

Recasting Stigma as a Dialogical Concept: A Case Study of Rural-to-Urban Migrants in China

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores stigma against rural-to-urban migrants in China, drawing on a dialogical approach. It investigates the processes of stigmatization from two sides: that of the stigmatizer and that of the stigmatized. Open-ended individual interviews were conducted with 138 participants (60 urban residents and 78 rural-to-urban migrants) in Tianjin, China. Findings from this study indicate that migrants were stigmatized by urban residents as having an unattractive physical appearance, potential perils of disease or crime, and discredited places of origin. Such stigma was embedded in China's unique *hukou* system and generated from a social categorization of superior and inferior groups. Migrants reported a number of coping strategies to counter such stigma: blaming fate, stigma reversal and upward mobility. However, migrants did not view themselves contemptuously and expressed positive feelings about their lives as migrants. They regarded internal migration as a way of pursuing happiness. Overall, urban residents stigmatized migrants legitimated by the *hukou* system, while migrants were surprisingly resilient against stigma, and did not internalize it, due to their economics-driven internal migration. This study underscores that stigma in a given society is dialogically interdependent with its socio-cultural context and that the perspectives of both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized need to be taken into consideration. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: stigma; dialogical approach; urban; rural; migrants; China

INTRODUCTION

Stigma against marginalized groups is a global psychosocial phenomenon, but it retains its local character in a given socio-cultural-economic context. From a global perspective, racial minorities, social deviants, people living with HIV/AIDS, physically or mentally disabled people, obese people, homosexual, homeless and physically unattractive people are all examples of stigmatized groups (Crocker et al., 1998; Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005;

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Towler & Schneider, 2005). From a local perspective, the large-scale rural-to-urban migration over the last three decades has been one of the largest internal migrations in recent history in China (Seeborg et al., 2000), and concomitantly, the migrant population has become strongly stigmatized (Li et al., 2006; Li et al., 2007).

Rural-to-urban migrants in China

The term 'rural-to-urban migrants' in China refers to farmers-turned-workers who move from rural areas to urban areas for jobs and better lives without obtaining permanent urban residency (Li & Li, 2007). A critical feature of China's communist experiment during 1949–1978 was the distinction between rural and urban sectors instituted by the unique Chinese *hukou* system, which literally refers to the household registration system. Although initially conceived as an instrument for migration control, the *hukou* system was soon transformed into a social institution that divided Chinese society into spatial hierarchies whose sharpest division was between 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural' registration status. At birth, individuals inherited the *hukou* status of their mothers and were classified into either the 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural' category. Individuals registered as the 'agricultural' category depended mainly for their livelihood on their own labour and the fluctuating harvests. Individuals registered as the 'non-agricultural' category, on the other hand, were entitled to a 'cradle-to-grave' welfare package from the government. As a result, urban residents were seen as superior to rural residents in terms of both social reputations and tangible advantages.

China's liberal economic reform and opening-up to the outside world since 1978 created millions of jobs on the one hand and significantly decreased arable land in rural areas and produced millions of surplus rural labourers on the other (Yang et al., 2010). The restriction on rural-to-urban mobility had thus been relaxed. By 2010, approximately 153.35 million rural residents had migrated into cities and occupied 29.01% of national employment (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security PRC, 2011). The term rural-to-urban migrants has gained its currency to depict rural labour flows. However, it is almost impossible for the people who are working in cities but coming from rural areas to change their *hukou* from the 'agricultural' to the 'non-agricultural' category. Although the *hukou* system is no longer used to prevent rural-to-urban mobility, Chinese society can still, by and large, be divided into an 'agricultural' segment and 'non-agricultural' one. The division remains crucial in determining people's life chances.

As 'outsiders', migrants are segregated from the urban host population. They are considered as 'rustics', portrayed negatively by indigenous urban residents and maltreated at work. They have to do the so-called '3D-jobs', that is, dangerous, dirty and demeaning jobs (Roberts, 2001), which urban residents generally find inferior and undesirable (Kuang & Liu, 2012; Yang et al., 2010). They often experience much discrimination because of their low socio-economic status (Zhang et al., 2009). They are also sometimes blamed for the increase in crime rates in cities (Wong et al., 2007). Stigma has thus a great impact on the various aspects of rural-to-urban migrants' lives. As a special group, migrants have attracted much attention from the scholarly community in recent years. Numerous studies on rural-to-urban migrants approach the issue from perspectives of social policy (Nielsen et al., 2007; Roberts, 2002), migrants' economic status (Lague, 2003; Li & Li, 2007; Zhang & Song, 2003), and their poor mental and physical health (Wen & Wang, 2009; Zhang et al., 2009). Indeed, a few studies have addressed stigma against rural-to-urban migrants (Li et al., 2006; Li et al., 2007). However, no attention has been paid to the stigmatization concerning migrants from the perspectives of both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized.

Recasting stigma as a dialogical concept

Stigma, originally, is a Greek word signifying the marks that were pricked onto slaves to demonstrate ownership and to reflect their inferior social status (Falk, 2001). The modern understanding of stigma owes much to Goffman (1963). According to Goffman (1963), stigma refers to 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction', and the individual with the attribute is 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (p. 3), which, in turn, leads to social devaluation and discrimination. Stigma since then has been widely researched and elaborated, both theoretically and empirically (cf. Crocker et al., 1998; Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Despite the immense debates and controversies surrounding the issue, the literature on stigma can be categorized, in a broad sense, into two different types of approaches: individualism and functionalism. Mainly adopted by researchers in psychology, the individualistic approach individualizes stigma as a monological psychological process. Most of research conducted on stigma, as Hebel and Dovidio (2005) noted, is decidedly non-interactive, either from the perspective of the stigmatizer or from the perspective of the stigmatized. It explains the phenomena solely in terms of individual traits or psychological processes. The social nature of the phenomena is disregarded in this approach. This is a misreading on Goffman's (1963) seminal work. Indeed, Goffman (1963) suggested stigma is not merely an attribute but represents a language of relationships. In contrast, the functionalist approach, which is mainly adopted by researchers of sociology, regards stigma as taken-for-granted social processes. Much of the research with this approach defines the phenomena in functional terms and focuses on social-structural analysis of the phenomena by viewing stigma in its discriminatory actions. It places a great emphasis on the various political, social and economic functions of stigma and discrimination. This approach avoids the problem of individualism. But it confounds the societal functional consequences of stigma with the phenomenon itself. A crucial point, the individual as the agent of stigma and discrimination, is lost from this functionalist approach.

Facing up to the unproductive pendulum swinging between individualistic and functionalist approaches, and to overcome the problems inherent in the two, this study seeks to explore the issue of stigma against rural-to-urban migrants in China from an alternative, socio-psychological approach: the theory of social representations. The theory of social representations is a social psychological framework for studying the circulation of knowledge (including stigmatizing knowledge) in modern society (Liu, 2004; Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 1984, 2000, 2001). As a theory of social knowledge, the dialogically based theory of social representations presupposes that social thinking and language are phenomena in flux and that different kinds of social knowledge co-exist together in communication (Marková, 2003). As such, stigma is a deeply interactional phenomenon, taking place between people in a given context. A full understanding of processes of stigmatization requires attention to the interrelations between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized, and between individual processes and social processes.

Knowledge about people is not simply created by one group or another but is created through the dynamic interdependence between groups (Marková, 2003). Along the same line, it is reasonable to argue that stigma as a form of social knowledge about rural-to-urban migrants is thus created, transformed and adopted through dynamic relations between urban residents and rural-to-urban migrants, that is, between the stigmatizer and stigmatized. Both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized are considered as dynamically interdependent: one could

not exist without the other. Stigmatization thus should be examined in the context of social interactions between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. Stigma of rural-to-urban migrant is a collective phenomenon pertaining to a community that is co-constructed by migrants and the urban residents in their daily talk and action. This sort of dialogical interaction provides a symbolic thinking environment within which the urban residents and migrants organize their daily life, establish their priorities and form their attitudes. In addition, social knowledge is deeply patterned and shaped by the historical and cultural context in which it is embedded (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 1984). Knowledge of rural-to-urban migrants is thus shaped, not only by present-day socio-economic realities and societal ideologies in circulation but also by long-standing understandings of the meaning of urban/rural divisions and internal migration.

Purpose of the study

In the light of the aforementioned conceptual framework, the present study aims at exploring the stigmatization of rural-to-urban migrants by investigating the perspectives of both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized, in the context of Chinese society. This aim is subdivided, analytically, into the following three research questions: What is stigma against migrants? Why does stigma surround migrants? How do migrants response to stigma?

METHODS

Sampling

We selected Tianjin, a major city located in the northeast of China, as our study site. At the end of 2010, the population of Tianjin was 11.15 million, of which 9.59 million were residential holders of Tianjin *hukou* (state-acknowledged permanent resident status); the remainder were rural-to-urban migrants, which occupied 13.9% of the population of this city. The data were collected through open-ended individual interviews with 138 participants (60 urban residents and 78 rural-to-urban migrants). Participation in this study was voluntary. Table 1 depicted the characteristics of these participants.

Data collection

A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit the urban resident participants. After explaining the purpose of the interview, urban interviewees were asked the following questions: (i) What is your understanding of rural-to-urban migrants? (ii) How would you describe migrants? (iii) Can you tell me any ways that urban residents discriminate against migrants? How about your attitude? (iv) Why do you think urban residents discriminate against migrants?

The rural-to-urban migrant participants were also recruited using a snowballing technique. After explaining the purpose of the interview, rural-to-urban urban interviewees were asked the following questions: (i) Why did you decide to work or live in a city? (ii) Can you tell me about any experiences you have had of being discriminated against? How did it make you feel? (iii) What happened and how did you deal with it? (iv) Why do you think urban residents discriminate against you? (v) If you had a chance to choose again, would you come here to work or live? Why?

Table 1. Participants: urban residents versus migrants

		Urban residents (N = 60)	Migrants (N = 78)
Gender	Female	33 (55%)	41 (52.6%)
	Male	27 (45%)	37 (47.4%)
Age (years)	Under 20	4 (6.6%)	16 (20.5%)
	20–40	25 (41.7%)	43 (55.1%)
	40–60	19 (31.7%)	19 (24.4%)
	Above 60	12 (20%)	0
Marital status	Single	19 (31.4%)	33 (42.3%)
	Married	41 (68.3%)	45 (57.7%)
Education	Primary education or less	5 (8.3%)	45 (57.7%)
	Secondary education	37 (61.7%)	33 (42.3%)
	Higher education	18 (30%)	0
Years of migration	0–2	N/A	13 (16.7%)
	2–4	N/A	19 (24.4%)
	4–6	N/A	21 (25.6%)
	6–8	N/A	17 (21.8%)
	8+	N/A	8 (10.3%)

All the participants were assured about the confidentiality of their response. Each session of interviews lasted about 1 hour. Approximately 140 hours of interviews was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted from March to July 2010.

Data analysis

The data analysis was a complicated process of sense-making, which involved both detecting the actual content of what the participants said and drawing upon the underlying device that the participants used for framing their discourse (Liu, 2008). On the one hand, the analysis focused on the common content themes and the complicated linkage amongst these themes grounded in the data. Because this recognized that all participants are part of the process of stigmatization and allowed additional opportunities for making comparisons—looking for similarities and differences, an early decision in this analysis was to analyze all the interviews together rather than as two separate groups, urban residents and rural-to-urban migrants. A qualitative content analysis was applied to the verbatim transcripts of the tape recordings of all the interviews. The themes and linkages were summed up inductively from the data. They were continually created and revised throughout the coding process. Initial coding of all interview transcripts was carried out using the qualitative data analysis NVivo 7.0 (QSR, International Pty Ltd Victoria, Australia), a software program that assisted in the organization and analysis of qualitative data. The data from each category were then retrieved and again reviewed jointly by research team to ensure that the categories were conceptually clear and that no data had been mis-categorized. Each category was then analyzed for evidence of the general concepts that the researchers had noted throughout the discussion.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Stigma against migrants

Stigma is not a thing-in-itself in a vacuum in any sense, but structurally bound up with the context within which it emerges and circulates. As the data analysis has shown, stigma

held by urban residents towards rural-to-urban migrants involves following aspects: unattractive physical appearance, potential peril and discredited places of origin.

Unattractive physical appearance. It was found that migrants were perceived to be unattractive, frumpish and dowdy. Unattractive individuals were perceived as less socially skilled, less educated, low socio-economic status and less sociable than attractive individuals. It appeared that urban residents would be more likely to discriminate against a rural-to-urban migrant if he or she was perceived to be frumpish, unkempt and wearing unfashionable, dirty and work-worn clothes. On the other hand, if he or she was well dressed, the degree of stigma would be reduced.

Extract 01 from an urban participant (female, age 25 years, a graduate student)

To be honest, I think I didn't discriminate against rural-to-urban migrants. Because I understand their life is not easy. But I think, sometimes, looking down on them is an automatic reflex. For example, when I went to school in the morning, people were very crowded in the bus. I found two migrants were standing next to me nearly with four large and dirty luggages. My first reaction was to keep some distance from them. Maybe I think they are somewhat frumpish and unkempt.

Potential peril. Some urban participants presumed that migrants were associated with some infectious disease, such as hepatitis. They were afraid of germs on the bodies of migrants, who were living in poor sanitary and usually overcrowded dormitories provided by their employers or in shared accommodations with others. Other urban participants thought that migrants were criminal and aggressive, linked to crime, criminal gangs and anti-social behaviour.

Extract 02 from an urban participant (female, age 40 years, a business woman)

...When I go home after work, I must take my car from the company's underground garage. Last month, some migrant workers repaired the equipment in the garage. When I alone passed through them at night, they caught a glimpse of me. I was really nervous and scared. I was afraid maybe they had some criminal minds.[...]I knew almost that they hadn't. But I think that never have a heart to attack others, but a heart to prevent yourself from being attacked.

Extract 03 from an urban participant (female, age 32 years, a doctor)

My daughter is 5 years old.[...]Yesterday, I found my daughter was playing with a migrant girl in dirty clothes in our community garden, at the same time they were sharing a peach with their dirty hands. I was very angry, and then lead my daughter home and warned her not to play with the migrant girl. I gave a bath to her at once, because I was afraid she would be sick or infected with disease.

Discredited places of origin. Stigma against migrants was also shaped by the social construction of different locales, given that different provinces have different reputations in China. Some urban participants were worried about HIV/AIDS when in contact with migrants who originated from Henan province, which was severely affected by the AIDS epidemic. Migrants from Xinjiang Province were associated with thief, violence and other derogatory terms, as teenagers from Xinjiang engaged in frequent acts of theft.

Extract 04 from an urban participant (male, age 49 years, an employer from a restaurant)

When our restaurant recruits workers, wherever applicants came from, we would like to do a health check-up for them. But if an applicant comes from Henan province, we want to add a HIV testing. This test needs more money, but I will feel relieved.

The causes of stigmatizing migrants

It is evident in the data that stigma against migrants is embedded in China's unique *hukou* system and that there was the dialogical interdependence between urban residents as the

stigmatizer and rural-to-urban migrants as the stigmatized. It is in the context of interaction between social process and individual process, and between urban residents and migrants, that stigma against migrants is generated.

Legitimizing stigma. The data analysis showed that the *hukou* system played a central role in legitimating stigma against *migrants*. The sharp cleavage between urban and rural citizens created by the *hukou* system denies migrants permanent urban residency rights and many of the associated social benefits. As a consequence, urban residents expressed that it was reasonable that rural migrants were not treated equally because of their rural *hukou* status, whereas migrants had no choice but to face with discriminatory access to urban facilities and opportunities in housing, employment, education and health care. It is thus the unequal system that stigmatized rural-to-urban migrants.

Extract 05 from an urban participant (male, age 53 years, a businessman)

Urban dwellers enjoy a range of social, economic and cultural benefits, while migrants, the majority of the Chinese population, are treated as second-class residents. If you come to a city without an urban permit, you'll have a lot of problems. You get paid less. Your children don't have the same education rights and it's hard to get any welfare.

Extract 06 from a rural-to-urban participant (male, age 40 years, a hawker, has lived in the city for 8 years)

My family members were all born in the countryside. Although we now all live in the city, we have to pay much more for children's education and other things because our *hukou* are rural. [. . .]I hope my son does not end up like me.[. . .]I hope to give him a better life.

Differentiating between superior and inferior groups. Despite the fact that rural-to-urban migrants become an integral part of urban everyday life, the distinction between ingroup and outgroup was salient in the process of social interaction between urban residents and migrants. From the perspective of urban residents, rural-to-urban migrants were represented as a socially inferior group and were linked with aggressive, fatuity, old-fashioned and conservative. The boundary between the two groups was thus created.

Extract 07 from an urban participant (male, age 52 years, an officer)

I can't bear migrants' low education and bad habits. For example, some migrants often spit everywhere. One day, I saw a migrant piss alongside of the grass at night. In the summer, I found that some migrants stopped at the water pipe in the grass lane and tried to cool down him. And then, they lie down in the grass to have a moon-break. In fact, some workers were watering the grass and flowers. So, these behaviours were so rude. Of course, I understand their hard life, but they should study some good ways to improve their comprehensive qualities.

On the other hand, stigmatization experienced by rural-to-urban migrants was also originated from their direct personal contact with urban population. Migrants felt that they were socially segregated from the urban society, although they physically resided in the city. There were very limited social intercourses between rural-to-urban and local urban residents. Migrants had no choice but had to interact with their fellow migrants at a daily basis. The sense of social exclusion further intensified boundary between the two groups.

Extract 08 from a rural-to-urban participant (female, age 29 years, a barber in a little tonsorial shop)

When I first came here, I was very lonely. I felt the urban crowd were busy everyday. If I talked to someone, they answered my questions on their guard. So, I knew they are different to me. These residents are polite to us on the surface. However, to be honest, they think they are superior to us.

When I was shopping with my sister in a department shop, those salespeople often thought we had not enough money to pay these clothes. Although they said nothing, I still understood the meaning in their eyes.[. . .]I found that it is difficult to make friends with them. My friends are almost all migrants and we are persons in the same world.

Living with stigma: struggle for a better life

Facing with stigma posed by the *hukou* system and by urban residents, migrants responded rather ambivalent. On the one hand, they actively took a number of strategies to cope with stigma; on the other hand, they did not view themselves contemptuously but regarded internal migration as a way of pursuit of happiness.

Coping with stigma. Migrants are not simply the passive recipients of stigma but the active agents of coping with stigma. It is found that the following three different coping strategies were used by migrants to make sense of their negative experiences in daily life.

- (a) Blaming fate. When migrants encountered unfair treatments from urban residents, they attributed their negative experience to external and uncontrollable factors, such as the fate imposed by the *hukou* system, rather than themselves. For instance, a migrant participant said, 'this is my fate, which is decided at birth and can not be changed.' In this way, their self-esteem was restored.
- (b) Stigma reversal. According to Killian (1985), 'stigma reversal refers to the imputation of guilt and moral inferiority to the members of a dominant group on the basis of descent when the moral justification of the group's position of advantage is being redefined.' Indeed, migrants recognized the differentness between urban residents and themselves. Some migrant participants not only disavowed the perspectives of urban residents regarding stigma but also imposed their own version of stigma on urban residents. For example, a migrant participant who worked in a bar said, 'the people in the city are not good. They are very cold each other. They often think us poor, ignorant, greedy and lazy. In fact, they would do anything mercenary. In this bar, they cheated each other every night. Rather, we are more kind and simple-hearted.' In this way, migrants use moral discourse to maintain a sense of superiority to urban residents.
- (c) Striving for upward mobility. Indeed, there are a few channels by which one can convert from an agricultural to a non-agricultural *hukou* status; for instance, recruitment for enrollment in an institution of higher education, migrants pinned hopes on their offspring to change their identifications by their own effort. For example, a female migrant participant said, 'I hope my son to receive higher education in the future. Well then, he will be an urban resident, and work, live and marry in the city. Consequently, my grandchildren will also change their rural identifications.'

Migration as a way of pursuing happiness. Previous study indicated that many members of a stigmatized group tend to view themselves contemptuously (Heatherton et al., 2000). However, the present study showed the opposite. Migrants did not express bitterness or unhappiness about their urban lifestyle and did not feel stigma as intensely as one might expect, despite the fact that they were stigmatized by urban residents. Rather, they felt that they had a good life in the city and that their success was dependent on their own hard work. Many rural-to-urban migrants lived in shabby places and were often treated unfairly in the city, but they believed that they could benefit from the temporary social mobility. These benefits came in the form of increased employment opportunities and increased income.

Exact 09 from a rural-to-urban participant (female, age 36 years, married)

I am now satisfied with my life although sometimes we are discriminated against. In the past, we had been living a hard life. I could not even afford the children's educational fees. Once a farmer in Hebei province, I came to Tianjin for a job two years ago. I first worked as a waitress in a restaurant near NanKai University with a monthly salary of six hundred yuan. Later I attained a position as head waitress in that restaurant. My salary was doubled, and I became the economic pillar of my family[. . .]. My family in the country is building a new house. Other neighbour peasants in our countryside are envious of me. So, I don't care about urban residents' attitude to me, saving money is most important to me.

A reason for such positive experience was that migrants tended to compare their living conditions with those who were still living and working in their home villages, rather than with their urban counterparts, and compared their current living conditions with those of the past. They tended to attribute their lower socio-economic status and unfair treatment to their poor education and low work ability rather than social injustice. Despite the fact that migrants were discriminated against in social security because of their rural identification, migrants paid little attention to that and were instead trying their best to achieve direct and more important goals, such as better working opportunities and incomes.

Exact 10 from a rural-to-urban participant (male, age 46 years, construction worker)

To be honest, I often look down on my friends that still live in the country. If I didn't come here eight years ago, maybe I would be in the country all my life.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, the present study showed that rural-to-urban migrants were stigmatized by urban residents because of their unattractive physical appearance, potential perils of disease or crime, and discredited places of origin. Such stigma was embedded in China's unique *hukou* system and generated from social categorization of superior and inferior groups. Migrants reported a number of coping strategies to counter such stigma: blaming fate, stigma reversal and upward mobility. However, migrants did not view themselves contemptuously and expressed positive feelings about their lives as migrants. They regarded internal migration as a way of pursuing happiness. Overall, urban residents stigmatized migrants legitimated by the *hukou* system, while migrants were surprisingly resilient against stigma, and did not internalize it, due to their economics-driven internal migration. The results highlight that stigma is a context-specific and relationship-specific phenomenon (Major & O'Brien, 2005, p.395).

It is evident in our findings that stigma against rural-to-urban migrant is socially constructed in a Chinese context. Stigma against marginalized groups is indeed a global psychosocial phenomenon. However, stigma is also a historical, communicative and cultural phenomenon. It takes different forms from one culture to another. A significant feature of Chinese culture is its emphasis on a harmonious society and the appropriate arrangement of social relationships. The harmony of society in traditional Chinese thought is based on hierarchical and unequal relations in which each individual occupied a proper place. The hierarchical and unequal relations in contemporary Chinese society is further instituted by its unique *hukou* system, which categorizes those who originate from urban areas as a socially advantaged group and categorizes those who originate from urban areas as a socially disadvantaged group. As a way of life, the *hukou* system has already transformed itself into a culture, a history and a reality, and exerted a profound influence upon intergroup relations between urban residents and rural-to-urban migrant. Although millions of villagers have migrated to work in

cities with the relaxation of rural-to-urban mobility from the 1980s, the *hukou* system necessary for a change of permanent residence is still in force. For rural-to-urban migrants, the *hukou* system is seen as ‘an invisible hand’, which places them in a stigmatized group. It is thus arguable that the study of stigma must put an emphasis on the dialogical relationship between social morphology and their corresponding forms of social knowledge of stigma.

The present study also shows that stigma against rural-to-urban migrants involves a dialogical triad of urban residents/rural-to-urban migrants/rural *hukou* status. This dialogical triad is the basic unit of stigma against migrants. Stigma against migrants would not make any sense without this dialogical triad. It is crucial to make a distinction between urban resident as the stigmatizer and rural-to-urban migrants as the stigmatized. As the unity of opposites, urban residents and rural-to-urban migrants are dialogically related to each other not only in social relations through such avenues as public spaces, employment and educational institutions but also in communicative relations through face-to-face exchange and mass media. It is through such social interactions that urban residents stigmatize rural-to-urban migrants. On the other hand, because of the divergence in perspective between actors and observers (Farr & Anderson, 1983), living with stigma, migrants do not view themselves contemptuously but regarded internal migration as a way of upward social mobility, for the pursuit of happiness. It is thus essential to approach stigma from the perspectives of both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized.

Moreover, the interdependence of urban residents and rural-to-urban migrants is, at the same time, entwined with, and mediated by, a third party, rural *hukou* status. Like a patient trusts a medical doctor because of the certificate he or she has been awarded, urban residents stigmatize against migrants because they hold rural *hukou* status (Kuang & Liu, 2012), which ‘labels’ them as the inferior and undesirable. At first glance, our data seem to suggest that migrants are stigmatized because of their negative attributes such as unattractive physical appearance, potential peril and discredited places of origin. However, a further analysis indicates that to make sense of stigma against migrants, it is critical to attribute these superficially negative attributes to the rural *hukou* status of migrants. Therefore, urban residents, rural-to-urban migrants and rural *hukou* status are the co-authors of stigma against rural-to-urban migrants. In this sense, it is also essential to recast stigma as dialogical concept that involves the triad of ego-alter-object (Marková, 2003; Moscovici, 1984). By doing so, the study of stigma will avoid the potential pitfalls of individualism and functionalism.

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