Article

When modern public space encounters postmodern migration:
abnormality and the making of migrant identities

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Abstract

This article explores the discursive processes of migrant identity construction through multilingual practices in the context of China's linguistic diversity and population movement. Drawing on the data from ethnographic observation, interview and document collection, the article demonstrates how small discursive features become emblematic of individual and group identities, and how such identities are negotiated and ratified at various scale levels, particularly in the public and institutional spheres. Using a theoretical framework revolving around indexicality, this article starts with a discussion on the notions – abnormality and modernity – that are essential for data analysis, and presents three examples to demonstrate the discursive processes of migrant identity construction. The article concludes that people invoke general social norms and administrative notions when producing discourses from the public and institutional spheres, and that the identity categories defined and motivated in these discourses are rigid, static and general.

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1   Introduction

As a result of economic and social transition, China has undergone phenomenal population movements within the country's national borders in the last thirty years. The migrant population, according to a sampling survey conducted by the China National Statistics Bureau, reached 147,350,000 in 2005. In Beijing alone, it is estimated that the migrant population was 3,570,000 by 2005, which is some 20 percent of the total population of Beijing, and this figure is increasing by 40 percent per year. Such population movements, also known as 'rural–urban' migration, give rise to a rapid increase in linguistic and cultural exchanges among various communities and result in more complex sociolinguistic environments in which regional accents and dialects become salient markers of identity, projecting prestige and opportunity, or stigma and inequality.

Migrant workers may deploy a range of linguistic resources (e.g. regional dialects, accents, minority languages, standard Chinese, etc.) and claim multiple identities in everyday linguistic exchanges. Their identities, however, are scaled down to and framed in rigidly defined administrative notions in the public and institutional discourses, such as media reports, government policies and school registration. What we observe in public and institutional spheres of the (Western) European contexts, for instance, are strictly categorised identifications such as 'asylum seekers', 'economic immigrants', 'EU-passport holders', in mass circulation (Extra, Spotti and van Avermaet, 2009). In the case of Chinese rural–urban migration, the distinction is made between rural and urban residents, and although such a distinction is in many ways diminishing and in some circumstances invisible, it is indisputably printed in one's *hukou*.[1] One is either a rural *hukou*-holder or an urban *hukou*-holder, and to a large extent, this distinction conditions what one can get in daily life. For instance, it is often unaffordable for migrant workers to become ill in cities where they work and live, because their social security, including healthcare, is administratively linked to their *hukou* locality and *hukou* type (rural vs. urban), which means they have to travel back to their hometown for medical treatments.[2] For the same reason, their children are faced with many difficulties in obtaining free or subsidised formal education in the host cities, as government subsidy is *hukou* related. This raises serious questions – questions of equal opportunities, to name just one category. Consequently, identity becomes identification; that is to say, the identities of these migrants become enregistered in an institutional genre of identification, which effectively strips them of access to various facilities in the local economy.

The mass internal migration and the sociolinguistic diversity of China offer us an incredibly rich research potential, and yet the discursive processes of migrant identity construction in this field have been rarely touched upon. Although a number of recent studies have explored the role of linguistic and metalinguistic

practices in identity establishment (Dong, 2009; Dong and Blommaert, 2009), little research has been found on the migrant identity construction in public circulation, an important domain that conditions and constrains what could happen in synchronic communicative events (Blommaert, 2005; Dong, 2011). I attempt to gain a fuller understanding of discursive identity construction in the public and institutional spheres where contemporary migration – a postmodern phenomenon – encounters modern reactions. To call contemporary migration a 'postmodern' phenomenon is to recognise that the migration we are facing now is remarkably different from those before. Migration used to be people moving from one place to one place; it now is, however, from many places to many places. That is what Vertovec calls 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2006). In what follows, I shall first sketch the theoretical tools – 'abnormality' and 'modernity' – that will be employed in data analysis and interpretation. The focus will then move to the empirical part comprising three examples of identity building discourses. In the final section, I shall summarise the research and reflect on the multilingual practices and migrant identity-making in Beijing.

2   Abnormality and modernity

The notion of 'abnormal' is borrowed from Michel Foucault's *Abnormal* (2003), an edition of his lectures at the Collège de France between 1974 and 1975. Foucault's work *Abnormal* as well as his other studies on power, knowledge and the historical formation of modern institutions, provides theoretical references for conceptualising and analysing discourse, identity and power in society. The relevance of *Abnormal* for the present research on language and migrant identity needs to be seen in the light of Foucault's work being a 'diagnostic' analysis of contemporary French society coupled with an understanding of how it came into being (Blommaert, 2005). In the present study, the 'abnormal individual' is understood as 'the individual who cannot be integrated within the normative system of education' (Foucault, 2003:291). The peculiarity of abnormality lies in its introduction of disorder to and its disruption of the normative system. The norm is the rule of conduct, the tacit law, the principle of order and conformity, against which irregularity, disorder, disorganisation, dysfunction, deviation are measured and disqualified (2003:162). Public space is essential to the present research, 'abnormality' is 'ab-normality', something that deviates from 'normal', producing someone who is to be corrected.

The notion of abnormality has been theorised in a different social context (i.e. Western Europe), in relation to a different discipline (i.e. psychiatry), and on a different level of investigation (historical) from the present research. Its significance for the understanding of migrant identity construction, however, lies in the social construction of the normal as opposed to the abnormal. 'Abnormality'

conceptualises deviation from normality, and describes the 'disorderly' individual who does not fit into the order, who displays features of 'not orderly', who needs to be mainstreamed. 'Order' is the defining social product of modernity, and to maintain an orderly world is the eternal task of modernity (Bauman, 1991). An orderly world is a world in which we know how to go on, where to find out, what we can foresee of the future based on our knowledge and experience of the past. Modernity (not to be confused with 'modernism', cf. Bauman, 1991:4) is an historical period in Western Europe and (later Northern America) marked by a series of intellectual and social transformations starting in the seventeenth century – intellectually, the Enlightenment, and socially, the rise of industrial society and industrial capitalism. Some theorists argue that the modern era has ended and we are now in an era of postmodernity; others believe that we are in late-modernity, 'liquid' modernity, or still in 'high' modernity (see Anderson, 1998; Bauman, 1991; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Harvey, 1990). While a comprehensive review of these debates is beyond the scope of the present study, I suggest that the major instruments of modernity are still in place: first, the basis of modernity – administratively and bureaucratically structured modern nation-states; second, the power of modern system – the institutional control and surveillance of individual rights and duties; and third, the pursuit of order – that is, to classify, to define and to structure the world according to clear and generally valid categories (see Blommaert, 2009 for an example). At the centre of modernity, argues Foucault, lies the distinction between 'abnormality' and 'normality'. The abnormal individual brings disorder into the orderly world, as his own order can hardly be categorised and made to match the order of things at play in the institution. The order is broken by his presence, and he is to be normalised so as to fit the order.

In the public and institutional spheres we encounter talks from the 'top', talks that are not restricted to a single case, but are seen to have general validity, and are believed to be applicable to every member of the social category. One phenomenon often observed on this level is that migrant identity is presented as an aberrant identity, an individual that brings disorder to the urban social norms, through such discourses as 'we have too many immigrants', and 'it is dangerous to walk through that immigrant area'. The category of 'migrant' here has been inflated and covers features of social class, regional background, ethnicity, religion, language and (as we shall see) everyday aspects of behaviour such as the way people dress. The essential connection between the theoretical concepts and the migrant identity construction lies in the distinction between normality and abnormality rigidly defined in the public and institutional sphere discourses which are grounded in the administratively orderly modern world. Rather than just providing analytical techniques, these notions provide us with a perspective in addressing general patterns of identity attribution and in understanding the identity-making dynamics in the public and institutional spheres.

These notions – abnormality and modernity – are theorised in dramatically different social contexts from that of China, and are used primarily in disciplines other than discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Therefore this article is certainly exploratory and innovative in the sense that it attempts to apply these notions in discursive identity construction in the Chinese context. In this attempt, the notion of 'abnormal' has definitely moved away from Foucault's penal psychiatry analysis, but emphasised its fundamental meaning of 'ab-normal', something that does not fit into the normative system.

3   Abnormal identities

The data I shall discuss come from different sources and are themselves of very different natures – some of them came from my fieldwork sites (schools), others from newspapers, periodicals, the Internet, policy papers, and so on. Some of the data are interviews on school regulations, whereas others are documentation. The common themes that synthesise the data of this article, however, are the domains in which they are produced and circulated – the public and institutional discourses. We enter a space of public discourses in which general social norms and administrative realities are being invoked, and we shall see that identities constructed in this space are often rigid, inflexible, stereotypical and abstract.

3.1 'Learn Putonghua before migration'

The first example we shall consider is an extract of a periodical article. The article appeared in a monthly periodical called *Nongmin Keji Peixun* (*Science and Technology Training for Farmers* 2005, Issue 1), published by a training centre of the Ministry of Agriculture.[3] This periodical has a readership of rural residents and people who work in agriculture-related sectors. The title of this article is *Jincheng wugong qian lianhao Putonghua* (Practising Putonghua well before entering the city and searching for jobs), located in the section *Nomgmingong Zhi Jia* (A Home for Migrant Workers). The author of this article is unnamed.

Example 1
Translated periodical extract:[4]

1   …it is extremely urgent (for migrant workers) to practice and to achieve a
         good level of Putonghua proficiency before entering cities and searching
         for jobs; otherwise it would be very difficult for you even to move around
         in the urban areas. It is evident that Putonghua is a barrier for rural
5   redundant labourers to find jobs in cities. If (one) speaks good Putonghua,
         one will not only give a good impression (to others) in job interviews and
         thus increase one's employability; one can communicate with people
         effectively, express oneself clearly…so that one can find a good job and
         settle in the city. If what one said could not be understood by others, even

10   if he might be excellent in his job, he could not communicate with those around him, others might feel that he was not trustworthy, and this would therefore diminish his competitiveness. Meanwhile, the language barrier prevents one from communicating with others, and hence makes him isolated, and his emotional needs would be hardly satisfied…

Analysis and interpretation

This article targets rural residents who have not yet migrated but intend to leave their farming land for urban employment. It offers useful job-hunting advice to young farmers and stresses the importance of Putonghua in raising their chance of eventual settlement in cities, and in enhancing their quality of life. Let us first take a closer look at the text. In lines 1-2, it establishes the importance of acquiring Putonghua ('it is extremely urgent', line 1), and this claim is reinforced in lines 3 and 4, which state that migrants cannot move around in cities if they are unable to speak Putonghua. The urban areas, uniformly defined as opposed to 'the rural areas', are practically guarded by Putonghua, and people who do not speak it are disqualified as dysfunctional or functionless in cities. In terms of employment, the text suggests, Putonghua is self-evidently a 'barrier' (line 4) for migrant workers: people who master this 'tool' well can impress the potential employer in a positive way and increase their employability (lines 5-8), because it enables them to 'communicate with people effectively', and to express themselves clearly. People who do not speak Putonghua well, however, are negatively qualified in various ways: he is asocial, untrustworthy, uncompetitive although he 'might be excellent in his job', and finally, he may become 'isolated' in cities because he cannot talk with others (lines 7-14). Note this dense clustering of 'abnormal' character features indexed by 'poor' Putonghua. Contrasts of sounds – Putonghua vs. regional vernaculars – are converted into contrasts of social personae, and the migrant worker with inadequate Putonghua proficiency becomes an abnormal figure who is suspicious both in individual integrity and in employability.

   This article is produced by an unnamed author of a training centre affiliated to China's Ministry of Agriculture. Although the author's voice is not necessarily that of the Ministry, the stance of this article is nevertheless in line with the officially and institutionally endorsed one, that is, stressing the importance of using Putonghua as a common tool of communication and urging those who are not yet proficient in Putonghua to 'improve' and to 'correct' their language for the sake of their own benefit and well-being.[5] The article is circulated in the public domain, and in the meantime it circulates an ideal urban image of being capable, reliable, sociable, mentally healthy, physically mobile, possessing the 'normal'

accent, having an optimistic career outlook – in short, a 'normal' member of the mainstream society. It draws a neat line between this ideal urban individual and the potential migrant worker. The reader could easily decode the earnestness of the text in offering practical advice. Given the enormous sociolinguistic diversity of China, it would be difficult for someone who speaks only his regional vernacular to communicate with others to whom the vernacular is unintelligible; Putonghua is thus elevated to the position of lingua franca in its function of providing a common platform for communication. From this perspective, the article offers useful advice to potential migrant workers on their preparation for an urban life.

Beneath this practical layer of advice-giving, however, we see a deeper level of meaning conveyed by the text: the potential migrant worker speaks with an abnormal accent, an accent different from the linguistic norms, and differences are rarely equal, but are at once reconfigured into socially loaded speaker attributes. In the text under scrutiny, it invokes not only rigid administrative notions of the 'migrant worker' who will bring differences into the urban society, disrupting the orderly modern world, and who is therefore to be educated and mainstreamed; but also the general social norms of speaking the standard language which defines the normal urban citizen and the urban space. I do not intend to argue that the article takes a malignant stance toward migrant workers; instead, the article is clearly produced out of an advice-giving intention and the advice is meant to be helpful for migrant workers. This seemingly neutral position, however, betrays its actual effects in projecting abnormal identities onto migrant workers and in mainstreaming them into normal urban society. Let me repeat, the notion 'abnormal' here moves away from Foucault's penal psychiatry analysis, but emphasises its fundamental meaning of 'ab-normal', something that does not fit into the normative system.

3.2 'Change clothes before getting on the bus'

The public sphere discourses are traditionally found in newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts and TV programmes. The invention and popularisation of the Internet, a remarkable phenomenon of globalisation, increasingly provide people with an electronically mediated platform of information exchange and communication. In addition, the Internet has restructured the public space, notably through new genres such as the web forum, the 'Facebook' phenomenon and the blog. In all these cases private voices become publicly available, and we get new genres of public information exchange that defy traditional definitions of 'mass media'. Let us look at this relatively recent yet widely spread form of public discourse.

The following example is an online news report about an incident between eight migrant workers and a bus driver. It occurred in a city of the Pearl Delta Region, one of the leading economic regions and a manufacturing centre of China. Migrant workers across the country are attracted to this region by its booming manufactory industries. The reported incident attracted much public attention and was soon cited by various websites, mainly Internet forums for discussions and debates. I shall first present the translated news story, and then focus on one telling debate entry, Response (50), which argues against the migrant workers. However, it is important to bear in mind that many debate entries support the migrant workers and argue for their rights and equality.

Example 2
Translated news report:[6]

> On 11 January 2009, in a city of the Pearl Delta Region, migrant construction worker Mr Cai and seven of his co-workers took a bus. The bus driver and some passengers required Mr Cai and his colleagues to change clothes, because their clothes – the overalls for construction work – were covered with wet paint and dust. The two sides had an argument, and Mr Cai rang the bus operation company to complain. He was informed via phone about the service regulation that people who wore besmearing clothes should not get on a bus. Mr Cai indicated that he and his co-workers initially felt sorry that they had to wear stained overalls on the bus; but they felt that the way the bus driver and the passengers spoke was discriminating and insulting, which led to an argument. The bus driver said that he did not discriminate against Mr Cai and his co-workers; the bus was very crowded and he had to act for the sake of other passengers. He believed that the construction workers misunderstood him and that this had led to the row.
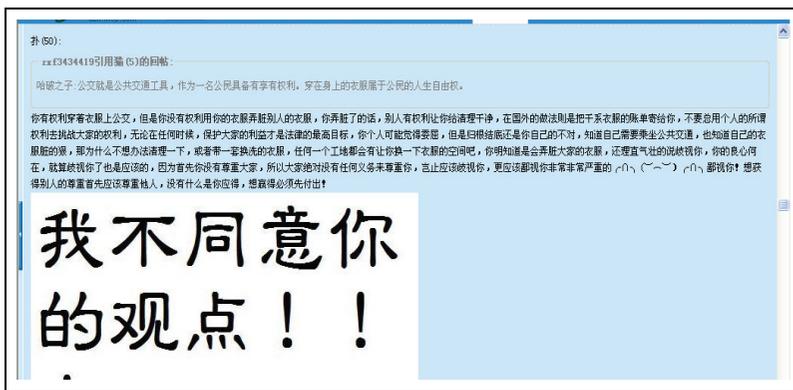

Figure 1: Response 50.
(The sentence in smaller font on top of Response [50] is a citation of Response [5])

!
1   Response (50): you have the right to wear (any) kind of clothes and to take a
     bus, but you don't have the right to make others' clothes dirty, if you do,
     others have the right to require you to clean (their clothes), in other countries
     they would send you their dry cleaning bills, don't challenge the rights of the
5   public with your own so called right, whenever it is, the ultimate aim of the
     law is to protect the rights of the public, you may feel unfairly treated, but
     after all it was your own fault, you knew that you had to take a bus, and you
     knew that your clothes were dirty, why didn't you try to clean them, or to
     bring other clothes with you for change, you knew clearly that you would
10   make others' clothes dirty (in such a crowded bus), you still asserted that you
     were discriminated, what your moral standard was, you didn't respect others
     in the first place, and therefore others didn't have the obligation to respect
     you... there is nothing you deserve, win respect with your own effort!

In the penultimate line there is an inverted smiley with signs of contempt. The
sentence with a bigger font in the white space says 'I don't agree with you!!'.

Analysis and interpretation

The news story describes an encounter between eight migrant workers and a bus
driver. The migrant workers wore dirty overalls in a crowded bus. The bus driver
and some passengers required the migrant workers to change clothes; the migrant
workers, who worked with paint, cement and other building materials in a
construction site, felt that they were discriminated against and complained to the
bus company. The company regulation, however, stated that passengers should
not wear dirty clothes in the bus. It is unclear what was said and how the bus
driver and the passengers talked to Mr Cai and his colleagues, but according to
the news report, the incident was a 'row', or more literally, a 'minor conflict'. We
could thus imagine that both the form and the content of the interaction were not
terribly pleasant. The episode might seem incidental; however, the fact that it
attracted much public attention and debates (thanks to the Internet which makes
private voices public), whether arguing for or against the migrant workers,
suggests that it was hardly an isolated incident, but rather an expression of the
increasingly tense relationships between urban citizens and migrant workers.

Did the bus driver and the passengers discriminate against the migrant
workers? Was it essentially a moral problem of the migrant workers? Was the bus
company regulation discriminating? People respond with diverse opinions. The
selected debate entry for data analysis, Response (50), argues against the opinion
of Response (5) quoted in grey colour above this message. Response (5) says 'A
bus is a public transport tool, every citizen has the right to use it. Every citizen has
the freedom to wear (what he wants to)'. The sentence in the white space of
Response (50) reads 'I don't agree with you!!' Being put in a much bigger size and
a different font, and against a white space in contrast to the shallow grey

background of the rest, it is an image rather than a text. The reader has to combine both visual and textual techniques in decoding this image (Juffermans, this volume). This multimodal sign implies a strong feeling of the author against the opinion of Response (5). The use of a double exclamation mark confirms this interpretation. This visual part of Response (50) can be seen as the declaration that attracts the reader's attention to its textual part.

The textual part of Response (50), translated from line 1 through line 13, is in the same size and font as that of other responses. It uses the second person pronoun 'you' throughout the text to refer to the migrant workers. The use of the second person pronoun, instead of the commonly used third person pronoun, makes the statement a direct address to the migrant workers and adds to the message a flavour of reproach. What is striking in Response (50) is the way that 'you' – the migrant workers – and 'others' – people in the urban space – are formulated as two distinctive and contrasting groups: 'your' right of taking a bus, 'your' duty of not making 'others' clothes dirty, and 'others' rights of requiring 'you' to clean their clothes. In this specific case the 'you' and 'others' distinction is a distinction between the migrant workers on the one hand and the bus driver with his passengers on the other, and both identity categories are rigidly defined.

In lines 4 and 5, an imperative/prohibitive expression 'don't challenge the rights of the public with your own so called right' is used to signal a command or a prohibition. When interfering with the 'public right', the migrant workers' right to use public transport is reduced to the 'so called' right, not a 'real' right. The 'public right', the right of the passengers not to have their clothes stained in an orderly modern world, is not an issue in question. It is guarded by the law (lines 5 and 6), norms and other tools of institutional control and surveillance, such as the bus company's regulation. It is the migrant workers' fault (line 6) that they were being berated, argues Response (50), for their behaviour is a deviation from the normal patterns of conduct. The migrant identity is thus abnormalised, or at least the deviant behaviour of the migrant workers is abnormalised, and the abnormalisation, here, is articulated around the migrant workers' physical appearance. The abnormality lies not in the 'strangeness' or the 'unusualness' of migrant workers present in cities; they are many in number and they enter into encounters with urban citizens on a daily basis. Rather, the abnormality lies in their transgression of the social norms and their introduction of disorder into the modern social world.

My analysis of this example is not about who was right and who was wrong; it is not even relevant to make a judgement on whether the bus driver was discriminating or the migrant workers were ill-mannered in the public space. What I want to show is the abnormalisation of the migrant identity articulated in the public discourse, and the emphasis of the Internet messages on the social order

and norms that sustain the modern urban world. The debate entry cited here illustrates the rigidity and inflexibility of identity categorisation in the public sphere, where people invoke general social rules of normal and abnormal, and invoke such categorical notions as social class, ethnicity and place of origin. In this example I also want to show that, although people are free to choose what to wear, how to speak, what identity to claim, there is always a limit to this freedom of choice making; what people choose is constrained by the unequal resources available to them. It is probably more revealing to consider why such resources are not available to them – the migrant workers could have opted for a clean outfit before taking the bus, but that tacit norm was not available to them, and their – as well as the bus driver's – choice of discursive and non-discursive activities are determined by the general patterns of social inequality on a macro level.

3.3 'But that would be wasted'

So far we have looked at identity-making discourses produced and circulated in the public sphere; the first two examples have shown how migrant identities are constructed both through conventional public communication media – a periodical article – and through a new form of communication media affecting the structure of the public space – the Internet – respectively. In what follows, I shall present an institutional discourse and analyse the construction and constraints of the institutional discourse on the migrant identity-making. It is an instance of the process stated earlier, whereby higher-order categorisations enter interactional events and give shape to them. The data are taken from an interview that was carried out on June 21, 2007. The interviewee was Miss Li, the Director of Education, Discipline and Administration (DEDA, *jiaodao zhuren*) of a public primary school in central Beijing. A DEDA holds a managerial position in Chinese primary and secondary schools. A DEDA usually has no teaching duty, but is in charge of administrative affairs and student moral issues, and reports directly to the headmaster. The management role gives Miss Li an insight into the school's problems and challenges at an institutional level. The interview is about 'the merit student award' (*sanhao xuesheng*, literally 'three-good student'), a national award system for primary and secondary school students. The winners of the award have to be outstanding in all three aspects of academic records, morality and physical fitness. The system works at several levels: from the elementary level of class-wide, to school-wide, district-wide, city-wide, province-wide and up to nation-wide. At the elementary levels of class-wide and school-wide, pupils vote for merit students of their own classes and schools. For the higher levels, school recommendations are essential. As Miss Li points out in the interview, those who are school-wide merit students for the final three years

(grades 4, 5 and 6) of their primary education are recommended candidates by the school for the appraisal at the district and city levels. The interview took place in the staff office, which was shared by seven teachers. As the interview proceeded, a teacher, Miss Zhao whose desk was next to that of Miss Li, joined us (line 46) and gave her opinion on the topic.

Example 3
Translated transcript:

1 Miss Li: …if the local pupils and the migrant pupils are similar, we could still hope (for local pupils to be elected as merit students). But they are <u>too different</u>.
  JD: You are talking about 'similar' and 'different', what do you mean by being 'similar' and 'different'? Do you mean their performance?

5 Miss Li: <u>Yes</u>, performance. (For example) in grade three the migrant pupils are <u>very good</u> and the local pupils are mostly underachieving, they were to elect four school wide merit students, the result of the election was that three were migrant pupils and only one was a local. They (the local pupils) are not as good and we couldn't do anything. Then the merit students are mostly migrant pupils,

10 but that (their awards) is not useful.
  JD: Did you mean by 'useful', for example, in their entering a middle school?
  Miss Li: Yes, in finding themselves a good middle school, holding a merit student award is an advantage for a local pupil in searching for a good middle school.

15 JD: How does it work (for middle school entrance)?
  Miss Li: (It is useful if one is the merit student of a) successive three-year: grade four, five and six.
  JD: hmm…
  Miss Li: There is nothing we could do. We only have more and more migrant

20 pupils. There are about 20 pupils in one class and only five or six (of them) are local, we could hardly find qualified local candidates for the merit students award.
  JD: hmm
  Miss Li: It happens that the merit student award is <u>wasted</u>; such as in a nearby

25 school, there is no city-wide merit student candidate this year, I asked why, they said that there used to be two (candidates for the city-wide merit student award), one is a migrant pupil, the other is local. The Beijing local pupil moved to another school. The merit student award is <u>not useful</u> for a migrant pupil.
  JD: hmm

30 Miss Li: They <u>gave up</u> the appraisal for the city-wide merit student award, they could send one candidate, but they had <u>no one</u> to send.
  JD: But why?
  Miss Li: The candidate must be a district-wide merit student for all three academic years of grade four, five and six.

35   JD: Couldn't the migrant pupil compete for city-wide merit student?
      Miss Li: *They could compete, but that would be a waste of opportunity after
      all*… no matter how good he (a migrant pupil) is, he will end up with Jian
      Qiang middle school, or if his parents are rich, they could pay high tuition for a
      good middle school, then he <u>does not need that</u> (merit student award) at all.
40   JD: If a Beijing pupil, if he has that (merit student award), he could go to a good
      middle school?
      Miss Li: It is at least an advantage. For example, if a high tuition fee is requested,
      he (or his parents) could ask for a discount.
      JD: Then for migrant pupils, even if he has it…
45   Miss Li: They (middle schools) <u>don't accept</u> (migrant pupils) at all. All migrant
      pupils (of this district) are put into one middle school.
      JD: No matter how good he is…
      Miss Zhao: Currently it (local pupils' tuition fees) is <u>all paid by the district
      government</u>, the money of the district is for the <u>children of the district</u>. Children
50   of He Bei (province), Zhe Jiang (province), they have their own money for their
      own children. It shouldn't be that they (migrant children) use up the money of
      <u>Beijing children</u>.
      Miss Li: <u>They (migrant children) come and share our pupils' money</u>.
      Miss Zhao: Exactly.
55   Miss Li: For example, if a Beijing child gets a subsidy of 80 RMB, and if we have
      five Beijing pupils, then we get 400 RMB (from the government), <u>but the
      problem is that the money has to pay for many migrant children's schooling</u>…

(Fieldwork recording, 2007-06-21-V049)

Analysis and interpretation

Before tackling the data, a brief explanation of migrant children's education is in
order. The official policy is that migrant children can have their schooling in the
host cities, but things are a lot more complicated at ground level – in most cases
they have to pay extra for primary schooling in cities, and sometimes they have to
return to their hometown for secondary education, if they ever have the ambition
to go to university. This particular school in which I carried out the fieldwork was
one of very few primary schools that did not charge higher fees for migrant pupils.
As for the merit student award, it does little to improve their chances of getting
into a good middle school in cities, and is up to the school of their hometown to
decide whether an award from elsewhere would be recognised or not.

    The content of the interview can be paraphrased and interpreted as follows.
Miss Li started the topic by stressing the differences between the migrant pupils
and the local pupils of her school (lines 1-2); she went on to explain what she
meant by 'too different' in an example of the grade 3 class – the migrant pupils of
that class (pupils aged about nine or ten) were satisfactory in their performance,
whereas the local Beijing pupils were almost all underachieving. In their election
of the merit students of the class, three out of the four candidates were migrant

pupils. Winning the award was 'not useful', however, for the migrant students (line 10). According to Miss Li, the usefulness of the award lies in enhancing local Beijing pupils' chances of being admitted to a prestige middle school (lines 12-13). Miss Li explained that the award would be an 'advantage' for a local Beijing pupil – a pupil of a Beijing *hukou*-holder – in hunting for a good middle school, but of little use to a migrant child in getting into a prestige middle school in Beijing (and as stated above, its 'usefulness' for migrant children in their hometown is uncertain).

Miss Li was well informed of similar situations faced by other schools, due to her position as DEDA. She gave an example of a nearby primary school. Its opportunity of recommending a qualified candidate for the city-wide merit student award appraisal was 'wasted' (line 22), because the local candidate moved to another school and automatically gave up the appraisal. 'The merit student award is <u>not useful</u> for a migrant pupil', Miss Li repeated and stressed in line 26. The school gave up the opportunity, she continued; they had a chance to recommend one pupil out of the two candidates, but the local candidate moved elsewhere and the school was left with 'no' candidate. This begged the question of what happened to the migrant candidate; I therefore asked for further elaboration. Miss Li's answer '[t]hey could compete, but that would be a waste of opportunity after all' (lines 34 and 35) was in a weaker voice than the rest of her utterance, which probably signaled her hesitation in giving the opinion. According to Miss Li, whether the migrant candidate entered the city wide appraisal or not and whether she would win or not, the opportunity would be 'wasted', because the award would not be an advantage for a migrant pupil in being admitted to a prestige Beijing middle school. She explained that no matter what award migrant pupils held, the middle school they normally ended up with was an under-achieving middle school that received a special subsidy from the district government for admitting migrant pupils who resided within the district, unless their parents could purchase them a place in a prestigious middle school with a big price tag, in which case neither performance nor award record would be relevant, as Miss Li indicated (lines 36-37).

Miss Zhao, a Chinese language teacher who had been around for a while and must have heard part of our conversations, interrupted us (line 46) and gave her opinion. Her move to join the interview might be a result of my comment in line 45 '[n]o matter how good he is…'; it was a repetition of what Miss Li said in line 35, but the disapproving tone of the utterance was 'visible' and might function as a stimulation of Miss Zhao's utterance. Miss Zhao emphasised that local pupils' costs of education were '<u>all paid by the district government</u>', and that the amount of district subsidy was meant for 'the <u>district's children</u>', that is, children of the *hukou*-holders. Migrant pupils had their own shares of government subsidy at

their *hukou* locality. Being non-*hukou*-holders in Beijing schools, they 'use up the money of <u>Beijing children</u>'. This argument was echoed by Miss Li '<u>They (migrant children) come and share our pupils' money</u>'. Miss Li gave an example of how the government subsidy worked, and stressed that '<u>but the problem is that money has to pay for many migrant children's schooling</u>' (lines 46-55). In this part of the conversation, both the teacher and the DEDA used emphasis frequently, which signaled that they felt strongly about migrant pupils who missed their home subsidy and had to share that of local Beijing pupils. The school was therefore under financial pressure because it did not receive as much subsidy as would fit to the number of children they educated. In much of the interview, the teachers were explaining the situation; however, no one could live in a social vacuum and the teachers' perceptions of the situation were inevitably conditioned by the wider institutional and social surroundings. This part of the interview (lines 46-55), in particular, demonstrated that the teachers were more than explaining the rules; they were stating opinions.

What is striking in this interview is the use of the adjectives 'not useful' and 'wasted' by Miss Li and Miss Zhao – becoming a merit student was 'not useful' for a migrant pupil and the advantage of being a merit student would be 'wasted' if it was granted to a migrant pupil. Both Miss Li and Miss Zhao produced these utterances as if it was a mere pragmatic concern to maximise the advantage of the award by having the local pupils, not the migrant, become merit students. I trust that they did not intend to treat the local and the migrant unequally; they perhaps saw the selectiveness of award candidates as simply a pragmatic issue. Miss Li and Miss Zhao were both my key informants, and as an ethnographer, I worked with them on a daily basis. I observed that they were caring, encouraging, responsible and professional toward each and every pupil. In linguistic and communicative encounters, what I observed were overwhelmingly friendly interactions between the migrant and the local. It was only when I had spent a semester (about half a year) as a fieldworker in the school, and my gaze moved to the institutional domain, that the pattern of inequality and the constraints of the institutional differentiation started emerging.

There are two aspects of the institutional constraints that are illustrated by the interview. First, the discourses of Miss Li and Miss Zhao on the link between the merit student award and the *hukou* localities of the award holders were determined by the tacit institutional policy, the unspoken rule that favoured local pupils over migrant pupils in selecting award candidates. Miss Li and Miss Zhao seemed to believe that it was only natural and practical to favour local pupils, because of how the award system worked – it only brought benefits to local award holders, not the migrants; it would make no difference for a migrant pupil's academic career. There was no doubt a practical layer, but behind this practical

layer stood the fact that the 'merit' student awards were not concerned only with 'merits', but that migrant identity played a considerable role in the 'performance-based' student appraisal. I do not intend to criticise the teachers; rather, I argue that both teachers and students are caught up in an institutional mechanism that reproduces educational and social inequality.

The second aspect of the institutional constraints was the identity catego-risations that Miss Li and Miss Zhao made by contrasting the local and the migrant pupils in the final part of the interview (lines 46-55). In their daily interactions with migrant pupils, as far as my observation showed, Miss Li and Miss Zhao were wonderful teachers. Speaking from an institutional level, however, they classified the migrant and the local pupils into two rigid and static groups which were not only defined by the administrative notions – their *hukou* record – but also were competing in the distribution of educational resources. One might argue that migrant children could obtain their fair share of government subsidy if they 'chose' to attend school in their *hukou* locality. This argument, which was circulated frequently among teachers, migrants, as well as in the media, essentially abnormalised migrant children's presence in urban schools – migrant children moved into cities and brought 'troubles' to the urban education system which had been devised for the local, not for the migrant. Along this line of argument, having education back in their hometown would be the 'best' (or 'normal') choice; but it appeared to me that they did not 'choose' to move back, but were forced by the institutional mechanism of the education system. The abnormality underlying the discourse of Miss Li and Miss Zhao, a discourse from an institutional level, was that the influx of migrant children into the neighbourhood disrupted the 'normal' operation of the school and the 'normal' mechanism of educational resource distribution. This perception was determined, not by the interviewees' own wish, but by the way the educational system was run, by the institutional inequality as a social construct, and by the wider social pattern and structure.

4   Conclusion

This article started off by introducing the central notions of 'abnormality' and 'modernity'. Foucault's notion of 'abnormal' was used with an emphasis on its essential meaning of 'being deviated from normal'. It has been applied in the data analysis to illustrate the construction and constraints of institutional and public discourses on the making of migrant identity.

The analytical part includes three examples. The first example was a periodical article advising potential migrant workers to achieve a good level of Putonghua proficiency before moving to the urban areas. The migrant worker was

abnormalised against an image of the ideal urban youth in the conventional media of public discourse, and the migrant identity was strictly defined in comparison and contrast to the Putonghua-speaking urban citizen. The second example was concerned with a new form of journalism – the Internet, which has largely restructured the public space. The data analysis was focused on a long debate entry combined with textual and visual signs. The migrant workers were abnormalised for their behaviour being deviant from the tacit urban norm. For the third example, I included an interview of the Director of Education, Discipline and Administration of a public primary school on the meaning of being a 'merit student' for the migrant pupils. The interviewees' use of terms such as 'not useful' and 'wasted' caught my attention. The presence of migrant children in the urban education system was abnormalised in the sense that they brought disorder, and hence problems and pressures, to the urban education institution. This example revealed the structural inequality that worked against the migrant pupils.

In all three examples we observe that modernity emphasises order; it works against categories such as migrants whose identity features are easily seen as disruptive of the 'normal' social order. We also observe, in these three examples, that people invoke general social norms and administrative notions when producing discourses from the public and institutional spheres, and the identity categories become rigid, static and general.

Transcription conventions

_	(underline) stress
* *	Segment quieter than surrounding talk, or weaker than the rest of the sentence
( )	Omitted part in the utterance

Unless otherwise specified, the translations from Chinese are my own.
Unless otherwise specified, the contents between brackets are my own additions or comments

Notes

1   *Hukou*, or household registration, groups people into agricultural/rural or non-agricultural/urban *hukou*-holders at birth, and transgenerationally, as children depend on their parents' *hukou* status. Possessing a local *hukou* means one is entitled to local resources and social services. It is usually extremely difficult to change one's *hukou* from rural to urban categories, or from smaller cities to bigger cities.

2   The situation is improving though; see http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/ 2009-02/08/content_10782192.htm for recent changes in migrant workers' social welfare status, last viewed on 22/07/2009.

3   The table of contents of this periodical is available at: http://www.cqvip.com/ qk/86404X/200501/index.shtml, last viewed on 22/07/2009.

4   Unless otherwise specified, the translations from Chinese are my own.
     Unless otherwise specified, the contents between brackets are my own
     additions or comments.
5   Relevant regulations and policies can be found from the official website of the
     National Language and Literacy Working Committee (NLLWC): http://www.
     china-language.gov.cn/, last viewed on 22/07/2009.
6   The online forum is available at: http://dzh2.mop.com/mainFrame.jsp?url=
     http://dzh2.mop.com/topic/readQues_9013555_0_0.html, last viewed on
     22/07/2009.

Acknowledgments

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