In the meanwhile, I conducted both participant observation and non-participant observation with them. I finally decided to stop recruitment after having nine participants in the study, when I found the collected

information was both sufficient to answer my research questions, and no new data were provided from my participants (Josselson & Lieblich, 2005). Six of the young migrant workers were male and three were female (details of their background information are listed in chronological order of recruitment):.

**(1) Sao Miu**, who I would describe as an "optimistic job-seeker", wore a slim-cut T-shirt with a stylish pair of jeans when we first met. He looked very sporty. He was very talkative, in a polite manner, with clear voice and steady pace. He described things in a simple way with a good sense of humour. At the age of twenty-four, he had already completed a comprehensive journey of work. He grew up at Hubei province (湖北) with parents who were both farmers. After finishing middle-school at the age of sixteen, he travelled alone to Shenzhen to work. His first job was as an apprentice in a small family workshop, but subsequently he changed jobs five times in the previous five years: (1) a worker in a big electronic manufacturing factory; (2) a security guard; (3) a street peddler; (4) a sales representative for an insurance company and (5) a waiter in a Karaoke centre. At the time we met, he was unemployed. He was single and had one older brother. In the future he hoped to run a small agricultural business with the help of his uncle in his home town in Hubei province.

**(2) Ah Ming**, who impressed me as a "smiley dreamer", came from a rural village in west Guangdong province, an eight-hour bus journey from Shenzhen. He was a sales representative for an IT company. He was also a talkative and humorous man. He often joked about his job—calling on people by phone to persuade them to buy his company's software. He liked to wear a suit and leather shoes that he had purchased at a bargain price. He liked to be well groomed and his hair was stylish. He was outgoing and liked to whisper while listening to the disco-mixed music. The pace of his speech was quite fast, although I was able to understand him. His native language was a western Cantonese dialect, but he learnt to speak Putonghua (普通話) in Shenzhen. He was twenty-five, single, a high-school graduate, and had a younger sister who helped her fiancé to run a small family workshop in Guangzhou (the capital city of Guangdong province). His parents were both construction workers in his home town, and they had never migrated to any other places.

**(3) Lam**, appeared like a "good dad" at our first meeting. He was twenty-seven years old, married and had a three-year-old son and a one-year-old daughter. His wife was taking care of the two children, and was living with his parents in his home town, a rural village in east Guangdong province a four-hour bus journey from Shenzhen. My first impression of Lam was that he appeared a gentleman, wearing a pair of

glossy black-framed glasses. He told me that he liked to buy clothes from *Taobao* (淘寶, possibly the most popular online shopping website in China, which mainly sells cheap products replicating Korean, Japanese and Western styles). His mother tongue was the *Chaoshan* dialect (潮汕話). However he spoke Putonghua (普通話) with me in the interview, because he knew that I did not understand the dialect. His consideration was also evident in his frequent recollections of his children; he wanted to be a "good father". For instance, he never smoked in front of his children. He worked as a clerk in a big tea shop run by his cousin. For four years previously, he had run a business selling computer products. However, he lost a lot of money that he had invested in the stock market during the 2008 financial crisis. Therefore, he sold his business to pay his debts. He had a younger brother who graduated from a well-known university and then worked for the local government in his home town. His father was also a businessman who traded in raw materials. His mother had worked as a peasant and a housewife for her entire life.

**(4) Ah Wei**, first appeared to me with her tidy dress—an office lady style—and had long, black shining hair. She wore no makeup and had big eyes and always smiling. She was the first female participant in my study. She came from a rural area near Ah Ming's home town, but they never met each other, and their respective life journeys seemed rather different: Ah

Wei's experience in Shenzhen appeared more positive. At the age of thirteen, she came out to work as an intern during her summer break from middle-school. Fortunately, her boss was impressed by her during her next vocational internship in Shenzhen, and she was offered a job as a human resource secretary after graduation (she told me that she was luckier than her schoolmates, who normally started their work in Shenzhen as assembly-line factory girls). She was twenty four and has a twenty-seven-year-old brother who was a university graduate and ran a photographic studio in Guangzhou. They kept contact through calling each other regularly. Also, she had a younger sister who, in her own words, "*is very introverted, does not like to talk, and the family worry a lot about her*". Her father was a migrant worker, but he was a gambler as well, after losing all the money he owned, he lived at home with her mother. In childhood, Ah Wei's mother supported the family alone by farming and doing seasonal agricultural work for fellow villagers. Ah Wei was still single, but she was looking for a "mature and composed" (成熟穩重) husband.

**(5) Nana**, who I would describe as a "sunshine girl", and I met in the playground. She always looked curious about the things around her. She was short and slim, but I could feel her toughness—her eyes were shining and she talked with confidence. In the interview, she wore a basketball suit and trainers. She tied up her long hair that made the scar on her neck visible. She

told me that she had had surgery on her neck three years previously, and liked to exercise more to stay healthy. Nana talked in a very gentle manner. I could feel her peace. She was twenty four. At the time we met, she was employed as a frontline factory worker. She had an older brother who also worked in a factory in Dongguan (東莞, a well-known industrial city near Shenzhen). Her parents were both farm workers in her home town, in Guangxi province, and they had never migrated to other places.

**(6) Cici**, was the second oldest child in her family. She had four sisters but no brothers (in rural China, even though it is prohibited by the one child policy, people still take the risk to have a son in an attempt to keep the 'blood' and surname of the family, 繼後香燈). She did not attend school beyond middle-school, and then she came to Dongguan to work with her parents. Only her youngest sister went to college. Cici was twenty-five and lived with her fiancé Ding, who ran a small jewellery fabrication workshop with his brothers in Shenzhen. Cici was unemployed. She had worked in some restaurants before she met her fiancé. Her knowledge of English was quite good and she knew many English words in my research proposal. She dressed in a very feminine way, wearing slim cut one-piece dress of simple design. She talked very clearly and slowly. Cici and her fiancé planned to get married a few months later. At the moment, she took charge of cooking and other housework in their workshop.

**(7) Fung**, was the father of a five-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter. My first impression of him was his physical toughness—he wore the uniform of a security guard, very short hair, dark skin, strong arms and chest. Unlike the feminine style of Cici, Fung talked in a very masculine way—lower tone but with a powerful voice. He was thirty-two and the oldest of the nine participants. His home town was close to that of Ah Ming and Ah Wei, although they did not know each other. Fung had a younger brother and a younger sister. His wife was eight years younger than him, so that he made a joke during our very first conversation, "*I am taking care of three kids now: my two children and my wife*". His parents were farmers in his home town. Even though he presented himself as very strong and tough, Fung was a man with deep emotions.

**(8) Jun**, was a "big man", six feet tall, and had small eyes in a big round face; he also had short hair and a dark skin. He was employed as a security guard. Although he was only twenty-six years old he looked about ten years older. He was a man with sad stories—both his parents had died because of chronic diseases, but he was optimistic. He came from Henan province (河南), the furthest distance from Shenzhen among the participants. His Putonghua had a strong home town accent, but he talked very slowly so I could understand him. He had a three-year-old son and, in his own words, a "*beautiful*" wife in his home town.

**(9) Yu** was twenty-eight, from a rural Hakka village at northeast Guangdong. He was the only participant who spoke with me in Cantonese. He had four older sisters and one twin brother who worked for the local government in his home town. It was quite difficult to get conversation going with Yu initially; however, after warming up with casual conversation about computer games (he loved playing computer games), he became very talkative. Yu's parents migrated to Hong Kong when he was in grade six of elementary school. His sisters lived in Shenzhen as well. He was single and worked as an administration assistant at the ABC social work community centre. Before this job, he worked in a factory and a shop run by his brother-in-law. He graduated from high school, but he told me that he wanted to study a part-time undergraduate degree course. He also wanted to become a social worker in the future. Yu was unique among the participants—he was planning a career to help others, particularly migrant workers and their families, in Shenzhen.

## 3.5 Data Collection

### *3.5.1 Narrative interviewing*

Narrative interviews served as the main means of collecting first-hand data (information) from the study participants. The narrative interview procedure consisted of three stages—orientation, narration and termination

(Riessman, 1994). Stage one "orientation", at the beginning of each interview, comprised my opening statement outlining of the background information of the study. Most importantly, I asked the participants for oral and written consent to take part in the study as well as their consent to the audio recording of our interview. I also allowed a few minutes for the participants to ask additional questions about the research. The second stage was narration. In an equal and collaborative relationship (Riessman, 2007), the research participants were placed in the centre of the narration—they directed me in their storytelling. They were encouraged to share their stories, starting from their childhood in the countryside to their current life in Shenzhen. At the same time, I tried to help participants maintain a good flow in their storytelling, by adding timely verbal and gestural responses and my personal sharing (Riessman, 2005). I did not take notes during interviews, although all interviews were audio recorded, supplemented with detailed interview notes made immediately after the interview.

The last stage of the narrative interview is termination. My final question in the interview "what are your plans for the future?" served as a signal for termination of the interview, although I told participants that it was not necessarily the end of our relationship or contact (Riessman, 2005). I informed them that they were welcome to get contact with me if they needed help. Considering the sufficient daily interaction before the formal

narrative interview and rich information during the narrative interview, I conducted the interview with seven informants just for one time. However, I invited Ar Ming and Yu to take part in a second narrative interview, since they were struggling in handling their love relationship and career development during the first interview. The purpose of this was: a) to discuss new issues that had not been discussed in the first interview; b) to provide update on their change of inner feeling and thoughts between the first and second interview; c) to elaborate on issues of relationship and connection that had been discussed in the first interview but not in sufficient depth.

### *3.5.2 Transcript writing*

The transcripts of narrative interviews are very important (Riessman, 2007), since they contain rich information about the identities, experiences and hopes of the research participants, along with our interaction, collaboration and reflection. I transcribed each interview verbatim by listening to the tape recordings. This was undertaken immediately after each interview while my memory was fresh. In addition to the actual words spoken by myself and the participant, the written record included pauses, non-verbal and emotional elements of the interview (Riessman, 2007). Each research participant was sent a copy of the draft transcript of their interview

for member checking (Riessman, 2007). Any comments they wished to add were included in the final transcripts.

### *3.5.3 Triangulation*

Getting information from young migrant workers provides part of the picture for understanding their life experiences. Triangulation utilizes: conversations with people with whom the participants interacted, and stakeholders in the community, observation, participation, analysis of songs, poems, images and videos, complementary information that helps to complete the picture (Bold, 2012; Creswell, 2012; Denzin, 1989). Further interviews, were undertaken with family members of young migrant workers (four individuals), factory bosses (three individuals), community leaders (three individuals), policy makers (three individuals), social workers (six frontline social workers, two social work managers and two external supervisors) and two scholars. I received their oral and written consent to take part in the study as well. These interviews followed a specific set of questions, including “Can you describe the *wailai dagong qingnian* (young migrant workers) you know? (您能描述您所認識的這些來打工的青年人嗎?)”, “What do you think of their life? (您怎麼看待他們的生活?)”, “How do you think social work can help them? (您覺得社工可以怎樣幫助他們?).

## 3.6 Data Analysis

Narrative analysis (Riessman, 1994, 2007) was applied for data analysis. It was used to interpret the context (structural and interactional), content (main themes, subthemes) and omissions (things not mentioned) of the life experiences of young migrant workers (Riessman, 2007). There are no universal instructions for undertaking narrative analysis, the researcher determines the most appropriate way in order to answer the research questions (Bold, 2012; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). All the data collected in my study were organized by scanning, labelling, filing and storing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In particular, the entire process of each narrative interview was transcribed, including the conversation backgrounds, life episodes, language, interaction, emotional exchange and reflection (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Then Riessman's (2007) thematic analysis (eliciting and comparing the emerging themes) and structural analysis (interpreting the structure and language of the narratives) were used in order to integrate, interpret and elaborate the identities, experiences and hopes of the study participants.

I applied thematic analysis to identify the key contents of the participants' narratives, including the main contents of their memories and life episodes, sequences of telling, frequency of words and sentences (Riessman, 2007). By comparing the contents of each narrative, I was able

to draw out the main themes of the life experiences of young migrant workers (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 2007). Besides identifying the main themes, cultural components (particular values, rituals or ways of behaviour) of young migrant workers were also taken into consideration (Bold, 2012).

Structural analysis complemented the narrative analysis. It enabled me to discover details of structure and language (Riessman, 2007), which contained important elements (such as emotional interaction and mutual reflection) to support the meaning of the narratives (Bold, 2012; Riessman, 2007). I applied Riessman's (2007) coding method to elicit the structure of the narratives, including "abstract" (AB), "orientation" (OR), "complicating action" (CA), "evaluation" (EV), "resolution" (RE) and "coda" (CO) (Riessman, 2007, p. 44). In each episode of their narratives, I marked down in the written transcripts with the structural coding (AB—what happened to them; OR—what were the contexts; CA—who did they interact with and what was the dilemma; EV—what did they think at that moment; RE—what did they react; CO—what happened after). The coding helped me further analyse the participants' meaning-making process in terms of the social context and interpersonal interaction (Riessman, 2007). Moreover, their language presentation throughout the interviews—emphasis, repetition,

pausing—was analysed to support the interpretation of emotional change and mutual interaction (Gee, 1991; Riessman, 2007).

## 3.7 Research Quality and Ethical Issues

In this part, I will consider how trustworthiness (or validity), credibility and research ethics had been framed in relation to qualitative inquiry in general and narrative approach in particular. I will elaborate how I ensured the transparency of the research process, eliminated my personal biases, applied triangulation in collecting different sources of data, and maintained a good ethical standard throughout the research process:

### *3.7.1 Ways to improve trustworthiness and credibility*

First of all, validity of the study was strengthened by ensuring transparency of the research process and eliminating my personal biases. All the procedures of data collection and analysis were described clearly (Golafshani, 2003; Riessman, 2007). They strictly conformed to the research methodology of a narrative approach (Riessman, 1994, 2007) with the participatory research paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In the meanwhile, I realized that the presentation of narratives inevitably contained my personal biases (Mishler, 1990; Riessman, 2007). Therefore, I compared the representation and interpretation of the participants' narratives with other similar studies of young migrant workers. More important, the research

participants were invited to provide member checking, comments and feedback to improve the accuracy of the stories they told and the authenticity of my representation of their stories (Riessman, 2007; Wells, 2012). In addition, they were asked to correct errors or provide clarifications and elaborations. Also, my academic peers and teachers (including those who were familiar or unfamiliar with study of rural migrant workers in China) were invited to provide constructive criticism to enrich the discussion (Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005) of my study.

Secondly, triangulation was used to support the credibility of the narrative analysis. I made use of triangulation of methods, investigators and theories (Denzin, 1989). I compared theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, findings and discussion of different studies with similar groups of young migrant workers (Riessman, 2007)—to identify related social issues from various perspectives. I also combined my own findings with triangulation of different data (Bold, 2012; Denzin, 1989; Golafshani, 2003; Shek *et al.*, 2005)—narrative interviews, participation observation, analysis of written narratives, archival analysis and conversations with relevant people. It helped enrich understanding of the social, economic, cultural and political circumstances of young migrant workers—as well as interpretation of their life situations across disciplines.

### *3.7.2 Research ethics*

My role as a researcher and my research information (e.g. research questions, procedure) were clearly presented to the participants and other people whom I interviewed. The participants were asked to give oral and written consent to participate in the study. All of them accepted me as a university student conducting an independent (i.e. one that was not funded by the government) study. Positioning myself as a qualitative researcher, I undertook multiple roles simultaneously: an observer, a listener, an interpreter and a helper (Riessman, 2005). Most important, I did my best to report what I saw, what I heard and what I thought.

Privacy of the research participants and their right to withdraw were the other important ethical principles of the study. To ensure their privacy and security, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. My record of their background information and narratives were stored in a locked drawer of my office table. In addition, the voluntary nature of participation in the study was emphasized to all participants. They were informed of the ability to withdraw from the research at any time if they do not feel comfortable. Respecting participants' privacy and self-determination helped decrease any anxiety they may have had regarding taking part in the study. As a result, they could enjoy a safe environment for comfortable sharing.

## 3.8 Research Limitations

Firstly, it is an individual research project, the interpretation of the findings mainly came from the individual viewpoints and social construction of the young migrant workers and myself. Although critical peer reviews and discussion with other senior researchers were added to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, it still contains personal biases. The narrative interviews discovered the "present self" of young migrant workers by mainly analysis on their past experiences. However, their "future self" is contingent, can be diverse from what they have presented. In addition, this research project was completed in a short time period—with the literature review, fieldwork, data collection and analysis and writing of the thesis all undertaken within a three year period. The limited time-frame also meant that the study was only able to capture some significant elements of the life experiences of young migrant workers at a specific point in time rather than over an extended period.

Secondly, as a qualitative study involving a relatively small number of participants, I would urge caution in applying the findings and discussion to a wider group of young migrant workers who work and live in different places in China. Although the study delivers no yes-or-no or right-or-wrong statement regarding the life experiences of young migrant workers, it provides some key insights and directions for understanding the personal

and social issues of young migrant workers. In the meanwhile, when I applied the analysis of the findings (narratives and other interviews) to provide recommendations for social work practice in Shenzhen, I did not have enough time to evaluate these implications, which makes some of my suggestions in the social work interventions with young migrant workers embryonic and tentative.

Thirdly, the conduct of the study was restricted by some political and cultural factors. In their interview, some participants avoided further sharing about their negative comments of the government; I believe this was because of their fear about getting into trouble. Culturally, although I also come from the Chinese Mainland, I was not familiar with some of the dialects and cultural backgrounds of different provinces, therefore, my understanding and interpretation of the culture of young migrant workers may have been distorted. To reduce this risk, I checked with young migrant workers the accuracy of my understanding of their narratives through member checking. Also, most interview were conducted in Putonghua which was not their native, it may prevent them from fully expressing of their feeling.

Last but not least, the study focused on exploring the common characteristics, competences, struggles, success, hopes and dreams of young migrant workers, while the subtle gender differences may be neglected. For

example, male and female informants may develop different style of filial piety and different style of parenting; they specific expectation of a better life may be different in terms of the saving and properties. In addition, as a married young man, I may not fully understand all the subtle feelings of the female participants.

## 3.9 Summary of the Chapter

The chapter firstly presented the participatory research paradigm that emphasized interpretation of the life experiences of young migrant workers was an action-oriented interaction process. Then, the rationale for, and advantages and importance of the narrative approach (the main research method) were discussed—it enabled me to explore important life themes and dimensions from the own words of young migrant workers. The main objective of the study was to promote the social well-being of young migrant workers through social work support. Research questions focused on their life experiences and the implications for social work. Sampling, recruitment and details of the research procedure (data collection and analysis) were discussed subsequently. The methods for ensuring triangulation of data collection and analysis by means of narrative interviews, observation, and reflection for comparative analysis were then reviewed. The research quality (trustworthiness and credibility) was

addressed by handling personal biases, applying triangulation, using feedback and comments and keeping rigorous documentation. The chapter concluded with consideration of ethical issues and how these were addressed.

# Chapter Four

# Findings: Approaching to the Life of Young Migrant Workers

This chapter will present my observations, and describe my interaction with young migrant workers in general as well as the research participants in CD town, Shenzhen. The "structural" context (e.g. institutions, social status, community environment that influence their life) and "interactional" context (e.g. my interaction with the young migrant workers in the narrative study) of the narrative approach will be elaborated. Regarding the structural context in CD town, labour-intensive manufacturing industries still dominate the local economy. Young migrant workers are living with financial and social insecurity. They have limited careers and support for health care from their workplace, local government or the communities in which they live. Even if they are supported by their own family and good friends, they are not respected by stakeholders in the urban community—employers, local cadres and local indigenous residents (*bendiren,* 本地人).

My interaction with the young migrant workers who took part in the research followed a narrative approach of getting familiar, building up friendship, creating comfort, exchanging experiences and reflection. This

approach basically referred to Riessman's (2007) suggestion of interaction with research participants in a narrative study. It also combined the application of my personal qualities, my cultural and political sensitivity and behavioural responses to the feedback from the participating young migrant workers. Elaboration of my narrative interaction with the participants will help the audience better understand the contents of their narratives (Riessman, 2007), which will be illustrated in chapters five and six.

## 4.1 Discovery of the Structural Context of the Lives of Young Migrant Workers

In order to develop my narrative interviews with young migrant workers in Shenzhen, I spent a year living in CD town. It is an industrial township in Shenzhen and is a centre for electronic products, automobile and container manufacturing. It comprises 23 communities (the lowest tier of social administration, *shequ*, 社區). Almost 10 per cent of the population across all of the communities are local indigenous residents, and the other 90 per cent are non-local people (*wailairen*, 外來人, mainly including non-local people with Shenzhen *hukou* and migrant workers with rural *hukou*). Comparing to local indigenous residents (who usually own one or more houses) and non-local people who have Shenzhen *hukou*, both young migrant workers and old migrant workers are facing more structural

disadvantages (details will be elaborated as below). Then I further narrowed my observation onto the local context—the communities in which they live and the people with whom they interact including family members, peers (fellow villagers, workmates or friends), employers, local cadres and human service providers (social workers, teachers or medical doctors).

### *4.1.1 The structural circumstances of young migrant workers*

#### *(1) Economic context*

The manufacturing, construction and service industries (the latter including restaurants, saloons and karaoke bars) in Shenzhen provide many job opportunities for rural migrant workers. Compared with working in agriculture, these labour-intensive industries offer a more secure livelihood through higher pay. Therefore, "going to the city for work" (*dao chengli dagong*, 到城裡打工) becomes the only choice for those rural young people who are unable to enter university but who desire a better life. However, the average income of rural migrant workers (around 2,000 yuan per month) has remained static for the past ten years (Shenzhen Trade Union & Shenzhen University Research Group, 2010). At the same time, the level of inflation (*wujia*, 物價, e.g. the cost of groceries, medicines and housing) has increased significantly (Bureau of Statistics of Shenzhen, 2013). As a result, young migrant workers need to spend more of their income on living

expenses and are able to save less. They have become the new "working poor"—staying in the city without financial security.

"To stay or to return?" is no longer a question for the inexperienced young migrant workers who indeed have no choices but to start working in the frontline of manufacturing, building or service industries. Most of the job openings are in the factories, service sectors and construction industry, the majority of which offer wages of around 1,000 yuan to 2,000 yuan wages per month. Three commonalities of the job requirement are low-skill, obedience and youth. First, almost no specific technical skills are required. Secondly, the most desirable job qualification is obedience, described as "hard-working and perseverance" (*chiku nailao*, 吃苦耐勞). Thirdly, young candidates aged between eighteen and thirty years are most preferable. On the whole, the labour market prefers to hire a cheap, obedient and youthful workforce. Instead of negotiating the job requirements and pay levels, it only offers young migrant workers the choice of which company (or boss) to work for.

***(2) Social context***

"Working for the boss" (*Dagong*, 打工) is a common destiny of young migrant workers in Shenzhen, who are following in the footsteps of the older generations of rural migrant workers. But they live in a different social context in terms of personal consumption, social media and social policy: a)

There is an increasing amount of consumption products (e.g. electrical products, fashion and beauty products, education courses and private health care services) mainly targeted at them; b) Social media has begun to raise public awareness of young migrant workers. One of the significant turning points was the 2010 serial suicides of young migrant workers at Foxconn in Shenzhen. These drew media and policy attention on the life situation of young migrant workers who are routinely overworked but receive low wages (Liu, 2010; Pun *et al.*, 2011); c) From the social policy perspective, they have limited legal, financial or social support. Originally a central government policy in China (*Weiwen*, 維穩) urged government departments to pay attention to public opinion and to reduce tensions between rich and poor. However, in practice, they are interested only in minimizing labour conflict and preventing strikes or protests by factory workers.

Besides, labour laws are inadequately implemented. Young migrant workers receive limited legal support for their labour rights in the workplace (e.g. signing the employment contract; negotiating salary and working hours; ensuring safety at work; requesting the purchase of social insurance). Even worse, many of them work without cover of social insurance, which means that they risk injury at work without receiving any compensation. Furthermore, they are not eligible for other kinds of financial support available to young people in Shenzhen. For instance, they do not qualify for

unemployment compensation or the two-year-interest-free entrepreneurship loan for which *hukou* in Shenzhen is a required criterion.

***(3) Political context***

Politically, in Shenzhen, almost no young migrant workers can take an active part in discussion so as to influence decision-making by the political leadership to protect their work and social benefits. Even in the community level of consultation, their presentation is limited by invitation, which means they have to develop a good social relationship (*guanxin*, 關係) with the local cadres. Some young migrant workers, who joined the Communist Party of China (CPC), are invited to the gathering of party members occasionally. But they have no chance to participate in the policy making of the Party to enhance their welfare at work. In the workplace, some have been elected to the labour unions (*gonghui*, 工會). However, they get a little help from the government in the negotiation of salary and other work issues with their employer. Overall, they are powerless in the political arena of Shenzhen.

***(4) Cultural context***

Young migrant workers live in the same cultural environment, exposed to the same mass media and entertainment, as the local young people in Shenzhen. The majority of songs and music videos about *Dagong* encourage hard work and returning to their home in the countryside with both money

and pride (*fengfengguangguang huijia*, 風風光光回家). Movies about young migrant workers normally describe them as people linked socially to each other (*youqing*, 有情) and loyal to each other (*youyi*, 有義), but they always encounter embarrassment, judged by the local indigenous residents in the city to have poor tastes and to dress unfashionable. Their lives seem to be filled with rich emotions of *Dagong* and poor recognition by the urban permanent residents.

### *4.1.2 Observation in the local communities*

#### *(1) A typical day of life in the community*

The day of a young migrant worker normally starts early, waking up between five and six a.m. to get ready for the day's work. Early in the morning the streets to the main factories of CD town are filled with walking or bicycling young migrant workers in their work uniforms. Most of them eat a take-away breakfast (e.g. a 50 cent meat bun or a one yuan Chinese pancake with a one yuan soymilk) purchased at peddlers' stalls. They look tired, showing no excitement for the coming full day of work. Many cover their hair with the work cap and move towards the factories quickly. Based on my observation, I could feel they were in a hurry to get to work.

In the afternoon, I normally cannot find them in the community mainly because many of them have a quick lunch in the canteen at their workplace. Some come out to the nearby mini-stores to smoke or buy snacks. In the

evening, small eating booths are full with relaxing young migrant workers. They normally eat a light dinner (e.g. a noodle soup costing four or five yuan). After dinner girls normally use their mobile phones to play games or chat in the remote-call phone booths. Boys gather around playing billiards or watching television. They look quite happy after work. Normally they work six days each week and get around eight hours sleep each day.

***(2) The invisible boundaries in the community***

Within the communities of CD town, there are almost no social activities that encourage or enable people from different social groups to mix with each other, including young migrant workers. Most of them are working all day, while many of their peers in the local indigenous population stay at home (e.g. gambling or playing internet games) or go to clubbing with friends. Most indigenous young people in Shenzhen do not appear to worry about earning money because of their affluent households (a large part of whose incomes come from the rent paid by migrant workers).

There is little evidence of communication between other people and young migrant workers in the community. Most of the women or elder people who take care of children gather in the parks, are not from Shenzhen, but have husbands or sons/daughters who work there. But they seem not interact with young migrant workers. It seems no one cares about the sudden

disappearance of someone in the community (Liu, 2010; Lu, 2013). Furthermore, the imbalance of resource distribution emphasizes the boundaries among different social groups within the local community. There are nine times as many young migrant workers and older migrant workers in CD town as there are local indigenous residents (Bureau of Statistics of Shenzhen, 2013). However, the indigenous people only are entitled to most of the social benefits (e.g. distributing collective bonus, entitlement to land). While young migrant workers contribute to the local communities through their rent payments and other local purchases, they receive almost no social benefits from the local community in return. The community administrative station (*shequ gongzuozhan*, 社區工作站) recruits indigenous people only to provide local administration and social services, many of which are targeted at indigenous women and older people. The newly-instituted community social work service centre (*shequ fuwuzhongxin*, 社區服務中心) may be the only place to provide social services (e.g. access to reading room, computer room and participation in group activities organized by social workers) to young migrant workers.

### *4.1.3 Interviews with key individuals in the community*

Besides my observation, I also conducted interviews with some key individuals in the community with whom the young migrant workers came into contact. These included family members, close friends, employers,

local cadres, small-business owners and human service professionals. I followed the interview questions (mentioned at chapter three) so as to find out how they view the personal and social issues faced by young migrant workers. They were also encouraged to share their thoughts about the lives of young migrant workers. Below is a selection from these interviews. All names are pseudonyms.

***(1) Parents and siblings***

Ling was a neat office lady who held an undergraduate degree in accounting. She had an older sister and a younger brother both of whom work in Shenzhen. She mainly shared with me her close relationship with her younger brother:

(Ling): *"We are all busy working, and we don't call each other often. My younger brother has a son. He is only twenty-three years old. Now my parents at hometown are taking care of his son, and I send money back to them every month. I know they spend some of the money on my nephew, so I feel I'm taking care of my nephew as well. My brother is a well-behaved man, but I know he and his wife spend everything they earn here. Some times they borrow money from me."*

***(2) Employers***

In their workplace (mainly the factories), young migrant workers are considered as an important element of the production process—the

managers need their physical labour to finish the procedures that cannot be completed by machines. I interviewed Qin, a middle-aged vice-president who has worked for ten years for an electric manufacturing factory that employs around 1,000 workers (most of whom are young migrant workers). He recounted the dramatic change among factory workers within those ten years, "*The older generation of workers were quite obedient, they seldom complained about the work. But now the new generation came and worked for few days then they left.*" He shared the dilemma posed for factory management, "*We need them to work hard, but we cannot neglect their requests for taking breaks, having entertainment after work. So we offer two fifteen-minute breaks for them every day, and we have an internet bar inside our factory. Still many of them left after a short time, and we really need them stay longer.* "

***(3) Social workers***

Neither the local enterprises and government nor the social work service centres offered much career support for young migrant workers. To offer a specific job-skill training course (e.g. management or computer skills) is considered costly and time-consuming for the social workers. Bing, a social worker in CD town, shared with me the difficulties of running career training courses for young migrant workers:

(Bing): "*They (young migrant workers) show great interest in the job-skill training courses we have here (in the community centre), but we could only run some basic-level courses such as WORD and EXCEL, interpersonal communication skills and beginner's level of English conversation, because we are not specialists and few people are willing to volunteer to offer such courses constantly. Also, it's costly to run the courses, and we can't afford to do it.*"

(Me): "*Do you think there's a way out?*"

(Bing): "*The government should take responsibility. The size of the population is so large, so they (government) may not be able to provide such financial support for us to run the job training programs. There is also need to deal with our educational system. They (young migrant workers) come from middle school or vocational school, but they always complained to us that they didn't learn enough professional skills there. As a result, they have limited job options.*"

## 4.2 Alongside Young Migrant Workers: From Initiating to Interacting

From the above observation of structural context of the lives of young migrant workers, I also want to elaborate the interactional context—the dynamic interaction between the young migrant workers and myself both

before and during the narrative interviews—to support the construction of narratives. In the field, I began approaching young migrant workers as an "outsider". To "enter" into their "world", I became a beginner-level "learner" who showed them respect, companionship, appreciation and support. In the meantime, I recognized that my position as a researcher might, albeit unintentionally, be oppressive. Therefore, I was sensitive to avoid any inappropriate language (e.g. to call them *migrant workers*) and behaviour (e.g. to interrogate them). Similar to the approach a commonly used in qualitative research, which emphasizes trust, equality, in-depth contacts, and friendship with the informants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), my relationship alongside with young migrant workers went from "initiating" to "interacting", details are as follows:

### *4.2.1 Initiating*

#### *(1) Gaining familiarity with young migrant workers with my sincerity and persistence*

My sincerity and persistence seemed to give me credit to gain familiarity with young migrant workers. At the outset, I tried to get to know them by initiating casual conversation (*Dashan*, 搭訕) by mentioning how different food tasted or the dress they wore. It was not easy to start up conversations with young migrant workers whom I did not already know or who had not been introduced via a friend, since they seemed suspicious of

me. However, after the ice had been broken, the young people started to recognize me as a friendly person, most young migrant workers I knew became talkative and easy-going—partly because they may not have many chances to chat with strangers in the community in which they lived.

In the meanwhile, to decrease their distrust of me, I wore similar clothes to the ones they wore (T-shirt, wind jacket, jeans) and introduced myself as a university student who was undertaking an independent research project. Most importantly, I tried to remember their full name and their preferred nick-name, since they may feel disrespected if I did not called them by their correct name. In addition, I tried to avoid using "migrant worker" in our interaction since I did not want them to feel discriminated against. Instead, I would use "*gongyou*" (workmate, 工友) and "*dagong*" (work for the boss, 打工) to learn about their basic work situations. Overall, I tried to ensure my sincerity in terms of my appearance, my use of language and behaviour when I approached young migrant workers.

***(2) Building up friendship***

Once they recognized me as a sincere and persistent young man, I began to build up friendships with some of the young migrant workers by joining their daily and weekly activities as a "playmate" (*wanban*, 玩伴). In CD town, I spent time with a group of young migrant workers playing in a public playground (e.g., dancing, playing volleyball, badminton and

basketball) almost every week, next to where we lived. I learnt how to dance from them, and I taught them how to play volleyball. When playing together with them, I put my research agenda aside. Surprisingly, I learnt a lot of new things from them (e.g. sign language dance, pop songs of *dagong*) and developed a better understanding of their leisure activities. I was impressed by their creative and youthful mind. They seemed to enjoy interacting with others (e.g. making jokes, sharing stories) while playing together. They also offered each other free services (e.g. cutting hair, assisting with makeup).

Building up friendship was also a process of generating mutual respect. I asked them the names by which they preferred me to call them. I tried to avoid making them felt that they were being used by me—they were not research objects or tools, but were human beings deserving of respect, care and concern. Consequently, I provided them support as much as possible, whenever they were in a depressed mood or in need of help. Being their playmate, I felt respected by them as well, because they called me by my name, smiled at me and thanked me for any help I gave them. Of course, they never asked to borrow money from me. In addition, in response to their request for learning English, I offered a free weekly English class in the local community.

### *4.2.2 Interacting*

Through the above "initiating" process, I identified some young people who, I believed, had rich life experiences to share. Once we got familiar, I recruited the research participants sequentially for the narrative interviews through the process of collecting, comparing and analysing their individual narratives. I provided them sufficient information about my study. They expressed a common concern of whether they were qualified for the interviews. Then I encourage them by saying "*everyone is special, I appreciate what you have been gone through in your life, and I really want to listen to what you feel in your heart*." Eventually, nine of them accepted my invitation of narrating their stories of life and *dagong*. Consequently, we moved from "initiating" to "interacting", right after they opened the "mystery box" of their life experiences:

***(1) Respecting their freedom of choice.***

I found that respecting their freedom of choice helped balance the power of our interaction. If I made use of the help from the authorities (e.g. the government, or their employers) to conduct the narrative interviews, the young people might feel oppressed and then refuse to participate. Therefore, I decided to bring up the invitation naturally, in our daily interaction. Only two of them declined to participate because they told me that they did not have so much to share; however, they each introduced me to their friends

who agreed to be interviewed. I felt happy because they followed their own feelings without the pressure of doing me a favour.

***(2) Creating a comfort zone***

Our positive interaction continued and became more intensive when the narrative interviews started. Treating them with respect, I enabled them to learn about the study (mainly the purposes and procedures) by inviting them to ask me any questions. In addition, the research participants were given the choice of where we could meet for the purposes of the interview. All of them either picked their favourite food stores or small parks near their workplace during work break.

When collaborating with the participants in the study, I began with smiling, in order to make them feel relaxed. Then I introduced the study to them:

> *"We are here together today for a study of my individual research project, and I mainly want to understand the life experience of the rural young people just like you who are working in Shenzhen. This study will not bring any harm to you, so please keep relaxed. I want you to share with me some of your life stories, starting from the past till now. During your sharing, I may ask some questions to better understand what you mean. After our conversation, I may invite you for another*

*round of interview. The interview will be recorded. I will also write down your narrative and double check with you later."*

To better create a comfort zone for them, I was mindful of my sitting position and the pace of talking. I avoided sitting directly opposite them so that they could have more space to stretch and to avoid direct eye contact with me during the interview of they wished. Also, I kept around a one-person distance from them to avoid direct body contact and to give them personal space so that they would not feel uncomfortable. Particularity with the female participants, I remained aware of their sensitivity of talking with a male—kept a good distance and avoided starring at their eyes or body. In addition, I tried to talk slowly to show them that I was not pushing them or that I was in a rush to complete the interview.

***(3) Handling self-deprecation of the participants***

After my orientation, two of the participants spoke disparagingly about the status of their employment. Fung, a security guard in an industrial park, who was married and a father of two children, began with a "confession" (quoted directly): "*Being a security guard is a job that is looked down upon by many people, and it provides no hope for your future career*". I was shocked by his straightforwardness and sincerity. I felt his lack of confidence and denigration of his job. Immediately, I responded with the intention of comforting him: *"How come? It is not all about others who may*

*look down upon you, but at least you don't need to look down upon yourself*". He seemed to agree, then I continued: *"In fact, you are a man with good responsibility, you can try to get promoted as a clerk of safety who takes charge of the safety of fire-protection and production."* Then he responded, *"It (the job) seems to carry lots of responsibility, and (I am) afraid that I cannot manage it."* At that moment, he seemed to be comforted by the potential career path that I pointed out to him.

The experience of handling Fung's self-deprecation helped me start another narrative interview smoothly with a participant called Nana, a young single lady who worked as an assembly-line worker. She showed me her lack of confidence when recalling her memories. She felt that she was not important to others here, in Shenzhen. Then I responded by helping her shift the focus to her contribution to her family, I said: *"(I) don't think you are not appreciated, instead, I admire your responsibility for helping out your family (沒有看輕你，反而肯定你為家的承擔)."* Nana showed me that she was comfortable to continue sharing her narratives.

## 4.3 Capturing the Life Experiences of Young Migrant Workers

In a holistic process of collaboration with the participants, capturing their life experience became a natural step that emerged from the preceding

steps of initiating and interacting. My interaction with the research participants went deeper after they started the narration. I felt that our relationship transferred from one of mutual respect and mutual trust to one characterized by increased emotional and moral involvement—by identifying connections in our lives. Furthermore, the process was characterized as "relevance", "response", "recognition", "reflexivity" and "revisiting":

### *4.3.1 "Relevance": linking with the common life experiences*

***(1) Sharing common experiences of growing up***

With my personal experience and increased familiarity of their living environment, I was not a passive listener in their narration. Instead, between the breaks in our interviews, I shared similar experiences of growing up with them. Growing up in a rural village in South China, two hundred miles from Shenzhen, I seldom recalled my memories of childhood so intensively. However, I did it with the participants. One of our most common experiences of growing up was the rewards and punishment given by our parents: for instance, when the participants, Cici and Nana, told me that they were punished by their parents for spending money for buying candy or having their hair cut, I recalled and shared my experience of being admonished for buying a toy gun during the Chinese New Year. My mother told me that a child should not spend their pocket money without obtaining

permission from their parents. The feeling was almost similar—we did not know what was wrong at that time, but after we have grown up, we felt thankful to our parents for such life education. By connecting with sharing similar experiences, we became an interactive pairing of “narrator” and “audience”.

***(2) Pairing up with a similar personality***

To create mutual emotional support, I also shared similar personality characteristics with my research participants. For instance, in her recollection of her early arrival in Shunde (順德, another industrial city in South China near Shenzhen), Nana told me that she had an introverted personality during her childhood but became more outgoing and open-minded after she attended middle school and then went to work. She looked happy and she felt proud of the changes in her personality, although I still sensed her lack of confidence while she recounted to me her “disadvantaged” personality. I responded to her immediately by sharing that, similar to her, I had an introverted personality during my childhood and had become an extrovert after attending university. Nana seemed to be inspired by our shared personality connection. She became more comfortable in sharing with me her life experiences.

***(3) Understanding their childhood dreams***

The participants also shared with me their childhood dreams, which opened another avenue for making connections. For instance, Cici said she had to do a lot of housework while she was little. When she paid for the first haircut in her life, she dreamed of becoming a hair dresser who was stylish and could help others become fashionable. However, she did not share the dream with her parents because of the negative labelling associated with working in a saloon (many small saloons in China are suspected of providing a front for the provision of sexual services). I appreciated that she could have such a dream. I tried to see things from her perspective—working as a hair dresser could create beauty and bring happiness to others. It was also a professional job. Therefore, I told her that I thought her dream was a good one. Cici seemed very happy following my approval of her childhood aspirations. After learning of the different childhood dreams of other participants (e.g. of becoming a shop owner, and becoming a teacher), I began to believe that people can have different dreams no matter where or who they are. Every dream of young migrant workers should be taken seriously in terms of the rationale behind it and their plan for achieving it.

***(4) Admitting to similar feelings of confusion***

Beyond linking to my research participants through sharing childhood experiences, dreams and personality characteristics, I also confessed my confusions about life. I shared that I experienced ups and downs as a "traveller", without pretending to be an excellent person full of confidence. Most of the participants shared with me their feelings of confusion particularly when they needed to make "tough" choices. For instance, whether to stay or leave Shenzhen while having the responsibility of caring for their children, and how to take care of their aging parents. I told them that I had similar feelings of uncertainties and neither would I know which steps to take when faced with difficult choices. In addition, we shared similar uncertainties about the changing society in which we lived. "*Our society is changing so quickly. The only thing you may able to take control of is your mind and spirit*", I shared with Jun, a participant who lost both his parents, and who encountered the financial burden of building a house in his home town and bringing his son and wife to Shenzhen. Sharing similar worries and anxieties, Jun and I later developed a more intensive communication about future family plans.

### *4.3.2 "Response": reacting to the participants' reflection*

Sharing commonalities with my research participants was our special communication based on our shared experience of life. Besides, the instant

reflection of the participants brought us closer. In the interviews, I tried not to introduce additional questions on their reflections (e.g. verbal or facial reflections), because I did not want to disrupt the flow of their narration by telling me why they think in that way. Honestly, I did not know how to respond to their reflection, but I kept encouraging them to share with me their thoughts about life. Therefore, I can take full accounts of their reflections in the later analysis. Here is the common reflections of the participants that helped me capture their life experiences:

***(1) Transitions from "innocence" to "maturity"***

All participants reflected that they were inexperienced and naive when they were adolescents coming from a rural village. For example, what Jun said to me, "*(I) was too young when (I) first arrived Shenzhen. (I) felt myself so naive*"; Ah Wei shared with me her reflection of being inexperienced, "*I was so young that (I) believed them (two men who deceived her for money) easily*". Fung also told me, "*(I) was so young then (when he first arrived in Shenzhen). I did not know what is going on*". Then they gradually realized that they "have experienced" various life events and situations in Shenzhen (*jingliguo, 經歷過*). And they made the transition from innocence to maturity. For instance, Jun told me, "*Having experienced many (life) events, now I can solve any problem in a more mature way"*; Sao Miu shared with me his reflection of becoming mature, " *Having experienced the worst*

*situations, now I prefer to depend on myself to do everything here, 經歷過最糟糕的情況，現在我更覺得在這裡做什麼事情都要靠自己*)." I could tell from their reflection that, with the sense of independence, they were capable of surviving in Shenzhen.

***(2) Transition from "being cared for" to "providing care to" others***

Most of the participants expressed common reflections of changes affecting their family life. Lam, who has a son and a daughter, shared with me his reflection of being a father for the first time, "*I suddenly felt more responsible to the family when I first held my new born son in my hands*"; Fung also shared with me his reflection when narrating the death of his beloved grandmother, "*afterwards (after recovering from his sadness), I thought from birth to death is just natural for us human beings*". Both Lam and Fung expressed a strong sense of the transition from "being cared for" to "providing care for" their family members, triggered by the birth of a baby or experiencing grief and loss.

### *4.3.3 "Recognition": expressing the ideas of social work*

With the purpose of exploring the implications for social work practice with young migrant workers, I also included discussion of social work mostly at the end of the interviews. Helping the research participants recognize that social work was a process of construction—we exchanged thoughts and ideas of how social work could relate to our lives. My duty

was not to “educate” them about social work practice. Instead, I respected them as the experts regarding their own lives to tell me what they preferred or imagined social work should do.

Usually, at the end of our first interview, I provided the participants with some information about social work and invited their ideas about social work. While two participants occasionally took part in social work programs or services, none of the others ever did. One good interaction took place between me and Nana at the beginning of our interview. Nana asked me what social work was. Then I told her that social work was to offer help those in need and to give advice to government. It was my simple illustration of the nature of social work—promoting social justice and protecting human rights. She responded, “*it sounds like charity, it must be a work filled with love*”. Nana’s recognition of social work showed me that she had a construction of social work—it helps people and does not make a profit. I did not contradict her impression of social work; instead, I shared my thoughts based on her comment, “*yes, social work is to further educate general public regarding social morality, and to promote the positive attitude of living.*” I decided not to use academic jargon since this might confuse Nana. She nodded her head to indicate understanding of what I said about social work.

However, I found that not all of the participants showed their information of social work services. When I introduced it to Fung and Jun, they thought that the social worker was an official who was interested only in undertaking research into the experiences and struggles of poor people, since they did not have any previous knowledge of or experience of social work services. I agreed with them. Rather, I valued their opinion. It helped me reflect that different people could have different perceptions and experiences of social work practice. Some did not recognize social work partly because they never previously participated in a good social work program, service or campaign.

After exchanging ideas about social work, the research participants further provided me feedback of what they hoped social work could do for them:

***(1) Positive feedback***

Being unemployed and living with her fiancé who runs a small jewellery fabrication store, Cici told me that social work should create a well-accepted definition among the general public to promote the services. Working as a junior secretary, Ah Wei wanted to get a college degree. She told me that social work should advocate for fifty per cent tuition support for those who want to attend a part-time bachelor-degree course. Unhappy in his work as a security guard, Jun suggested that social work should

provide support for those who want to run a small business. It should also provide job training and assistance with job searching. Having two children who were living at his home in the rural area, Lam hoped the social work could provide support for the education of children in the rural area, particularly to provide grandparents with information about child care and children's health. Furthermore, he recommended that social work should provide more support to the widows, the elderly and low-income families in rural China. Nana thought that social work should provide young migrant workers with informal support instead of organizing occasional entertainment events. She suggested that social work should provide places for young migrant workers to meet for leisure and mutual support activities (e.g. other migrants from the same rural area, friends through work).

***(2) Negative feedback***

At the same time, the participants provided some negative feedback on social work practice. Cici's husband, who runs a small business in Shenzhen, told me that implementation of state laws and central policies at the local administrative level was quite poor. He complained that local officials did not adhere to central standard requirements and instead, applied their own policies and rules—which made him feel insecure about conducting business in Shenzhen; he did not know when and what needed to be changed as required by the local officials. Therefore, he thought that social

work cannot help him to solve these problems. At that moment, I told him that I would pay attention to his worries and try to inform social workers to follow-up his concerns.

### *4.3.4 "Reflexivity": making use of mutual impression*

At the end of the interviews, three participants shared their impression of me: Lam told me that he felt I had provided emotional support (originally quoted in Chinese: "你讓我感覺到窩心"). Cici told me that she appreciated my positive attitude of contributing to society. Sao Miu told me that he felt happy after talking with me. I took all these comments with appreciation. More importantly, it helped me build up an idea of what they perceived as a good social worker or a researcher—a person with compassion for people and society; a friend displaying care and patience to listen to their feelings and struggles.

To better capture their life experiences, I also wrote reflective journals immediately after each interview. I considered doing this as an opportunity to rethink my construction of their experiences and social reality. One initial reflection came from my impression of their personalities: simple and sincere (樸實坦誠的); optimistic and mature (樂觀成熟的); independent and filial (獨立孝順的); capable of surviving hardship (能吃苦的) and content with what they have (知足的). Furthermore, I found that they all came from poor rural families. Their parents had to make a decision to

concentrate financial support for more education on one child only. Obviously, my participants were not the one chosen by their parents. However, they did not complain about their parents' decision, but kept providing support to the sibling who had continued schooling. They showed me a strong desire to get more education themselves, but they needed to earn money to support their family. Even facing the unfortunate side of life, they did not give up, but they kept going. Therefore, the image of young migrant workers as uneducated who contribute nothings but bring trouble—as presented by some social media—was misleading. I felt the construction of the narratives served as a way of rewriting what they really were, why and how they made their life decisions.

#### *4.3.5 "Revisiting": learning more from others*

To enrich the interpretation of these narratives though means of additional perspectives, I also revisited the life of young migrant workers by discussion with my critical peers (my colleagues who also conducted their postgraduate research on migrant workers in China) and the social workers in CD town. During the discussion, I ensured that I maintained the privacy and confidentiality of my participants.

To conceal the name and other background information of the participants, I discussed the key themes of their narratives with some social workers in CD town. For instance, Ben, a social worker in ABC social work

centre, told me that Ah Wei's (he did not know the real name of Ah Wei) case was not common in the rural areas, since her mother was so dependent on Ah Wei and her brother to make major family decisions. He described her as "a person with rich life stories" (有故事的人). He was very interested to learn the participants' reflections on "going home with pride" (風風光光的回家). He also shared his interpretation about filial piety, "*they (the participants) will try their best not to let their parents lose face in the village*". Ben's reflection provided me a good alternative viewpoint, which helped me revisit the narratives of the participants from the perspective of a frontline social worker in Shenzhen.

Besides, I also invited my peers to discuss the social issues (e.g. family connections, urban living) experienced by young migrant workers. We discussed these from a multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary perspective—my peers focused on class, production and reproduction, identities and the return of female migrants to their rural homes, which inspired me to think about the complete picture of the lives of young migrant workers. I also presented my initial findings to them during our group discussion of thesis writing. Their constructive comments on the study helped me further enrich my interpretation and construction of the narratives with the participants.

## 4.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter elaborated the findings from a macro perspective of social structure to a micro perspective of dynamic interaction with the young migrant workers who participated in the narrative interviews. Their life circumstances are complicated—they have limited career opportunities and social support; others with whom they come into contact in the community and community stakeholders treat them differently; they faced barriers (difficulties in interacting with the locals) in living in the urban community. Besides the structural context, the interactional context of the narrative approach was also elicited in the chapter. This interaction highlighted the flexible application of common communication strategies (e.g. friendship, trust) and the establishment of rapport in terms of exchange of experiences and provision of emotional support. The above presentation of structural and interactional context of the narrative interviews provides the foundation for understanding the construction of their narratives discussed in the following two chapters—their meaning-making regarding family, health, work and life.

# Chapter Five

# Findings: Connection to Self and Family

## 5.1 "A Concentric Circle": Interpreting the Participants' Narratives

Regarding the above structural and interactional contexts of the narrative approach with young migrant workers in Shenzhen, I will begin to present the content (what they told me), form (how they told me) and omissions (significant things that they did not mention) (Riessman, 1994) of their narratives. In brief, each account of their life is meaningful in terms of the subjective details, individualized styles of presentation, specific interaction and involvement of emotions and reflection. Although they were snapshots taken at a particular point of time (the time of the narrative interviews), the narratives highlighted the dynamic life experiences of young migrant workers. In addition, the participants' individual narratives contain rich commonalities and diversities for the later narrative analysis.

The presentation of the narratives was a construction process (Riessman, 2007) of a comprehensive life picture of young migrant workers in Shenzhen. Using direct quotations (translated into English for the purpose of the thesis) and paraphrasing their original narratives, I also tried to

re-present the subjective life experiences of the participants. First, their individual experiences of past and present life were elicited; next, their ideas and hopes of their future life were interpreted as well. Four significant themes emerged from the narratives, in a concentric circle: a) the inner circle is "identity bonded with family"; b) the middle circle is "livelihood with health concerns"; c) the outer circle is "connection to urban/others mainly through work"; and d) "facing the future" as a fourth theme that links up all circles (refers to Figure Ⅰ).

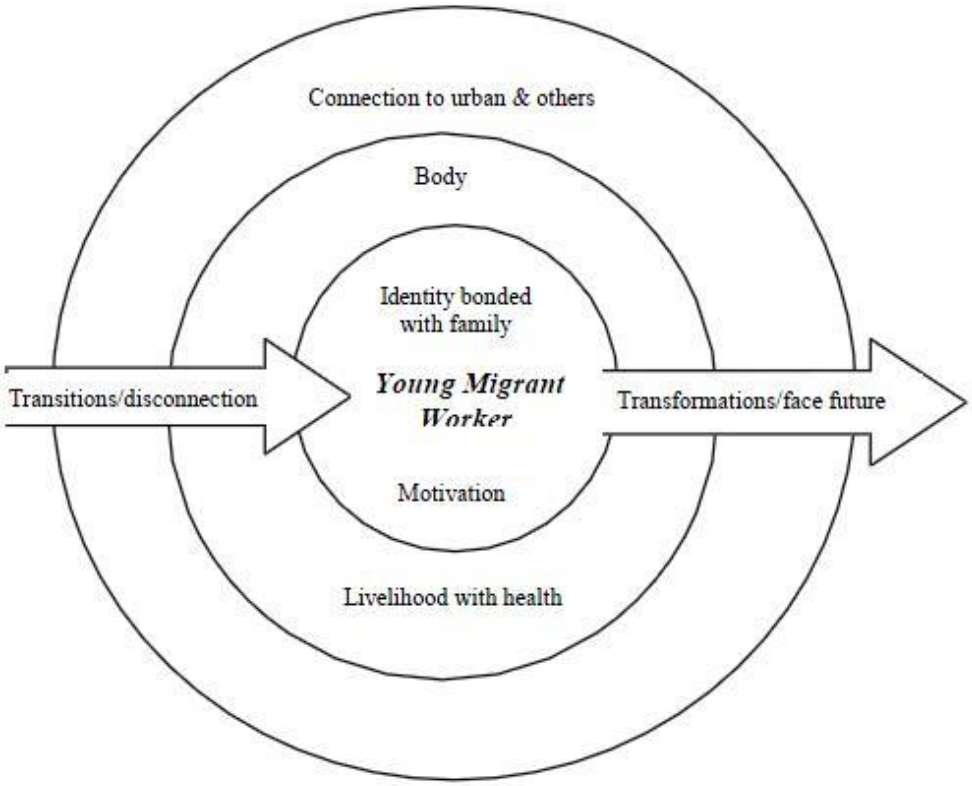


*Figure Ⅰ: A concentre cycle presented four themes of young migrant workers' narratives*

## 5.2 Identity Bonded with Family

### *5.2.1 Leaving the rural village as an adolescent: impacts of the family*

All the participants came from a poor family in rural China. To maintain a livelihood for the family, most of the participants' parents had to move to the cities to work and earn a living (*dao chengli dagong zhuanqian*, 到城裡打工賺錢), few stayed at home by doing farm work. None of the participants attended university because of indifferent academic performance and lack of money. After graduation from middle-school or vocational school, as adolescents, they left their rural villages and went to Shenzhen to work. A common motivation of their migration was simple and straightforward—to work somewhere near to where their parents, siblings, or other relatives lived.

***Cici***

Cici described that moving to work in the city was a happy process—without too much fear or hardship. She smiled when recalling her feeling of the early moment of resettling from the countryside to the city:

> (Cici): "*I was so young at that time. After finished middle school, I moved to Shenzhen and lived with my parents, who rent a house there. My sisters also worked in a place nearby. Only my youngest sister stayed in my home town with my grandparents. I didn't think too much*

*about how to find a job. My relatives introduced me to my first job in a small restaurant.*"

(Me): "*Not any fear or frustration at that time?*"

(Cici): "*No, I just felt that I was so ignorant of what happened around (meng dong, 懵懂), but I had my parents and sisters who lived near by.*"

By remembering the past, Cici told me that her family was so poor when she was a little child. In addition, because they had no son, her parents were looked down upon by other villagers. Her parents' migration to Shenzhen made her believe that by moving to work in the city she would be able to leave behind the unpleasant feelings that came with living in the village. *Dagong* seemed to be her only choice, since her family could not afford the tuition fees of the high school. Cici's youngest sister was lucky to go to high school and then study at university. Cici said, "*my little sister was very clever, so our parents decided to support her to continue her schooling*". Hidden by her smiley face, I could feel Cici's sadness at being unable to continue her schooling. Therefore, I decided not to raise any further questions about schooling, because I did not want to cause her any further hurt.

Other participants demonstrated a similar route of following in the footsteps of their parents (working as a migrant worker) in the beginning of

their life in the city. With the initial support from their parents, siblings and other relatives, some of them felt quite comfortable to work in Shenzhen:

(Lam)*:"Shenzhen is only four hours away from my hometown. My father worked here before, now he has returned home, but I am still living here. I like Shenzhen, because I can live not so far away from my children, my wife and my parents."*

### *5.2.2 Transcendence to adulthood: dynamics with the family*

Even with connection with their family in the countryside, urban life was not so easy and was full of challenges for the nine participants. Some of them experienced a strong feeling of "growing-up" (*zhangdale,* 長大了) at some crucial moments (*turanjian,* 突然間). They began to realize that they could not merely depend on their rural family to make a decision at times of trouble, and they needed to face the challenges of working and living. Furthermore, they decided not to let their parents know they were in trouble, because they did not want to make them worry.

***Ah Wei***

To the participants, transcending to adulthood started with a common experience learnt from being deceived in Shenzhen. I would like to use Ah Wei's story to illustrate this dynamic process of transformation. While recounting her experience of moving to the city from the countryside, Ah

Wei referred in great detail to being deceived when she first began working in Shenzhen:

(Ah Wei): *"The most memorable thing to me so far is the experience of being deceived. I was very young then, in the third year of middle school, around the age of fifteen."*

Then Ah Wei made a joke of saying "*I was so lucky not to have been kidnapped by them (the two men who deceived her), If that had happened, I would not be able to talk with you here and now*. *Haha* (laughing)". I nodded my head and smiled to show my agreement. But I observed that she crossed her fingers tightly. It showed that she might still have a sense of fear. Then she continued by recalling the details of her story:

(Ah Wei): *"It happened in the summer right after I finished middle school. I really wanted to continue in school, because my family was poor, and my parents told me 'we would support you to go to school, but we don't have money'. So I came out to Shenzhen to work as a summer intern in a factory for the second time in my life. I worked in the modelling line, it required me to work thirty days a month non-stop, with overtime at night as well. After two months, the power supply of the factory suddenly stopped for two consecutive days. I had earned 2,000 yuan by then, that's enough for my tuition to attend the junior vocational training school (職業中專). So I decided to leave the job,*

*and home and get ready for school. I transferred 1,500 yuan back home. I packed my luggage and set out for the bus terminal alone. On my way, two middle-aged men approached me and asked me where I was going. I told them the name of my home town, then they said they were from there as well, and they could take me to the bus. I was so naive, and I believed them without any hesitation."*

She paused here for a while. Then she informed me that she still cannot figure out why she believed them, then she continued:

*"Then they told me the bus terminal was in another place, and then they took my luggage. We travelled on a bus for fifteen minutes. Then we arrived at a place looked like a public library. Then they told me that 'you need to go through a checkpoint and you are not allowed to carry your luggage, cell phone and bank card'. They also told me that I needed to tell them the password of my bank card in order to go through the checkpoint. I believed everything they said, and I told them the password of my bank card. They asked me to stay there and they would return shortly. Then they left with my luggage, debit card and my cash (20 yuan). After about three minutes, I started to suspect, and I tried to find them but failed. I felt worried, then I called the police. At that moment, I only had two yuan left in my inner pocket."*

After another short pause, Ah Wei told me that she was taken to a police station, and she called her relatives to pick her up. They spent a long time trying to find the police station, and then brought her to her friend's place in Shenzhen. She did not return home directly, instead, she stayed in her cousin's house for a few days because she was too worried to let her mother know she lost all her money.

I kept listening to her dramatic story full of interest—Ah Wei told me that a few days later she was so surprised and happy to find out that no money had been withdrawn using her debit card. She told me that after this experience, she became more wary when she met strangers, although she was not afraid to stay in the city alone anymore. My immediate reflection on this was that, growing up in the countryside, young people were taught to be honest. When they came to the city, they were deceived by "familiar strangers"—people who claimed to be a fellow villager. But they quickly learnt from their experience, and became aware of the people and things that were happening around them. They became more adept in protecting themselves.

***Yu***

Similar to Ah Wei, Yu shared with me his strong feelings of being an adult at two crucial moments in his life: the first occurred during the second year of working in Shenzhen, when he returned to meet his mother who

worked washing dishes in a restaurant chain in Hong Kong, during the Chinese New Year. He noticed for the first time his mother's hair beginning to turn white. At that specific moment, he was shocked. He realized that the long hours of overtime were tiring her out. The other crucial moment occurred on the wedding day of his twin brother. Yu still remembered clearly his strong emotional feeling while witnessing his brother and his parents greeting the wedding guests in front of the stage (*jingjiu*, 敬酒, an important ritual by the host family to show their appreciation to the wedding guests). Yu said, "*they (his brother and his parents) were really happy, but I was unhappy*". Therefore, he decided to stay alone at the table, without joining his brother and parents to greet the guests. He felt a sudden emptiness, but he was unable to describe his exact feelings. He kept silent during the whole evening. The next morning, he woke up and realized that he should not be "wandering in life" (*wusuo shishi*, 無所事事, having no particular goals in life) anymore. Then he said, "*something needed to be changed*", because he wanted to prove his capability for surviving in society just like his brother.

### *5.2.3 Being alone in Shenzhen: separation from family members*

All the participants, except Cici, were living alone without their parents, children or siblings. Some of their parents had returned to their home town to run a small business or undertake agricultural work; while some had

never left their home town in the countryside. None of the participants had a permanent place to live in Shenzhen. Instead, they lived in the dormitory provided by their workplace, or rented a small room from local landlords. Lam, Fung and Jun who were married and whose wives and children lived in their home towns in the countryside all expressed their emotional suffering of separation. The other six participants who were still single, showed great concern for their parents—by worrying about them being lonely.

***Lam***

When we discussed Lam's current life in Shenzhen, I asked him about his relationship with his wife and children. When he heard the word "children", his eyes suddenly turned brighter. Then he shared with me his feelings about being separated from them:

(Lam):*"My wife is taking care of the kids now, they all stay in Chaoyang with my parents. She brought them to stay with me for a time each year. Because I don't have a permanent place to live, they stayed a short while each time. I feel so lonely when I'm away from my children and my wife. I really want them to come and stay with me. No matter how expensive it is."*

Lam also told me of his plan to rent a bigger place after earning more money, and to live with his wife and children, in CD town. But he

complained of the higher cost of kindergarten in Shenzhen, "*I once calculated the cost of sending my son to a local kindergarten. The tuition costs 3,000 yuan each year. Counting the monthly fees for lunch, and extra spending on buying other items (uniform and study equipment) for class and school activities, it was almost 7,000 yuan each year, it's too much for me now. And it's much cheaper in my home town. But, I still want my son to attend the kindergarten here, because I want him around, and he can learn more here."*

***Ah Ming***

Suffering from separation from their children, parents, wives and siblings, the participants wanted them to live nearer to them. Those who were single show similar feelings of wanting to be near their parents and wanted to stay longer with their parents each time they reunited. Although he enjoyed living in Shenzhen and being independent, Ah Ming shared with me his worries about his parents who were home alone:

(Ah Ming): "*I returned home only three to four times a year, for the traditional events. Each time, I stayed for a short time. My parents started to build a new house recently, because they have worked as construction workers for many years. They decided to build it all by themselves. I really wanted to stay with them longer. And I told my father to hire one or more people to work with them, so that they can*

*avoid being too lonely while doing the construction work. Usually, they worked together but did not talk to each other all day. My father rejected my suggestion, because he wanted to save the money."*

Then he lighted up a cigarette, and hand me one, I thanked him and told him that I did not smoke. Then he inhaled deeply, calmed down a little bit and continued to say:

*"I am worried about them being too lonely. But I can't go back home to stay with them because I have my job here. The most important thing for me now is to earn more money for them to build the house in the village.*"

### *5.2.4 Family as "home": taste, comfort and connection*

As shown above, the participants shared some common life experiences in their transition from rural to urban living: coming to Shenzhen as adolescents, becoming independent and maturing, and living away from their family. Many of their parents who had also migrated to the city had returned to live in their home town. As city-dwellers, all the participants seemed to have some form of homesickness. They tried to seek a measure of emotional comfort from their rural home town. They used "home" (家) frequently in our conversations. "Home" seemed to provide them with mental healing for homesickness and unhappy experiences in the

city—they looked happy while talking about the taste of food at home, the happy memories of childhood, and the people at home they were missing:

***(1) Familiar taste of the food***

The home provinces of the participants are Guangdong (廣東), Guangxi (廣西), Hunan (湖南), Hubei (湖北) and Henan (河南). They had become used to the taste of food in Shenzhen—light and sweet. For instance, Ah Ming, connected the taste of food with events and seasons in his home town, *"The taste of fish is so fresh there (his hometown), we usually net the fish in the river, especially during the Chinese New Year, while most of the people return for a rest. Litchi fruit is also very famous. During June, right after the Dragon Boat Festival, there are plenty of litchi fruit around the mountains of my village. I would welcome you to my home town."* Ah Ming was proud of the local food of his hometown. With a verbal and facial presentation of confidence, he invited me to visit his home town for food. At that moment, a short discussion of food provided a closer link between us for the further narrative interview.

***(2) Happy memories of childhood***

All participants informed me that they enjoyed the time of their childhood. Even though most of their families were very poor at that time, they still felt happy playing with other children, going to school without a heavy burden of homework, and surrounded by familiar people. Their

childhoods were in the 1980s, when villages in rural China experienced a rapid change characterized by peasants (the parental generation of the participants) migrating to the cities for temporary labour-intensive jobs. They returned to their rural homes for seasonal agricultural work.

At the beginning of our interview, Sao Miu told me that his childhood was very relaxed and happy, even though his family was poor. He explained more to me, "*The interpersonal relationships, at the time of my childhood, were quite simple and supportive, I stayed with my neighbours, played with my little friends, and ate their food. We were almost in the same economic conditions. Unlike today, people in my village now like to compare money and things they have. Rumours and slanders are everywhere, I don't like to stay there anymore.*" It seemed that Sao Miu missed the good old days of his childhood, and he missed his home town of the past—he enjoyed a supportive community. To him, the change of his home town was mixed with the emotional comfort of "home"—a memory of the past.

***(3) Being together with family members***

By recalling the taste of food and memories of childhood, all the participants expressed a very interesting common idea of a family—it may no longer be a physical house with a roof in a particular geographical area, but it is an emotional shelter when they feel the warmth of family members being together (*zaiyiqi*, 在一起). Just as Cici recalled, *"my home is no*

*longer a concrete building with four walls and a roof. What it means to me is that all family members 'zaiyiqi', even it only happens in some big holidays of the year."* She continued to reflect that being poor in the past strengthened the unity of her family members. She usually visited her other sisters in Shenzhen and Dongguan at weekends. She kept calling her parents by phone almost once a week.

Similar to Cici, all the participants had moved between rural and urban locations, from one industrial area to another, even from one city to another. However, most of them preferred to have a settled place to live in the city but could not afford to buy or even rent an apartment. Without prompting from me, Cici proceeded:

(Cici): *"The rent here (Shenzhen) climbs up each year, but my family income is not increasing accordingly. If have enough money, we (Cici and her husband) prefer to have two 'homes", one here, and the other in our home town (Hunan). My parents-in-law are now supporting us to build a house in our home town. I know we won't stay there (the new house) long, but my parents-in-law can live there. And our kids can stay there too. That's good. And we will eventually go back there when we get old."*

A physical family with a roof in the rural village became an emotional comfort for Cici—more than a secure place to live, but a place where the family members can be together.

### *5.2.5 Memories and impacts of the mother-figure*

Beyond their interpretation of the emotional elements (taste of food, memories of childhood, being together with other family members) of the family, many participants showed me that they were thankful to their mothers or grandmothers. They considered them as a key caregiver in their childhood. When mentioning their mother-figure (mother or grandmother), many participants used the description—"a typical rural woman" (*yige dianxingde nongcun funv*, 一個典型的農村婦女). They explained the concept with the appreciation of "*qinkuai*" (勤快, hardworking) and "*hengtengwo*" (很疼我, having much affection for me) of their mothers or grandmothers. Moreover, the mother-figure person seemed to have a great influence in their journeys in later life:

***Lam***

By responding to my question "*could you tell me what is the most memorable thing in your childhood in your rural home town?*", Lam smiled a little bit, without a pause, he shared with me a story of his childhood that he remembered most. He started by introducing me to his mother:

(Lam): *"My mom is the most important person in my life till now. She is a 'typical' rural woman. She only graduated from elementary school, but she knows how to handle various jobs. She kept the house in order, took care of my younger brother and me. She took care of my grandmother as well."*

Without any interruption from me, Lam continued to tell me a story of the "shoes":

(Lam): *"It happened in my fourth year in elementary school. One day, I saw my little friend wearing a pair of shining sneakers, and I really wanted a pair too. So I went back home and told my mom that I wanted them. She told me that they cost 10 yuan, and we couldn't afford it. I cried and begged her to buy them for me. In the early morning of the next day, I saw she carried a knife and a basket, and then went out to pick the herbs, from mountain to mountain. I still remember that she did this for two whole days. Then she sold the herbs and bought me the shoes I wanted. At that moment, I realized that how selfish I was and how great she was. Then I started to study hard, because I didn't want to disappoint her."*

Lam's story of his "shoes" showed his emotional attachment to his mother. He realized money never came easily for his family at that time. In the meanwhile, he reflected on the event as a turning point in his

childhood—from “going to school for fun” to “going to school for study”. He seemed to transform the appreciation of his mother to a self-imposed obligation of not disappointing her.

***Fung***

The participants appreciate the love of their mother, and they also show love towards their grandmother. Fung shared with me a story of a “man in tears” in his narrative. Being a migrant worker and a young veteran (he came to Shenzhen at the age of fifteen, then joined the military at eighteen; after spending two years in army, he returned to Shenzhen to continue to “work for the bosses”). Fung said that he was tough but silent. Other people considered him as an “iron man” (*tiehan*, 鐵漢). He seldom shed tears. He cried only once when his grandmother passed away:

(Fung): *“My grandmother is a typical rural woman. When I was a little boy, I was told by my mom that my little sister was picked up in the street. But my grandmother loves me and my sister, and took care of us so well. She always gave us good things to eat. After I grew up, I went to Shenzhen for work, and I insisted on saying goodbye to my grandmother in person every time I left my village, to return to Shenzhen. A few years ago, she became very sick, so I asked for leave from my factory, took a night bus back home to stay alongside with her in bed. Eventually she passed away, and I stayed with her dead body*

*for mourning for a whole night in the ancestral temple (祠堂). I didn't shed a tear until the moment her body was taken away in the hearse. I was not allowed to sit in the funeral bus, because I was the oldest grandson in my family. After seeing the bus off, I remained alone in the temple, I began to cry crazily."*

Fung paused here for a while, and started to appear sad. I tried to console him. Fung continued to comment on the dramatic relationship between his grandmother and other family members. "*My mother had a bad relationship with my grandmother, they seldom talked to each other. My mother loves my youngest sister most, while my grandmother loved me most*." Fung did not explain this feeling further. And he then told me an anecdote about something that occurred between his grandmother, himself and his younger brother's wife: "*A few years ago, when she (Fung's grandmother) was still alive, she loved to distribute candies to the children in the village. But my younger brother's wife felt jealous. One time, she criticized my grandmother for giving other children more candy. I was in Shenzhen then. I felt very angry when I heard about it. At that moment, I really wanted to go back home and tell her (his younger brother's wife) off for such verbal offense towards my grandmother.*" Then Fung continued with his explanation, "*No matter if they are right or wrong, you should*

*never say anything to criticize the seniors at home, you need to respect them.*"

As shown by Lam and Fung's narratives, participants seemed to appreciate the love and care they received from their mothers and grandmothers. They remembered them as hardworking, kind-hearted, and caring for them. The influence of their mothers and grandmothers still impacted on their current life in Shenzhen—they learnt from them to be good, honest, considerate and respectful of others.

### *5.2.6 Interdependence with parents*

In their narratives, beyond their emotional attachment to their family home, the participants also showed some of their interactions with their family members, especially with their parents. On the one hand, they were becoming "independent"; they have refrained from asking their parents for money and in the event of any emergency, they would ask to borrow money from their siblings or good friends. When in trouble, most of them decided not to tell their parents to avoid them worrying. On the other hand, they had developed a mutually "dependent" relationship with their parents: they were emotionally attached to each other, even without much oral communication; some participants tried to anticipate how to enable their parents to have "face" and feel happy; some participants showed respect to their parents' opinions in decision-making.

***Ah Wei:***

Becoming independent, the participants still feared the loss (害怕失去) of their parents. Even if they do not see each other frequently, some participants hoped their parents were getting along well. For instance, Ah Wei experienced a conflict between her parents during her childhood, "*My father was once working in Dongguan as a construction worker. But he loved gambling. In my final year at elementary school, my father lost a lot of money by buying lottery tickets on the 'black market'. In order to avoid his debt, he ran away, and never back home again. So my mom had to take many jobs to raise my brother, sister and I. She raised us all by herself. I really hated my dad then*". Ah Wei's recall of her father running away and her emotional reaction all suggested that the event was lodged in her memory and continued to impact her values about the family.

Even though her father treated her and her mother so badly, Ah Wei told me that she still wanted her parents to stay together:

(Ah Wei):*"My mom and my father now are living together, they still quarrel frequently, and my dad is a quiet person, he keeps silent all the time. Even though he is a jerk, I don't want to see him leave my mom and the family, because I'm fearing losing him."*

When Ah Wei expressed her thoughts about her parents, she always mentioned her mother before her father, which may show that she resisted

the tradition of gender hierarchy of the superiority of men over women in rural China. In her mind, her mother was way more important than her father. She intentionally omitted memories and comments about her father when she recounted her experiences as she was growing up. However, she still wanted them to stay together. Her fear of loss showed me her desire for security and having an intact family.

Indeed, Ah Wei stayed in contact with her mother by phone every week. And she told me that her mother would always consult her older brother and herself for their opinions about the "big events" at home (家裡的大事). "*I'm getting along quite well with my mom. She will call me and my older brother when she needs to make some big family decisions. Such as decoration of the house, purchase a television."* To avoid hurting her, I tried not to bring up any discussion of her father. Instead, I smiled and asked her, "*So does your mom ask you to get married soon?*" Ah Wei smiled back to me, "*Haha (laughing), not at this moment.*" From her expression, Ah Wei's mother seemed to be quite dependent on her two children who work away from home, but not on her husband. Their discussion about family decisions kept them communicating with each other, even though they were separated by a long physical distance. They were still bonded together.

Similar to Ah Wei, other participants also expressed their experiences of having regular interactions with their parents, especially for exchanging

ideas about making crucial family decisions. They also relied on each other emotionally. However, when I asked whether they would say "*I love you*" to their parents, they all said they had never done it before.

(Nana): *"Even though I care for them (her parents) a lot. It's still hard to open my mouth and say 'I love you' to my parents, I feel embarrassed."*

(Lam):*"They (his parents) are taking care of my children at home now, even though we don't talk too much on the phone, I am so thankful to them."*

***Lam***

Another perspective that reflects the interdependency between respondents and their parents was the "negotiation" of mutual expectations. All the participants remembered that their parents seldom objected to their decisions (for instance, to decide where and how to work). Their parents mainly expected them to show endurance towards the hardships of urban life, and to have a good marriage and establish a good family. Lam's recall of his negotiation with his parents provides a good example. When we discussed his relationship with his parents, Lam told me firstly, "*Both of them want to see that I am happy in Shenzhen, they don't want me to do any heavy duty jobs, and hope I can stay safe here."* Then, Lam started to show me his inner struggles of following his own opinion and not disappointing

his parents, in his narration of his "conversation of getting married" with his parents:

(Lam): *"My younger brother got married two years ahead of me, and his wife is from Hunan. My parents didn't really like my brother's wife. They can't communicate well because my parents can't speak Putonghua. At that time, I was in a two-year relationship with my girlfriend, who is also from the other province. My parents strongly disapprove of our relationship. They wanted me to find a wife who spoke the same dialect and came from somewhere nearer. I struggled for a long while, I even became very angry and stopped talking with them for a while. But, later, I felt my parents were getting old, I didn't want to make them sad, so I finally broke up with her (his girlfriend) with so much pain. And a few years later, I met my wife, who came from a village nearby, and she's now living with my parents and they have a good relationship."*

As indicated, Lam could still recall his reaction to and inner struggle with his parent's disapproval of his first girlfriend. He finally ended his resistance on account of his parents getting older. He decided to break up with his girlfriend in order to please his parents. To be a good son, he may worry about being criticized by people he knows. Other participants also

showed a similar experience in their interaction with their parents in terms of marriage plans:

(Cici): *"I have known my husband since we were children. When we grew up, our parents connected us together with a marriage interview. Then we fell in love with each other. Both our parents were so happy to see us engaged."*

(Fung):*"My girlfriend had my baby, then I brought her back home to see my parents, they said she's good, then we got married."*

## 5.3 Livelihood with Health Concerns

Apart from family, health is another common theme that emerged from the narratives of the participants. Some of them experienced spending all their savings and borrowing money to get medical treatment because of receiving no reimbursement from the rural health care system. In the meanwhile, they complained about the health insurance provision and health care services in Shenzhen. Those who already have children or plan to have children tried their best to ensure that their children received timely and quality health care either in Shenzhen or in their rural home towns.

### *5.3.1 Frustrations about the health care in rural home towns*

One significant memory of the participants is the story of health care—either for their parents or themselves. Without health insurance or any

official support for health care, they were completely responsible for looking after themselves when they became ill. They complained about corruption in the village administration, which failed to distribute the centralized financial support to the villagers who were unable to afford the medicines or health care treatments. In the meanwhile, they realized that they could not rely on the government, but had to work hard to save money to pay for health care.

***Jun***

Jun is the only child of his family. He lost both of his parents in the past few years. Growing up in a low-income family, Jun realized the great efforts his parents made to provide for the family—they worked very hard to earn enough to eat and afford other necessities of life. During the first few years after he moved to Shenzhen for work he sent all his savings to pay for medicines and hospital treatment for his parents who both suffered with severe chronic diseases (his mother became ill first, then she passed way; after that, his father also became ill and then died). His parents did not receive any reimbursement from the committee in the village (村委會) for either medicines or hospital care.

(With his facial expression showing great disappointment, Jun started to tell me about his experience of his mother's sickness): *"My mom was suffered from diabetes. In our village, she was entitled to receive some*

*government assistance for the medicines. We claimed it from the committee in the village (村委會), but we never got it. We all suspected that the village cadres 'grabbed' the money and put it into their own pocket. We were so angry. We could do nothing but try to get enough money to pay for her treatment."*

Jun paused for a while to take a deep breathe. Even though I have not experienced death and dying among my own family members, I can understand Jun's sadness of losing his parents. Then I looked into his eyes and said to him in a quiet voice, "*are you okay*?". Jun looked at me, seemed calm, and then told me that his mother eventually passed away in 2003. At that time, Jun and his father spent all their savings from *dagong* to pay for the treatment of his mother. He then continued to recall:

(Jun): *"Then two years later (after his mother passed away), my dad was sick as well. At that time, I need to borrow money from my parents-in-law, my relatives and some good friends to get medical treatment for my father, but he passed away last year. And I have to repay my debts now."*

The illness of both of his parents seemed to be a dominant feature in Jun's memories of the past. Two years after his father passed away, Jun got married to a woman from his home town, and his parents-in-law treat him if

he was their own son. Now, Jun told me he keeps sending money back to his parents-in-law every month.

***Nana***

Nana also experienced the suffering of saving all she earned in the city to pay for an operation in hospital. At the very beginning of our interview, she brought up the story of her surgery by showing me the scar on her neck. She said that the problem with her neck began when she was a child. In the early years of her *dagong* life in Guangdong province, she even did not have enough money to buy medicine for pain relief.

(Nana): *"I was so sick when I was little, and I always had a pain in my neck. My parents told me that we (her family) were poor, and they didn't have enough money to buy good medicines for me. But I really want to get it healed. The good thing was, after a few years, I earned enough to afford an operation. After the surgery, my parents came to visit me in Guangdong. My mother put 200 yuan to my pocket and told me to buy some good food to eat. I was so thankful to them then. Now I'm feeling much better, you can see my scar. I found being healthy is the most important thing in my life so far."*

(I responded with nodding my head): *"Yes, I totally agree with you. Staying healthy is so important."*

Without any financial or medical assistance from her village or workplace, Nana managed to pay for the surgery using her savings from her hard work, and she realized the importance of her parents' support. She was so thankful to her parents, and considered the experience of getting healed as a turning-point in her life—she values health as the most important thing in her life.

### *5.3.2 Disappointment with the health care in Shenzhen*

In their interviews, participants also commented on their experiences of getting health care in Shenzhen. Most of the comments reflect their disappointment about the increasing costs of the registration fee and prescription medicines, the poor attitude of the medical personnel (both doctors and nurses), and having to wait for a diagnosis in the public hospital.

***Cici***

Like other participants, Cici did not enjoy her experience of the health care in Shenzhen. She seldom went to hospital, but she could still remember in some detail her emotional reactions each time when she went to the hospital in Shenzhen:

(Cici):*"I remember when I first arrived in Shenzhen, the registration fee of the hospital (public hospital) was two Yuan, now it's fifteen Yuan. It's up a lot. The doctors will always give you a bad face (choulian, 臭*

*臉) when they see you walk in and sit down. They make me feel that I owe them money."*

(Feeling her disappointment, I responded by putting myself into the same situation): "*But we have no choice when we get sick.*"

(Cici showed her agreement, then she continued to comment): *"The waiting line in the public hospital is always so long, with people shouting, little kids crying, it's quite annoying for me sometime."*

Besides showing her disappointment about the hospital, Cici also suffered from the increasing cost of medical treatment, even though she had medical insurance.

(Cici):*"Two years ago, I still worked in a chain restaurant. My boss told us that he bought us medical insurance. But I didn't figure out how it works. We still needed to pay for the medicines and treatment unless we got a severe illness. I remember, one time, I hurt my leg when falling down the stairs in the room I rent. So my good friend took me to the hospital. To our surprise, the hospital charged me eight-hundred Yuan for an X-ray test, and I found out that it wasn't covered by my medical insurance. Eight-hundred Yuan is what I earn in two weeks! There's just no way to get enough reimbursement from the medical insurance."*

From Cici's story, it seems that the cost of health care in Shenzhen is exorbitant for many young migrant workers. In addition, the medical insurance also could not cover most of the cost of medicines and treatments. Disappointment about the health care was a common experience among the participants. However, some of them still preferred health care in Shenzhen, probably because they thought that health services in their rural home town were even worse:

(Sao Miu): *"Anyway, the hospital here (in Shenzhen) is better, because it seems more professional with better doctors. If my parents have a severe illness, I will bring them here to get treated. Even if it will cost me way more."*

### *5.3.3 "My children's health is my primary concern"*

Narratives and comments on health care, both in rural areas and in the city, show participants' experience of frustrations and disappointment in the past and present. Furthermore, they are anxious about their children's health. Three fathers who took part in the study, Lam, Fung and Jun, all displayed serious concerns about the health of their children:

***Fung***

Living away from his children, Fung worried about whether they can get timely treatments when they have a fever, catch a heavy cold or have

occasional diarrhoea. When mentioning his children, he first recalled the night when his son fell ill with a fever in Shenzhen:

(Fung): *"One day, my son got a fever in a middle of a cold night. My wife and I were so nervous, we were so worried, and the hospital (a private one) here (in CD town) was closed. So we called a taxi to take him to the children's hospital in Luohu (羅湖, downtown area of Shenzhen) It's quite expensive for the trip. Even in the late night, I still remembered the waiting area in the hospital was so noisy, with many kids crying or shouting. Then the nurse did a temperature test with my son in the corridor. It took a long time before we eventually saw the doctor, but he just said a few words, and he said my son was okay."*

From Fung's description of the doctor's reaction, I could feel both his disappointment and the release of his anxiety. He repeated the emotional expression of being worried about his son—his recall of the loud noises and the long waiting time. It showed that Fung really cared about his son's health, even to get timely treatment he would spend a lot of money. Similar to Fung, after he became a father, Lam cared more about his children's health than himself:

(Lam): *"Now I understand my parents, what they really want to see is for their children to grow up healthy (孩子能健康成長). My children's health is my primary concern now."*

Without a Shenzhen *hukou* (深圳戶口), the participants needed to spend more money to get the same access to health care for their children as the local children. In addition, they were concerned about the quality of the food for their children. "*Let them (the children) eat the best (讓他們吃最好的)*", Jun said. He earned 2,000 yuan a month, separated from his wife and his children who lived in the home town. Jun told me that he would bring them to Shenzhen to live together in the near future.

Not having a baby yet, Cici worried about the health of the children in general in her rural home town. After sharing her unpleasant experience in the hospital in Shenzhen, she said, "*Grandparents love their grandchildren, but some tragedies have occurred in my home town, when some grandparents did not know how to deal with an emergency after their grandchildren were injured in an accident, and the children died. Maybe social workers can do something, say, to provide health care information about the children in the rural area, especially for the grandparents, whose adult children are working away all year long."*

## 5.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the findings of two primary themes from the narratives—family and health, which seemed to be the participants' main life concerns. Living in Shenzhen, they were still family-oriented, they

showed me their intimacy and interdependency with their family, including cognitive development from innocence in their early years to maturity as a grown-up, emotional attachment and family interaction. Health is also an important element of their life experiences, including their frustrations about obtaining benefits from the inefficient rural health care system, disappointment about health care in Shenzhen and primary concerns about their children's health. The next chapter focuses on two further significant themes (struggling for a decent job and striving for a better life) of their narratives.

# Chapter Six

# Findings: Connection to Urban and Future

While sharing their thoughts about connections with family and concerns with health, the research participants also mentioned their expectations and hopes in their narratives, which mainly included: (1) their struggles for a decent job and (2) their endeavours for a better life. In the interviews, they also elaborated on their reactions and coping strategies, including their use of resilience and resistance, keeping their dreams alive, trying to ensure that their parents live well, creating a better environment for their children and finding their own paths gradually (details will be presented in first two parts of the chapter). Being the same generation (post-80s in China, 中國的八零後) as my participants, I realized that I had similar worries, frustrations, expectations and hopes as the study participants. In the last part of the chapter, I will present my initial reflections of their personal qualities that emerged from their sharing of their life experiences.

## 6.1 Connection to Urban: Resilience and Resistance

Most of the participants did not highlight the specific circumstances of their work (e.g. the duties related to their job, relationships with their managers and other fellow workers). They seemed to integrate work into their life experience. Nana, Fung and Jun, who worked as factory workers and security guards, did not seem to be proud of being "bottom-rung cheap labour". Sao Miu and Cici, although they were currently unemployed, thought that they should look for a better job. Ah Ming, Ah Wei, Lam, Yu, whose working conditions seemed to be better than those of the other participants, wanted to get more opportunities for upward occupational mobility (e.g. to become a manager). Overall, all the participants, even though they had different job positions, showed me their common desire for a "decent job". It sounded to me that they were searching for more than just a material position, but an identity and an expectation of a job that could provide them with sense of dignity, higher salary and better career opportunities. However, in our interviews, their difficulties in searching for such kinds of decent job were evident: they were not well recognized at work; their jobs just required the simple execution of the specified work duties; their bosses normally ignored their complaints and requests for better pay. Further details of these concerns will be elaborated in the following narratives:

### *6.1.1 Desire for dignity*

The very first thing the participants told me about their work was their desire for dignity and respect. They felt unhappy at being looked down upon by others (e.g. their bosses, the local people) in Shenzhen. Meanwhile, they did not consider themselves as cheap labour. In our interviews, they rarely used "factory (工廠)" or "migrant worker (農民工)" to describe their workplace and social status. I felt that they were quite sensitive to protecting their "face". In response, I tried to show them my respect. I would try to avoid hurting them by my use of language; therefore, I used "*gongyou*" (fellow workers, 工友) instead of "migrant worker" and "*gongsi*" (company, 公司) instead of "factory" (工廠) in our conversations. Furthermore, I found that they would take actions to fight for their dignity:

***Fung***

Fighting for dignity was not just a thought but also an action. Fung's story of "being deceived by a job agent" displayed his anger and action against the job agent who looked down upon him. When I asked Fung, "*did you experience any frustration about working here*?", he then shared this story:

(Fung): *"I still remembered the year right after retired from the army. I came back to Shenzhen with my good friend, who also was an army veteran (一同退役的戰友), to look for a job. We found a job agent*

*here, they offered us a 'decent job' to work in the office. We trusted them at that time, and each of us paid the agent 400 yuan as the introduction fee. But eventually we found this 'decent job' was extremely hard work and low-paid. We didn't work in the office, but in a small and polluted factory. We quit the job after two days. And we got very angry, we thought that they (the job agents) were insulting us. Therefore we came to their office, turned over all their tables (he paused for a few seconds). At that moment, I really wanted to kill them (he paused again for another seconds). Finally, they returned the 400 yuan we had paid them. Looking back, I think I was too offensive then, and I will stay calm if I faced same situation again."*

In this recollection, Fung recalled the scene of their "offensive" visit to the job agent's office to regain their dignity and money. He paused twice while confessing his impulse of wanting to "kill" the job agents who had cheated him and his friend. His story showed that he was aware of protecting his dignity. At the end of the episode, he reflected that he would keep calm when facing the same situation again. When he was telling his story, I felt his struggles to find a decent job—he felt happy to get a good job, found he had been cheated, became angry, showed offence and eventually developed a sense of guilt (of being too offensive).

***Nana***

Besides caring about their dignity, the participants were also looking for a work environment where they could be respected by others, particularly the local people. Nana thought that she was not so different from other young women in town. She told me that she was wearing the same style of clothes, shoes, and eating the same styles of fast food (e.g. McDonalds, KFC). However, she found it difficult to make friends with the local young people while she was working in the factory. She felt more comfortable getting along with others from the same province (同鄉) because she could receive recognition and respect from them:

(Nana):*"We are all from Guangxi province (廣西), and we know each other through common friends. We understand each other. I enjoy spending time playing with them. We communicate with each other by text messages and Wechat (微信, instant online chatting software using mobile phones). Once a friend in our group calls for a gathering, the rest will respond instantly and join. I feel I am respected in the group."*

(Nana paused for a while then continued):*"Young people just like me, have hands and legs, we work here, live here, play here, so why do they (the local people) still look down upon us? It's very difficult to make friends with the local young people around here."*

Nana's confession impressed me in terms of her desire to seek a variety of friendships in the local community. She seemed to get along well with others from her home province. However, she did not appear to be satisfied with socialising with a small group of young migrant workers only. She wanted to make friends with the local young people. She realized that, even though she was doing the same things as them, it seemed impossible to get connected with them. At this point, I can understand her struggle—she is not working merely for money, but also has a desire to be recognized and included in the local community.

### *6.1.2 Resilience of "Dagong" (打工)*

Beyond a common desire for dignity and respect, participants in the study showed me their resilience in terms of working for the boss (*dagong*, 打工). Living in the city, they had limited support in finding jobs. They needed to protect themselves from being cheated or even threatened by other people. Although they maintained their connections with their families, relatives and good friends, they had to rely on their own resources (*kaoziji*, 靠自己) in handling troubles of work and life. Furthermore, they seemed to show good patience in the face of adversity. They would try their best to overcome any difficulties at work. Jun and Ah Ming's stories of their first working experiences of *dagong* in Shenzhen demonstrated a sense of resilience:

***Jun***

Jun could recall his first arrival in Shenzhen and working as a cleaner in an industrial park, where he stayed for almost nine years:

(Jun): "*I can still remember the experience when I first arrived here. After I left the (Shenzhen) train station, I took a bus here (CD town). When I arrived, I was very shocked, it's so isolated here, with a few factories built around the villages. Many people here were still farming. There were few stores or shops around. I was in such despair. It's totally unlike downtown Shenzhen, where I almost can't figure out which direction to go, but here, everything was so basic and isolated. I was introduced by my relative (uncle) to work in this industrial park. I started to work as a cleaner, doing the gardening, planting trees and flowers and cleaning sidewalks and factory rooms. I didn't like the job at first. And I really wanted to quit. But when I thought about my uncle, I didn't want him to lose face. Also, my manager told me that 'work well, and you will receive a better one (job) soon', I listened to what he said and then stayed."*

Jun recalled his first job experience in Shenzhen with a sense of despair. By making the decision to "stay", he referred to the reflection of saving the "face" of his uncle and to the encouragement from his manager. I felt that his resilience at work was generated from his interpersonal relationships (for

instance, maintaining a good relationship with family members who had helped him and encouragement from the manager). Meanwhile, I felt that Jun might not have other choices at that moment—because he was not familiar with the new environment. He needed to earn money to support his mother who was receiving medical treatment.

***Ah Ming***

Similar to Jun, Ah Ming showed me his resilience at work in terms of his first job in the factory—he considered it as a commitment not to give up (*bufushu*, 不服輸). He told me that he went to Shenzhen to look for a job after his poor performance in the university entrance examination (*gaokao*, 高考). When he first arrived in Shenzhen, he attended an interview at a Korean-owned garment factory. The boss looked at his injured fingers (Ah Ming had two disfigured fingers cut as the result a fire accident in his childhood, and he also had a disability certificate, 殘疾人證明), and doubted his competence as an assembly-line worker. Ah Ming could still remember his response to the boss then, "*my hand is okay, please give me an opportunity, I could do it well*." He got accepted. He told me that he worked very hard to prove that he was able to do the job well. In our conversation, he still felt satisfied of his "great achievement" at his first job. He said with a smile, "*when I left there (the garment factory), my boss asked me to stay, and my workmates told me that they didn't want me to go.*" Ah

Ming's resilience seemed to give him the motivation to go through the challenges of his first job. He made me believe that nothing is impossible for any single young person who has a strong commitment.

### *6.1.3 Resistance to "Dagong" (打工)*

The participants shared the common characteristic of resilience (e.g. to save face, never to give up) against prejudices and adversities at work. Some of them also showed me acts of resistance in the face of work challenges. To me, quitting the job was one example of their resistance to unpleasant experiences and unfair treatment at work:

***Sao Miu***

Sao Miu's stories of life in Shenzhen were full of experiences of changing jobs; he told me that he kept looking for a decent job that he deserved:

(Sao Miu):*"I have been in Shenzhen for five years. And I tried many jobs: an assembly-line worker, a security guard, a vendor, a sales representative. Now I'm unemployed, but I'm attending some business training courses."*

I was curious about his decision to quit his jobs, so I asked:

"*So why did you quit the jobs? Any bad experiences?"*

(Sao Miu): *"My first job in the factory was a really bad one, the boss exploited me. I worked twelve hours a day for six and a half day every*

*week. But I didn't get good pay, and the boss didn't purchase health insurance for me. He promised that before. When I was a child, my parents told me that we should treat others with honesty and sincerity. The boss didn't treat me like that, so I was angry, and then I decided to quit the job."*

Choosing to quit seemed to be a reaction by Sao Miu to the job that failed to meet his expectations—decent pay and health care security. He said that he never felt any regret at quitting the jobs. Meanwhile, I found that he never took any further action to negotiate with his bosses. Instead, he chose to keep silent and quit. I tried to understand the reasons from his perspective. It seemed to be a more realistic strategy for him to quit the job and find a new one—because he did not get any support from other work colleagues, his family, relatives, friends or the local government. Meanwhile, his parents never taught him how to resist. He may probably think that he was a helpless man in negotiating about work benefits and insurance protection. He did not want to offer resistance alone either, since he was concerned about having more troubles (problems) in a place with which he was not familiar (and also where he had no social network).

***Jun***

Facing a similar situation of discontent with his job, Jun seemed to give more thought than Sao Miu to planning his campaign of resistance. After

nine years of working in the same company, Jun told me that he found the number of workers were decreasing every year; he said, "*I saw many young people coming and leaving within a few weeks, and the factories here are short of 'hands' (缺人手) now.*" And he kept complaining about his current boss:

(Jun): *"I don't see any future to working here now, I will change to a new job if I can get higher pay. This job was once very good to me, but our boss has changed to a new one, and then we never received any good increase in pay. The new boss doesn't offer pay that I think is reasonable especially as I have worked here for nine years. And we're (Jun and other work fellows) asking him to increase our pay, but he didn't. We're so angry. I tried to seek support from the local cadres, who have known me since I arrived here. I wanted them to put pressure on my boss, because they were from the same village. But I realized that the local cadres were on the side of my boss, and they never did anything to support me. They still saw me as an outsider (外人). I was so disappointed. Now I'm waiting till I have worked here for ten years, because it is warranted in the law that after ten years of working in Shenzhen the boss needs to pay me a higher amount of compensation if he fires me. Then I can take some action to negotiate for better salary from my boss."*

From feeling despair at the beginning of his employment, then deciding to work hard and work well, gradually to raising his awareness of the options for resistance, Jun presented a dramatic working journey full of dilemmas and reflection. He appeared to be a loyal worker for the company, and he gained promotion to being a security guard from a gardener. However, he was aware of poor treatment at work by his new boss. Not following in his parents' footsteps, who were taught to be silent and work without complaining (忍氣吞聲), Jun vocalized his complaint and tried to get support from the local cadres. Even though he failed, he demonstrated his patience and maturity in facing this adversity. He was still dreaming of taking actions to resist. As a listener, I realized that I did not know much more about the legal procedure of negotiation with the boss on the salary. Therefore, at that moment, I did not give any advice on his plan of resistance. Instead, I showed him emotional support by appreciating his patience and thoughtfulness.

### *6.1.4 The dream job*

Displaying resilience or resistance at work, the participants showed an attitude of never giving up easily. They kept searching for a decent job. Other than working for a boss, they told me of their dreams of starting their own business, with differences according to gender and personal preference. From the interview narratives, male participants seemed to be more

ambitious in having their own business; in contrast, female participants seemed to be more indirect in telling me their career plan. Ah Wei told me that she wanted to marry to a man at least five years older than her (she did not explain why). She hoped they could run a small business together. Cici was hoping to assist her fiancé in running the jewellery fabrication business.

Starting a new business is not so easy for the participants. On the one hand, they have to continue to look for a decent job, which could provide them with opportunities to save more money and to learn management and fiscal skills. On the other hand, they realized the difficulties of stop to work for the boss and starting their own small business. Lam told me, *"I want to resume my business of selling computers and accessories. I'm now working hard here, because I need the seed money (benqian, 本錢)."* Sao Miu also shared with me his plan of starting his own business in his home town:

> (Sao Miu): "*I have an uncle in my home town who breeds scorpions for medical use, his business seems very successful. I want to follow his footsteps, and have my own business to raise scorpions as well. But I don't have enough seed money now, and I can't borrow from my parent. So I have to stay here (Shenzhen) to earn more money, and wonder if one day, after several years, I can return to my home town and run my business."*

Also, not all the participants considered running a business as their ultimate goal. Yu shared with me his desire of working as a social worker to help others, especially the poor and new migrants:

(Yu): "*I worked in companies before. I don't like the business world, because it is full of deception and being deceived. Experiencing being poor in the past, I feel more compassion for other poor people. I really want to help them get through their hardships of life. Now I am working here (a social work community centre) as an assistant, I felt so happy because I enjoy the team work. I want to become a social worker.*"

## 6.2 Facing the Future: Security and Sustainability

Family, health and work were important components in the narratives of the participants. Besides, they also expressed their expectations and anticipation of their future life. They showed me that they were family-oriented and children-centred. In their plans for the future, most participants wanted a better life for their parents and their children. However, they did not tell me much about a detailed plan of personal development; they seemed to have no specific ideas of what they are going to do next; they seemed not well-prepared to adapt to the economic and social change.

### *6.2.1 Hoping for a better life for their parents*

To the participants, striving for a better life first meant to have their parents living well. For example, Yu said, "*I want to earn 'face' for my parents（我想讓父母更有面子）*". Some participants did have more money than they required for their own living expenses (e.g. to pay for rent, food and transportation) in Shenzhen. At the same time, they never asked their parents for money, since they did not wish to make their parents worry. Moreover, they hope that their parents would have face to live in their rural village:

***Ah Wei***

Ah Wei was an obedient and respectful daughter to her parents. She told me that she would buy many gifts every time she returned home so as to show respect to her parents. She also wanted her parents' neighbours to know about it, so as to earn face for her parents:

(Ah Wei): *"I'll take many good things for my parents each time I go back to my home town. It just like moving a house. I carried boxes loaded with gifts for them. I want my parents to show their gifts to the neighbours. I want them to have face."*

(I thought that girls normally want to look beautiful, therefore I was curious about whether Ah Wei will spend her savings to buy things for

herself, so I asked): "*So what about yourself? Do you ever buy clothes, shoes or accessories?* "

(Ah Wei seemed a little shy when she smiled and told me her dilemma): "*I like wearing beautiful clothes, but I don't earn so much, and every time I go shopping, I think more about my parents. I am okay with a few new clothes, but I really want my parents to wear some good ones. I know that they will never spend their money to buy good cloths, because they still try to save money. So I will buy for them.* "

(Then I continued to ask): "*Don't you want to go back home with honour (你自己不想風風光光回家嗎)?* "

(Ah Wei responded): "*Not at all. I wear very plain and simple clothes every time when I go back. I felt happy when I see my parents happy at home.*"

To me, Ah Wei put her parents into first place in her life. She seemed to believe that her hard work and buying gifts for her parents could bring pride to them in the village. Even though she wanted to buy good things for herself, she decided to spend the money on her parents, because she expected that they would earn face by having a daughter who could always bring back good things. Ah Wei's value about a better life for her parents seemed to connect with her experience of comparison among people in the village—it related with having face and even being respected by others in

terms of the properties they owned. Ah Wei's filial actions seemed to reflect her dilemma of a better life—balancing having an independent and decent living in the city and having parents living well in their home town.

Besides showing care for their parents, most of the participants tried to meet their parents' simple expectation—to live in a better life in the city. They all experienced poverty in their childhood, but they feel happy with their family. Meanwhile, they all enjoyed the good days of their childhood, and felt thankful to their parents and other family relatives (e.g. grandparents, uncles, aunts) for taking care of them. They would buy good things for their parents when they returned home.

For instance, Yu reflected that, "*After I graduated from middle school, I remembered that my parents always support any decision I made, and they never refused me when I needed money, even if it meant that they needed to borrow it from other relatives and friends. We experienced being poor together, they want me to live better in Shenzhen, and I also want them to live better in Hong Kong.*" Yu's expression of mutual expectation between him and his parents resonated emotionally with me. I remembered that my mother always cooked sweet soup when I was sick. We were also poor then but we were happy. And I also want my parents have a better life, no matter how hard I work, I want them to live well and stay happy.

### *6.2.2 Hoping for a better life for their children*

Besides caring for their parents, the participants' expectation of a better life also seemed to be a children-centred endeavour. They prioritized their children ahead of their own interests and desires. The three fathers, Lam, Fung and Jun, all told me that they were working hard to provide a better environment in which their children could grow up. However, they are living with a dilemma—between "earning money to build a house at home" and "taking care of their children by being with them".

***Fung***

In our discussion of the future life, Fung looked at me seriously and said, "*earning enough money to raise my family (yangjia, 養家) and build a new house at home (zaijia gaifangzi, 在家蓋房子) are the two biggest tasks for me, and after that I should spend more time being with my children.*" I did not totally understand his reason for wanting to build a house in his home village, so I asked him, "*why is building a house at home so important to you? it seems that you don't want to return home to work.*" Fung then said, "*who knows, I know what you mean, but I want my parents and my children to live in a big new house. So I have to do it.*" Then I said, "it sounds confusing to me", Fung then patiently explained to me, "*you know, rural people will judge you by what you have, so having a big and new house is important, they will not look down upon you or bully you anymore, because*

*they know that they may get some help from you*" Therefore, owning sufficient properties seemed to provide evidence of the family's strong financial position in the rural village. Showing fellow villagers his financial capability seemed to provide Fung with a sense of security of protecting his children and their caregivers, his parents, in the village. That may be a strong reason why Fung was still trying his best to earn more money in Shenzhen.

***Jun***

As with Fung, Jun was also striving to raise his family and build a house at home. Because he had lost both his parents, Jun considered his parents-in-law as his own parents; he deposited his savings in their bank account every month. When speaking of the future, Jun smiled, and told me his plan for children, "*I want to have one more child, so in the near future, we (he and his wife) could bring one here (in Shenzhen) and the other can stay at home with my parents-in-law.*" Then I asked, "*what about your plan for your son?*" Jun told me his plan of having his son to attend the elementary school in Shenzhen, and then to send him back to his home town to a "better" middle school environment. He explained, "*the elementary schools here are good, they have good teachers. But when my son grows older, I want to send him back to join the middle-school in my home town, I heard that the middle-school there has better teachers, they provide evening*

*teaching sessions (wanzixi, 晚自習) for the students, which is not included in the education provided by the private middle school here in Shenzhen. So I think it is good for improving their study.*" To Jun, creating a good study environment for his son was his great concern. He hoped his son would study well. He told me the reason why, *"I already experienced being looked down upon because of my job. I regretted that I had not studied hard. Now I want my children to have better education, so that they can have a better job opportunity."* A common aspiration participants had was that their children of the participants would obtain a better education. Since they experienced poor education and missed the opportunities to obtain further education themselves, they did not want their children to duplicate their life journey and having to suffer a life of hard work and low pay.

### *6.2.3 Facing uncertainties about their own future*

The participants who were married seemed to transfer all their hopes for the future to their children. Those who were still single seemed to be more uncertain about their own future. In their narratives, I found that they omitted to refer much to their own future. One common struggle for them was not having a clear career path. In addition, they found that they were unable to save sufficient money, because of the combination of being in a low-paid job and having high living expenses in Shenzhen.

***Nana***

Although she was a young woman in her early twenties, Nana impressed me with her maturity. For instance, she worked hard so that her parents could live well. At the end of our interview, she shared a wish for her future life. She said, "*I have an older cousin, she's only one year older than me, and I know she is attending a good university in Beijing. She also plans to stay there for work. I really want to talk with her every time we met at home during the Chinese New Year. But we didn't talk much. I really want to know what she thinks about life and the future. She took her parents to Beijing a few years ago. I also wish to take my parents to Beijing. I keep trying.*" I tried to understand why Nana made a reference to her cousin. She seemed to set up a future goal for herself of "taking her parents to visit Beijing, the capital of China" by having a role model (her cousin). Even though she did not mention any other plan for her own future, she presented to me her desire to aim for a good life, a life of having more freedom and showing thankfulness to her parents.

***Ah Ming***

Being familiar already with Ah Ming, I asked him directly, "*so what is your plan for the future?*" He told me that, at that moment, he had no specific ideas about his future. He told me that he could describe his expectation of the future with one word—"*mangran*" (茫然, blank)". Then

he further shared with me his personal struggle: he wanted to return to his home town and develop a new career there. He found there were many opportunities for human capital development at home, and he wanted to become a trainee teacher. But his girlfriend was strongly opposed to this because she wanted him to stay in Shenzhen, and earn more money and said that if he did not do as she wished, she would not marry him. I could understand Ah Ming's struggles—he wanted to have a new career at his rural home town, but this would compromise his wish to marry his girlfriend who does not want to return to the rural area. Therefore, he decided not to think about the future any and kept his current job—working as a sales representative in Shenzhen. Even with these struggles, he was still optimistic about his career and future, because he kept saying, "*all is well*."

***Yu***

Like Ah Ming, Yu is also a single young man who had no ideas about his future plans. Yu told me that he had some unpleasant romantic relationships in the past, "*I had some girlfriends before, but we all broke up eventually. I still remembered my last girlfriend who told me "you are not ambitious enough (你不夠上進)". I was really shocked at that moment. But I said nothing and let her go. I know I am a man who is satisfied with my life (我是個知足的人). It's difficult for me to really be ambitious in my career.*"

Then I responded to his self-reflection, "*I don't think it's bad to be satisfied with your life.*"

Yu then told me a story that affected his life values, "*I think why I am content with what I have now is because I experienced a traffic accident before.*" Staying calm, then he continued, "*It was the birthday of Kwan-yin (觀音誕) a few years ago, I took a mini-bus with my parents, my brother and my two younger cousins, we went to pray in the temple up the mountain in my home town. On our way back, the driver of the mini-bus suddenly lost control and the minibus crashed down the mountain. I thought I was going to die then. But fortunately, we just hurt our legs and no one died. It's a miracle. After then, I realized life was full of uncertainties. So I started to enjoy what I have in my life.*" This story made more sense of Yu's desire to help others who are unfortunate in their lives. He was thankful that his life had been saved and he had compassion for the poor. Yu's experience of life might be unique, but he shared a common experience with other post-80s' generation young people in China—we all feel uncertain about our future life (e.g. rapid policy and political changes, the unstable financial and economic system), but we have to take the challenges that life presents us.

## 6.3 Initial Reflections of the Participants' Narratives

By listening all of their narratives, I noticed of the participants' common reflections of their life experiences, which emerged from the specific episodes in their lives that they recounted:

### *6.3.1 "With dignity" versus "with ignorance"*

In facing the new environment in Shenzhen, most of the participants touched me with their spirit of living with dignity. They enjoyed the new life in city, at the same time, they did not like to be looked down upon. They were confident in their ability to adapt to the community. They did not like the feeling of being ignored by the local people. They wanted to make friends with them.

### *6.3.2 "Resilience" versus "self-denial"*

When they began working in Shenzhen, they tried their best to get over the prejudices, difficulties, and adversities placed in their way. I felt their toughness in the adversities, and they seemed not to give up easily. Meanwhile, I understood their reasons of keeping a low profile at work—to earn sufficient money not only for survival but also for the dreams of starting their own businesses. They never told me that they gave up a job opportunity easily because of being picky. They also tried to earn some money for their family.

### *6.3.3 "Resistance" versus "blind-obedience"*

Regarding their years of experience at work, they started to show an awareness of "saying no" to unfair treatment they received at work (e.g. as regards receiving reasonable pay and health care insurance). Although none of the participants I interviewed took any action against their bosses, they showed me their thoughtfulness to develop strategies to cope with any unpleasantness related to their employment. Furthermore, they have an inherited belief from their parents—working people should get reasonable pay in return for their hard work.

### *6.3.4 "Being positive" versus "being negative"*

Many of the participants told me of their dreams for their future career—mainly, to run a small business or to assist their husband in business. They were positive about the future, even though they realized that they did not have many choices in work. They were positive about earning enough seed money to start their business. Some participants even had a plan for the business in their mind. They still had the passion to pursue their dreams.

### *6.3.5 "To be secure" versus "to be insecure"*

To stay or to leave, is not a decision for them currently. Instead, they applied some common strategies for ensuring their security—to earn more money, to raise their family and to build a new house in their home town. They realized the changing reality in the rural areas: people became less

friendly to each other and have begun to compare each other's properties. Meanwhile, they realized it was a realistic choice for their children to remain in the home town to be cared for by their mother or grand-parents. Therefore, they tried their best to provide security for them. Meanwhile, they did not give up hope of living with their children in the city.

### *6.3.6 "To live in the moment" versus "to live without directions"*

Even though participants had limited detailed thoughts about the future, they embraced a life value of moving forward. They realized the uncertainties (e.g. potential for dramatic change) in the changing society in China. They seemed to be lost, but indeed, I felt they were aiming for a better life. I believed they will have a bright future.

## 6.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the work and life dilemmas as narrated by the young migrant workers who took part in this study. They showed me rich emotions, reflection and reactions while facing many challenges. Though our interaction, I interpreted and reflected their struggles and frustrations using rapport. I endeavoured to be supportive. I was impressed that they had their own ways of handling the dilemmas of the life with a set of common strategies—working with dignity, resilience, resistance and dreams; living with hopes for a better life for their parents, their children and themselves.

Meanwhile, they were positive, looking for security and living with expectations and hopes. In the following two chapters (chapters seven and eight), I will start the discussion of life experiences of young migrant workers based on the above findings of the interaction and narratives of the research participants.

# Chapter Seven

# Discussion:

# Five Dimensions of the Life Experiences

The previous chapters recorded my research inquiry into the life experiences of young migrant workers. Chapter four detailed my observation and interpretation of the economic, social, cultural and political context of the lives of young migrant workers. The intention of my engagement with young migrant workers was to adopt the ideology and methodology of the narrative approach. Thus my observation and interpretation located them in their community and interactional context (including their relationships with me) and focused on them from where and who they are.

Chapters five and six presented my interpretation of their individual narratives which included four common themes: connection with family, concerns about health, struggling for a decent job and striving for a better life. To further explain their identities, experiences and hopes and draw implications for social work practice, chapter seven will discuss the key concepts of the life experiences of young migrant workers. Insights drawn from this to improve social work involvement in their lives will be suggested in chapter eight.

## 7.1 Context of the Life Experiences of Young Migrant Workers

Construction of the life experiences of young migrant workers starts from discussion of their objective context (life situations, *chujing*, 處境) and subjective context (life definition, *shengmingguan*, 生命觀). It is important to connect the macro structure with participants' micro experiences based on their narratives (Lit, 2010; Riessman, 2007; Robb *et al.*, 2010). Growing up during the rapid development of the market economy in China, regardless of gender difference, young migrant workers still endure an underprivileged status as regards social inequality, economic insecurity, cultural isolation and political exclusion. However, they aspire to advance beyond mere survival to enjoy a decent living standard. They experience sufferings while enhancing capability. They reflect on the purpose of their lives while developing better strategies to cope with difficulties and hardships.

### *7.1.1 Underprivileged status: the life situations of young migrant workers*

***(1) Social inequality***

Social inequality (in regard to health care, earnings and welfare) as experienced by migrant workers was initially constructed by the household registration system (the *hukou* system) in the 1980s that ensured a

rural-urban divide. The majority of education resources, industrial development, financial investment and infrastructure are concentrated in China's urban areas (Chen, 2010; Felizco & Slavick, 2010; Whyte, 2010). In China currently, social inequality seems to be re-constructed by the privileges, wealth, property, social resources and networks of the social elites. These are mainly the middle-aged "people with political power" (有權利的官員) and "people who have commercial bargaining power" (有勢力的商人) (Li, 2011), who pass their wealth, property and rich social networks to their offspring—the post-80s' generation of "privileged" young people, namely "the second generation of people who have political power" (*guanerdai*, 官二代) and "the second generation of people with bargaining power" (*fuerdai*, 富二代). They are considered to be a group of "children of the privileged social elites" who invest less personal effort but enjoy superior social benefits (Li, 2011).

In contrast, young migrant workers and other post-80s' generation young people with few inherited privileges are considered as "the second generation poor" (*qiongerdai*, 窮二代). Obviously, the environment in which they have grown up is better than that experienced by their parents, since most of them received stable family care, adequate food and clothes and better education. However, comparing them with their "privileged" counterparts (the *guanerdai* and *fuerdai* as mentioned above), the structural

disadvantages experienced by young migrant workers are strongly connected with the inferior social status of their parents and the poor financial well-being of their families. They need to make much more personal effort (e.g. striving for higher education, striving to perform well in the workplace) to gain a similar opportunity of the children of the privileged elites (Yan & Lam, 2009).

To demonstrate, working as a human resource assistant, Ah Wei told me that her boss would promote her to a junior managerial post if she could get a bachelor's degree and improve her spoken English. However, she did not have sufficient time or money to afford the courses. In sum, young migrant workers live in a competitive world full of both restrictions and opportunities (Felizco & Slavick, 2010; Hannan, 2008; Whyte, 2010). At the same time, place of origin, parental resources, education and occupation put young migrant workers in a disadvantaged position. It seems difficult for them to achieve upward mobility.

***(2) Economic insecurity***

Young migrant workers are at-risk of economic insecurity from the perspectives of their rural land, the labour market and urban living. Their rural land is no longer a secure property for ensuring survival since many of them have resettled in the city to obtain a better opportunity of work and life (Chan & Pun, 2009: Felizco & Slavick, 2010). In the meanwhile, many

young migrant workers and their families will build a house on their land, because of the need of getting married and raise their children (buying a house or an apartment in the urban cities is almost impossible for them). However, building a house in their rural homeland increases the financial burden of the whole family.

In the urban job market, work opportunities available for young migrant workers normally offer low pay but demand high physical labour. Young migrant workers have neither adequate power nor social support to negotiate with their employers on their salary and other work benefits (Guang & Kong, 2010; Murphy, 2002; Pun & Li, 2012). They have become the new "working poor" in the labour market. They experience difficulties for a sustainable family life in urban areas as well, such as expensive school education for their children, costly city transportation and commuting to their home town. In addition, they face increasing food prices, rent for accommodation and health care costs, which put them at risk of living in poverty if they become ill or unemployed.

***(3) Cultural isolation***

Culturally, young migrant workers are isolated from the mainstream social culture in China, which is dominated by the thoughts of being a successful urban man or woman with wealth and power (Hewitt, 2007). Young migrant workers are still living with the negative label and stereotype

of migrant workers (*mingong*, 民工)—who are degraded as socially inferior and economically poor. Meanwhile, the media do not show much appreciation of the efforts of young migrant workers (e.g. their contribution to industrial production, urban construction, and urban services). Therefore, they are marginalized by mainstream society by means of discrimination, indifference and isolation.

However, young migrant workers have their own subculture—the culture of *dagong* (打工文化), which is shared mainly through the internet and by word of mouth (Felizco & Slavick, 2010; Ma, 2006). Using instant messages, internet blogs, songs, poems, stories, photos, videos and other multimedia materials, they develop, reflect and exchange ideas of *dagong*: it is a life journey of hardships, as well as of suffering and pain; but it provides them with emotional rewards when they are able to have a decent job and live a better life. Here is a song, "Brother Bill", written by a young migrant worker Sun to narrate the *dagong* culture:

*When I know you. You have been working for thirteen hours.*

*All the guys call you Brother Bill.*

*The warmest way to name you.*

*When you are drunk, you can say you are homesick,*

*How you miss your wife and children,*

*How you work harder and harder for them every day,*

*How you wake early in the morning,*

*Work late into the night,*

*How tired you are, but harder and harder,*

*You work for them every day.*

*You hate the guys who do nothing, but gain the most.*

*They wear beautiful clothes, but look down on you.*

*'Who supports who', you ask.*

*They can never understand you.*

*They can never understand you.*

*Day by day, year by year, the days have passed.*

*What you possess: a pair of empty hands.*

*You always said there may be a change tomorrow,*

*But the day after, you wake, work, harder, endless.*

*When I know you, you have been working for thirteen hours.*

(Sun, translated by Slavick, in Felizco & Slavick, 2010, p. 83)

To further illustrate the influence of the isolated culture in young migrant workers lives, I use examples from my research participants Ah Ming and Ah Wei. Ah Ming told me that he loved listening to the disco-mixed songs about *dagong*, because they inspired him to continue to strive for a good life; Ah Wei likes to write internet blogs about *dagong* to tell her friends about her feeling and reflections of life in Shenzhen, and they will always give her positive encouragement. Although young migrant workers have a group culture that is filled with inspiration and positive mutual encouragement, they still face the oppressive cultural judgments of successful men or women in urban China—who are able to earn and spend more (Hewitt, 2007; Ma, 2006).

***(4) Political exclusion***

Besides facing social inequality, economic insecurity and cultural isolation, young migrant workers are also excluded from political participation. In the local community, they do not participate in community decision making or public events, mainly because they have limited individual leisure time and they receive few social invitations. In the labour market, they have to take low-paid manual jobs in the informal sector in which labour law is difficult to defend (Felizco & Slavick, 2010; Pun & Lu, 2010). In reality, most of the labour unions are controlled by the employers and are discouraged from representing the interests of the

employees—young migrant workers (Pun & Chan, 2009). Even in their rural home towns, many young migrant workers are not entitled to participate in the negotiation of public affairs of their villages, which are dominated by the village committee (He, 2010; Liang, 2013). In sum, the increasing urban-rural and privileged-underprivileged divisions make young migrant workers more vulnerable to share the social, economic, cultural and political benefits

### *7.1.2 Upward motivation: the life meanings of young migrant workers*

Regarding the underprivileged status of young migrant workers, the "concept" of their life is expanding, diversified and reflective. Having higher expectations of life, they show aspirations of upward mobility: (1) they do not only strive for survival (*shengcun*, 生存) but also a decent living (*shenghuo*, 生活) with family responsibilities, personal achievement and social recognition; (2) they experienced suffering (*ku*, 苦) in different stages of life, and they enhance the capability to go through hardships; (3) they have developed reflective thinking to aid understanding of a meaningful life (*lingwu rensheng*, 领悟人生) while searching for responsive strategies to meet the challenges of urban living.

#### *(1) Expanding life from survival to decent living*

To have enough food, clothing and stable accommodation is no longer the sole life goal for young migrant workers. Even though their monthly

salary is relatively low (around 2,000 yuan), it can ensure their survival in Shenzhen. However, it is not enough to enable them to raise a family (with a spouse and one child living together in Shenzhen, which is estimated to cost 5,700 yuan per month) (Shenzhen Dagongzhe Migrant Worker Centre, 2013). A decent living, as constructed by the young migrant workers in the study, articulates this income dilemma and elaborates their concept of life: they are concerned to fulfil their family responsibility by providing a better living environment for their parents and children; they have aspirations for self-achievement, and they seek opportunities for acquiring skills, working experiences and seed money for a better career (e.g. starting their own business); they desire social recognition and dignity in Shenzhen.

***(2) Experiencing suffering at different life stages***

The lives of young migrant workers also includes a shared experience of suffering (*ku*, 苦) in various stages of their lives: feeling pain and responsibility accompanying the birth of their children (*sheng*, 生); having concerns and worries about their parents aging and deteriorating health (*lao*, 老); experiencing emotional suffering and the financial burdens associated with the illness of their parents, their children or themselves (*bing*, 病); addressing grief and loss while facing the death and dying of family members (*si*, 死). On one side, disparities of health care (e.g. higher costs of basic health care, insufficient coverage of health care insurance) increase

their suffering in *sheng, lao, bing* and *si* (Mou *et al.*, 2009; Yip, 2010). On the other side, through suffering they learn to enhance their capacity to deal with hardships—they become more mature while remaining calm in a health crisis; they try to borrow money from family members, relatives and friends to pay for necessary health care; they welcome external emotional support to deal with their loss and pain.

***(3) Reflecting on a meaningful life***

The young migrant workers have developed self-reflective skills so as to seek a purpose in their life. For instance, Nana does not want to fall behind her peers, particularly her cousin who is a graduate medical student in Beijing. Also recovering from neck surgery, she identified the goals she wanted to achieve in the near future—to learn more, to stay healthy and to enable her parents to travel to Beijing. Obviously, her life goals are exclusively focused on earning money. Another example is Fung's handling the conflict with his wife who lost almost 10,000 yuan after being tricked by a pyramid selling scheme into buying over-priced poor-quality cosmetic products. He did not blame her for losing the money. Instead, he stayed with her to think about the purpose of their marriage and their future plans—making an effort to live better through mutual trust and family collaboration. Therefore, the young migrant workers have developed reflective thinking about the purpose of their life as a result of their different

experiences. They are searching for responsive strategies to live meaningfully.

## 7.2 Change of Life: From Transitions to Transformations

The changes in the lives of young migrant workers develop from a linear transition to a multi-perspective transformation—a process of change involving people, episodes, crucial moments and reflection. The narratives of the participants changed my initial perception of the changes in their lives—transition from: (1) rural to urban living; (2) studying to working; (3) adolescence to adulthood; (4) naivety to maturity. Instead, they showed me a comprehensive transformation of their (1) physical world, (2) social world, (3) cultural world and (4) mental world:

### *7.2.1 Transformations of the physical world*

Accompanying the process of moving from their "rural" villages to "urban" Shenzhen, they have experienced both a change of time and space in their physical world. On the one hand, they realize the differences between rural and urban in the feeling of time and space. The former is lower pace, more spacious, with natural surroundings, animals and fields; the latter is faster paced, more intensive, with more people, factories, shops, traffics and nightlights. On the other hand, they begin to form the connections between urban living and village living. Some enjoy the quiet

environment of the factory area that is similar to their rural homelands; while some try to become familiar with people from same province and travel back and forth to their home town when they have time off work (e.g. the Chinese New Year). Most importantly, they start to think differently in a mobile world—they start to recognize that the familiar could become unfamiliar, stability could turn to instability in terms of people, place and plans.

### *7.2.2 Transformations of the social world*

Beyond a transition of "student" to "worker", they experience a transformation of roles, relationships and social networks within their social world. In terms of changing roles, they have realized that they are no longer a recipient of care from their parents; instead, they start to acting as a care giver to raise their own family. Most of them stopped asking their parents for money at the time they migrated to Shenzhen. They have to earn money in order to survive and maintain an independent life. In terms of relationships, besides maintaining relationships with their family, they start to develop other significant social relationships while working in Shenzhen—an employer-employee relationship with their boss (*laoban*, 老闆), friendship with fellow workers (*gongyou*, 工友) and a romantic relationship with their spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend (*banlu*, 伴侶). With the transformation of roles and relationships, they expand their social

networks, which no longer comprise just their parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, classmates or childhood friends. They have to learn to face and get along with different kinds of people. They need to ascertain who can be trusted and who can be asked for help in solving problems at work and in life more generally.

### *7.2.3 Transformations of the cultural world*

Young migrant workers do not simply grow up from adolescence to adulthood, but they also develop their identity, social language and some new habits of urban living inside the cultural world. They are aware of the biological changes of their body. Meanwhile, they try to shift their identity from rural adolescents to urban young men or women—which is demonstrated by the way they dress, the way they eat and the way they talk (Chang, 2008; Ma, 2006). With the help of social media (e.g. the internet, urban television stations and radio stations), they learn and practice diversified social language (e.g. talking with people from different provinces, learning new slang words) in Shenzhen. Meanwhile, they have developed new habits (e.g. working, resting and working again, and travelling). They also become open to different cultures as a result of their social mobility (Chang, 2008).

### *7.2.4 Transformations of the emotional world*

Integrating the above transformation in their physical, social and cultural world, young migrant workers further develop their emotional world. Beyond a transition from "naivety" to "maturity", they presented a transformation of their emotional world from "being new and green" (*mengdong*, 懵懂) to "experiencing, adapting and adjusting to urban life" (*jingliguo*, 經歷過). Some young migrant workers reach the current state of "feeling uncertain about the future" (*mangran*, 茫然), experienced mainly in the dilemma of getting used to living in the city while facing difficulties in affording the increasing cost of a sustainable family life in Shenzhen.

In the adult world, young migrant workers, similar to other young people in China, are considered to move beyond the old-fashioned lifestyle and traditional rituals and habits (Ni, 2010). However, young migrant workers seem to retain some traditional ways of living (e.g. earning money in the cities, building a house in their rural home, getting married, returning home to retire). They face the challenge of living in an urban society where many people spend more than is reasonable (*fukua*, 浮誇) and where many people like to compare themselves with others as regards social status, the number of children they have and personal property.

## 7.3 Relationships: From Independence to Interdependence

Besides the above transformation of their physical, social, cultural and mental world, young migrant workers developed an interdependent relationships with their family—mainly their parents. Those who received stable care from childhood developed a primary relationship with their care givers, particularity the mother figure in their life—either their mother or grandmother. They followed the "footsteps" of their parents (or other relatives who belong to the older generation) in the decision to migrate to the city. At the same time, they are searching for a different pathway of life—beyond survival to securing a decent life; beyond making money to fighting for self-achievement. Aware of being part of the family, they think and behave under the influence of the family hierarchy—still dominated by patriarchy and seniority (Chang, 2008; Fan, 2008; Gaetano, 2010). After their move to Shenzhen, they keep in contact with their family members. They exchange ideas and provide support (financial, emotional and care-giving) for each other.

### *7.3.1 Becoming the "adult children" of the family*

#### *(1) Intimacy: considering "home" as a family network*

Young migrant workers treat their family as a "home" (家)—a family network characterized by physical location, biological connection (e.g. kinship, blood) and emotional communication. Home represents a primary

and close relationship with family members. It is more than a physical house with a roof, rooms and windows. It is a biological connection including the relationship between parent and child, between spouses, between siblings, between grandparents and grandchild, and kinship relationships in the village. Furthermore, home is a comfortable feeling of emotional communication. The young migrant workers gather with their family during important events throughout the year (e.g. Chinese New Year, house-warming, wedding, and funeral). Family gatherings provide a significant emotional meaning for them—to exchange the message that "all is well" with their family members; to relieve any feelings of homesickness as a result of living in Shenzhen.

***(2) Attachment: being affected by the care-giver***

Besides appreciating the family network, young migrant workers also show their intimacy with, and attachment to, their care-givers—especially the mother-figure (their mother and grandmother). In their childhood, they received care from the mother-figure who took care of them and taught them basic moral standards (e.g. to respect their elders, to be honest) and their first lesson in how to provide care and show concern for other family members. What they learnt from the caregivers has a continuing effect in their later life (Bourdieu, 2002). When they become the parents of their own children, young migrant workers develop a similar pattern of parenting,

comparing to that of their mother-figure. For example, Lam, Fung and Jun try to become a good father and a good care-giver of their children—by working hard in Shenzhen and teaching their children the importance of honesty and respect. They hope their children will enjoy in a better environment for learning and development.

***(3) Filial piety: showing respect and earning face***

Under the family hierarchy (e.g. patriarchy, seniority) (Felizco & Slavick, 2010; Feng, 2010; Gaetano, 2012l Hu, 2012), they show respect to the senior family members (e.g. parents, grandparents) and try to earn face for them. The traditional expectation that male offspring will assume responsibility for taking care of their parents is predicted on the fact that sons will receive more financial support from the family for building a house and for getting married (In China, the groom's family is supposed to build/buy a house, pay the cash gift to the family of the bride and pay for the wedding ceremony). While the female offspring are expected to become obedient wives and care-giving mothers (*xianqi liangmu*, 賢妻良母). They are expected to get married as young as possible if they fail to go to university. The gender bias restricts the freedom of female young migrant workers, although they still show respect to their parents and financially contribute to their families. For example, Ah Wei and Cici, did not complain too much about receiving limited financial support from their families and

even spent their own savings to buy good things (e.g. clothing) to earn face for their parents. They also show respect to the senior members of the family (e.g. grandfather, grandmother) as well (e.g. giving them money to buy food).

### *7.3.2 Becoming the "path-finders" of the family*

#### *(1) In the footsteps of parents at the beginning of migrant working*

It is not difficult for young migrant workers to make the decision to work in the city. They can follow in the footsteps of their parents (or other relatives, friends of parents among the older generation) who migrated to the city to earn money. Economic interest is still the primary motivation for migration by young migrant workers, since they realized that by becoming a "free-agent" in the urban job market they can earn more money than living in countryside (Hu, 2012). Meanwhile, they inherit some of their parents' characteristics (e.g. hardworking, resilience) and strategy of life (e.g. trying to avoid getting into trouble, 不惹麻煩). The urban employers try to make good use of those qualities that fit the labour-intensive production or service—which require the taking of orders and obedience.

However, young migrant workers are more aware of their rights to receive fair pay for their hard work (Chan & Pun, 2009; Liu, 2010). In addition, they learnt that being new and naïve could put them in a risky situation. For instance, Ah Wei and Fung were deceived by unscrupulous

people because they were unfamiliar with the urban environment. On the other hand, young migrant workers still prefer to keep silent when they are not familiar with the new environment (a strategy similar to that used by their parents). They prefer not to make trouble or engage in disputes in Shenzhen unless it is absolutely necessary. Even though they share common characteristics and a common life strategy with their parents, they develop alternatives for their life journey—a desire for a different way of living:

***(2) Desiring a different way of urban life***

Unlike their parents who returned to their rural home when they had earned enough money, young migrant workers want to change their life destiny as a rural man or woman. Witnessing the return of their parents to their rural home land for the rest of the life, they have developed higher career aspiration. Many of them want to live a city life providing opportunities for better personal development and better education for their children. They want a decent job that provides them with dignity, reasonable pay, better work benefits and sufficient leisure time; at the same time, they want a better life for their parents, their children and themselves. As a result, they start their migration journey by following in the footsteps of their parents, and they continue to navigate urban life with increased desire and higher aspiration. They have become the new generation "path-finders" of their families.

***(3) Separation and reunion***

Young migrant workers seem to live independently of, but in practice, their relationship with their families is one of interdependence. On the one hand, they learn to live independently in the city while many of their parents returned home because they became old or to take care of their grandchildren. Young migrant workers prefer to show their parents that they are doing well—they told their parents mainly the good news about their life in Shenzhen, whilst keeping quiet about any bad news. (e.g. falling ill). Being separated from each other, neither the children (young migrant workers) nor their parents want each other to worry about their lives. Young migrant workers may find other emotional channels (e.g. their spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend, good friends or fellow workers) with whom to share their complaints about employers and urban living.

On the other hand, "reunion" with their children and spouse becomes a common expectation of many young migrant workers (Hewitt, 2007), but they cannot afford the expense of renting an apartment and paying for children's education in Shenzhen. Even though family members may find their own place to live, the family network keeps them connected. They appreciate the time they share together at family gatherings during special events (e.g. Chinese New Year, house-warming, weddings or funerals). Feeling lonely, they desire reunion with their family. For instance, for Fung

and Jun, reunion with their children and spouse offered them a solid reason to keep living and working on in Shenzhen. Overall, the dynamics of separation and reunion illustrate the interdependence between young migrant workers and their families—they are lonely yet not alone. They are backed up by their families.

## 7.4 Expectations of Life

Young migrant workers have comprehensive expectations in relation to self, family and society. What they expect to do changes with their personal transformation and social relationships. At the individual level, they are striving for contentment, comfort and connection. At the family level, they try to receive and meet as well as anticipate and negotiate their parents' expectations, and they carry a simple expectation from their parents—to behave well and live healthy. At the social level, they hope for a society characterized by justice, freedom and morality.

### *7.4.1 Expectations, hopes and dreams*

Young migrant workers keep adjusting their expectations in terms of their accumulated experiences of work and life in Shenzhen. Ah Ming provides a good example: when he first arrived in Shenzhen, he was only concerned to earn sufficient money to survive, thus he did not think too much about a career and life more generally. Then, he began to develop a

sense of hope after he gained promotion as a salesman. He gained more experience in developing interpersonal skills and he realized his potential for selling—he was talkative and persistent. He began to feel confident. However, after working in a new position for a year, he began to learn the difficulties of collaborating with others and getting things done—it was all about a good social relationship (*guanxi, 關係*). Now he has doubts about his capabilities as a successful salesman. But he learnt from the advice from books and other people. He learnt to plan things for the long term rather than the short term. Therefore, he found a new direction of his career and life—to become a trainer who teaches sales and management.

### *7.4.2 Self-expectations: contentment, comfort and connection*

The self-expectation of young migrant workers seems to be very simple—they are striving for contentment, comfort and connection:

***(1) Striving for contentment***

Having the experience of being poor in childhood, they were aware of the progress they made in the city. They felt satisfied in every attainment and achievement in their life. For example, after she was tricked by thieves into giving them her debit card and password, Ah Wei found that no money had been withdrawn from her bank account. She said that she was extremely surprised and happy at that time. She felt contentment for getting back what she had worked hard to earn. Nana provided another example, saying that

she felt a blessing after undergoing successful surgery. She felt contentment for the recovery. Similarly, Yu considered himself lucky, because he survived a car accident. He realized that staying alive is a blessing and wanted to care for others who need help.

***(2) Striving for comfort***

Living away from their family and their home town, young migrant workers try to overcome homesickness. They come from a rural environment (with which they are familiar) to an urban world filled with diversity and uncertainties. They appreciate the companionship of family and friends, which provides them with emotional and financial support. They are seeking for comfort. They want recognition and understanding from others in the urban community. They are looking for respect from their employers, their landlords the local cadres. They want their stories heard by others and are seeking emotional support beyond their own families.

***(3) Striving for connection***

Furthermore, they are looking for connection. They hope to develop social networks that can connect them to better opportunities in both their career and life more generally. Their family network provides them with a starting point for making urban connections—they make new friends through introductions made by their family members. Then they develop new friendships through working and interacting with other migrant workers

in the same community. At the same time, they are valuing "sincerity" (*zhen*, 真), "goodness" (*shan*, 善) and "virtue" (*mei*, 美) in searching for and establishing connections with others. In Shenzhen, they have to face all kinds of people, some are bad, some want to trick them out of their money or merely make use of them. They try to avoid being cheated and harmed. Therefore, they want to make friends with people who are sincere, honest and kind-hearted.

### *7.4.3 Living with the parental expectations*

As the "adult children" and "path-finders" of their family, young migrant workers receive and meet as well as anticipate and negotiate their parents' expectations. In their childhood, they received a common expectation from their parents—to behave well and keep healthy. They tried to meet these expectations. When they could not continue their academic study after middle school, they tried to "escape" from their parents and experience the excitement of urban life (Fan, 2008; Hu, 2012). However, they have to negotiate with their parents their parents' expectations and their own expectation of marriage. They may experience conflict with their parents when seeking "Mr right" or "Miss right" as a potential spouse. To avoid making their parents unhappy, some of them may give up their own choice of partner. Furthermore, some young migrant workers try to anticipate their parents' new expectation. They consider that being a filial

son or daughter provides one way to make their parents happy. Therefore, once they earn money in Shenzhen, they will do things for their parents (e.g. buying clothing, good food) as a way to show respect to them. Furthermore, they want to earn face for (*you mianzi,* 有面子) their parents in the rural village. However, few parent-child pairs can really understand each other's expectations.

### *7.4.4 The social expectations of young migrant workers: a just, free and moral society*

Young migrant workers' expectations of society are that it should contain basic elements of justice, freedom and morality. Firstly, they desire an environment that does not discriminate in terms of gender, age, rural origins, education level or occupation, and which provides fair competition. They are aware of their low social status. They desire equal rights to jobs, benefits and education for their children (Feng, 2010). Even though they are aware of corruption in local government, they still rely on the government to promote a just society. Secondly, they desire freedom to choose their own lifestyle and where to live and work (Lu, 2013). Thirdly, they want more pay, more free time and fewer restrictions in the workplace. Fourthly, they expect a society to be moral. They want to help other people while also requiring help from others. They are compassionate towards the poor and complain

about the rich. They want to live in a society with a good moral order—in which there is neither deception nor discrimination.

## 7.5 Decision-making in Life

Young migrant workers have to make decisions of where to live, how to live and what to do to achieve a meaningful life. Indeed, their decision-making is a comprehensive process of self-questioning and self-negotiation, influenced by their expectations, attitudes on consumption and life values.

### *7.5.1 Self-questioning of decisions*

Young migrant workers may regret the decisions they made, because of a lack of confidence or inadequate career planning. For instance, Fung doubted his decision to work as a security guard, because he thought it was not a decent job. In addition, he had not planned to be a security guard. As another example, Ah Ming was hesitant about whether to stay in Shenzhen or go back to his home town. He admitted that he do not want to leave his girlfriend (with whom he had been in a relationship for seven years) who wanted him to stay in Shenzhen. However, he kept questioning the decision to stay in Shenzhen—he saw more opportunities in his home town for setting up a business, but he also wanted to maintain his romantic relationship with his girlfriend. As a result, he struggled with the dilemma of

either to break up with his girlfriend or to keep the relationship but will be unhappy about working in Shenzhen.

### *7.5.2 Self-negotiation of decisions*

Their decision-making is also a process of self-negotiation, influence by the social, economic, political and cultural environment: (1) socially, young migrant workers received opinions from their family and other people they respect; they also adjust their plans according to the changing social policies related to their life; (2) economically, they are aware of their financial responsibilities towards their families and for their own upkeep; they keep looking for a job that provides decent pay, while they cannot afford long term unemployment; (3) politically, they realize their weak social networks could limit their choices of job; (4) culturally, they are influenced by the culture of *dagong*, they are sensitive about the salary and benefits at work, which influence their decision whether to quit or stay in the job.

### *7.5.3 Family as an essential decision-making unit*

Their decision-making is also influenced by their attitudes towards family consumption. Building a new house at home and caring for their parents and children are their main consumption tasks. Building a new house at home is a serious decision for them to make. With the growing competition between fellow villages, they feel under pressure to build a

decent house to secure their status among their neighbours. The physical property in which they live demonstrates their ability to protect their families. They also exercise purchasing power for their parents and children by spending on health care and education.

Besides, young migrant workers are expecting to live in a society that is just, free and moral. However, they have limited choices because of their underprivileged status in the real world. The study shows that they still have hopes and dreams in terms of striving for a better life for their families. They believe that everyone should have the right for upward social mobility (Cong, 2012; Hu, 2012).

## 7.6 Summary of the Chapter

The chapter elaborated and discussed five significant aspects of the life experiences of young migrant workers who participated in the study—context, change, relationships, expectations and decision-making. Although they are restricted by their underprivileged status (social inequality, economic insecurity, cultural isolation and political exclusion), they have upward aspirations. They become resilient in facing hardships; they also began to reflect on what they wished to achieve in life besides merely earning money. Meanwhile, they experience a comprehensive change of life in terms of the transformation of their physical, social,

cultural and mental world. They learn to adopt new roles and adjust to a new environment. Living independently of their parents, they develop an interdependent relationship with them through intimacy, attachment, filial piety and path-finding. They have rich expectations of life in relation to self, family and society. They still have hopes and dreams in terms of a better life for their families. They regret, question and self-negotiate in the process of decision-making which is influenced by their attitudes towards consumption and life values.

# Chapter Eight

# Discussion:

# Improving Social Work Involvement in the Lives of Young Migrant Workers

The findings (reported in chapters four, five and six) and discussion of life experiences of young migrant workers (chapter seven) mainly presented their hardship, success, relationships and aspirations in the social, economic, political and cultural context. This chapter will further discuss the implications for social work practice with young migrant workers in Shenzhen, China. Integrating with the triangulated information from my participatory observation and interviews with the employers, community leaders, policy makers and social workers, the chapter will apply the social work theory and practice to interpret the research findings. The discussion will begin with representing the roles of social work with young migrant workers according to their felt need and expressed need. To further promote the psycho-social well-being of young migrant workers, I propose three crucial perspectives of improving social work involvement in the lives of young migrant workers, in a standpoint of strengths perspective and empowerment: a) cultivating and mobilising the young and new social

workers in Shenzhen; b) building a supportive relationship; c) initiating a caring community.

## 8.1 Revisiting Roles of Social Work with Young Migrant Workers in Shenzhen

Young migrant workers have their strengths and weaknesses. The research results indicate that, from the strengths perspective, social workers need to understand young migrant workers' motivation, capacities, and resources. They are family-centred and rural-bonded, they can be empowered to overcome the hardship and adversity in the life transformation with better psycho-social support as well as ecological connections—to strengthen the connections with their rural family and living community. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the appropriate roles of social workers in according with the competences and vulnerability of young migrant workers:

### *8.1.1 Core competences of young migrant workers in pursuing a meaningful life*

Well-educated, wealthy and good social networks are labelled as some of the golden criteria of a successful individual in contemporary China (Yan, 2012). However, this may not apply to the young migrant workers whom I interacted and observed. I found that my participants (who do not meet any

criteria) are positive about their own lives. They are trying to pursue a meaningful life with their competences:

One core competence of young migrant workers is “family-centred”. All my research participants consider family as a reliable and stable source of security. In the narrative interviews, they shared that they were not only earning a living for themselves but also for the family commitment. They want to be a “filial son or daughter” of their parents, and to be a “responsible parent” of their children. They will respect and do good things for their parents; they want to take good care of their children even living separately.

Another core competence of young migrant workers is “rural-bonded”. With a sense of belonging of their home, young migrant workers have maintained a close economic and emotional connection with their rural homelands (*diyuan*, 地緣). My research participants Lam, Jun and Fung have their parents and children who still live in their rural home. They also have their land and house there. As born and raised in rural China, young migrant workers are “uprooted” (working in the city for a better life) but not “disconnected” (totally separate from their rural homes). Even they are flexible to settle in any places that meet their comfort zone, they are developing their social network with informal support generated by their places of origin (by parents, siblings, family relatives, significant others

from their homelands). When coming across troubles, they would firstly try to handle by themselves, then they will seek for their "rural-bonded" support from the trusted ones. In contrast, they do not proactively make use of the local support (from government, social workers or other helping professionals) in Shenzhen.

### *8.1.2 Tensions and contradictions faced by young migrant workers*

In some extent, young migrant workers are insecure, unprotected, vulnerable and they face many challenges to live in a sustainable life. They are trying to settle in the cities by bringing their families. Family becomes a core consideration of their life planning (National Health and Family Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2013). However, young migrant workers seem to become the "working poor" who are confronting dilemmas of living: a) they have a strong sense of moral obligation to take care of their families, but they face financial pressure of fulfilling their filial duty; b) they want to be respected and appreciated but they are unprotected in their workplace and living community; c) they are eager for success and upward social mobility, but they are lack of sufficient social capital, skills training, promotion opportunities, and financial support for starting business.

The challenge of making life sustainable also arises. Young migrant workers have their career aspirations, but they have realized the importance

of health since they need to make a living mainly by “selling” their physical labour. They have been worrying about the physical health of their aging parents as well as the education of their children. More important, they are uncertain about the life path they can choose for their own good. They need to develop better strategies in order to maintain financial and family sustainability. It sets some questions for improving the local social work practice in Shenzhen. How to help them recognize their inner strengths and outer environment? How to empower them so that they can provide financial and emotional support for their parents in health and their children in education? How they can gain sufficient information and feasible advice to make right choices.

### *8.1.3 Limitations of current social work interventions for young migrant workers in Shenzhen*

Based on my observation and interviews with the social workers, the new-born social work profession in Shenzhen have its own limitations to develop better practice for young migrant workers, which can be summarized in three aspects: a) social work administration system; b) professional relationship between young migrant workers and social workers; and c) service delivery and intervention.

Firstly, the social work administration system is characterized as “executive-lead service delivery” (*xingzheng zhudao,* 行政主導). There are

three major limitations of the “top-down” system: a) from the strategic perspective, heads of social work department in charge of policy making as well as financial allocation for the social work agencies; b) at the management level, many social service managers and social work supervisors are promoted in a rush, while they are not well “equipped” to provide professional and emotional support to the frontline social workers; c) at the operational level, most of the frontline social workers are young and inexperienced, and they are overwhelmed by following the demanding indicators of caseloads (*yingzhibiao*, 硬指標). As paperwork of the caseloads is a large source of the governmental evaluation, social workers have to spend most of their time writing reports instead of doing practice.

Second, social workers found it difficult to build up a good relationship with young migrant workers. On the one hand, many social workers expressed their difficulties to approach young migrant workers and to gain their trust. On the other hand, many young migrant workers told me that they never meet a social worker. It seems there is a mismatch and communication gap between young migrant workers and social workers. They are living in the same community, but are unable to communicate and connect each other in the daily life. Furthermore, in my interview with the social workers, not all of them identified themselves as migrant workers. It seems that they do not understand the needs of young migrant workers.

Third, service delivery and intervention are problematic. Since the heads of social work in Shenzhen are ambitious to expand the enterprise social work services (*qiye shehuigongzuo*, 企業社會工作), many social workers have no experience in working with the employers and with young migrant workers in the enterprise setting. They are lack of confidence to initiate collaboration by proactively communicating with the employers of young migrant workers. They also face the challenges from the employers—who do not believe that social workers have such capacity to help solve problems. Besides, the social work agencies are struggling to find a better way to engage young migrant workers in the community. As a contrast, many young migrant workers do not feel that they need help from social workers. Instead, they need the social workers who can respect and understand them, and who can provide them additional support in family livelihood and personal development. From this point of view, effective services and programs for young migrant workers (both at the enterprise level and the community level) are still very limited.

### *8.1.4 Rediscovering the role of social work to play*

Internationally, social work gets involved with the young migrants in various perspectives: assisting them in adopting to the new culture and environment; facilitating interaction of the migrants and the locals (Choi & Choi, 2005); encouraging their civic engagement (Chapman, 2002; Nash,

Wong & Trlin, 2006) in the hosted society. However, in the Chinese social and political context, social work practice cannot replicate all of the Western experiences—as discussed in the literature review and findings, young migrant workers are not only "internal migrants" but also "young people"—according to Bradshaw's (1972) four types of need (normative need, comparative need, felt need and expressed need), the need of young migrant workers and social work response are identified as follows (please refer to Table II):

*Table II: Four types of need of young migrant workers in Shenzhen and level of social work response*

| Types of Need | Young Migrant Workers | Social Work's Level of Response |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Normative need | Psychological well-beings (relieve stress and anxiety); human capital (social skills and further education); work protection (timely pay and reasonable work benefits); support for their children education; apply for urban household residence; | **Current social work practice in Shenzhen mostly focus on these approaches:** provide individual counselling; provide workshops for interpersonal communication and social skills; provide legal assistance in work protection; provide after-school tutoring for their children |
| 2. Comparative need | Need more concerns on psycho-social well-beings in the transformation of life; need more professional assistance in handling their individual and social issues | **Revisit the role of social work:** Changing from "helping" to the role of "supporting" and "empowering"; from "intervention" to "prevention" |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Felt need | Desire for dignity, understanding and appreciation; desire for emotional support; strive for contentment, comfort and connection; desire for a justice, freed and moral society | **At the practice level (two entry points of social work practice with young migrant workers):** build a supportive relationship with young migrant workers; engaging them in the community development |
| 4. Expressed need | Eager for a decent job and a healthy and better life; hope parents and children are healthy and happy; want some financial support for continued education and starting business | **At the policy level (these are the "blind spots" of social work practice):** initiate a rural-urban service alliance; advocate for an equal access to health care and child education |

Although social work cannot do the "magic" alone—to solve all related personal and social issues of young migrant workers, based on the summary of the four types of need of young migrant workers, I want to propose two basic roles plus two advanced roles that social work can perform:

Firstly, social workers can take two basic roles. The first basic role is to raise the self-awareness of young migrant workers who may not fully recognize the strengths, resources and potential they have, social workers can help them develop a better self-understanding through recalling their past experiences and the impacts on their later live. Social workers can also expand support from individual young migrant worker to their family and core groups of friends. The second basic role is to empower young migrant workers who want to make some changes in their lives. Social workers can

engage more in promoting the civil rights of young migrant workers and their equality to access public services in the city (National Health and Family Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2013). Furthermore, in terms of the comparative need of young migrant workers, who have strengths but deserve more concern and assistance in their life transformation, there are two advanced roles that social work can play while working with young migrant workers:

***(1) Social worker: "helper" and "facilitator"***

First of all, social workers can act more than "helpers", they should take proactive initiatives to approach young migrant workers. Social workers should change their mind-set of practice: young migrant workers are not merely the "service recipient", they can be the "service participant". Social workers may not just act as the "helper" by only providing timely services to young migrant workers, but they can be "facilitator" who encourage young migrant workers to make positive life changes. Social workers can assist them in reflexively constructing their individual biographies and reconsidering their lives in full recognition of the social, economic, political and cultural context (Ferguson, 2001, 2003). Young migrant workers should be considered as the "master" who take responsibility for their own lives, while social workers can more act as the

“companion”—fellows who are “travelling” with young migrant workers in the life journey.

Besides, social workers should proactively collaborate with the stakeholders and other helping professionals and in the communities. The social issues of young migrant workers are complex and cannot be solved by social workers alone. But social workers have the advantage of knowing people and linking them together in the community. Social workers can act as the mediators to facilitate the communication between young migrant workers and the community stakeholders (Pun & Yuen-Tsang, 2011). Meanwhile, social workers can be the “team leader” by calling for a group of professional helpers (e.g. medical doctors, lawyers, school teachers, etc.) to provide holistic social services to young migrant workers.

***(2) Social work practice: “intervention” and “prevention”***

It is apparent that working with young migrant workers requires not only the “intervention” but also the “prevention” to address the tensions between their individual needs and structural disadvantages. Social workers can get engaged in the crucial moments (e.g. drop out of school in rural; first arrival in urban; family conflicts) of young migrant workers. They can work closely with young migrant workers in the turning points of life, by providing information, accompany and support. Social workers can help rural young people get prepared for the urban life and working environment.

They can promote community development in a direction of harmonious cohabitation of people with diversities. They can try their best to integrate young migrant workers in the process of community development and policy making.

To provide practical recommendations of social work with young migrant workers in Shenzhen, the following discussion will further integrate with the narratives of young migrant workers and interviews with significant others. I would like to start from a discussion of helping the social workers in Shenzhen, since most of them have few frontline experiences before they work as a "professional" social worker. Without cultivating and mobilising these social workers, further improvement of social work practice with young migrant workers may not be achieved.

## 8.2 Cultivation of the New and Young Social Workers in Shenzhen

Many social workers in Shenzhen are the post-80s generation "young migrant workers". Some scholars discussed this before, but they did not link up with the influence on social work practice with migrant workers. They face similar life challenges as young migrant workers under a common social and economic context. Social workers need care and support. We cannot assume that they naturally have the confidence and competences to

work in frontline, particularity to work with young migrant workers. We need to help them identify directions of capacity building. We need to help them to realise the paths of their professional development. We need to provide them timely and sufficient supervision and institutional support.

### *8.2.1 "Young professional migrant workers": Rethinking the new and young social workers*

It is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the new and young social worker in Shenzhen—who can be considered as "young professional migrant workers" (they have rural origin and migrate to the city as a professional). The Shenzhen social work development report (2012) states that there are more than 1,800 social workers working in 58 social work agencies in Shenzhen, the majority of them are the post-80s generation (Shenzhen Social Work Association, 2012). It means that two groups of rural young people (the social workers as the "professional young migrant worker" while the young migrant workers as the "service user") are interacting in the social work setting of service. It can bring more positive benefits than negative challenges for the social work practice, because social workers shared many similarities with young migrant workers: a) they share a feeling of financial and emotional insecurity in Shenzhen; b) they are both socially inexperienced, but they are the free-agents who are eager to gain their skills and qualifications in the job markets; c) they share a common

aspiration—come to Shenzhen not only for money but also for living in a better urban life.

"Getting out of troubles" seems a prerequisite for social workers who try to engage with young migrant workers. Indeed, in my interviews, all social workers shared similar difficulties in building up their confidence and competences. Another empirical study by Institute of Social Service Development (ISSD) (2012) also reported that young social workers in the Chinese Mainland face hardships at work according to: lack of self-confidence (e.g. unable to mobilize social resources for the service users); lack of understanding and support from general public (Institute of Social Service Development, 2012). Therefore, it is important to motivate and support the new and young social workers in terms of their professional growth as well as their capacity.

### *8.2.2 Capacity building*

Many social workers in Shenzhen are newly recruited from universities, they probably do not process all the necessary capacity to work in the frontline, hence it makes the on-job training more important. They need values, knowledge and skills to foster their professional development. Self-understanding seems to be important, since they need to develop intrapersonal and interpersonal competences to handle the balance of work and life. A supportive team of colleagues is also crucial, since many of the

new social workers need timely team support and warm work culture to release their stress and burden. Besides, it is important to support their capacity building highlighted with political and cultural sensitivities to work with young migrant workers:

They first need to develop the political competence in terms of learning to balance the interests among government officials (*lindao*, 領導), stakeholders (including the local cadres and employers) and young migrant workers. In Shenzhen, many social workers are required to work with young migrant workers either in the community setting or in the corporate setting. In my observation, the political environment supports, but at the same time, restricts the social workers' activities: for instance, the existence of government or half-government units that provide all kinds of social welfare and services to the people in the community. Social work engages in community service by overlapping or taking over the duties of these administrative units. So how to divide the job responsibilities and to collaborate with each other become a tough issue faced by social workers. Moreover, control of all community resources remains in hands of the administrative units, while young social workers are criticized for their abilities and knowledge in handling complex issues (Mo, 2013). Therefore, social workers need to deal with authority and power in the community. At least, they can demonstrate their strengths and unique roles to play in the

community. They can also learn to communicate and collaborate with different administrative units to promote the social well-beings of young migrant workers.

Another important capacity social workers need to develop is their cultural competence. Social work practice with young migrant workers should be an ethical and moral practice. Social workers need to be aware of the good ethics of the young migrant workers—family loyalty, resilience and sincerity. It will shape the cultural direction of the practice—which not only seeing young migrant workers as rational individuals but also as path-finders of the family and the rural China. In addition, Social workers need to learn the group culture of young migrant workers if they want to further work with them—for example, their ways of interpersonal communication and social interaction. At the same time, social workers also need to help young migrant workers learn the culture of the local people in Shenzhen. Take CD town as an example, many of the local Hakka people are still practicing their traditional beliefs and special rituals. To learn the local culture help young migrant workers to get accustomed to their new urban life. In the community, social workers can also establish contacts with different groups of people, as well as creating activities to improve the relationships between young migrant workers and other people (both the locals and other migrant populations) in the host urban communities.

### *8.2.3 Professional development*

Professional development of social workers is also a common demand since they consider themselves a young "professional" but lost direction in the career path. We need to strengthen social workers' professional identity and development (Liu, Lam & Yan, 2012). We need to help them answer the questions from "who they are" to "where they are" as well as "the career path they can go". To begin, many social workers still depend on experts or supervisors to teach them the "technical skills". However, I argue that professional knowledge is not fixed or merely taught by experts, instead, it should include practice wisdom that accumulated and reflected by the frontline social workers in their daily work life. It is not only techniques but also involve with moral judgement and application of social work values to particular context of practice (Tsui, Chu & Pak, 2013).

It is also important to help social workers maintain their aspiration of working as a social worker—to identify a career path in social work; to have a sense of belongings to the profession and Shenzhen. Indeed, many young social workers in Shenzhen cannot establish a long-term career in social work—they found that their salaries and other associated benefits are not enough to afford the living expense in Shenzhen, even knowing that they earn more than the social workers in many other cities in the Chinese Mainland. It would be difficult to improve their salary in a short period of

time. However, it is possible to encourage them that working as a social worker in Shenzhen can provide beneficial experience for longer-term career prospects, since the hinterlands of China (e.g. Hebei 河北, Xinjiang 新疆) have started to develop social work and require experienced social workers to provide administrative and professional supervision. If they work hard and plan ahead, social workers in Shenzhen can be good competitors to seize the better career opportunities of expanding social work development in China.

### *8.2.4 Supervision and institutional support*

As discussed above, social workers may not do it alone in terms of improving their capacity as well as developing their career. They need to be cultivated by effective supervision and sufficient institutional support.

Supervision can partly meet the new and inexperienced social workers' needs for continuing education and professional development in social work knowledge, skills and values. The supervisors, recruited from Hong Kong and have years of frontline experiences, could provide personal supervision on emotional and practice issues (Institute of Social Service Development, 2012). However, many social workers also expect their supervisors to act as a role model, to help them communicate and negotiate with different parties (e.g. local government, civic bureau, social work agencies) for resources and support (Hung *et al.*, 2010). Even their dependence attitude is not

encouraged, it reflects that their demands of supervision are more than getting administrative, educational and emotional support. Furthermore, they also need professional support from the senior social workers (前輩支持) in their own agencies, especially working with migrant workers—a task full of exploration challenge and uncertain outcome. They need some practical action guidelines to overcome the frustration when they approach young migrant workers.

Besides, social workers need sufficient institutional support. It is not possible for the social workers to do the magic—to solve all the problems of young migrant workers. In practice, they face the tensions between "what is ideal" (e.g. the wish to help all young migrant workers) and "what is real" (e.g. the inability to help an individual to solve his/her problem). Hence, they need care, appreciation, encouragement and reassurance from the agency heads, the social work administrators and the community. Within the agency, social workers should voice out their needs as well as provide their ideas and suggestions of how to work with young migrant workers. Outside the agency, government and enterprise should have major roles and recourses to respond to the needs and aspirations of young migrant workers.

Meanwhile, supporting the professional practice of social workers with young migrant workers in Shenzhen requires more policy support—to provide affordable housing, health care and education for children. Similar

to the young migrant workers who took part in this research study, this group of "young professional migrant workers" are striving for a better life in Shenzhen as well. They want to establish their own family. The 2010-2012 national long-term talent development program of China has provided a promising start in responding to the hopes of social workers—it emphasizes four main tasks for developing the social work profession in China, namely social work training, salary scale and incentives, career prospects and job security, assessment system and quality control (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Therefore, it is possible to improve the system support for social workers who can earn a decent pay and gain more resources to improve services.

## 8.3 Building a Supportive Relationship with Young Migrant Workers

From the above discussion, we need to pay attention to the personal and professional growth of the new and young social workers in Shenzhen—to help them build up confidence and capacity to work with young migrant workers. To inform the direct practice, I revisit the research findings again from the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1996, 2013; Guo & Tsui, 2010)—from identify resilience as a core competence of young migrant workers, to recognize that they are bonded with their family and

having hopes and dreams. Therefore, I want to propose two particular entry points for that social workers to better work with young migrant workers in Shenzhen—a) "empowerment" through building a supportive relationship; b) "connection" through engaging them in community development. First, relationship building is not only a prerequisite of empowerment practice, it is also one of the felt need from the research participants—they need respect, understanding and support; next, since the life of young migrant workers is connected to a dual urban-rural setting, social work can proactively engage in community development to promote the social well-being of young migrant workers.

This section will discuss how social workers build a supportive relationship with young migrant workers. Through my observation and reflection in interaction with young migrant workers in CD town, Shenzhen, the process of relationship building come from "initiating" to "interacting", then to share common experiences and life goals. I suggest that social workers should build a supportive relationship with young migrant workers—a cohesive process of establishing rapport, providing additional emotional support and caring for hopes:

### *8.3.1 Establishing rapport with young migrant workers*

In this study, the young migrant workers derived comfort from having their stories heard and having their values recognized. They felt warm and

being supportive (*woxin,* 窩心) by having someone who could listen their life stories and care for their concerns and frustrations. It further shows the value of establishing rapport with young migrant workers to nurture the professional relationship (O'Leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2013). Hence, I want to further share some thoughts on how the social workers can establish rapport with young migrant workers in three perspectives:

First and foremost, to show mutual respect to young migrant workers. Social workers can assist them in develop a sense of pride and importance. Social workers need to respect them as independent and responsive young adults who have the ability to organize their lives; meanwhile, social workers need to address common issue of low self-esteem of young migrant workers—many of them have a sense of failure or self-blaming for not being successful. It is necessary to help them recognize they are important for their families—they try to earn a living and support their families. Indeed, young migrant workers are also the important members of community development, social workers should encourage them to raise their voices in the community. They should encourage young migrant workers to express their needs and concerns, as well as bring the messages to public discussion.

Secondly, to understand the physical, social, cultural and emotional transformation of young migrant workers, as well as to help them adopt

these changes. a) Social workers can assist them in adjusting to the new physical environment by providing detailed information of urban survival. They can help them learn to balance work and life, even if most of them had to work more than eight hours each day, six and a half days a week. For instance, the social workers can facilitate leisure activities that will provide opportunities for young migrant workers to develop their personal capacity. b) Social workers need to be aware of the changes of social world of the young migrant workers who are performing some new roles and developing new social relationships. Considering young migrant workers are free agents in the labour market, the social workers can assist them in job settlement and occupational protection; noticing they are getting marriage and becoming parents, social workers can help them learn to handle personal and family relationships. c) Social workers should develop a better understanding of the cultural world of young migrant workers. In order to gain familiarity with the subculture of young migrant workers, the social workers can initiate conversations or workshops on sharing the feeling of "*dagong*" (打工) stories, poems, songs and videos. They can also invite young migrant workers to write narratives of their lives. d) Social workers can develop shared goals and beliefs with young migrant workers. They can create rapport with young migrant workers by attentive listening and an active participation in their daily lives—joining their group activities, and

facilitating support groups for them. Furthermore, social workers can give advice to young migrant workers in handling the crisis. They can even work together to devise a way of solving the problems.

### *8.3.2 Exchanging emotional support with young migrant workers*

Young migrant workers do not only need financial support and educational support, but they also need emotional support. Family as well as social workers can be the sources of such emotional support:

***1) Engaging family first***

In the study, the young migrant workers maintain a relationship with their parents that are emotionally and financially interdependent. Separated from their family by physical distance, which limits family gatherings to occasional events, young migrant workers normally communicate with their parents by phone calls. However, it may not be easy for them to share troubles of living, work and health. Each side try to erase the bad news until necessary. Hence, social workers can firstly encourage their deeper communication with their parents and other trusted family members. The social workers can facilitate emotional communication inside the family—encouraging them to handle life troubles together by sharing care, social network and financial support. In addition, considering that many young migrant workers cannot afford the train or bus ticket to travel back

home, social workers can help them make a saving plan so that they can able to reunion with their families.

***2) Providing additional channel of emotional support***

Social workers can provide supplementary emotional support to young migrant workers by showing concerns to their personal and social needs. Being in the same situation, social workers can provide alternative channels of emotional support (compared to emotional support provided by family) to young migrant workers. Social workers should not take for granted the needs of young migrant workers from their own perception. They need to become an active listener as well as who can initiate a dominance-free story telling (Lit, 2010)—to listen to their needs in respectful and appreciative way. Moreover, social workers can respond to their narratives by sharing their own life stories, experiences and reflections. It is important to let young migrant workers know that they are not alone in their struggles with difficult situations. By creating such rapport, social workers and young migrant workers can further work together in overcoming hardships and struggles.

### *8.3.3 Caring for the hopes*

The study also found that young migrant workers are the "dreamer"—their individual, family and career aspirations should not be dismissed. It is necessary to point out that social workers should draw on

both formal (e.g. institutional) and informal (e.g. family and friends) support for young migrant workers to achieve their realistic goals. In other words, social workers can help young migrant workers to develop better life strategies in three perspectives:

***1) Individual aspirations***

Respecting the individual aspirations of young migrant workers, social workers may need to understand the past experiences as an integral part of their current lives (O'Leary, 2010). They need to show respect to every single young migrant workers for where they are and who they are (Mackinnon, 2010). They can further facilitate secure and supportive relationships (Synder, 2002) for young migrant workers in their pursuit of their hopes and aspirations. Social workers may not able to help young migrant workers solve all their problems, but they can help them learn to adopt to the changing social environment and to make good use of available social resources at the local community.

In a long-term, it is also important to maintain a balance between providing external support and encouraging internal resilience (Braithwaite, 2004) of young migrant workers. Social workers can raise the self-awareness of young migrant workers by using personal narrative to help them realize their strengths and limitations. They can empower them to identify available choices and know what can be changed and what cannot

be easily changed (Furguson, 2001; Webb, 2006)—in order to make better life choices.

***2) Family commitment***

As young migrant workers are family-centred, many of them may include their families in their planning of the future, social workers can further assist them in planning as a family. They can firstly help young migrant workers identify the important family members they can depend on. They can also help them decide the mode of living—when and how to form a family by getting married; when and how to reunite with their children, spouse and parents; how to arrange their children education; how to take care of their parents. Social workers need to help them plan ahead.

***3) Career planning***

The study also revealed that young migrant workers need to make decisions in overcoming their hardships and struggles in their career. Social workers can call for a team of experts of different disciplines to help young migrant workers in career planning. To do this, the team will play a role in relieving the stress of decision-making and introducing mentorships (e.g. inviting experts from different professions) to offer young migrant workers useful information to help with career planning. In addition, it may be more appropriate to offer young migrant workers accurate information about possible alternative life pathways they can follow. For instance, their (young

migrant workers') expectation of finding a decent job in Shenzhen may not be easy, since the manufacturing is relocating to the cities of the inner provinces in China. Their expectation of starting a small business may be unrealistic as well because competition in the business world is intensive. In sum, social workers and other professionals can help them explore and compare options of the career, to further good choices.

## 8.4 Engaging Young Migrant Workers in the Community

While building a supportive relationship with individual young migrant workers, social workers can take further action to engage them in the community—which is only a physical living space but also a sense of belonging and a supportive network to facilitate the life transformation of young migrant workers. Similar as other community residents, young migrant workers could be considered as an important asset of community building in Shenzhen—they can contribute their own strengths, talents, family and rural networks to build an integrated and caring community. To better facilitate the process, I suggest the following three approaches, at the community level, for the local social work practice with migrant workers:

### *8.4.1 Promoting social integration in the community*

Both social workers and young migrant workers can be the active members in promoting social integration in the community. From my

research observation, a common “we and them” (*bendiren* 本地人 and *waidiren* 外地人) identity boundary prevents the social integration in the communities of Shenzhen. The research participants (the outsiders) and the local people are lack of trust and communication. The study also shows that young migrant workers merely depend on their family support and peer support to handle life trouble. However, they got few support from the local people. To bridge the gap, in a long-term, social workers can help young migrant workers extend their social network with the local people. They can also help them vote as well as advocate as a community member—to voice out their concerns as well as their ideas of community development.

Immediately, social workers can firstly promote the positive interactions among different groups of people in the community, to help them learn more about each other and respect more each other. Furthermore, social workers can encourage young migrant workers to take volunteer work in the local community—to facilitate their participation in the community and raise their belongings of the community. From my observation, the young migrant workers, who volunteered as sending pamphlets of labour rights information to others, are having more sense of belongs in the community, they are more willing to promote the community development in the perspective of social justice and mutual care.

### *8.4.2 Bridging the "urban-rural" geographic and identity boundary*

Beyond focusing on social integration in the urban community, the narratives of young migrant workers shows that, in their life transformations, they have rich social interaction in a dual "urban-rural" setting—both the urban community where they are living now and the rural community where they came from. Therefore, social workers need to "think out of the box", to actively bridge the "urban-rural" ecological boundary (Li, Huang & Lin, 2009) and to improve their involvement in the lives of young migrant workers:

***1) Initiating urban-rural service alliance***

First of all, social workers may not only focus on the community development in Shenzhen, but also need to promote and initiate an urban-rural service alliance for young migrant workers, who show a common concern for the health of their children and parents in their home town. In response to this, in the near future, social workers can link social resources (e.g. making connection with rural health care service agencies) to follow up with their health care need. Indeed, as young migrant workers keep moving from place to place, social workers can also initiate a domestic network of volunteers to provide follow-up assistance and sufficient information (e.g. living arrangement, children education, health care) in other cities or the rural home lands for them.

In the long run, there is a need of implementing better social policies to support cross-provinces urban-rural social services, which will provide continuing family and career support for young migrant workers, regardless of whether they remain in the same city, who may return home or move to another city or return home to the rural area. Furthermore, equal education policies (e.g. providing sufficient financial resources for developing schools in the countryside, facilitating smooth transition of transferring from rural school to urban school) are needed to support the left-behind children education. Social workers can also initiate volunteer events to promote better parent-child education in the rural homes of young migrant workers.

***2) Helping young migrant workers recognize their rural networks and resources***

Social workers should not only provide urban-rural services to young migrant workers, but also help them learn to make good use of their rural networks as well as resources. To do this, social workers can initiate support group for young migrant workers to explore the resources their can use. Such as Ah Ming told me, he came from a countryside that has many excellent senior workers in construction, even he is not working in that field now, he could have the career option in the construction industry (e.g. to work as a project manager of a construction team in the future) with the competitive advantage (*hangye youshi*, 行業優勢) from his home town.

Another good example is a town in Shandong, many young people there finish the apprenticeship of electric welding and migrate to Australia for a decent job with good income (Qilu Newspaper, 2013). They do not follow a traditional route of working in the coastal cities. They choose to make use resources of their own rural community and survive in another new community.

***3) Assisting young migrant workers in making good use of the virtual community***

Social workers can also work with young migrant workers through creating a common virtual community. Mobile phone and internet are important components of young migrant worker's life (Chen, 2010; Peng, 2008). Hence, social workers can create some websites to facilitate information exchange and sharing among young migrant workers. They can encourage young migrant workers to share their information of jobs as well as living in the internet with the newcomers. To promote a better rural-urban transformation, social workers can also develop a welcome information kit for the incoming rural young people, including the tips of working for the boss, local living information, institutions and people they can seek help from and so on. Social workers may also invite young migrant workers to spread the information to the new comers.

### *8.4.3 Initiating "ecological connections"*

Social workers can help young migrant workers build up their "ecological connections" at the hosting urban community and the original rural community. "Ecological connections" is a concept drawing from the theoretical perspective of ecological systems thinking. It emphasizes on helping the young people to develop self-efficacy and their supportive network through rediscovering and reconnecting to the holistic social system,(Liang, Ng, Tsui, Yan & Lam, 2013)—here, to facilitate young migrant workers to live with their community support. It applies to three key ecological elements highlighted in young migrant workers' life transformation at the community level: people, environment and resources:

***1) Connecting people: promoting mutual help as neighbourhood***

As discussed above, social workers can first connect people together, to encourage reciprocity among different groups of residents in the community, including the young migrant workers. In a short-term, they can facilitate neighbourhood mutual help by linking people up with similar life situation, for example, to organize a mother's group for the young female migrant workers who have children to take care of. Moreover, in Shenzhen, social workers can proactively initiate social organization (*shehui zuji*, 社會組織) to stimulate young migrant workers to group with each other or group with other people in the community with a common goal.

***2) Connecting environment: linking entitlements, rights and fairness for young migrant workers***

Social workers can also try to promote a better social environment, they should be aware of entitlements, rights and fairness of young migrant workers should be linked. But more important, the government should take the primary responsibility to eliminate the negative impacts of urban-rural division, gaps between the rich and poor, as well as the oppression against the underprivileged young migrant workers. More important, there are some significant social reforms need to be undertaken, including: a) urban household (*hukou,*户口) should be more available for the young migrant workers who are eager and eligible to apply one; b) urban health care provision for young migrant workers should be reasonable and subsidized by their social insurance; c) affordable education provision for both children and young adults should be equitable for young migrant workers and other urban residents; d) secure and decent-quality accommodation should be equally available to urban and rural residents.

Furthermore, to protect and promote the urban civil rights (e.g. equal access to work opportunities, health care and children education) of young migrant workers, social workers need to communicate and collaborate with the policy makers and community stakeholders. They can advocate reduction of social discrimination as a long-term goal. In the short-term,

they can also work with the lawyers and media workers to monitor the illegal labour exploitation. In addition, they need to seek for legitimacy from the local authorities—they need to consider the mutual benefits of each party (young migrant workers, key stakeholders in the community and the local government).

***3) Connecting resources: collaborating health care, human services and social policy***

Collaborating with young migrant workers is not the task of social work alone. Instead, it is a commitment on the part of society to promote the psycho-social well-being of young migrant workers. It requires connection of all the possible support—health care, human services and social policy. Social workers can help people interact, share information and collaborate in projects to achieve a common goal of promoting the well-being of young migrant workers. This proposed social collaboration will include three levels: a) individual young migrant workers, their families and reliable friends; b) the stakeholders of the local communities in Shenzhen (local cadres, business owners who hire young migrant workers and other representatives of community residents); c) experts of all disciplines (e.g. lawyers, educators, medical doctors, academic researchers, media workers and so on).

In the short-period of time, social workers can refer young migrant workers to different human services professions to receive assistance and support in Shenzhen. For instance, they can link up the young migrant workers with medical doctors to do a body check or to consult on their occupational health; they can invite the school teachers to provide free after-class tutorials for the children of young migrant workers; the lawyers can be invited to handle the labour conflicts of young migrant workers and their employers; transportation service administrators can be asked to provide convenience (e.g. easy access to buy the train and bus ticket, more shuttle bus to the train and bus station) for young migrant workers who travel back home during the Chinese New Year.

## 8.5 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter extended the discussion of social work implications of learning the young migrant workers' life experiences. Starting from identifying competences and vulnerability of young migrant workers who need support for social sustainability, social work in Shenzhen can play crucial roles as facilitating young migrant workers to understand themselves and their conditions better, to make use of available resources to pursue a meaningful life; more important, social work practice should move beyond interventions to preventions, to coordinate with young migrant workers, the

local residents, the community stakeholders and other professionals. To better fulfil these social work's roles, I suggest that we first need to pay attention to care and support the young social workers in Shenzhen. A supportive relationship is important for social work to get involved in the daily lives of young migrant workers; from micro to macro practice, social work can also initiate a holistic community development approach to connect good recourses for the sustainable living of young migrant workers.

# Chapter Nine

# Conclusion

The previous eight chapters recorded my study journey with young migrant workers in Shenzhen, China. Based on my qualitative investigation (narrative interviews, observations, supplementary semi-structure interviews with the important people related to young migrant workers, as well as analysis of the supportive documents), I developed a better and deeper understanding of the hardships and struggles of young migrant workers in the context of social divisions (urban-rural, rich-poor and privileged-underprivileged) that oppress against them. From their narratives, I also identified the common hopes and dreams of young migrant workers—aspirations of family, economic and social well-beings). Furthermore, I discussed how to improve social work involvement in the lives of young migrant workers. In this chapter, first, I will summarize the key findings and discussion of the study. Second, I will draw implications for knowledge building of young migrant workers in China. Third, I will provide further recommendations for social policy, social work education and research in terms of working with young migrant workers. Finally, I will conclude the thesis with my reflections over the research journey.

## 9.1 Summary of the Study

### *9.1.1 Significance, research objective and methodology of the study*

The importance of the study was outlined at the beginning of the thesis. A common social portfolio of young migrant workers was further identified. Most young migrant workers are low-income earners whose health, employment and living arrangements in Shenzhen are insecure. They are facing the uncertainties of personal, family and social changes that put them at risk of poverty and being marginalized. At the same time, social support and social work interventions for young migrant workers to handle their troubles seem insufficient. Therefore, I developed a research objective of how to promote the social well-being of young migrant workers through social work interventions. Consequently, I conducted this social work study to explore suitable approaches for working with young migrant workers, based on the discovery and interpretation of their life experiences—particularly their hardships, struggles, hopes and dreams.

The literature review summarized and criticized the extensive studies of young migrant workers, which mainly focus on the impact of domestic migration and the labour market in the Chinese Mainland. It also revealed three levels of gaps to be further explored. Theoretically, limited attention appears to have been given to understand young migrant workers' perceptions and reactions to the social issues that affect them. In the existing

body of knowledge, inquiry of the personal development and social relationships of young migrant workers, which is culturally-bound and interactively-bound, seem to be underestimated. In Shenzhen, China, pervious social work interventions for young migrant workers neglect to address their psychological and social needs both as an individual and as a social group. Therefore, I introduced three major research questions based on the literature review: (1) “how do young migrant workers narrate their life experiences?”; (2) “how do they construct the meanings of personal development and social relationships”; (3) “what are the implications of interpreting the life experiences of young migrant workers for social work practice?”. By answering these three questions, I want to achieve the research objective of finding a suitable and effective way to promote the psycho-social well-being of young migrant workers.

In order to find the answers, I followed a participatory research paradigm and conduct a qualitative investigation that mainly included a narrative approach and other triangulation research methods (observations, semi-structure interviews and analysis of supportive documents). In my one-year interaction with them in CD town, Shenzhen, nine young migrant workers were invited for the narrative interviews. They shared a variety of significant life events through their storytelling. Meanwhile, I acted as not only a researcher but also an active listener and an empathic facilitator

throughout our narrative interactions. Narrative analysis (thematic and structural analysis of the contexts and contents of the individual narratives) was applied as the main method of data analysis. In addition, reliability, credibility and ethics were taken seriously to ensure the quality of the research.

### *9.1.2 Key findings of the study*

First part of the research findings was the context of the narrative approach—my observation of the social structure and community environment that affected the daily lives of young migrant workers; my interaction with young migrant workers in general as well as those who took part in my narrative interviews, in CD town, Shenzhen. Young migrant workers are living in a structural context with oppressive social divisions, including urban-rural division, gap between the rich and the poor, between the privileged and underprivileged. With a busy daily routine of work and rest, young migrant workers also face discriminative barriers to integrate into the local communities. Based on the above understanding of their backgrounds, our interaction went from knowing each other to interacting with each other. I found that showing them respect, appreciation and encouragement was important in our relationship building; in addition, bringing connections by sharing our common life experiences, struggles and

aspirations was helpful to promote a dominant-free narrative interaction with the research participants (the young migrant workers).

Chapters five and six, as the second part of research findings, elaborate the contents of the narratives of the young migrant workers. Four main themes were emerged from their narratives that can be constructed as "a concentre cycle": a) identity bonded with family; b) livelihood with health concerns; c) connection to urban and others; d) facing the future in terms of security and sustainability. By interpreting their narratives with a past-present-prospective order, I found some important commonalities of their life experiences. First, in the past, they followed the pattern of the older generation who went to work in the cities, by relying on the help (e.g. provision of information about jobs) of family members, relatives, friends and fellow villagers. Second, whilst living in Shenzhen, particular key turning points in their lives (e.g. being the victim of deception, getting married, having a child), made them aware of the hardships, dilemmas and struggles in work and life. Last but not least, while they expressed their hopes for the welling-being of their parents, their children and themselves, they had no specific detailed life plans but they had dreams that they wished to pursue.

### *9.1.3 Major discussion of the study*

The discussion of the study highlights the needs for a reflective understanding of the interplay of different life elements of the young migrant workers, as well as the appropriate social work approaches to get them engaged. Chapter seven presented the discussion of the narrative interviews. It elaborated the construction of the life experiences of young migrant workers, followed by five significant dimensions—context, change, relationships, expectations and decision-making—in the life path of young migrant workers. a) Being underprivileged, they still aim for upward mobility. b) Young migrant workers go through comprehensive transformation in their physical, social, cultural and mental world. c) They develop an interdependent relationship with their parents through the provision and receipt of financial and emotional support. d) They have common individual expectations—aim for contentment, comfort and connections, meanwhile, they have to cope with their parents' expectations on them, and to adjust their expectation of a just, free and moral society. e) In their decision-making, they consider their plans for major expenditure—building a house, caring for the health of their parents and children.

In chapter eight, I discussed my observation and interviews with frontline social workers, social work mangers, social work supervisors and

administrative heads of social work in CD town, in the topic of how to improve social work practice with young migrant workers in Shenzhen. I argued that attention should first be paid to training and supporting the social workers, as "young professional migrant workers", to develop their confidence and competence. This will, in turn, enable them to become more supportive in helping young migrant workers to make their dreams come true. I further suggested that social work practice can follow the strengths perspective to work with young migrant worker while focusing more on empowerment and connection. Building a supportive relationship was important to facilitate the empowerment. To do this, three ways were suggested for the social workers to get along with individual young migrant workers: a) establishing rapport by knowing who they are and where they start from; b) sharing mutual emotional support with them, it can serve as an alternative to minimize the missing of family emotional support; c) understanding and supporting their personal aspirations. Besides, social workers can also engage young migrant workers in community development—in terms of promoting social integration, bridging urban-rural geographic and institutional gap, strengthening ecological connections. Creating a sustainable and positive future for young migrant workers is also a collaborative endeavour across various disciplines and social groups.

## 9.2 Implications for Knowledge Building of Young Migrant Workers in China

This study provides rich information and discussions to understand and work with young migrant workers in the social work lens. In the contemporary urban-rural divided Chinese society, young migrant workers are underprivileged in terms of their low educational background, socioeconomic status and poor social capital, however, they are resilient and positive to live a meaningful life. The study found that young migrant workers are not just going through life transitions, but the "transformations"—adaptation in the dramatic change in physical, social, cultural and emotional world. It is obvious that the core drive for young migrant workers is economic incentives. However, in this study, it seems that they migrate to Shenzhen with expectations more than personal achievement and goals—an inherit commitment to improve their family well-being.

Particularity focusing on connecting young migrant workers and social work practice, the study urges that inner voices and authenticity of marginalized young people need to be considered seriously by the social workers and researchers. It suggests a practical approach to work with young migrant workers through friendship making, interaction, sharing of individual narratives as well as exploration of the past, present and

prospective directions in life. It also enhances current knowledge of interpreting the identities, experiences and hopes of young migrant workers as well as elaborating the hardships and struggles they experience. In addition, it provides knowledge for applying the narrative approach to research with marginalized young people in the particular political and cultural context of China—politically, it deals with balancing social support for and empowerment of young migrant workers; culturally, it reveals the importance of promoting emotional exchange, showing appreciation and encouragement to the young migrant workers.

## 9.3 Implications for Policy, Education and Research

By expanding the implications for social work practice and knowledge building of young migrant workers, I want to present some additional recommendations for social policy, social work education and future research:

### *9.3.1 Implications for social policy*

First of all, social workers can do more than execute social policies while working with young migrant workers in Shenzhen. They can advocate in child education and health care for the young migrant workers, since these are the two major concerns of their future life. But most important, government should take the primary responsibility to promote a fair, free

and moral society. From the reflection of the participants, the implementation of the social policies (e.g. education policy and health care policy) are poor and problematic—for example, many local officials do not strictly follow the policies to regulate the education and health care market, where young migrant workers do not gain the timely protection. Therefore, government should not only promote new social policies for young migrant workers but also monitor the execution of the existing social policies. In addition, government should take an active role in designing a better urban environment for young migrant workers. For example, to provide holistic public centre in terms of easy access to library, hospital, social work services and public transportations.

### *9.3.2 Implications for social work education*

First**,** universities in China, as the crucial training institutions for new social workers, should collaborate with their local communities to provide courses and internships that prepare the social work students to work with young migrant workers. Second, the social work students should be trained to understand the context of migration in the Chinese Mainland, so as to develop a better compassion and companionship with young migrant workers in travelling together through the hardships and struggles of life transformation. Last, the social work students also need to learn how to communicate and collaborate with different groups of people in the

community, because their service users (the young migrant workers) may face comprehensive social issues (such as request for a timely pay) that require negotiation among different parties.

### *9.3.3 Implications for future research*

First, I suggest that social work researchers can collaborate with other research experts (e.g. public health, urban design) to conduct a comprehensive study of young migrants in Shenzhen, by taking their economic, social, cultural and political underprivileged into full account. They can learn about how to provide better health care for young migrant workers and their family in the dual urban-rural setting. They can also learn how to design a migrant-friendly urban community by providing the sufficient living support to the young migrant workers who want to settle there with their children and spouse.

Second, for future studies on young migrant workers with a social work perspective, it is important to conduct the dominate-free and action-oriented inquiries by applying various research methods (e.g. participatory action research) with a greater range of young migrant workers. Researchers should also focus on places other than Shenzhen (e.g. the rural home land of young migrant workers) as well as over a longer period of time. In addition, three prospective questions may be considered: (1) What are the difficulties to mobilise the new and young social workers to work

with young migrant workers? (2) What are the particular institutional and cultural barriers to promote social integration in the community? (3) What are the financial and administrative restrictions for social work interventions to young migrant workers while balancing other services to other disadvantaged populations in the same community?

## 9. 4 Reflections

### *9.4.1 Personal reflection*

The study is more than a project but a journey in my personal life. As a "traveller", the study helps me re-discover my past experiences and current expectations of life. Resonance with the similar life experiences of young migrant workers, I realize that I am not just simply "come and go" in a city, I want to settle down when I can form a family and start a career. From their narratives, I also learn that achieving one's own hopes and dreams is never easy. We need to fight against adversities and connect with other people and the society to make our dreams come true.

As a "young man" from China, I am also experiencing the multiple transformations from a research student to a teacher, from a township in the Chinese Mainland to a more developed urban city—Hong Kong, from a single to a father-to-be. I want to be understood and supported even I am strong enough to stand alone. Inspired by the young migrant workers, I

realize that relationship with family is important and can provide a strong sense of emotional security for traversing the difficulties and hardships of life. I also learn that being young, I may make mistakes but I need to make good life choices with consideration of my family and career.

### *9.4.2 Professional reflection*

As a registered social worker, I found that social work is not only a professional job, but is also a personal commitment with four sides of the "heart": sincerity (*zhenxin, 真心*), morality (*liangxin, 良心*), love (*aixin, 愛心*) and concentration (*zhuanxin, 專心*). With the "heart", I suggest that social workers need to think seriously about the questions "what do we want to be?" versus "what do we want to do?". The former relates to the aspirations and missions of social workers while the latter relates to the steps to take and practice. Are we acting as professional social workers who are merely the technocrats? What are unique functions of social work? How to promote social justice and well-being of the people in the specific cultural and political context?

Furthermore, social workers can work with young migrant workers with a "3C" framework—contextual, collaborative and contingent. First, social workers need to understand the thoughts and behaviours of young migrant workers as well as their expectations and decision-making, in the context of dramatic personal and ecological systems change. Second, social

workers need to reflect the inner strengths and personal qualities of young migrant workers not only by observation but also by collaboration with them in handling the social issues together. Third, valuing practice wisdom contingently. Social workers should not only focus on enhancing their knowledge and skills but also embrace moral and political concerns of practice (Chu, Tsui, & Yan, 2009). It is particularly important in China, when most people are facing uncertainties as regards economic and social development, with possibility of dramatic change of policy; therefore, social workers should stay alert with cultural and political sensitivity, to get prepared for unexpected changes.

### *9.4.3 Philosophical reflection*

From the study, I further learn about the meaningful life from the perspective of the young migrant workers—even they are experiencing many adversities in their life transformations, they want to promote their family socioeconomic well-being as well as their personal development. They need opportunity, companionship and support to develop their chosen modes of life. They are not the only ones who experience the transformations, but so does the society. It is necessary to transform the private and collective hopes of young migrant workers to a solid public hope—marginalised young people can develop their positive life choices with sufficient and effective social protection. Young migrant workers are a

group of the changing migrant generations in the history of China. They are embracing the heritage of hard working and never give up easily. They are developing strong resilience and family commitment despite of unsettling in a dual urban-rural setting—in which divisions of the rich and poor, the privileged and unprivileged are widen. But more important, they cannot go for hopeless and despair, together with them, we need to keep our hopes alive by creating a just, free and moral society.

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