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—Special Issue—

Suspension: Complexed Developments and Hypermobility In and From China

Guest Editor: Biao Xiang

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Pacific Affairs is delighted to announce the 19th
William L. Holland Prize

for the best article published in Volume 93 (2020) is awarded to:



Jaeyoun Won

for his article published in Vol. 93, No. 3

**THE MAKING OF POST-SOCIALIST
CITIZENS IN SOUTH KOREA?: THE
CASE OF BORDER CROSSERS FROM
NORTH KOREA**

How are North Koreans border crossers re-made into citizens upon their arrival in South Korea? Jaeyoun Won's Holland Prize-winning article addresses this question through a focus on the re-education process undertaken at the Hanawon, officially known as the Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees. Combining a rich base of empirical information, gathered via long-term interactions with North Korean border crossers, deep dives into South Korean government documents, and engagement with a judicious range of secondary sources; a clearly outlined conceptual framework; and an explicit methodological approach, it provides insights on the specifics of "individual resilience" preached in the Hanawon, and also flags the larger implications of normalization of core values in the process of citizen-making in general.

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The William L. Holland Prize is awarded annually for an outstanding article published in *Pacific Affairs* during the preceding year that, in the opinion of the Editorial Board, best reflects the ideals of long-time editor Bill Holland in promoting international understanding of the spaces, practices, and peoples of Asia and the Pacific. We look for articles based on strong empirical research, preferably displaying a full awareness of local conditions, languages, and sources; argumentation that engages with a range of theoretical and comparative literature, and contains clear potential for cross-disciplinary appeal; and writing that is clear and cogent and appealing to specialists and generalists alike.

This article may be viewed at: pacificaffairs.ubc.ca

INTRODUCTION

Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World

Biao Xiang

ABSTRACT

“Suspension” is the translation of the Chinese term *xuanfu*, which has been widely used in public discussions in China since the mid-2010s. Suspension indicates a state of being in which people move frequently, conduct intensive labour, and pause routine life—in order to benefit fast and then quickly escape. People keep moving, with no end in sight, instead of changing their current conditions, of which they disapprove. As a result, frantic entrepreneurial energy coexists with political resignation. Suspension is a life strategy, a multitude of experiences, a feeling—and now, a keyword: a crystallized consciousness with which the public problematize their experiences. This special issue develops this term into an analytical approach based on ethnographic research involving labour migrants in and from China. This approach turns migration into a basis for critical analyses on issues far beyond it; enables co-research between researchers, migrants, and the broader public; and seeks to cultivate agency for change among actors. This introductory essay, based on the author’s long-term field research and public engagement, outlines why we need such an approach, and how we might develop it.

Keywords: suspension, hypermobility, agency, problematization, complexed development, the present, compressed modernity, *jiujie*, *xuanfu*

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The working population in the Chinese private sector is exceedingly mobile. Many people change jobs and residences every few years.¹ Rural-urban migrants, for instance, move to a new job on average every two years. The younger the workers are, the more frequently they move.

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This special issue is an outcome of a conference held in September 2018, University of Oxford, which was part of the project Immigration and the Transformation of Chinese Society, funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), United Kingdom.

¹ China Academy of Human Resources, *Zhongguo renli ziyuan fazhan baogao* [China human resources development report] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2013), 5.

Migrants born after 1980 change jobs every 1.5 years, compared to 4.2 years among those born before 1980. Women change jobs more frequently than men, every 1.6 years compared to 2.3.² Hypermobility is not entirely new. According to a survey that my colleagues and I conducted in 1994 in the Pearl River Delta (south China), factories there lost 5 percent of their workforce every month, with an overall turnover rate of two years. To retain workers, some factories charged bonds and withheld two months' wages during the first two years, which means that workers would lose out on both if they left within two years. But these measures had little impact, and migrants kept moving.³ Hypermobility is not unique to rural-urban migrants: international outmigration is often an extension of hypermobility inside of China;⁴ those who returned from overseas continued their migratory journeys both in China and across borders.⁵ With the rise of the gig economy worldwide, labour hypermobility is now a global phenomenon.

Labour hypermobility is more than a migration pattern or a manifest of industrial relations. It is part of a prevalent condition of being, which we call "suspension." In suspension, people move frequently and work tirelessly in order to benefit from the present as much as possible, and escape from it as quickly as they can. It follows the motto: "Make as much [money] as you can now, then move on quickly." Little energy is invested in systemic changes here and now, as people keep moving without an end in sight. The condition is structurally compelled but also self-inflicted. It partly explains why we see tremendous entrepreneurial energy in daily life in China but few bottom-up initiatives for social and political change. The Chinese public constantly feel that they are on the edge of major changes, given the accumulated contradictions; but again and again, life moves on and things remain the same. Few improvements have been achieved in labour relations, civic participation, or economic equity in China over the last two decades.⁶ Globally, the working and living conditions of migrant workers have probably deteriorated over the same period.

Where is the agency of historical change in this hypermobile world in

² Tsinghua University Research Team, Department of Sociology, *Nongmingong duangonghua jiuqie qushi yanjiu baogao* [A research report on migrant workers' short-termism trend in employment], 8 February 2012, available at <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/617e2c34b90d6c85ec3ac670.html>, last accessed 24 May 2019.

³ Biao Xiang, "Dongzhen minggong: tiaocao," [Migrant workers in Dong Town no. 3: jump ships], *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu* Issue III (1998): 40–42.

⁴ Yang Wei, this issue.

⁵ Biao Xiang, "Pocketed Proletarianization: Why There Is No Labor Politics in the 'World's Factory,'" in *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Non-citizenship*, eds. Catherine Ramirez, Sylvanna Falcon, Juan Poblete, Steven McKay, Felicity Amaya Schaeffer (Rutgers University Press, 2021).

⁶ Although there were improvements in formal legislations regarding labour rights since 2002 in China, they are poorly implemented in the local contexts. See Eli Friedman, *Insurgency Trap: Labor Politics in Postsocialist China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). Since 2019, the poor working conditions in the service sector, especially in the high-tech industry, have attracted wide attention in the Chinese social media.

suspension? Such agency—the will and the capacity to problematize the present, to envision a different collective future, and to chart a journey that starts from here and now—has to be found among the mobile labouring population. No one can predict, let alone design, when they will become a subject of historical change, and in what form. But we know one thing. Historical experience and social theories teach us that a critical awareness of one's life experiences—of how one's energy is channelled on a daily basis, what efforts one thinks are worth making and what not, and why—is crucial for subject transformation. In developing such awareness, academic theories are indispensable but not enough. Formal theories, such as those on neoliberalism, precariousness, or social exclusion, often explain *away* rather than *within* problems. Theories sort phenomena into a neat order and provide general assessments (“too much inequality”), but fall short in capturing how people feel, calculate, and struggle inside the practices. As such they cannot provide actors with new eyes to examine their own lives as they unfold.

More documentation about life experiences alone is not sufficient for this purpose either. There is no shortage of scholarly attention to people's subjective experiences. Indeed, subjectivity has been a focus of social research in the West since the 1960s, as most clearly represented by the Foucauldian approach. Migration studies have documented migrants' daily experiences about exploitation and discrimination, as well as celebrated their creativity and resilience. In this special issue we engage with this body of work extensively, but we also recognize the distance of this knowledge to migrants' self-understanding. One strand of this literature is what Sherry Ortner calls “dark anthropology,” or what Robbins describes as the anthropology on the “suffering subject”—research that legitimizes itself by highlighting the research subjects' miseries.⁷ Do migrants need anthropologists to tell them that migrants are suffering? Why would anybody feel empowered by reading themselves being represented as “misery porn”?⁸ Robbins calls for more attention to “the good”: care, love, and agency. But migrants know that they care and love. They know their experiences. They want tools that help to articulate the contradictions in their lives, and to figure out the shapes and causes of the problems that they face—in the way they experience them.

How ironic: the shift from system to subject as a focus of scholarly inquiry is accompanied by disengagement from subjects themselves. Earlier system analyses, particularly in the Marxian tradition, mobilized the public. Although removed from people's direct experiences, the analyses spoke to the people, and sometime even transformed them. They said things that people found useful in examining their experiences. Today, sophisticated renderings of

⁷ Sherry B. Ortner, “Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 1 (2016): 47–73; Joel Robbins, “Beyond the suffering subject: Toward an anthropology of the good,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 19, no. 3 (2013): 447–496.

⁸ Ortner, “Dark anthropology,” 62; Tobias Kelly, “A life less miserable?” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 1 (2013): 213–216.

subjectivities are so convoluted and intellectualized that few outside of the cult understand. *Can academic examination of subjectivities contribute to actors' reflections on their own subjectivities?*

It is to this end that we experiment with the notion of “suspension.” We wish to develop an approach that will open migration up as a lens for developing general social critiques, and, more importantly, facilitating migrants’ problematization of their experiences and the larger contexts. “Suspension” is the translation of the Chinese term *xuanfu*, literally “hanging and floating.” This term can be explained more clearly through images than words. A typical image of *xuanfu* is one of a hummingbird frantically vibrating its wings, striving to sustain itself in the air. The bird struggles hard but moves nowhere, yet it is incapable of landing. People keep moving, but do not engage with the present critically. We take suspension as the central trope for our inquiry based on a simple reason: the Chinese public, including migrants, are already using suspension as a keyword to reflect on their lives. Although I was probably the first to use *xuanfu* in this sense, the term acquired a life of its own.⁹ Its popularity, totally unexpected to me, makes perfect sense in retrospective: it speaks to the public. *Xuanfu* gives people a vocabulary to point to what has concerned them for a long time. Among the numerous comments that I received on a 2014 interview by a web-based magazine, one reader remarked that the notion “touches my wound”; another commented that the word “pointed through the window paper”—with light suddenly pouring through.

Suspension is widely used because the notion resonates with people’s *demand* to problematize their life experiences. The desire to point out that something in life is wrong and needs to be changed, is the most powerful, yet often neglected, form of agency among actors. This desire is of course vague and fragile, constantly suppressed by the hegemony. But it is always there. It is the other, arguably more agentive, side of how people ingeniously take immediate advantage of a given circumstance. “What else can we do?” The migrants whom I interviewed often said so with a heavy sigh. We can interpret this as a sign of passivity, but also, we can listen to this as an outcry demanding explanations of how the unjust condition became a trap: Why is there no alternative? We can rationalize how people get by as a manifest of agency, or we can delve into their discontent with the status quo and their desire to do things differently to see agency of a different kind. Suspension

⁹ Biao Xiang, “Chinese people are like hummingbird, vibrating wings in order to suspend themselves in the air.” Interview by *Interface*, 17 December 2014, <http://www.jiemian.com/article/215429.html>. An online lecture by me on suspension was downloaded 20,000 times between 8 November and 10 December 2019, even behind a paywall, <https://www.ximalaya.com/jiaoyu/29648636/218163126>. A more recent video interview that touched on related topics was watched 30 million times on Tencent and 60,000 times on YouTube in the first two weeks (28 November–10 December 2019). The video can be viewed on Tencent (<https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc00200c5sxk4p/o3026pze76s.html?>), and on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj0HuHJMcl>). I thank Beryl Liu, co-founder of Matters Lab Limited, for collecting the data.

is a term for problematization. The term summarizes experiences in a way that demands pause, reflection, examination, and explanation.

The term suspension also resonates with the public because it connects experiences across groups. My own relation to this term is telling. I first used the word in 1995 to describe migrant workers' structural position in Chinese society: the rural-urban migrants could not settle down in the city, nor could they return to the countryside; thus, they were suspended between the rural-urban divide (this form of suspension has changed significantly especially after the early 2000s—see Sier and Zhan in this issue).¹⁰ Twenty years later, the term came to my mind when I was trying to summarize the living conditions that many Chinese experienced, including myself as a migrant academic. I used the image of a hummingbird to refer to a wide range of activities across populations: migrants ask for overtime hours of work that they hate to do, dreaming that quick savings will make them petty businesspersons one day; assistant professors maximize the number of quick publications, promising to themselves that they will do real research once tenured; officials diligently obey the rules that they disapprove of in order to reach a position that may allow for more discretion.¹¹ The referents are diverse and the meaning of the term is far from fixed. But its capaciousness appeals to the public. In this version, readers see themselves *as well as* others. Subject formation is always an intersubjective process. Otherwise there would be no “historical blocs” or “war of positions,” as Gramsci envisioned. Academics should watch out for what is missing in research that focuses on demarcated groups for the neatness on paper.

Starting as an etic concept—a term used by a researcher to describe an objective condition—suspension has become an emic term, which actors use to describe their own lived experiences and feelings. This essay aims to develop suspension further as an “emic-etic term.” An emic-etic term emerges through back-and-forth dialogues between the researcher and the research subject. The researcher and the subject share the basic definition regarding the term, which forms a basis for continuing the dialogical cycle. For actors, an emic-etic term not only represents their lives as they experienced them, but more importantly helps them to problematize the experiences, which typical emic terms are unable to do. For researchers, an emic-etic term theorizes social phenomena from within, rather than against given theoretical or political positions in etic terms. This enables researchers to speak *about* and speak *to* the subjects at the same time.

¹⁰ Biao Xiang, *Peasant Workers and Urban Development: A Case Study of Dongguan City, Pearl River Delta* (Department of Sociology, Peking University, 1995).

¹¹ A hummingbird might be a fitting metaphor of the academic life of some of us. We strive for more publications, grants, and recognition, following fast-shifting fashions. We know that this is not what research is supposed to be, but we tell ourselves, and each other, that if we do not instrumentalize the present, our very survival will be in question. “Be realistic now,” we are kindly advised, “you can do meaningful research later.” Once the feet are off the ground, words fly. Faster and ever more convoluted, we think and write in a mode of suspension.

This article develops suspension as an emic-etic term in two steps. First, I delineate what experiences “suspension” corresponds to in migrants’ lives, and particularly what the main contradictions are that make migrants feel that their experiences need to be problematized. Second, I trace migrants’ daily experiences to larger structural conditions in order to explain how these experiences and perceptions came into being. The last section outlines how the individual articles in this special issue elaborate on this approach following similar lines: by exploring contradictions in migrants’ experiences, and by relating the experiences to larger structures.

This article draws on data that I accumulated through long-term ethnographic research since 1994. It is also deeply informed by what I have learned from public engagement via social media since 2014. My field research offers a systematic view of migrants’ experiences and their contexts, while my public engagement demonstrates the explicit desires among the public to reflect on their condition of being critically. My job here is to connect the two.

Suspension as Experiences, Strategies, and Perceptions

A laid-off worker and divorced single mother in northeast China planned to go to Italy to work as a domestic helper. She told me that she knew the job would be demanding, the separation from her teenage daughter painful. But she needed to earn the money for her daughter’s college education. “I will take these three years as if I went in,” she said. “In” is a colloquial expression for imprisonment. Going overseas is like being jailed for her. This is because both migration and imprisonment would suspend her from normal life. A migrant taxi driver in his forties in Guangzhou, south China, worked two shifts (20 hours) every day. He was determined to buy property in his hometown before he turned fifty. “But aren’t you worried about your health?” I asked. “Health? That is something [to be worried about] in the future,” he replied. He, of course, knew that it would be too late to worry about health in the future. He was not simply postponing the concern; he was suspending life itself. More commonly, migrants work long hours away from home, thereby minimizing their social life and forgoing the joys and duties associated with being a family member, a friend, and a neighbour in order to maximize savings. Suspension, first and foremost, is a lived experience where migrants halt important parts of life to pursue particular goals.

Sacrificing short-term benefits to secure a long-term future is not new. Similar rationalities can be found in deferred gratification¹²—and, on a much grander scale, socialist modernization campaigns, such as China’s Great Leap Forward Movement (1958). But suspension is not only a rush to the future;

¹² Jorge Parodi aptly calls this the “ability to wait.” See Jorge Parodi, *To Be a Worker. Identity and Politics in Peru* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 82.

it reduces the present to an empty vehicle to the future. The driving motivation is to run *away* from the here and now. The Great Leap Forward, as horrendous as it was, mobilized the population precisely due to the rich meanings that the campaign assigned to the present, projecting the present as a solid basis on which a utopia would be built. Many migrants today work hard, as ethnographic research shows, not because they enjoy what they do, but rather, because they are eager to eventually stop working by saving enough money as quickly as possible. As Rofel aptly put it, for migrant workers in China, “affective engagement with a possible future in which one could have another mode of being is what pulls migrant workers through the present.”¹³ Hairong Yan calls this a desire of “ephemeral transcendence.”¹⁴ It is “transcendence” because migrants seek a radically different future; it is “ephemeral” because the future is elusive, the paths to a different future disappear as soon as they appear. In the end, few migrants move out of manual jobs. But the desire for such transcendence remains an integral part of their lives.

The urge to run away from the present is an important factor behind migrants’ frequent job changes. According to our 1994 survey, the common causes listed by migrant workers for quitting their last job included: getting a better paid job (21.1 percent); conflict with workmates (18 percent); following friends who were in a different factory (17.2 percent); quarrel with the management (16.7 percent); changes in romantic relationship (9.1 percent); and boredom (8.8 percent).¹⁵ In other words, income was a relatively minor motivation for changing jobs. The workers often recalled their experience of quitting as an act of courage and dignity. “To show to the manager my true colours” is how one informant described his walk-out from the factory after being told off by the shop floor manager.¹⁶ But why didn’t migrants show their true colours by directly confronting and tackling the problems—perhaps through consultation or negotiation—instead of walking away? The typical answer given was simple: this would be unwise. It would be “too complicated,” they suggested, if one wants to change working

¹³ Lisa Rofel and Sylvia J. Yanagisako, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion* (with an essay by Simona Segre Reinach) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 154.

¹⁴ Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 8.

¹⁵ Xiang, “Dongzhen mingong no. 3: tiaocao,” 40–42.

¹⁶ Born after 1980, the so-called “new generation of migrants” are better educated, detached from the countryside, and have a higher awareness of their rights than previous migrants. But they change jobs more frequently. For discussions on the “new generation of migrants,” see Wang Chunguan, “Xinshengdai nongcun liudongrenkou de shehui rentong yu chengxiang ronghe de gxi” [Social identification of the second generation of the rural-urban floating population and its relationship with rural-urban integration], *Shehuixue yanjiu* no. 3 (2001): 63–76; Cheng Zhiming, “The New Generation of Migrant Workers” in urban China in *Mobility, Sociability and Well-Being of Urban Living* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2014), 67–91. Regarding the young migrants’ hypermobility, Willy Sier has provided a compelling account. Willy Sier, *Everybody Educated? Education Migrants and Rural-Urban Relations in Hubei Province, China*, PhD thesis, 2019. Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam.

and living conditions. Thus, the wiser choice in the short term was to make money and then “buy out” from the status of being a migrant worker. The migrants are at once resigned (“there is nothing that you can do about the current condition”) and hopeful (“things should get better in the future”).¹⁷

Inspired by Guyer’s analysis about “the evacuation of the near future,” I characterize the experience of suspension as the displacement of both the “near future” and the “nearby.” By near future, Guyer means the temporal horizon where concrete socialities emerge and consequential collective actions can be taken. It is a timescale for reasoning. In the public temporal imagination of the post-1970s US, the “evacuation of the near future” means that this timescale is replaced by a combination of a fixation on immediate situations and an orientation to a very long-term horizon.¹⁸ In our more ethnographically oriented analysis, “near future” disappears as people chase opportunities that are available at the moment and dream about what a fulfilling life they will lead one day, yet are ultimately at a loss in establishing a content life within five or ten years. In the rush to the future, one forgoes the opportunities to build solidarity with fellow workers and residents. The “nearby”—the immediate social surroundings such as the workplace and neighbourhood—is also hollowed out.

Suspension as an Exception and Norm

Apart from being a lived experience, suspension also represents a perception of life. In this perception, the present and the near future are exceptional periods that will soon pass, and as such are exempted from the ethical judgement that one normally upholds. As the migrant nightclub hostesses in southeast China keep reminding themselves, one must be “a little more realistic”: stop making moral judgements about the present, profit from whatever chances one can get, and move on (Fengjiang, this issue). Even more telling, a female Chinese worker in Singapore commented on a romantic relationship developed during migration as “you will lose out if you take [the relationship] too seriously” (Yang, this issue). This does not mean that the migrants discard moral principles all together. On the contrary, they often construe their long-term life goals in deeply moral terms: for instance, sacrificing their personal interests for the sake of family. They are also conscious that their current practices are morally ambiguous. But they emphasize that it is simply not wise to ask these questions now.

Migrants refrain from raising ethical questions even when they fall victim to others’ unethical actions. In northeast China, where I have worked with unskilled labour outmigrants since 2004, would-be migrants typically paid

¹⁷ Biao Xiang, “Dongzhen minggong no. 5: Gonghuizuzhi, liyi biaoda he quanyi yishi” [Migrant workers in Dong Town no. 5: trade union, interest expression and rights consciousness], *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu*, issue V (1998): 46–49.

¹⁸ Jane Guyer, “Prophecy and the near future: Thoughts on macroeconomic, evangelical, and punctuated time,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 403.

commercial intermediaries US\$6,000 for a contract job overseas of two or three years' length.¹⁹ Occasionally, unscrupulous intermediaries disappeared with the money, leaving the would-be migrant high and dry. When gossip spread that someone was swindled, fellow villagers tended to jeer at the victim instead of banding together to demand compensation from the intermediary. The swindled had to keep their heads low in the community. Isn't it obvious who should be sympathized with, and who should be punished? When asked this question, no informant disputed the principles of right or wrong. The problem is, they felt that they were not in the position to apply these principles when they were in a rush. As a village shopkeeper put it:

You have to admit, the intermediaries are capable people [...]. Everyone wants to make money quickly. Those who go overseas want to make quick money just like the intermediaries. If you don't know how to handle [the intermediaries] ... it is just that you lost out to them.²⁰

Life is a game that rewards the capable few. Actions are judged by outcomes alone; success by dubious means is preferred to honest failures. More sympathetic neighbours may encourage the would-be migrants to move on—to find other ways to make money to cover the loss. “Reality is like this,” said the shopkeeper. “You will only lose more time and feel worse [thinking what is right and what is wrong].”²¹ To move on, some failed would-be migrants turned themselves into subagents for intermediaries, hoping to earn commission by recruiting more would-be migrants.

In contrast to the migrants' perception that regards the present as transient, suspension represents a prevalent pattern of how labour—and, to a great extent, social life in general — is organized in China. China would not have achieved its rapid growth without the immense number of workers suspending their normal life.²² China's transition to a service-oriented economy also relies on the flexible, hard-working, and mobile workforce described by Sier (this issue). Equally important, suspension helps to maintain social stability in the face of mounting social conflict. This peculiar mix of resignation and hopefulness keeps people going. Hypermobility dissipates, rather than ignites, grassroots energy for social change.

¹⁹ The northeast is China's “Rust Belt,” and had just experienced large-scale privatization of state-owned enterprises. Hundreds of thousands of workers were laid off, while a small number of managers with connections became millionaires. The wealth gap dramatically widened. It was thus not surprising that the less unfortunate rushed to migrate, either to other parts of China or overseas, for quick money. Nor was it perplexing that people invested large sums of money to go overseas.

²⁰ Author's fieldnote, 3 June 2008, Ying'ermen Village, Qingyuan County, Liaoning Province.

²¹ Author's fieldnote, 3 June 2008, Ying'ermen Village, Qingyuan County, Liaoning Province.

²² In the case of international migration, Jamie Coates describes how Chinese migrants in Japan, who have succeeded in their migration projects, still feel unsettled, partly since the expectations from others and from themselves continue to rise. Jamie Coates, “The cruel optimism of mobility: aspiration, belonging, and the ‘good life’ among transnational Chinese migrants in Tokyo,” *positions* 27, no. 3 (2019): 469–497.

The question is, then, what does it mean when most of the working population in a society live in a liminal state: temporary, transient, exceptional? Liminal individuals, according to Turner, are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”²³ Liminality is an exception that upholds the norm, a temporary state outside of the established structure, but it is critical in maintaining the structure. The literature on migrant liminality highlights how international migrants live between different normative social orders.²⁴ But the mobile subjects in China do not fall in a space that is “between” discrete orders. Suspension is the general order. Every part of society is moving fast, but collectively no one knows where it is headed. The experiences of suspension, thus, must be understood as part of a broader structure.

Complexed Development: Suspension as Part of a Larger Structure

Suspension is, in a way, developmentalism writ small: get rich first, worry about the rest later. Migrants’ perceptions mirror the famous Chinese official line: “problems arising from development should be handled through development.” The officials do not necessarily believe that development will provide solutions, but they are convinced that development must continue as this is the most effective way to push problems aside. In other words, development dissolves instead of solves problems. After four decades of frantic development, China faces multiple challenges, ranging from widening inequalities to environmental deterioration. The faith that things will only get better is losing appeal.²⁵ But the doubt about developmentalist promises ironically enhances a *political* developmentalism. Political developmentalism is different from general developmentalism in that while the latter believes

²³ Victor Turner, “Liminality and communitas,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

²⁴ Shirlena Huang, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Theodora Lam, “Asian transnational families in transition: The liminality of simultaneity,” *International Migration* 46, no. 4 (2008): 8, 3–13. Anthropologists have recently expanded the concept of liminality beyond a “threshold” stage. Thomassen suggests that liminality is a condition in which “the very distinction between structure and agency cease to make meaning” and yet “structuration does take place” (42). Farha Ghannam points out that “mobility, a state of in- betweenness, has both spatial and temporal aspects that generate possibilities for the transformation of bodies and identities.” Our empirical observations so far have not suggested that suspension leads to structural changes or individual transformation. At the individual level, suspension is meant to serve upward mobility—there would be no suspension if everyone accepts their current place in society. But migrants tend to conform to the established norms about success. They rush into socially approved roles (e.g., an entrepreneur with a respectable family) rather than exploring new ways of being. Bjørn Thomassen, “Thinking with liminality: To the boundaries of an anthropological concept,” in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, eds. Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015): 39–58, 42; Farha Ghannam, “Mobility, liminality, and embodiment in urban Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 4 (2011): 790–800.

²⁵ For a critique of developmentalism, see Michael Cowen and Robert W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London: Routledge, 1996).

in the *result* of development, political developmentalism takes the *process* of development as a basis of a regime's political legitimacy. Development as the "anti-politics machine" has become politically indispensable.²⁶ This is developmentalism par excellence: development for the sake of development.

How does the Chinese state handle developmental problems through development? Suspension is key: moving ahead without engaging with the present seriously. First, like migrants who jump from job to job, government—particularly at the lower rungs (prefecture and county)—hops from project to project. A joke goes that construction should be of low quality because repairing, demolishing, and rebuilding will create more jobs and add to the GDP, therefore helping the economy stay afloat. Second, instead of introducing checks-and-balances mechanisms—i.e., unionizing workers, or empowering civil society—the state has established a mechanism of what may be called "balancing through contradictions." For instance, the state strives to broaden labour incorporation and enable rural youths through the rapid expansion of college education, but at the same time, continues to curtail labour rights. Local governments are urged to make the economy more environmentally friendly but are also pressured to guarantee enough employment opportunities. Third, government resorts to ad-hoc emergency measures as solutions to social problems, which exacerbate said contradictions in the long run. A typical example is what Lee and Zhang call the "commodification of petition" at the local level.²⁷ Petitions are commodified because, under pressure from the central government to reduce the number of petitions from their constituents to Beijing, local government dissuades intended petitioners by paying them off. Some citizens threaten to petition to the higher level with an eye on the payoff. This measure calculates social contradictions into immediate financial gains, an act of suspension on both parties.

These measures result in a condition that I call "complexed development." I use the term "development" here because it is presented so in the mainstream discourse, with development meaning interventions aimed at improvement. "Development" here clearly does not mean linear progression; it has become an empty signifier. Building a marketplace is presented as development, as is demolishing it two years later. There are many movements and dynamics, but they are often "moving on the spot or in circles," as Berlant described the "impasse" faced by the public in contemporary America.²⁸

The word "complexed" means that the dynamics point to different

²⁶ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁷ Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang, "The power of instability: unraveling the microfoundations of bargained authoritarianism in China," *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 6 (2013): 1475–1508.

²⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

directions. They are simultaneously entangled with each other, resulting in confusion and disorientation. Complexed is a rough translation of the Chinese term *jiujie*. *Jiujie* is another “keyword”—a word that is widely used beyond its original context, and therefore indexes broad general concerns.²⁹ *Jiujie* became popular in the 2010s. Literally meaning entangled and complexed, *jiujie* is often translated as “difficult choices,” yet surely Chinese people didn’t have to wait until the twenty-first century to realize that life has dilemmas. *Jiujie* as a keyword is not about making difficult choices, but rather about having to pursue conflicting goals at the same time. As a keyword that emerged in this historical context, *jiujie* means more than a mundane affect; it expresses a popular desire to problematize the general living condition, just like *xuanfu* does. As such, the linguistically awkward term “complexed development” not only indicates a distinctive pattern of development (such as “state-led development”), but more importantly means development processes that have problematic effects on ordinary citizens. It is such “complexed” effects that link broad political economy to the experiences of suspension.

Complexed development is thus more than compressed development. “Compressed modernity,” proposed by Chung Kyung-Sup, captures a key feature in east Asian developments. Compressed modernity is “a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system.”³⁰ As an example of compressed modernity, a deeply ingrained patriarchy coexists with radical feminism, a hybrid that partially contributes to the especially low rate of marriage and birth in east Asia. While compressed modernity started in the late nineteenth century according to Chung, complexed development emerged in the early twenty-first century. Compressed modernity is about leaping forward to, catching up with, and reconciling so-called “Western modernity” with what are perceived as local traditions. Complexed development is about staying afloat, preserving the status quo, and persevering despite multiple problems. In complexed development, the state and social norms play central roles. They therefore shape the experience of suspension in important ways. The remainder of this section discusses the role of the state and social norms in turn.

The Multiple Faces of the Chinese State, and Suspension as a Mode of Participation

Suspension would not have become a widespread experience in China without the Chinese state. The Chinese state is known for its capacity to both

²⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).

³⁰ Chung Kyung-Sup, “The second modern condition? Compressed modernity as internalized reflexive cosmopolitanization,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 444–464, 444.

impose social control and promote economic growth. Strict political control incapacitates migrants' ability to challenge the existing order and forces them to suspend their political actions. But economic growth is an equally important priority for the Chinese government. The state has managed to satisfy the population's material needs, and this is partially why state repression of workers' self-organization in recent decades has not backfired. The state, particularly at the local level, constantly shifts between the priorities of control, growth, and care. This oscillation of policy emphasis creates a condition of suspension. Ou's ethnography (this issue) about the cyclical movement of construction-demolishing-rebuilding of housing in a migrant neighbourhood on the outskirts of Beijing provides an excellent illustration of this dynamic. When the government adopts pro-growth policies, migrants are welcomed and residents expand their houses to accommodate migrants as renters; when the government emphasis shifts to social order and safety, unplanned housing is demolished, and migrants are chased away. But before long, government again tilts towards growth, and immediately residents rush to reconstruction before being hit by another round of demolition. Most of the time, migrants manage to find accommodation, but never know when the roof above will disappear.³¹ Informal economies are tacitly allowed as they lower the living costs of urban residents, create employment, and increase local property values. But informal economies never escape government control; they are always in a state of suspension and can be curtailed—and even eliminated—when needed. In the community, grassroots cadres and local landlords are thus kept in suspension. They are always in a rush, either hurrying to promote growth, or “cleaning up,” either frantically extending houses or knocking them down overnight. What they cannot do is plan for the near future.

Social welfare is another example of complexed development. The Chinese government has expanded social welfare rapidly since the late 1990s, and especially during the early 2000s. At the end of 2015, 858 million Chinese were covered by the basic pension insurance scheme, and 66 million were covered by the minimum livelihood assistance.³² Neither scheme existed before 1997. By the end of 2015, more than 95 percent of Chinese citizens were covered by medical insurance.³³ The state tightened regulation of land acquisition in the 2010s, and now offers sufficient compensation to peasants who lost land to secure their livelihoods (Zhan, this issue). Despite widespread coverage, however, the amount of provision remains low. It is far from enough

³¹ I documented how a migrant community in Beijing expanded geographically, ironically because repeated government campaigns of demolishing and cleansing forced the migrants to spread out. Biao Xiang, *Transcending Boundaries: Zhejiangcun: The Story of A Migrant Village in Beijing*, translated by Jim Weldon based on Kuayue bianjie de shequ (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005).

³² State Council, People's Republic of China, *Government Work Report, the fourth meeting of the 12th National People's Congress*, 5 March 2016, available at http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-03/17/content_5054901.htm, last accessed on 12 February 2019, page 3.

³³ State Council, *Government Work Report*, 3.

to provide a strong safety net. Most citizens must save money on their own in order to meet the ever-rising costs in housing, education, and medical care. “We sell life to earn money [maiming zhuanqian: “selling life” means working to death] now,” a vegetable vender told me, “then we can use the money to buy life [naqian maiming: paying for essential health care] later.”³⁴ If one must “buy life” at a later stage, one must “sell life” now, when one can. Overall, social welfare at its current level of provision seems more effective in bringing more citizens into the largely unregulated market, thereby intensifying competition for wealth, than in providing them with socioeconomic security.

Under complexed development, suspension represents a form of exclusion, but, also, a mode of participation. People would not be able to be so mobile and risk taking if they had no basic welfare, rural land ownership, or access to the job market. People also put themselves in suspension because they feel entitled to participate in economic development, partly due to China’s socialist legacy. Economic reforms since the end of the 1970s are, in a way, a state-led “mass movement,” participated in by most of the population, who had relatively equal assets at its onset. The inclusive and egalitarian starting point of reforms ironically brought about a particularly acute sense of competition across the masses. The sense of entitlement also induces self-inflicted pressure to prosper and win respect. Lagging behind one’s peers is unacceptable. The suspended are thus not the outright excluded,³⁵ expelled,³⁶ or those waiting for a bright future.³⁷

To suggest that suspension has a participatory dimension does not justify the current condition. The participatory dimension implies specific intellectual and political challenges that we have to face. While it is widely felt that the status quo must change, there is no identifiable enemy to attack, nor a clear path to follow. Since things are not moving in a single direction, it is hard to envision counter-movements; had migrants been clearly excluded from developmental opportunities in China, it might have been easier for them to organize themselves to confront the present and build a near future. Given the complexities on the ground, exclusion-resistance dichotomy and critiques based on an existing framework will not mobilize actors.

³⁴ Author’s interview in Wenzhou, southeast China, 4 November 2017.

³⁵ James Ferguson, for instance, called attention to the widespread feeling among contemporary Zambians of “abjection” of “being thrown out [and] being thrown down” (236), and of being “unplugged” from the world system. See *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

³⁶ Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014).

³⁷ Graig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Entrepreneurial as the Means, Conformist in the End

Complexed development is also reflected in how people perceive their lives. On one hand, people's expectations about what constitutes a good life—i.e., having an apartment, a car, a profitable investment—rise continuously. On the other, the fundamental criteria that one uses to judge oneself and others—what makes a respectable man or woman—become more conformist than before. People are ready to break rules and suspend ethical principles in daily pursuits, but then closely follow conventions when making major life decisions, such as marriage. The return of the familism norm in China can be witnessed in the public concerns over the so-called “leftover women” and the practice of “forced marriage, China-style,” which became widespread in the early 2000s.³⁸ Forming a heteronormative household is not good enough. A desirable family today must have the capacity to purchase at least one apartment in the city, guarantee a reputable education for the children as well as having savings and, ideally, investments. One makes extraordinary efforts just to be accepted as ordinary. Conversely, one conforms in order to make sense of one's daily struggles.

Essentialized norms are sometimes detached from daily practices, which facilitates ethical suspension. For instance, a fetishized “family value” means that one must have a family of a particular *form*, but it does not necessarily make one more faithful to a partner, more filial to parents, or more helpful to one's siblings.³⁹ It is always easy to justify instrumentalist manipulations by pointing to abstract norms from afar.

The mix of instrumentalism and conformism is clearly illustrated in the case of female migrant workers in Singapore who temporarily cohabitate with male partners (Yang, this issue). Independent and enterprising, the women manage intimate relationships as mutually beneficial “deals.” In making said deals, they capitalize on their femininity and sexuality, therefore reinforcing the hegemonic gender hierarchy. At the same time, they repeatedly assert that “family is the most important thing for women” and that they are doing everything for family back home. Stressing general norms may be a way for the women in question to relieve the moral anxieties resulting from the extramarital relations. Their experiences resonate with

³⁸ Stevan Harrell and Gonalo Santos have illustrated a similar paradox in the Chinese patriarchal system, where radical changes coexist with surprising continuities. “Introduction” in *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Gonalo Santos and Stevan Harrell (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2017), 3–36. “Leftover women” mean women above thirty years old who remain single. See Arianne Gaetano, “‘Leftover women’: Postponing marriage and renegotiating womanhood in urban China,” *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 124–149; Yingchun Ji, “Between tradition and modernity: ‘Leftover’ women in Shanghai,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 5 (2015): 1057–1073; Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2016); Sandy To, *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and its Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2015). “Forced marriage China style” means parents persistently pressure adult children to marry.

³⁹ Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

those of the aforementioned nightclub hostesses (Fengjiang, this issue), who model themselves after essentialized images of femininity in order to boost their “body price”; manipulate relations with commercial clients, boyfriends who provide regular allowances, and family members; and stress “family value” and dignity as the ultimate motivators for what they do. Conformism helps the hostesses to justify their actions, but it also creates tremendous mental stress.

Apart from conforming to gender and family norms, migrants also take the existing political order as given and unquestionable. This is how they make sense of a life that they have little control over. When the nearby and near future disappear, the established political order becomes a source of meaning and stability. Migrant tenants in Beijing who experience repeated displacement nevertheless regard demolition as politically legitimate and good for the “grand scheme” of things (*daju*)—like the national needs or state plans for further development—and therefore should be good for everyone. “You’ve got to rely on yourself ... and the state!”⁴⁰ labour migrants from northeast China to Japan told me. In other words: you must rely on yourself because you are navigating a poorly regulated market economy, and the state because it is seen as a last resort for justice.

Suspension in Specific Cases, and our Journey Forward

In developing suspension as an emic-etic term that will hopefully give rise to a new research approach, this issue presents a set of case studies. The subject groups are diverse: petty traders, salespersons, club hostesses, former migrants resettled in urban peripheries after losing their land to development, factory workers in Singapore, and technicians in Ethiopia. Individual articles develop the idea of suspension in parallel to what I sketched above. The case studies first identify central contradictions in the migrants’ lives that have put their lives in suspension. Sier’s article shows that young salespersons with rural backgrounds moved up into the status of urban residents, thanks to the rapid expansion of higher education and the service sector, but at the same time some moved downward economically to become poorly paid, precarious, and sometimes indebted labour, a condition worse than that of their rural or migrant parents. They are constantly disappointed, but are always hopeful that the next job—they change jobs every few months—will be better. In Yang’s article, female migrant factory workers in Singapore work hard to fulfill their roles as dutiful wives and mothers. At the same time, some cohabit with male migrants in strictly temporary terms, with limited emotional involvement, and aimed at economic gains. The women enter

⁴⁰ Biao Xiang, “‘You’ve got to rely on yourself...and the state!’ A structural chasm in the Chinese political morality,” in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China*, eds. Carlos Rojas and Ralph Litzinger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 131–149.

such relationships as a reaction to their structurally suspended position—the immigration regulations treat them as nothing more than temporary labourers, with no family or social life. The women in turn put their relationship in a state of suspension: they instrumentalize it as an exceptional arrangement that will end abruptly once they leave Singapore. Fengjiang focuses on club hostesses in a small city in south China. The hostesses regard their present work as a necessary step towards their goal of becoming successful and respectable women, yet they hope to leave their current experiences behind and forget them. This contradiction necessitates the painful effort of suspending one's ethical judgements about the self. In Driessen's case study, the male Chinese engineers and technicians in Africa live in a condition of "double bind": they are expected to continue migrating to earn money *and* to return home to lead a normal family life. The result is repeated temporary migrations and endless agony. They are perpetually suspended between China and Africa. Finally, the resettled peasants in Zhan's article turned themselves from migrant labour into sedentary rentier capitalists, as beneficiaries of urban relocation programs. They engage in financial speculations, wait for the next windfall fortune, feel empty in daily life, and are despised by others as parasites. Although they have stopped migrating, they remain socially suspended. They are not entirely dispossessed or excluded, but are unable to participate in the urban economy productively, and are thus suspended between.

As the case studies delve into migrants' personal experiences, they also illustrate how "complexed developments" result in, and are in turn sustained by, suspension. Ou delineates how the seesaw-like interactions between market force and local state power, and the entangled relations between migrants, residents, grassroots authorities, and city government, create physical spaces of suspension—spaces that migrants rent for accommodation and business that are constantly demolished but rebuilt. The local government tacitly allows local residents to extend their houses and rent out to migrants, but periodically demolishes the construction and evicts migrants. Once the demolition campaign subsides, local residents build more houses to accommodate more migrants, who, in their turn, extend their living and business spaces. Such spaces offer no stability or entitlement, but are constantly expanding and enable migrants' informal businesses. Sier disentangles how the massive expansion of China's higher education since the end of the 1990s has undermined the country's rural-urban divide, but has introduced multiple intersecting hierarchies. This complexed development traps rural graduates in "complexed mobilities." The articles by Yang on migrant workers in Singapore and by Fengjiang on hostesses in south China both highlight how gender relations intersect with migration, labour, and family regimes in creating the condition of suspension. Women have become economically more independent, assertive, and entrepreneurial. Yet at the same time, gender and family norms have arguably become more

conservative and homogenizing in the 2010s. Juggling between conflicting expectations, the women have to suspend some aspects of life, for instance emotional engagement and ethical judgement, in order to pursue other goals. Zhan's article points to the entanglement of institutional forces in the context of population relocation. The state expands social welfare provision, but the job market becomes more exclusionary for those less educated, and the family stands out as the central site through which welfare is distributed. In this context, young resettled peasants live on state welfare handed down by their parents and on petty financial speculations that are highly unstable and socially alienating.

Finally, van der Meulen's article makes a methodologically important addition. The article demonstrates what social scientists can learn from artists in capturing migrants' experiences of suspension, and in combining emic and etic problematizations more broadly. Based on a detailed analysis of two documentary films by Wang Bing, the article traces how the filmmaker productively tackled three sets of methodological tensions. The first is the tension between mobility and stillness. By adopting the technique of "slow camera," the films capture the sense of suspension primarily by focusing on the repetitiveness and stillness of the migrants' lives, instead of the physical manifestations of hypermobility per se. Second, the films enable strong affective understandings through close engagement with materiality: the movements of hands, the sounds of machines, or simply silence and stillness. Third, Wang's films are at once deliberately subjective and observationalist, combining a deep sense of engagement with non-interference distance. All these are valuable lessons for ethnographers who aim to speak accurately about subjects and speak effectively to subjects.

Suspension is not meant to become a stable, general concept. Our ultimate purpose is to seek change, and a changed context will demand new ways of problematization and may well render the concept suspension obsolete. The value of our work lies in our dynamic engagement with our research subjects. Our context-specific analysis will hopefully sharpen actors' awareness about their life experiences. Explorations about possible changes in turn raise new theoretical questions. Theory and praxis are integrated through lively exchange. Thought and action progress together through constant traffic between the emic and etic. In this process, we as researchers also acquire new agency and may become a new type of subject of history ourselves.

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Spaces of Suspension: Construction, Demolition, and Extension in a Beijing Migrant Neighbourhood

Tzu-Chi Ou

ABSTRACT

Communities with large concentrations of migrants, who often live in makeshift and illegal housing, have been common on the margins of large cities in China since the 1980s. Why do so-called “urban villages” persist and even flourish despite repeated government crackdowns? By addressing this question, this article sheds light on a subtle dynamic of city making that has not been fully appreciated by scholarly literature and media reports that have focused on large-scale demolition and eviction in China’s rapid urbanization. Drawing from my two years of field research in Hua village, a community on Beijing’s fringes in line for land expropriation, I explore how multilateral negotiations between local residents (villagers), migrant tenants, the village committee, and municipal government led to a cyclical movement of temporary housing construction, demolition, and extension. The dynamics of recurring demolishment and reconstruction engendered spaces of suspension, which enabled migrants to enter the urban economy at a low cost. Such spaces, however, offered no formal protection or basis for developing lasting social relations, and always faced the prospect of being demolished, but nevertheless were constantly available and even expanding.

Keywords: migration, urban village, demolition, urban informality, city making

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Introduction

On a sweltering summer morning in August 2013, I was trying to immerse myself in the everyday routines of my fieldwork site, Hua village, a suburban Beijing neighbourhood with a large concentration of migrant workers. Soon after turning onto a bustling main thoroughfare, I ran into a crowd of *chengguan*, widely despised municipal officers who enforce order on the streets—all in loose-fitting grey uniforms, black pants, with deep-blue caps and red badges on their left upper arms. They were in the middle of removing a makeshift fruit stand. I was nervous about witnessing a violent conflict between street vendors and city regulators, a recurring theme in media reports and scholarly literature.¹ The scene, however, was placid. Bystanders whispered to each other. The two impassive vendors sheltered watermelons from the sun, while a dozen officers clumsily moved the plastic roof cover and wooden pillars of the fruit stand onto a truck. The next day, the stand reappeared as if nothing had happened.

In my two years of fieldwork, ad hoc but frequent inspections like this occurred in the so-called “urban village,” a peri-urban area where residents earn a living by building and renting out low-cost housing to thousands of migrants. The inspections happened almost every month, and the vendors always returned afterward. Even after a large-scale cleansing campaign in early 2017 that demolished several large compounds and apartment buildings, residents erected new housing blocks barely a year later.² This begs the question: Why does the urban village persist and even flourish despite repeated crackdowns by the government?

This article sheds light on a subtle dynamic of city making in urban villages: over the past few decades, a cycle of recurring demolition and reconstruction turned into a hidden routine. I argue that these dynamics created “spaces of suspension,” which enabled migrant tenants to enter the urban economy quickly at low cost but, ultimately, offered no stability. In such spaces, all actors—residents, migrants, local government cadres, and inspection officers—maximized their immediate interests as they were unable to think of the near future. Residents who lost farmland relied on building houses and renting them out to migrants as their main source of income. The local administration tacitly allowed this as a means of boosting the economy but periodically demolished the construction and evicted migrants

¹ Several studies focus on violent clashes between street vendors and *chengguan*. Sarah Swider, “Reshaping China’s Urban Citizenship: Street Vendors, Chengguan and Struggles over the Right to the City,” *Critical Sociology* 41, nos. 4–5 (2015): 701–716, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514529676>; Amy Hanser, “Street Politics: Street Vendors and Urban Governance in China,” *The China Quarterly* 226 (June 2016): 363–382, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016000278>.

² In addition to routine rule enforcement, the governments periodically launched inspections to keep illegal construction at bay. Between 2015 and 2019, Hua village residents experienced at least three crackdowns on illegal housing.

when pressure from higher levels became acute. Once the demolition campaign subsided, local residents built more houses to accommodate more migrants, who, in turn, extended their living and business spaces. They all did so in a hurry, worrying that this could be the last chance to do so. Migrant workers lived with dynamic and fluid relations but remained hopeful about an elusive future.

Spaces of suspension grew fast, precisely because they were “suspended”—that is, everything was temporary. Shops were extended ever closer to the road, courtyards were turned into kitchens, and gaps between buildings became storage spaces for tools. Such flexibly extendable space made it easy for migrants to start small businesses. But spaces of suspension could also vanish suddenly through periodic demolition. Migrants constantly lost space for accommodations and business, and were thus forced to be hypermobile. In the urban village, the informal economy and the migrants’ lives were vibrant and precarious, at the same time.

The notion of spaces of suspension wishes to nuance our understanding about rapid urbanization in China, which is arguably one of the most dramatic social transformations of global significance in our times. China’s “urban speed machine”—an assemblage of state power, urban planning, and land finance entities—has been widely documented.³ Between 2005 and 2011, about 27,200 square kilometres of rural land was expropriated and converted into state-owned urban land.⁴ The demolishing process, which encroached on farmland and replaced it with high-rise buildings, boutique malls, wide roads, and brand-new metros, recalls the epic story of urbanization in developing countries.⁵

However, this speed machine is not without cracks. In contrast to the image of a bulldozer tearing down village houses, Chu documents a “passive-aggressive” form of demolition.⁶ Against the backdrop of a series of legal reforms in the 2000s, local governments opted for less confrontational approaches when evicting and relocating residents. But residents’ experiences varied greatly. Rodenbiker highlights the heterogeneous and uneven ways the villagers were incorporated into urban areas.⁷ While some villagers moved into wealth due to land expropriation as documented by Rodenbiker, Chuang

³ Shiuh-shen Chien and Max D. Woodworth, “China’s Urban Speed Machine: The Politics of Speed and Time in a Period of Rapid Urban Growth,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 4 (2018): 723–737, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12610>.

⁴ The World Bank, *Urban China: Toward Efficient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Urbanization* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2014), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0206-5>.

⁵ Fleischer recorded ethnographically how suburban Wangjing was transformed through massive construction into a middle-class residential area in Beijing. Friederike Fleischer, *Suburban Beijing: Housing and Consumption in Contemporary China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁶ Julie Y. Chu, “When Infrastructures Attack: The Workings of Disrepair in China,” *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 2 (2014): 351–367, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12080>.

⁷ Jesse Rodenbiker, “Uneven Incorporation: Volumetric Transitions in Peri-Urban China’s Conservation Zones,” *Geoforum* 104 (2019): 234–243, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.05.002>.

registers the tragic deaths of impoverished villagers as a consequence of dispossession.⁸ These differentiated experiences manifest a mode of “recombinant urbanization.”⁹

This article joins this literature by illustrating a particular mode of “urban informality”¹⁰ on the ground that is an integral part of the “urban speed machine,” yet with its distinct logic of being cyclical and dynamic.¹¹ In what follows I will first position the urban village as a site of uncertainties and mobility in the grand movement of urbanization in Beijing. I will then explain why residents in Hua village rushed to build and rebuild illegal rental housing, and why they were tacitly allowed to do so. This is followed by a discussion about how migrants made use of such space, and at what cost. I will then explore the socio-political implications by examining migrants’ reactions to the fact that they lived in a state of suspension. The conclusion recaps how the spaces of suspension were sustained by delicate and dynamic negotiations between residents, migrants, grassroots authorities, and government agencies, which reflected the condition of “complexed development” in contemporary China.¹² This study is based on my ethnographic research from 2013 to 2014 in Hua village in northern Beijing. Its 2,000 villagers no longer ploughed the land; instead, they provided rental housing for about 30,000 rural migrant workers, rural *hukou* holders from nearby provinces.¹³ Middle-aged migrants tended to work as domestic workers, janitors, construction workers, home renovators, drivers, and retailers, while younger migrants often worked in the service sector as salesclerks, IT programmers, accountants, real-estate brokers, and couriers. During my research, I worked with a grassroots NGO serving migrants in the village, and its routine activities and social programs allowed me to establish relationships with 70 local villagers and migrant workers. Among them, I conducted 35 in-depth interviews.

⁸ Julia Chuang, “Urbanization through Dispossession: Survival and Stratification in China’s New Townships,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, no. 2 (2015): 275–294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.990446>.

⁹ Andrew B. Kipnis, *From Village to City: Social Transformation in a Chinese County Seat* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 15.

¹⁰ Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2005): 147–158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360508976689>.

¹¹ In this article, I highlight how local actors as a “regime of urban informality” fostered informal settlement and spaces of suspension. HaeRan Shin and Soyoung Park, “The Regime of Urban Informality in Migration: Accommodating Undocumented Chosŏnjok Migrants in their Receiving Community in Seoul, South Korea,” *Pacific Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2017): 459–480, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2017903459>.

¹² Biao Xiang, this issue.

¹³ The household registration (*hukou*) system divides China’s population into agricultural and non-agricultural populations. Despite the recent *hukou* reforms, many rural *hukou* holders who migrate to large cities cannot benefit from public provisions and social services.

On (the) Edge: The Urban Village as a Site of Uncertainty

Against a backdrop of rapid urbanization, urban villages are on the edge in two senses. First, urban villages are spatially on the periphery of expanding cities. A rural village is turned into an urban village after it becomes a target of expropriation for urban development. Second, urban villages are on the edge because the residents are socially “edgy”: unsettled; energetic, yet anxious; constantly engaged in construction, moving, and transactions.¹⁴ Urban villages are also on the edge in terms of their administrative positioning. In Hua village, where my research took place, the village committee was supposedly a self-governed body of the residents. The committee oversaw daily activities in the community and nominally controlled the collectively owned land. The community had no autonomy in terms of its development plans, especially regarding land use.

Living on Beijing’s edge, the Hua villagers I spoke to were anxious about their destiny because they were on the frontier of urban development. The village started to lose its farmland in the late 1980s. From the perspective of Old Wang, my landlord and a local farmer in his sixties, the land was encroached by various actors. The military appropriated the land on the east part of the village. The Beijing Gardening and Greening Bureau zoned the northern part of Hua village for a park. The most recent requisition took place in 2004, when the city government seized part of the village for constructing a subway station. By 2005, Old Wang told me, there was no farmland left in the village.

While the future direction in Hua village was clear to the villagers, the process of how the village would be turned into a fully urban place was far from certain. There was no definite timetable, while piecemeal demolitions were constant and rumours were rampant as for what might happen next. The negotiations between residents, the village committee, the city government, and the developer regarding the terms of compensation and relocation were complex and could take years. In other villages nearby, the demolition of old buildings and the construction of new ones took place on a small scale, rather than the entire village being bulldozed all at once. Such demolishing processes created ample spaces of transition that could be appropriated for various uses on a temporary basis.¹⁵

Irregular inspections by authorities intensified the uncertainty. In urban villages, illegal construction fell into a regulatory grey zone. The Hua village committee’s stance on illegal buildings oscillated between turning a blind

¹⁴ Erik Harms, *Saigon’s Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Victoria Nguyen highlights the “slow construction” of urban renewal in Beijing. Victoria Nguyen, “Slow Construction,” *City* 21, no. 5 (2017): 650–662, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1375728>.

eye and cracking down. For some villagers, the committee's demolition of illegal buildings was nothing but a "show" [*zuoyangzi*] to satisfy inspectors from higher up. Right after officials left, owners immediately rebuilt the structures. But sometimes, the government enforced the law vigorously. As Old Wang was rebuilding his old house, a team of a dozen officials suddenly arrived and accused him of illegal construction.

Villagers tended to blame corruption for the arbitrariness in enforcing the rules.¹⁶ This could be true, but the village committee's inconsistency also stemmed from its desire to balance economic profit and political risk. On one hand, land seizure was a major source of revenue for local governments.¹⁷ City government was also fully aware that it was impossible to eradicate temporary housing, and that the informal housing might be necessary for urban life. On the other hand, governments remained responsible for maintaining civility and modernity in the city, especially by thwarting "big city diseases," including overpopulation, congestion, and housing shortages.¹⁸ They carried out frequent inspections to keep illegal construction from spinning out of control. Through recurrent inspection and demolition, the sprawl of rental housing was contained within the boundary of the village.

Anticipating imminent expropriation amidst such uncertainties, residents (the villagers) hurried to add to their rental housing. The village committee also earned profits from the rental housing they built on collectively owned land. In the village, stacks of bricks, bags of concrete, and piles of rubble were everywhere. The village was soaked in clouds of dust and immersed in the noise of drilling. As villagers were building more and more apartments, migrants moved into urban villages for the cheap housing.¹⁹ Rent in Hua village ranged from RMB300 to 1,000 per room per month.²⁰ By contrast, renting a room in an apartment in normal residential compounds adjacent

¹⁶ According to media reports, the party secretary was convicted of land-related corruption offenses in 2015. A few local villagers told me that Hua village's party secretary and his family alone controlled quite a few rental properties.

¹⁷ You-tien Hsing, *The Great Urban Transformation: Politics of Land and Property in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

¹⁸ "Beijing tongguo guanche jingjinji xietong fazhan guihua gangyao de yijian" [Beijing municipal committee's opinion on passing the 'outline of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated planning'], *Xinhua News*, 12 July 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-07/11/c_128010212.htm.

¹⁹ In 2016, the number of permanent residents in Beijing was 21.72 million, while the population of migrants from other provinces was 8.07 million. Xiaozhuang Li, "Beijing liudong renkou jiegouxing tezhenɡ ji duice yanjiu" [The structural characteristics and countermeasures of floating population in Beijing], *Beijing shehui kexue* 11 (2017): 4–16.

²⁰ According to my fieldwork in 2013–2014, rooms in a one-storey house [*pingfang*] were below RMB500, while rooms in a *gongyu* apartment building were between RMB600 and 800. A one-bedroom apartment, an unusual layout, cost at least RMB1,000. In winter, landlords charged their renters another RMB200 per month for heating. After a series of demolitions between 2017 and 2019, housing supply fell, and rents skyrocketed. In 2019, rooms in a *gongyu* apartment building were between RMB1,000 and 1,600.

to Hua village cost two to three times more than that.²¹ Old Wang noted that migrants carrying huge amounts of luggage flocked to the area like attending “open banquets” in the countryside.

Landless Landlords: The Morality of Illegal Construction

Although villagers were categorized as rural households and still called peasants, their livelihood no longer relied on farming. Instead, they developed rural land for low-cost rental housing for migrant workers. Speaking about the sprawl of illegal construction in Hua village, Mrs. Wang, my landlord’s daughter-in-law, told me:

They [the village committee] took our land away. There is nothing here. In our neighbouring village, each of their villagers receives an RMB800 allowance per month [from the village committee]. There is no welfare provision in this village. Until last year [2013], we still received some rice, flour, and cooking oil. Now we have nothing. They don’t take care of your livelihood, so they do not care about the illegal construction.²²

For Mrs. Wang, if the villagers had land, they could be self-sufficient. The village committee, however, took their land away without providing sufficient compensation. It was thus fully justifiable for them to make a living through renting out their homes. Since the village committee abdicated its responsibility, it had no standing to intervene in illegal construction.

In 2016, only a year after the Old Wang family replaced its old, single-storey farmhouse with a four-storey building, the village administration ruled the building an illegal construction and tore down its third and fourth floors because officially, only two-storey buildings were allowed. The demolition process exasperated Old Wang: “Tell me what is illegal construction? You [the officers of the village committee] even built houses on arable land. Yours are not illegal. [Why is it that] we ... peasants are not allowed to *fanshen* [turn over] and live in a higher, better building?”²³

Old Wang justified his action through the notion of *fanshen*, or “turning the land into housing.” *Fanshen* is a politically charged term; it was a new word created by the Chinese socialist revolution, meaning the emancipation of peasants who “throw off the landlord yoke” and “enter a new world.”²⁴ Old Wang professed a strong nostalgia for Maoist China, when the subjects of emancipation were peasants. As Xiang argues, they “[felt] that they not

²¹ During my fieldwork, I met former tenants from the nearby residential compound who later moved to Hua village to save on rent.

²² Author’s field notes, 4 January 2014.

²³ Author’s field notes, 4 November 2014.

²⁴ William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), vii.

only ‘owe[d]’ the state, but that they also ‘own[ed]’ it.”²⁵ Peasants were no longer “subjects with entitlements” embedded in a socialist country. Such an ideal society had been left behind in the era of economic reforms. Old Wang saw himself as part of the most underrepresented group in politics: deprived and ignored peasants [*nongmin*], entitled to only the worst social welfare.²⁶ He thus regarded constructing multi-storey buildings for his livelihood completely justifiable.

Migrant Tenants: Makeshift Housing Helps Maximize Savings

Whereas landlords experienced foregone entitlements as the subjects of emancipation, migrants were less concerned about the legality and morality of the construction. Migrants chose to live in Hua village to save on rent. They kept their living conditions basic. Their “spatial inscription of liminality” was vividly illustrated through tiny, packed urban village housing.²⁷ When visiting my informants, I often found myself sitting on the edge of a bed. As small as 100 square feet, a typical room was packed with possessions; spending on rent was reduced to maximize savings.²⁸ For example, Sun Yuan, an accountant for a foreign company in Beijing, rented a house for RMB500 a month in Hua village. Her humble house was in a large housing compound, where most residents made their living trading scrap. This amounted to a “dirty, chaotic, and substandard” (*zang luan cha*) living environment.²⁹

Noticeably, the rent-to-income ratio was extremely low among migrant tenants in Hua village. The migrants that I interviewed spent roughly one-tenth of their monthly income on rent,³⁰ while the average rent in Beijing

²⁵ Biao Xiang, “‘You’ve Got to Rely on Yourself ... and the State!’ A Structural Chasm in the Chinese Political Moral Order,” in *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China*, eds. Carlos Rojas and Ralph A. Litzinger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 147.

²⁶ Old Wang expressed his vexation through writing. Whenever we met, he would read his poems. The poems discussed broad themes from land, housing, environmental problems, and social relationships to politics. He once wrote a song for the 2008 Olympic Games. He said that his song would not be selected because he was merely a peasant.

²⁷ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 84–86. Due to the household registration *hukou* system, migrant workers could neither settle down in the city nor lead lives as farmers in their rural hometowns. Migrant workers belonged “neither to the rural nor to the urban society” and thus became “a people of prolonged liminality.” Zhang, *Strangers in the City*, 27.

²⁸ In 2014, 61 percent of the “floating population” who migrated to Beijing relied on renting private housing, and 67.3 percent of the same population spent less than RMB1,000 on their monthly rent. Li, “Beijing liudong renkou,” 6.

²⁹ Yang Zhan, “The Urbanisation of Rural Migrants and the Making of Urban Villages in Contemporary China,” *Urban Studies* 55, no. 7 (May 2018): 1525–1540, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017716856>.

³⁰ In 2014, most migrants I interviewed earned from RMB3,000 to 5,000 per month. At the low end, this number was slightly higher than the nation-wide average of RMB2,864 in 2014. Guojia tongji ju (NBS), *2015 nian nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao* [2015 survey report on rural migrant workers] (Beijing: National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016), accessed 5 May 2020, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201604/t20160428_1349713.html.

typically took up a quarter of a migrant's income.³¹ Sun Yuan spent only 5 percent of her RMB10,000 monthly income on rent. "I would rather save money to buy a house than pay more rent," she told me firmly.³² She did not care about the hardship or sacrifice of living in an urban village. Instead, for a long time, she focused on buying a property.³³ When having a house elsewhere is the most important goal, the transient nature of living in Beijing is seen as necessary.

Like Sun Yuan, most migrants minimized their rental housing costs to quickly become a homeowner somewhere else. Twelve out of the 35 migrant workers I interviewed in Hua village spent from RMB200,000 to 400,000 buying houses in their rural townships and counties.³⁴ One of them was Lan Ying, a saleswoman working in a Carrefour supermarket in Beijing, who bought a new three-bedroom apartment in her hometown in Henan Province. Not planning to return home any time soon, Lan Ying stayed in Beijing, where she had worked since 1993. "How about improving the condition of your home here?" I asked her. (I meant her house in Hua village, where she had been living with her husband and daughter for more than ten years.³⁵) "No, I won't," she answered flatly. "To improve [the house] is to put my renminbi [money] into wasteful motions [*zheteng wode renminbi*]," she joked.³⁶ She considered it a waste of money to invest in the present, in the family home where they lived day and night.

Most migrants living in Hua village were not impoverished. They chose to live there partly to take advantage of the illegal nature of the housing, which gave them the "freedom" to extend a given structure in a way that maximized their living space. Makeshift kitchens adjacent to rental units, for example, were ubiquitous in the village. Outdoor, temporary kitchens made of shelves stood next to the one-storey farmhouses. Children sat on a low stool and did their homework on a folding table in the yard. Within multi-storey buildings, tenants set up a station of stoves in the corridor. These extensions further lowered living expenses.

Although housing in a space of suspension might charge low rents, the

³¹ Migrants' rent-to-income ratio in Beijing was 24.2 percent in 2011 and 25 percent in 2016. Ran Liu, Tingzhu Li, and Richard Greene, "Migration and Inequality in Rental Housing: Affordability Stress in the Chinese Cities," *Applied Geography* 115 (2020) Article 102138, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2019.102138>.

³² Author's field notes, 22 March 2014.

³³ In 2014, Sun Yuan and her husband decided to balance their jobs and their children's education by buying an apartment in Yanjiao, a township in Hebei Province which became a bedroom community of Beijing.

³⁴ Most of the houses or apartments were in the migrant homebuyers' hometown provinces. Five migrant homeowners purchased apartments in Yanjiao. Many migrant homebuyers, however, left their houses behind and continued to stay in Beijing.

³⁵ Her married son lived with his family in another rental unit in the same housing compound.

³⁶ Author's field notes, 27 September 2014.

cost brought about by frequent demolition was high.³⁷ Due to constant demolition, migrants had to move from one urban village to another frequently. Each wave of demolition broke up networks and forced migrants to rebuild social relationships in new destinations. The cycles of demolition and relocation led to fragile social relations and undermined solidarity between tenants.³⁸

Migrant tenants thus saw themselves as sojourners and suspended themselves from improving their lives in the urban villages, even if they were financially capable of doing so. I asked a teacher from a private school set up for migrant children in Yue village if she visited students' homes. "The parents rent the houses to make a living in the city, not for us to visit," she responded, in an aloof manner.³⁹ The teacher did not see the rental house as her students' home, but rather, a temporary dwelling to earn money.

The Economy of Suspension

Against the backdrop of pending expropriation, an informal economy flourished in the urban village.⁴⁰ The roads were often heavily congested with unlicensed taxis, moto-taxis, motor scooters, mini-buses, and bikes. Along the central road, stretching for a mile, stood numerous stores and shops, with or without licenses, satisfying all kinds of needs, including restaurants, fruit and vegetable stands, grocery stores, hair salons, clothing stores, supermarkets, drugstores and clinics, and stores for mobile phones and domestic appliances.⁴¹

On the streets, migrant shop owners utilized every opportunity to extend the physical reach of their shops. Food sellers, for example, used the place in front of their doors or around windows to cook. They also utilized the small front yard for extra seating. Moto-taxi drivers and unlicensed taxis

³⁷ Sociologist Matthew Desmond has called attention to the neglected relationship between private rental housing and urban poverty in the United States. The urban poor tend to spend more than two-thirds of their income on rent, and the growing scale of eviction further constrains upward social mobility for the poor. Compared to the American urban poor, the self-inflicted status of suspension, rather than rental stress, better characterizes the housing predicament of migrant workers in Beijing. Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016).

³⁸ Frequent demolition and the construction of multi-storey buildings also led to estranged relations between the landlords and tenants in the village. Tzu-Chi Ou, "Low-End Accumulation: Spatial Transformation and Social Stratification in a Beijing Urban Village," *Positions*, forthcoming.

³⁹ Author's field notes, early 2008. I initially conducted field research in Yue village in 2007.

⁴⁰ To gain an ethnographic understanding of the informal economy, I lived in a rental unit, shopped for groceries, cooked, bought clothing, and rode moto-taxis in the village, as did other migrant tenants. Through daily activities, I built rapport and exchanged views with merchants and store owners. These daily encounters helped me capture suspension and extension in the dynamic of city making.

⁴¹ In addition to retailers and storekeepers, there were two big compounds where most households processed and traded recycled scrap. A few small factories were scattered at the edge of Hua village.

occupied the crossroads at the centre of the village. Grocery stores displayed fruit and vegetables outdoors. Towels were hung up and air-dried in front of hair salons. Colourful buckets, stools, brooms, and dustpans piled outside of hardware stores. Migrant vendors and shopkeepers made use of such extensions to expand businesses and maximize their earnings.

These extensions were indispensable for running the informal economy. Several self-employed migrant workers living in Hua village told me that when they searched for houses to rent, a spare space for storing their tools, equipment, and materials was their first criterion.⁴² Such space in formal urban residential areas would be expensive or simply unavailable. The extensions thus helped the migrant workers, vendors, and shopkeepers to provide cheap products and services. As a result, food prices in Hua village were as low as half or two-thirds of Beijing's average.⁴³

The village committee played a crucial role in facilitating the spaces of suspension and extension. The committee profited from the buoyant economy through rent-seeking practices, such as charging stall fees and "hygiene fees." Inspections from higher levels were often reduced to a formality. The village committee usually notified vendors and shopkeepers beforehand so the latter could be prepared for the show. On the day of the inspection, all extended business locations suddenly vanished, whether they were carts with a bamboo steamer basket for buns, cooking pots and stoves for noodles, or outdoor seating and tables. The main road—which used to be busy, chaotic, and crowded by stalls, vehicles, and pedestrians—became wide and empty. A passing water truck dampened the dusty roads. No single vehicle dared to park on the street. And yet, soon after the team of inspectors left, sellers restored extensions without further ado. As usual, the smell of buns and noodles from bamboo steamers and cooking pots wafted on to the street. Moto-bikes and unlicensed taxis queued up and blocked the heart of the bustling village as if a few hours earlier no inspection had occurred. Through negotiations between the committee officers and the shopkeepers or vendors, the spaces of extension were kept in check.

The resulting uncertainty did have an obvious impact on the local economy. Businesses in the village changed hands at an extraordinarily fast rate. The signs "shop space ready for rent" were found everywhere. A hot pot restaurant on the main street, for example, changed owners three times in less than four months, between December 2013 and March 2014. Self-

⁴² Construction workers and home renovators extended their living spaces to the front yard or adjacent vacant lots to store cans of paint. Housebuilders, drivers, and vendors took up space around their houses to park their cars, trucks, or street food carts. The most representative examples were scrap recyclers, who made use of any spare space for processing recycled paper, wood, metal, or household appliances.

⁴³ For example, in 2014, a plate of pepper and beef over rice cost about RMB10 in Hua village, but it cost about RMB15 in a fast-food restaurant in the central city. Some migrants even complained that living expenses in their home counties were higher than in Hua village, especially clothing and daily necessities such as shampoo and cosmetic products.

employed migrant workers, street vendors, and shopkeepers, one after another, tried their luck at starting a small business in Hua village because barriers to entry were much lower than in the urban core, with its strict laws and regulations. A shop owner selling *liangpi*, Chinese cold noodles, in Hua village bluntly told me, “No license was required here. You can start a business anytime you want.”⁴⁴ The shop owners and vendors did not intend to run a long-lasting business in an urban village. The tenants looked to save as much as possible. Neither the vendors nor the customers appeared interested in having the roadside stalls “upgraded” into proper shops.

Between Resignation and Hopefulness

In early 2014, a rumour circulated that the government planned to close the street open air markets in Hua village. I asked vendors what they would do if the government enforced the order. A vendor voiced their collective attitude: “Who knows? We just take one step at a time without knowing what comes next [*zouyibu suanyibu*].”⁴⁵ Almost two years after the rumour first circulated, at the end of 2015, the government finally took action. Given the unclear plans about demolition, the migrants avoided making any major decisions. Their reasoning was straightforward—if the urban village was fated to be demolished, what would be the point of differentiating rumour from truth? Instead, waiting and seeing was the most common strategy.

The mentality of “taking a step now without knowing the next” resonates with the temporality of suspension, which is characterized by an unknown length of time. Most rural-urban workers, bounded by the household registration system, migrated in the belief that they would eventually return to hometowns, like “falling leaves returning to their roots.” Unlike local villagers, ordinary migrant tenants were ineligible for compensation when their rental housing was demolished. On that account, any investment in the urban village home would “put renminbi [money] into a wasteful motion.”⁴⁶ Migrant tenants resigned themselves to temporary, makeshift housing in the urban village. The near future in the city then disappeared as they deferred decisions until the last minute.⁴⁷

In the meantime, a vernacular developmentalism encouraged optimism about an elusive future. When I visited another urban village, where low-cost apartment buildings were ubiquitous, a seven-storey building with an elevator

⁴⁴ Author’s field notes, 6 March 2014. The shop owner planned to familiarize himself with making and selling cold noodles in Hua village, and aimed to become a member of a famous *liangpi* chain store in downtown Beijing.

⁴⁵ Author’s field notes, 18 June 2014.

⁴⁶ I quoted from Lan Ying, a migrant worker whom we met earlier in this article. Author’s field notes, 27 September 2014.

⁴⁷ Jane I. Guyer, “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 409–421, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.3.409>.

impressed me. The friend who introduced and accompanied me to the village asked, “This village has progressed more than Hua village, right?”⁴⁸ To my friend, an elevator in an urban village indicated growth and progress. A linear time-space imagination of urban development mentally distanced the residents from their immediate surrounding in the urban village, as everything here and now was meant to vanish soon.⁴⁹ In making sense of their lives, the migrants either looked backward to the “undeveloped” countryside or looked forward to the “developed” urban areas.

Migrant workers were optimistic about what the demolition would bring to their lives. In the spring of 2017, about one-third of Hua village was torn down during a city-wide campaign to “disperse and release” [*shujie*] migrants from the capital. As I visited Liu Tao, a young IT programmer from Hebei Province, he was just moving out of one demolished apartment building to another in the same village. I asked him what he would do if the whole village were to be demolished. “Move outward,” he replied without thinking, meaning that he would move farther away from the city centre to the Sixth Ring Road, on the outskirts of Beijing. Then, I asked what he thought about the demolition. “This [demolition] is better,” he said. “Beijing should not have such a chaotic place. Both the traffic and public order are bad [here].”⁵⁰ His close friend, who was having dinner with us, echoed Liu Tao and added, “The city should look like a city. The countryside should have the look of the countryside.”⁵¹ The urban village, as a non-rural and a non-urban place, has no place in these blueprints.

Migrants detached themselves from “the nearby,”⁵² as if the demolition were unrelated to them. That allowed migrant workers to work, live, and long for a rosy future when facing another round of demolition and displacement. Rather than taking their personal pains as the starting point, migrants rationalized the demolition campaigns from the perspective of the state. Behind their hopefulness was a common reasoning that emphasized the importance of the “grand scheme” [*daju*]. Ordinary migrants stood by the state’s vision of developmentalism. The demolitions, small or big, they believed, would pave the way for progress.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the dynamic interactions between the Beijing landlords, the migrant tenants living in the makeshift housing, the village

⁴⁸ Author’s field notes, 13 June 2014.

⁴⁹ As Biao Xiang noted, “‘near future’ disappears as people chase opportunities that are available at the moment.” Biao Xiang, this issue.

⁵⁰ Author’s field notes, 17 July 2017.

⁵¹ Author’s field notes, 17 July 2017.

⁵² Biao Xiang, this issue.

authorities, and the municipal government. The loss of government care prompted villagers to accumulate wealth through building illegal construction. Makeshift housing enabled migrant tenants to maximize their savings, and suspended them from a content urban life. Village authorities oscillated between turning a blind eye and cracking down, to balance growth and political pressure from the municipal or central government. The pendulum swung between ignoring and enforcing rules for migrant vendors, extending leeway in commercial spaces and expanding the informal economy.

The spaces of suspension were sustained—as well as constantly undermined—by multilateral relations that were highly fluid. Sometimes, landlords defied rules and discreetly constructed buildings. Sometimes, migrants seemed powerful enough to disregard regulations and utilized the grey zone to extend their territory. Sometimes, the government had the upper hand to crack down on illegal construction and the informal economy. Due to dynamic and fluid relations, the spaces of suspension offered no formal protection and hardly provided a basis for fostering lasting social relations. As the fruit stand in the article's introduction showed us, spaces of suspension can be temporarily eliminated, but then re-emerge. As such, the persistence of urban villages must be understood in both temporal and dynamic terms. Such dynamics on the margins of the city have characterized urban life in China over the past two decades.

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Keep On Moving: Rural University Graduates as Sales Workers in South and Central China

Willy Sier

ABSTRACT

Between 1978 and 2018 the percentage of the Chinese workforce in the service sector rose from 12.2 to 46.3. A large share of this workforce is in sales, selling products ranging from household goods, insurance, advertising space, and education, to various other services. The proliferation of salespeople in China is facilitated by the dramatic increase in the number of university graduates. Personnel in sales jobs, which are particularly popular among graduates from rural backgrounds with degrees from universities with indifferent reputations, experience an extraordinarily high level of mobility. They typically change jobs every few months, either because they are fired or they pursue better opportunities. Based on one year of fieldwork undertaken between 2015 and 2017, this article shows how the rapid expansion of China's higher education subjects students from rural backgrounds to new inequalities, which, in turn, reconfigure the rural-urban divide into multiple intersecting hierarchies. Building on the concept of complexed development, this article analyzes how salespeople experience contradictory mobilities in a web of intersecting hierarchies. It shows how they achieve upward status mobility by breaking away from agricultural and manual labour and becoming university graduates and white-collar workers; but also, how they sometimes experience downward mobility in terms of income in comparison to previous generations of migrants and their less-educated peers.

Keywords: Chinese workforce, downward mobility, upward mobility, labour, rural urban divide, sales, youth, inequalities in higher education, intersecting hierarchies, complexed mobilities, precarization.

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Introduction

In China the number of university graduates per annum rose from 1 million to 8.7 million between 1998 and 2020.¹ A large share of this growth can be attributed to the increased enrollment of students from rural backgrounds. By facilitating the rural-urban migration of these young people, the massive expansion of China's higher education system undermines the country's rural-urban divide, offering a pathway for rural youth to become city residents. Yet these students are subsequently confronted by the inequalities within this higher education system that largely restrict their access to the lower rungs of an increasingly stratified system. In other words, while the expansion of China's higher education system appears to facilitate a more equal distribution of opportunities, it also subjects students from rural backgrounds to new inequalities and a different set of hierarchies.

The tension between these expanding educational opportunities and new inequalities is visible in the studies on this group: while some scholars celebrate China's educational expansion as proof of the country's social progress, others show that this expansion has gone hand in hand with increased rural-urban inequality in terms of access to higher education.² As a result, it has been argued that the uptick in the number of graduates brings down real wages, and graduates from rural backgrounds find themselves jobless or precariously employed.³ At the same time, scholars agree that the "new generation" of rural-urban migrants,⁴ born after 1980, is different from the previous generation of migrants as they are better educated, less

¹ Yao Amber Li, John Whalley, Shunming Zhang, and Xiliang Zhao, "The Higher Educational Transformation of China and Its Global Implications," in *The Globalization of Higher Education*, eds. Christine Ennew et al (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 135–62; Yurou, "China Expected to Have 8.74 Million College Graduates in 2020: Ministry," *Xinhuanet*, 31 October 2019.

² Vidya Rajiv Yeravdekar and Gauri Tiwari, "China's Lead in Higher Education: Much to Learn for India," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 157 (2014): 369–372; Jiaozhong Qiao, "On the Rural-Urban Disparity in Access to Higher Education Opportunities in China," *Chinese Education and Society* 43, no. 4 (2010): 22–31. Huizhen Liu, "Shehui jiecheng fenhua yu gaodeng jiaoyu jihui jundeng" [Social class disunion and equity of higher education access], *Beijing shi fan da xue xue bo (She hui ke xue ban)* 1 2007: 17–22; Hua Ye, "Key Point Schools and Entry into Tertiary Education in China," *Chinese Sociological Review* 47, no. 2 (2015): 128–153.

³ Lennon Choi and Victor Li, "The Role of Higher Education in China's Inclusive Urbanization," *Cities* 60 (2017): 504–510; Lian Si, *China's Ant Tribe: Between Dreams and Reality* (蚂蚁: 大学毕业生聚居村实录) (Guilin, Guangxi: Normal University Publishing House, 2009); Limin Bai, "Graduate Unemployment: Dilemmas and Challenges in China's Move to Mass Higher Education," *The China Quarterly* 185 (2006): 128–44; Yu He and Yinhua Mai, "Higher Education Expansion in China and the 'Ant Tribe' Problem," *Higher Education Policy* 28, no. 3 (2015): 333–52.

⁴ "New generation migrants" should not be confused with "second generation migrants," a term used to refer to the children born in Chinese cities with parents who practiced rural-urban migration in previous decades. The struggles faced by this group are different, e.g., gaining access to education in the city without a local registration, and have been set out in the literature by authors such as: Terry Woronov, *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015); Minhua Ling, *The Inconvenient Generation: Migrant Youth Coming of Age on Shanghai's Edge*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019).

connected to the countryside, and have a “broad urban dream.”⁵ Building on these studies, this article focuses on *how* graduates from lower ranked universities strive to realize this urban dream on a third-class ticket in a rapidly changing urban labour market. It shows that sales work is an important employment channel since it gives graduates from rural backgrounds access to the revered category of white-collar labour and allows young people to continue dreaming about major upward social mobility in the future.

By delving into sales workers’ experiences, this article contributes to discussions about difficulties pertaining to the transition from school to work for China’s growing number of graduates from rural backgrounds—discussions which have thus far not taken note of the emergence of sales jobs.⁶ Studies have shown that the percentage of the Chinese workforce in the service sector rose from 12.2 to 46.3 percent between 1978 and 2018.⁷ Yet it is often difficult to imagine the realities lying behind these statistics. The service sector is an umbrella term that covers an enormous range of companies and scores of different labour regimes. Sales work is not generally mentioned as a subsection of the service sector.⁸ It may thus far have gone unnoticed as a category of labour as sales work is spread across various industries that are considered part of the service sector (anything ranging from food, advertising, finance, real estate, education, and beyond) and therefore stays under the radar as a *type* of employment. Sales jobs may also go unnoticed by researchers employing quantitative methods since people move through these jobs rapidly and often work without contracts, which explains the lack of statistics available to show the prevalence of young people working in sales. Yet I contend that these jobs form a crucial entry point into the urban economy for graduates from rural backgrounds. Among the approximately 50 interlocutors with whom I was in contact between 2015 and 2017, the large majority had worked in sales. Additionally, the high number of sales jobs advertised on the online platforms through which my interlocutors sought employment, my visits to sales offices, and the conversations I had with employers, convinced me that sales work makes up a substantial part of the jobs in the service sector.

This article focuses on a specific type of sales work that entails selling goods and services for private companies in exchange for salaries that are

⁵ Zhiming Cheng, “The New Generation of Migrant Workers in Urban China,” in *Mobility, Sociability, and Well-Being of Urban Living*, eds. D. Wang and S. He (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2004).

⁶ Lian Si, *China’s Ant Tribe: Between Dreams and Reality*; Limin Bai, “Graduate Unemployment: Dilemmas and Challenges in China’s Move to Mass Higher Education”; Yu He and Yinhua Mai, “Higher Education Expansion in China and the ‘Ant Tribe’ Problem.”

⁷ These numbers were reported in a statistical bulletin on career development by China’s Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security: <http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/zwgk/szrs/tjgb/201906/W020190611539807339450.pdf>

⁸ For an example of a study on the service sector see Yanrui Wu, “China’s Services Sector: The New Engine of Economic Growth,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 6 (2015): 618–34.

largely commission-based. These jobs are located in hierarchically organized competitive systems, which means that employees not only compete against one another, but are also a part of sales teams that compete against other such teams. The performance of salespeople is often publicly displayed and compared to encourage competition, making these jobs particularly stressful. This type of sales work, which I call company sales work, differs from cashier work and independent sales work, which refer to working in a shop as a sales clerk, running online shops, or selling goods through social media. In this article, I mainly focus on company sales work, which is what I refer to in subsequent sections when I use the term “sales work.”

By focusing on sales work and analyzing labour relations in this segment of the labour market, this article demonstrates how rural-urban inequalities in the Chinese higher education system shape young people’s post-graduation experiences, which are marked by multiple contradictory mobility processes. Sales workers are hypermobile—they change jobs regularly as they navigate the hire-and-fire system—shifting between selling products ranging from cars to real estate, and education to insurance. The constant changing of jobs is a key component of how labour is organized in the sales sector. To maximize profit, managers dismiss and recruit salespeople constantly, using phone applications aimed at matching employers and job seekers. Salespeople get stuck in a seemingly never-ending cycle of starting new jobs full of promise, only to leave these jobs in disappointment and start all over again. In other words, they are trapped in a state of suspension—moving constantly and rapidly, without stable social networks or relations with established institutions, unable to lead a balanced life due to work pressure, yet are full of energy and hope even if the promised riches fail to materialize time after time. This article takes a different approach from existing literature on labour precarity in China and more broadly in the Global South in three ways.⁹ First, while recognizing the forms of exclusion and marginalization that previous studies have noted, this article shifts the focus to the ways these youth are *included* in the urban economy. As the first persons in their families to gain access to higher education, graduates from rural backgrounds embody the social change the Chinese state has long declared to strive for through educational expansion, placing them right at the heart of China’s education-for-development ideology. Second, instead of thinking about their

⁹ Guy Standing describes how a new social class has come into existence, which he calls “the precariat,” referring to workers whose existences are marked by short-term contracts, low incomes, difficult labour relations, little social security and a lack of political voice. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). Sarah Swider demonstrates that the re-emergence of urban informal employment as the main mode of employment in Chinese society is the result of both global capitalism and state institutions and regulations in: Sarah Swider, “Informal and Precarious Work: The Precariat and China,” *Rural China: An International Journal of History and Social Science* 14, no.1 (2017): 19–41. Breman examines the lives of the working poor in India in Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour: Working in India’s Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

experiences in terms of decline and precarization only, this article calls attention to these young people's experiences in a societal context where future gains, not losses, are expected. Sales workers stay positive during extended periods of insecurity and hard work through their conviction that they are moving towards a dreamed-of future. Third, this article considers sales workers' experiences in relation to multiple, intersecting hierarchies. It shows that, even though these young people face the worsening of their positions in the urban labour market in terms of real wages, they may still experience upward status mobility, particularly in terms of overcoming China's deep rural-urban divide. Salespeople may, for example, experience upward status mobility through becoming white-collar workers, yet end up earning less than their less-educated peers. Thus, building on Biao Xiang's concept of complexed development, this work shows that salespeople's inclusion is partial and has contradictory outcomes.

Xiang introduces the concept of complexed development in the introduction to this special issue of *Pacific Affairs* as a multi-directional process of constant societal change and movement rather than the process of linear social progress to which the word "development" generally refers. The word "complexed," based on the Chinese term *jiujie*, means that the dynamics of this movement "point to different directions and yet are entangled, often resulting in confusion and disorientation."¹⁰ Complexed development compels people to move fast, without knowing what they are moving towards. What is most confusing about complexed development is that it is movement presented as development, as in the result of "conscious plans and interventions aimed at improvement," while it is also movement that effects little meaningful change.¹¹ The expansion of China's higher education system is complexed because it goes hand in hand with increased stratification and the emergence of new hierarchies and inequalities in higher education that limit the educational opportunities for youth from rural backgrounds, and lead to the reproduction rather than the mitigation of rural-urban inequalities. These contradictory dynamics of in- and exclusion constitute fertile ground for the emergence of the sales sector, where graduates from rural backgrounds enter the white-collar labour market in the hope of seizing the opportunities for upward mobility promised by the expanding higher education system.

The article is organized as follows. After a note on my research methods, I delve into the expansion of China's higher education system. Next, I

¹⁰ Biao Xiang, "Introduction: Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World," *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2021).

¹¹ In 2018, Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist analyzed how governments focus on creating opportunities through facilitating migration even though these migrations often fail to bring about proportionate benefits for those who migrate. This is an example of complexed development. Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist, "Postscript: Infrastructuralization: Evolving Sociopolitical Dynamics in Labour Migration from Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 91, no.4 (2018): 759–773.

demonstrate that salespeople are simultaneously upwardly and downwardly mobile in various hierarchical structures. Then, I analyze labour relations in the sales sector, explaining the hierarchically organized structures of competition that give rise to feelings of loneliness and dependency, while also driving hypermobility. Finally, I will discuss how my findings contribute to discussions about labour issues for graduates from rural backgrounds in China.

Research Methods

The ethnographic research for this article was conducted in the context of a PhD project on graduates from rural backgrounds in China's Hubei Province. Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted 11 months of field research, and in the summer of 2017, I returned to Wuhan for visits to sales offices and further conversations with employers. Today, I am still in regular contact with six interlocutors who work in sales via WeChat, China's most popular social media application. One informant has kept a diary intermittently since 2016, in which she reflects in her own words on her experiences as a sales worker. At different times she has shared parts of this diary with me. In addition to gathering data via informal conversations and accompanying interlocutors to their places of work and job fairs, I have also interviewed employers and analyzed online recruitment processes. I did not select my interlocutors based on their sales work experience. Instead, the prevalence of the sales sector as a field of employment became apparent when I researched the working lives of university graduates from rural backgrounds in Wuhan. Following this discovery, I prioritized learning about the workings of this segment of the labour market as one of the objectives of my field research. Throughout my research, I have always tried to practice participant observation, not in terms of becoming a sales worker myself, but in terms of studying my interlocutors in their everyday lives, and in their own time and space. In practice, this meant that my research data was gathered mainly through informal chats and debates during periods of intensive hanging out in the spaces where my interlocutors lived, worked, and relaxed. I conducted all my research in Mandarin, a language I have studied since 2004.

Educational Expansion and Complexed Development

China's higher education system is an important site for performing complexed development. The constant changes and growth of the higher education system suggest progress and change, while concealing the fact that underneath the changing names and shifting hierarchies the status quo is maintained. In this section I reflect on shifting categories within the higher education system that suggest movement without effecting change, and the effect of higher education on rural-urban inequalities.

The growth and changes in the Chinese education system are not only celebrated as markers of development, they are also seen as crucial to achieving future development goals. For example, on September 10, 2018—China's 34th Teachers' Day—President Xi stated that education is the foundation for national revitalization and social progress, and that education is significant for promoting people's overall development, strengthening the nation's innovation capability, and realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.¹² A retired high-school teacher in a small town in central Hubei province explains this as follows:

[...] Education is important for economic development. If you improve a country's level of education, you stimulate its economy. And when the economy keeps growing, we will attract more and more foreign investment. We have so much talent in China, think about it ... millions of graduates per year! The level of education of our whole population has increased so much in recent decades. Just wait and watch China in five or 10 years!¹³

This view is widely shared among students and parents. In addition to educational expansion being considered as a driver of economic growth and development in a more general sense, it is also seen as a strategy for mitigating rural-urban inequalities, as higher education—often referred to by parents as “the only way out”—is viewed as an alternative route to the city, as it provides young people with opportunities to achieve a stable, middle-class urban lifestyle in contrast to the unstable urban lives of labour migrants of past decades. Parents' enthusiasm for this strategy is made visible in rural villages through the organization of banquets to celebrate their children's enrollment into university and village squares adorned with photographic exhibitions displaying graduates' pictures and providing information about the universities they graduated from and the jobs they currently hold. Yet the reality is more complex than the narratives that suggest there is a straightforward relation between educational expansion and social progress.

The effects of educational expansion must be understood in the context of existing patterns of social stratification that correspond to the stratified structure of the Chinese higher education system and affect the distribution of the opportunities following from educational expansion. China's higher education system is pyramid-shaped, with a small number of elite institutes at the top and a large and rapidly expanding base of low-ranked institutes. Research shows that the Chinese government's investments in education are distributed very unequally, with most government funding directed towards a small number of universities through elite funding programs.¹⁴ Additionally,

¹² Descheng Cao, “Xi Calls on Building China into Education Powerhouse,” *China Daily*, 11 September 2018. <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/11/WS5b96c0eda31033b4f4655422.html>.

¹³ Retired middle school teacher, interview by author, Jingmen, 8 June 2016.

¹⁴ Li et al., “Higher Educational Transformation.”

media reports demonstrate that the enrollment of students from rural backgrounds into the institutes at the top of the pyramid has declined in recent decades (e.g. at Qinghua University it declined from 50 to 17 percent between 1970 and 2014; and at Beijing University from 30 to 10 percent in the past decade).¹⁵ Statistical research shows that the number of students from rural backgrounds enrolled in universities drops as the rank of the institution rises.¹⁶ Thus, for students from rural backgrounds, China's educational expansion has meant *increased* access to the lowest rungs of the country's higher education system and *decreased* access to top institutes.¹⁷ This has serious consequences for the subsequent mobility of these graduates in Chinese urban labour markets and is crucial for understanding the complexities of their mobility processes.

Complexed development in higher education thus means that seemingly progressive initiatives serve to reproduce the status quo and even reinforce inequality by making the hierarchy more opaque and more difficult to negotiate for underprivileged people. This can be illustrated by the policy of abolishing the category of class-three universities. The most important division between Chinese universities is the division between class one, two and three universities. All three of these classes offer four-year bachelor-level degrees, but the class-one universities include the country's most well-funded institutes, while class-three universities are mainly private universities with relatively poor reputations, and class-two universities exist somewhere in the middle.¹⁸ Below these three classes, there is still a large base of *zhuanke* universities, which are schools that offer three-year programs and are often attended by students from rural backgrounds (see Table 1).

In Hubei Province in 2016, the class-three category was suddenly abolished, following a government decision to merge the classes two and three into a single category. This change was motivated by the negative reputation held by class-three universities, which were seen as universities where wealthier

¹⁵ Pumin Yin, "Rural Students Falling Behind," *Beijing Review* 37, 15 September 2011, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/nation/txt/2011-09/13/content_389895.htm.

¹⁶ See, for example, Hongbin Li et al., "Unequal Access to College in China: How Far Have Poor, Rural Students Been Left Behind?" *China Quarterly* 221 (2015): 185–207; Jinzhong Qiao, "On the Rural-Urban Disparity in Access to Higher Education Opportunities in China."

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion about how exactly rural-urban differences are created in China's higher education system, see Willy Sier, "The Price of Aspirations: Education Migrants' Pursuit of Higher Education in Hubei Province, China," *European Journal of Development Research* 33, no. 1 (2021): 16–34.

¹⁸ University classes are divided by score lines, which are the minimum number of points new recruits must have scored on the university entrance exam to be eligible for enrollment. Scores lines are calculated by the central Chinese state based on the scores of previous year's entrants. Score lines also determine universities' status.

Table 1
Overview of Hubei higher education system, 2014
(total number of universities = 123)

Class	Number	Kind of student	Public/Private university
One	19	High scores; large majority urban	All public
Two	25	Mid-level scores; majority rural	Majority public
Three	24	Low scores; majority urban	Majority private with much higher fees than state schools
Zhuanke	55	Low scores; majority rural	Majority public

Source: Wuhan Bureau of Education in May 2016.

students with very low scores could buy their bachelor degrees.¹⁹ Yet these universities continued to exist regardless of their change of category and the practices that earned them their poor reputation did not change either. But as they were merged into the class-two university category, they became more difficult to distinguish and criticize. The eradication of class-three universities is construed as a positive development, as this tainted category, which hinted at educational corruption and the buying of diplomas, now no longer exists. At the same time, class-three universities continue to operate in the higher education system where people with low exam scores and the wealth to afford high tuition fees can easily get bachelor degrees. Moreover, the fact that statistical research has repeatedly proven that the expansion of China's higher education system exacerbates rural-urban inequalities in terms of access to higher education—as students from rural backgrounds are increasingly trapped in the lower segments of this stratified system—points at another example of complexed development. More space is created for inclusion at the bottom of the higher education system, while at the same time the lines that exclude students from rural backgrounds from participating in the top segments of this system are drawn deeper.

Going Up or Going Down?

Salespeople experience mobility in various directions. As the first generation of the rural population that has had large-scale access to higher education

¹⁹ This internet article explains the three classes and also discusses the cancellation of the class-three category. Manmande xinqingwu: “一本、二本、三本与专科，都是属于大学，真正的差别到底在哪里” [class one, class two, class three and zhuanke are all universities, what is the real difference between them?], 19 February 2017, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/sid=1625689969401859023&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

they experience significant upward status mobility. They break permanently with their families' histories of agricultural and manual work. This status mobility is founded on the symbolic values that have been ascribed to the rural and the urban since the start of the reform era, with the rural representing the past, the unenlightened and the undeveloped realm, and the urban having become associated with progress and modernity.²⁰ Educating oneself is an important vehicle for rural youth to "become urban." Gaining a university degree makes returning to farm work unimaginable for youths from rural backgrounds, tying them permanently to the urban environment.

Young people who move to the city as students, not as workers, see themselves as different from those who practice labour migration. One important marker of this difference is the type of work they do. As white-collar office workers, these youths pioneer new terrain in the urban economy where their less-educated peers and family members, who often work in shops, restaurants, factories, and on construction sites, have not yet ventured. When my interlocutor Lily talked about her father's position in the city she said: "He is only a worker," intimating that she considers him to have a low position in the hierarchy of urban workers that she imagines.²¹ In recent decades the culture of white-collar work has become part of the Chinese vision of modernity as it is associated with a middle-class urban lifestyle. Sociologist and gender scholar Jieyu Liu explains that female "white-collar beauties" have been featured heavily in magazines, newspapers, and TV dramas and are presented as the embodiment of youth, intelligence and beauty.²² Depictions of white-collar workers are the direct opposite of the imagery of migrant workers: clean versus dirty, modern versus backward, beautiful versus ugly, trustworthy versus morally ambiguous.²³ Scholarship on identity work has shown that identity is defined relationally. Sociologist Michele Lamont calls this "boundary work,"²⁴ which refers to the way people interpret differences between themselves and others to construct a sense of

²⁰ Jonathan Bach, "They Come in Peasants and Leave Citizens": Urban Villages and the Making of Shenzhen, China," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 421–58; Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants. Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Jinting Wu, *Fabricating an Educational Miracle. Compulsory Schooling Meets Ethnic Rural Development in Southwest China* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016).

²¹ Lily, interview by author, Wuhan, 4 April 2016.

²² Jieyu Liu, *Gender, Sexuality and Power in Chinese Companies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 17.

²³ See, for example, Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*; Liu, *Gender Sexuality and Power in Chinese Companies*.

²⁴ Michele Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

self-worth. Sales work is thus important for university graduates from rural backgrounds as it offers an entry point into this admired category of employment and creates a distance between them and their rural past.

However, doing sales work sometimes means accepting labour conditions that compare unfavorably with those experienced by their less-educated peers. Salespeople's basic salaries are often near the local minimum wage level, between RMB1500 and 2000.²⁵ Moreover, it is not uncommon for salaries to drop even lower during periods when sales results are disappointing. At the same time, the wages earned by blue-collar workers and workers in the service industry have risen in recent years. According to statistics, construction and hotel workers earn RMB4000 and RMB5000 on average per month, respectively.²⁶ Moreover, salespeople's labour conditions are negotiated on an individual basis, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and scams, as they lack the protection enjoyed by blue-collar labourers who are recruited collectively or find work through social networks.²⁷ This means that even if graduating from university and doing white-collar work elevates the status of these youth and their family in the home community, it might result in lower wages, worse labour conditions, and ultimately downward mobility in a hierarchy of wealth. This creates a sense of disorientation in these young people, who have achieved a lot, yet continue to struggle with stigmas based on their rural status and earn less than their less-educated peers.

It is common for salespeople to take out loans to bridge the gap between their heightened status as white-collar workers and their low incomes. With money borrowed from banks or parents, salespeople compensate for their lack of wealth and spend the money as if their future riches are guaranteed. Liwei, another one of my interlocutors, not only spent her borrowed money on clothes, makeup, and hair treatments, she also exchanged her shared apartment for a private one located near her new office when she started working for a company selling advertising space in cinemas.²⁸ This move increased her rent from RMB600 to RMB2400. Spending their expected future earnings only deepens salespeople's state of suspension, because now there is no way back: they *have to* succeed. Even when their earnings are relatively high, salespeople often spend more than they earn, increasing their need for money. Julia, who was the highest earner among my

²⁵ For information about minimum wages see Alexander Chipman Koty and Qian Zhou: "A Guide to Minimum Wages in China in 2020," <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/minimum-wages-china-2020/>.

²⁶ For information about average wages see Statista "Average Wage of Employees in Urban China in 2018, by Sector (in yuan):" <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278351/average-wage-of-employed-persons-in-urban-units-in-china/>.

²⁷ Sarah Swider, *Building China: Informal Work and the New Precariat* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

²⁸ Author's field notes, 13 June 2017.

interlocutors, took out a mortgage as soon as the bank permitted it—to buy a yet-to-be built apartment for her family. When she subsequently fell into a dispute with her employer and lost her lucrative job, she borrowed another RMB150,000 from the bank to invest in opening a business selling English language courses with her friends.²⁹ When COVID-19 hit in early 2020, Julia's business was seriously disrupted and her sales income decreased dramatically, making it very difficult to keep up with the payments on her loans. She even considered selling the still not-yet-built apartment again.

Of course, taking out loans is not always a sustainable strategy. Sometimes small loans were necessary to cover basic living expenses. Li, an interlocutor who sold cars, borrowed small amounts from his mother in the months when he was not earning enough to cover his rent and food.³⁰ Julia instead took out loans to invest in businesses, hoping to increase her earnings. Liwei borrowed money to sustain her lifestyle as a white-collar worker in Wuhan, expecting her earnings soon to match her status, but instead experienced a rapid downward spiral that ended with her having amassed RMB68,000 in credit card debt after 18 months of working.³¹ Only when the bank started pressuring her did she find the courage to tell her parents, who ordered her to quit her job immediately and return home. Her parents borrowed money from a family member to pay the bank and stop the interest repayments from mounting. Liwei subsequently took a job in a restaurant in her hometown, where she worked long and hard to help her parents repay the money she had lost.

Hypermobility and Forced Competition in the Sales Sector

Salespeople are often part of a sales team that is overseen by a manager who, in turn, reports to a branch manager. In the case of large companies, this branch manager reports to the head office. A manager's success depends on constantly hiring and firing staff members. The continual recruiting necessary for the frequent staff changes is facilitated by phone applications with names such as "Boss" and "No Worries About the Future" that have simplified recruitment and job searching to a great extent.³² After a profile and resume have been uploaded applicants can apply by tapping a single button. When the job seeker scrolls through the jobs listed, the application shows a percentage that indicates the extent of the match between their profile and the job vacancy. While searching for jobs, it is not uncommon for young people to send out hundreds of applications per hour. When an interview materializes and an agreement is reached, work starts almost

²⁹ Author's field notes, 17 June 2017.

³⁰ Author's field notes, 10 February 2016.

³¹ Author's field notes, 3 December 2019.

³² The Chinese names of these applications are *laoban* and *qiancheng wuyou*. Translation by author.

immediately. Yet sales jobs are as easily lost as they are found, as managers constantly fire underperforming members of their sales team. In the words of one such manager: "Our company is like the army. The army barracks are always there, but the soldiers are not fixed inside, they flow through the structure. Our company is like that: the structure is fixed, but the staff changes constantly."³³ The managers themselves also constantly deal with the impending threat of being let go, as the performance of their sales teams has consequences for their own future in their company. Their own insecurity is also in the forefront of the managers' minds. In conversations they often emphasized their own transient status with phrases such as: "If I'm still here next year..." and "In two years, I probably won't be here."³⁴

In every layer of this structure an element of competition drives employees' performance. This competition is viscerally experienced because it is made public, with numbers being written on posters in meeting rooms or sent around by e-mail. In addition, neoliberal ideologies that promise improvement in pay as long as salespeople persist, motivate them to keep trying. Slogans are painted on office walls, espoused in work training sessions, and repeated by managers. "Giving up is the greatest failure," was an often-heard statement.³⁵ In Liwei's office a poster read: "The road to success is not crowded, because only a few persist." In conversations between friends, similar encouragement was often exchanged: "Never give up. If you are excellent, you will succeed!" These messages emphasized self-responsibility and the need for sacrifice: give up something now and you will benefit later.

Selling as much as possible is important for retaining one's job, as those who fail to meet targets risk being fired. Additionally, sales volume also determines salespeople's salaries. In Wuhan in 2016, it was common for companies to offer a basic salary ranging between RMB1000 and 4000, supplemented by a three percent commission on sales. In bigger companies, salary structures could be very complex, with basic salaries varying depending on the volume of sales in previous months, on individual and team targets, special bonuses for bringing in new clients, and salary reductions in case of missed targets. Of course, there is much variation in the way companies pay their sales staff, as illustrated by these examples:

1. Selling cars in Wuhan

The bottom line is 12 cars per month. If you don't make that, they cut your salary. The basic salary is RMB1400. If you sell nine cars, you get 0.9 of the basic salary. If you sell eight, you get 0.8. Until you sell five cars, then you get 0.5. You never go under 0.5, but then you basically already don't have a salary.³⁶ (Li)

³³ Manager sales office, interview by author, Wuhan, 16 June 2017.

³⁴ Manager sales office, interview, 16 June 2017.

³⁵ Author's field notes, 13 June 2017.

³⁶ Author's field notes, 17 June 2017.

2. Selling education in Shenzhen

My basic salary is RMB9000 and my monthly target is RMB300,000. My salary is based on my sales performance in the previous quarter. It varies between RMB3500 and 9000. There are several bonuses we can get as a team each month and as an individual there is a bonus of RMB300 to 500 for each new client we sign up. And we get commission on our sales, which also depends on the volume. For example, it's zero percent on the first RMB100,000; three percent for between RMB100,000 and 200,000; five percent between RMB200,000 and 300,000; and so on. So, the calculations are quite complicated.³⁷ (Julia)

3. Selling advertising space in Wuhan

My basic salary is RMB1800 and I receive three percent commission on my sales.³⁸ (Liwei)

These pay structures make it easy to understand the rapid turnover in sales jobs. The managers who do the hiring and firing for these companies can be seen as speculators who invest in their employees hoping for a quick return, and who have to cut them loose before they eat too much into the profits they have generated for the company. Liwei's situation in the advertising business is a good example. She worked in the company for 10 months, receiving a total of RMB18,000 (10 times RMB1800) in basic salary. She also received a commission of RMB3000 on an RMB100,000 sale. This means that when her manager fired her after she had not sold anything for six months the company had still earned RMB79,000 by employing her for 10 months.³⁹

To make these decisions, managers need to constantly gauge which employee is most likely to strike a deal in the near future and stay abreast of the latest developments in the relationships between their sales staff and potential clients. Salespeople therefore receive frequent phone calls and texts from managers who ask for updates and instruct their staff to pursue particular contacts. The communication between salespeople and managers is never straightforward, as they have contradictory motivations. Salespeople consider it beneficial to hold on to jobs for longer periods of time. In their slang, "developing your circle," which refers to developing a stable base of repeat customers, is crucial for turning an unstable sales job into a steady source of high income. Managers do not expect this sort of linear progression for all their sales staff and, as illustrated by Liwei's example, want to cut out an employee before the costs of their base salary exhaust the profits they have generated for the company.

Stress, Isolation, and Dependency

Salespeople work seven days a week. There is always a sales evaluation around

³⁷ Author's field notes, 12 May 2019.

³⁸ Author's field notes, 7 April 2016.

³⁹ Author's field notes, 7 April 2016.

the corner, a deal about to be closed, or a sales goal nearly achieved. Yao, a 22-year-old saleswoman, worked for a platform selling used goods.⁴⁰ Her company charged clients for advertising their goods and took commissions on closed deals. Yao worked in the car department, selling ad space to second-hand car dealers. After a year she started suffering from stress-related health complaints and had to quit. She had rarely had time to meet me while she was working, but now once that she had quit, our first outing together was to see a doctor. She explained to me and the doctor why she had started to feel so unwell:

One of the hardest parts of this job was that I never knew when the day would end. If sales were up and the manager was happy, our team could leave on time. But when the manager was under pressure because of disappointing numbers, she would not let anybody go home until late at night, or would require our team to work through the weekend.⁴¹ (Yao)

The unpredictability of this job meant that Yao could never plan ahead or make commitments that were not work-related, leaving her feeling very socially isolated and unhappy. She had now decided to take three weeks for rest and self-care before starting a new sales job. She agreed with the doctor to use this break to take a 20-day course of treatment, which would cost her RMB2000, before re-entering the wild world of sales. Just as Yao had described, I found that working long and unpredictable hours left many salespeople with very weak social networks. Apart from their colleagues and managers they had nobody with whom they could discuss their life strategies. Moreover, their work relationships were either hierarchical or competitive, which made it difficult to communicate openly with workmates.

In some cases, salespeople even live on company grounds, completely isolated from the rest of society. Li, for example, lived above the showroom where he sold cars and he was completely consumed by his work. He rarely left the building in which the showroom was located and shared a bedroom with colleagues. He never took days off, he explained: "I have no time. Never. And if you take a day off, your manager will look at you like: 'You've only sold six cars this month, and you want to take a day off?'"⁴² This meant that even though Li was technically living in Shenzhen, he had seen nothing of the city aside from the industrial complex in the suburb where the showroom was located.

Li got along with his colleagues but also talked about the difficulty of sharing such an isolated space with people with whom he was in constant competition. He was a very gregarious character who was well-liked by his

⁴⁰ Author's field notes, 25 May 2016.

⁴¹ Author's field notes, 25 May 2016.

⁴² Author's field notes, 10 February 2016.

colleagues. When his phone—a crucial device for a salesman—had stopped working, his colleagues had pitched in to help him buy a new one. In the evenings, Li often joined his colleagues in card games and beer drinking. Yet it was not uncommon for work relationships to suffer from the constant competition.

In Liwei's office, for example, I noticed that people entered and left the office without greeting one another and ignored each other completely as they crossed paths. I soon learned of the conflict that lay at the roots of this frosty atmosphere. People had stopped acknowledging one another after a co-worker had accused Liwei of trying to sabotage a deal by taking a signed sales contract from her desk, something she vehemently denied. Liwei had been scolded by her manager after this accusation, which left her feeling wronged and completely isolated. She had withdrawn from the group chat which was her team's main channel of communication, and now had to focus completely on winning back her manager's trust by improving her sales.

The hypermobility and competition in the sales sector undermine solidarity and trust among salespeople, making them dependent on their hierarchical relationships with managers. Changing jobs frequently inhibits the development of social networks and competition exacerbates feeling of isolation, as it leads to disputes between colleagues and a general atmosphere of distrust. Salespeople felt deeply reliant on their managers, who were often among the few people with whom these young people communicated on a daily basis and whom they perceived as gatekeepers to the urban white-collar economy. Reminiscent of labour relations between migrant domestic workers, recruiters, and employers in Beijing described by Yan Hairong,⁴³ managers in the sales sector sometimes spoke about their recruits from rural backgrounds in a pathologizing manner. They reinforce rural-urban hierarchies by strengthening the idea that rural and urban people are differently positioned on a spectrum of development and present themselves as benevolent helpers who “give rural kids a chance.” These labour relations are thus rooted in rural-urban inequalities that shape both salespeople's vulnerable positioning in urban labour markets and their desire for achieving social upward mobility through white-collar work.

Keep On Moving

Working in sales means constantly starting and stopping jobs, as workers are either fired for not selling enough or quit for not earning enough after a few months of working for one company. Disputes over working conditions and especially remuneration often arise, yet the transient nature of these jobs means that workers would sooner walk away from a job than invest energy in trying to change their working environment. The salespeople working without official contracts, in particular, realized they had a difficult time

⁴³ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*, 2008.

holding their manager to their word when problems arose. Yet it is very common for salespeople to work without contracts.

Liwei once worked for one of China's biggest real estate companies and was never given a contract. As her previous employer had refused to pay the salary she was owed when he fired her, I urged her to ask for a contract this time. She laughed and said: "Don't worry, people here really trust each other. We don't need a contract."⁴⁴ She was fired only weeks later without having been given any notice. After a few days of mourning, she was back on the job market and within two weeks she had started a new job. When workers were fired, employers sometimes paid a so-called "consolation salary," which covered only a portion of the salary for the work already done.⁴⁵ When faced with these practices, workers took what they were offered and moved on. Sometimes salespeople were also charged for mistakes made on the job. When Lily worked for a company that sold tokens for online games, she once forwarded an activation code to a customer before having received a RMB1000 payment. When she received her next paycheck, she saw that her boss had taken out RMB500 for this mishap. Her boss had not discussed what had happened with Lily, or warned her that mistakes would be deducted from her salary. Lily directed her anger at the customer, calling him a "bad egg," but refrained from criticizing her boss. She quit her job a few weeks later to start a job selling aloe vera products soon after.

Julia, a young woman unafraid of standing up for herself, talked about labour disputes more frequently than others. She had been in several situations in which employers had broken their promises or refused to pay her at all. After one of these episodes she wrote in her diary:

Who is going to compensate me for the time and energy I invested in that hopeless company of yours? [...] You see all the people in the world as losers for you to use as you please and you see me as a little girl in Shenzhen all by myself, without friends or family [...] an easy target for you to exploit.⁴⁶ (Julia)

Julia clearly realized that she was perceived of as easy prey, as a young rural woman with only a degree in fashion design from a low-ranking university. She tried to call employers out when they did not keep to their agreements but also knew that there was no way to change their behaviour. In most cases, she worked without labour contracts, and believed that the authorities would not take her seriously if she complained. In fact, her accumulated distrust against employers only increased the speed with which she burned through jobs. Afraid of investing too much in a job that might not pay off, she had learned to move at the first signs of trouble. As a result,

⁴⁴ Author's field notes, 7 April 2016.

⁴⁵ In Chinese this term is *anwei gongzi*.

⁴⁶ Julia, diary entry, 21 October 2016.

Julia had five different jobs ranging from selling bridal gowns to selling English language education between May 2016 and June 2020.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

By focusing on how graduates from rural backgrounds are included, albeit only partially, into the urban economy through their access to sales work, this article has gone beyond narratives of precarization, deepening our insight into how the expansion of China's higher education system reconfigures processes of social stratification. Thanks to the opportunities created by the expansion of China's higher education system, these young people are the first in their family to enter universities. Yet as they navigate this higher education system and subsequently enter urban labour markets, they are confronted with new inequalities and hierarchies resulting from the expansion of the higher education system. Xiang refers to this type of simultaneous movement in separate directions that leads to a sense of disorientation as complexed development.

To study contradictory processes of mobility it is necessary to consider how people are simultaneously located in various hierarchies, which in this case include the hierarchies of rural-urban resident status, wealth, education, and job position. Young people's mobilities need to be historicized in the context of their broader educational and life trajectories. In doing so, this article considers the social effects of the expansion of China's system of higher education as going beyond young people's school-to-work transition. It shows that even if graduates can only work in particularly stressful and precarious sales jobs, they still value their ability to achieve the coveted status of the white-collar professional, a figure that has become central to imaginings of Chinese modernity and exists in contrast to farmers and manual labourers.

These young people conceive their struggles as part of a grand project of development that leads towards a bright future. This perception drives them to work hard, continue trying, and keep on moving, despite being continuously confronted with the enduring effects of rural-urban social inequalities. Emphasizing the importance of analyzing labour subjectivities as rooted in local socio-economic contexts, this article supports existing critiques of theories about the precarization of labour developed from a Global North perspective, which are often directed at Guy Standing's concept of "the precariat."⁴⁷ These theories view processes of precarization as resulting from globalization rather than as an integral part of state development

⁴⁷ Ching Kwan Lee and Yelizavetta Kofman, "The Politics of Precarity: Views beyond the United States," *Work and Occupations* 39, no. 4 (2012): 388–408; Ronaldo Munck, "The Precariat: A View from the South," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 747–762; Ben Scully, "Precarity North and South: A Southern Critique of Guy Standing," *Global Labour Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 160–173; Jan Breman, "A Bogus Concept? [Review of: G. Standing (2011) *The precariat: the new dangerous class*]," *New Left Review* 84 (2013): 130–138.

strategies, and consider changing working conditions across the globe in relation to a more secure past that does not always resonate with the histories of work and workers in the Global South. This article's ethnographic approach has revealed that sales workers consider their labour experiences, instead, in relation to those of less-educated peers who work in blue-collar sectors. Moreover, it has shown that these young people can accept lower wages, worse labour conditions, and downward mobility in a hierarchy of wealth in exchange for upward status mobility and the promise of future improvement.

Analyzing these mobilities is critical for considering the futures of graduates from rural backgrounds in Chinese society. It also provides us with a revealing lens to examine how rural-urban relations are being renegotiated. These young people who arrive in cities as students have serious ambitions to build stable lives for themselves in the city, and are welcomed by local governments as people who can contribute to the success of their cities' economies. More research is needed to develop ideas about how social institutions can support the realization of such ambitions and to analyze the reconfiguration of patterns of social stratification in Chinese cities through the expansion of higher education and the arrival of this new generation of urbanites.

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Holly Wardlow is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto and author of *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society*.

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“Temporary Couples” among Chinese Migrant Workers in Singapore

Wei Yang

ABSTRACT

The article examines temporary extramarital cohabitation arrangements between low-wage Chinese female migrants and their male counterparts in Singapore, a phenomenon which is widely referred to by the migrants as becoming a “temporary couple” or “teaming up to have a life.” In the simulated households, the men usually shoulder most of the daily expenses for both members, while the women are expected to take care of the men’s intimate needs and most of the housework. The vast majority of the women involved in such arrangements are married and migrated for work on their own. This article, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2019, explores how these women perform and understand such temporary intimacies. I first demonstrate that the women enter the relationships as a reaction to the institutional setup that places them in a suspended status, in which they are treated as nothing more than temporary labourers. I then illustrate how the women put the relationship in a state of suspension: they instrumentalize it as a means to maximize savings, and mark it out as a short-term exception that will end abruptly once they leave Singapore. The structurally imposed and self-inflicted conditions of suspension limit the women’s agency to an ambiguous private domain that is away from both work and home. Drawing on my long-term ethnographic fieldwork, this article deploys the notion of suspension as a guiding concept to unravel the tensions and moral anxieties that the women experience with their temporary intimacies.

Keywords: transnational migration, labour, extramarital cohabitation, gendered agency, demarcation

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Introduction

In Singapore, migration from China has grown rapidly over the last several decades. While Chinese migrants to the city-state are a highly diverse group, the majority of them are admitted to Singapore as temporary workers who undertake low-wage jobs shunned by citizens.¹ This article investigates temporary extramarital cohabitation arrangements between low-wage Chinese female migrant workers and their male counterparts in Singapore, which are referred to by the migrant workers as “temporary couples” (*linshi fuqi*) or “teaming up to have a life” (*da huo guo ri zi*). In the simulated households, the men usually shoulder most of the daily expenses for both members, while the women are expected to take care of the men’s intimate needs as well as most of the household chores. This arrangement is based on a mutual understanding that their relationship will not last beyond their stint in Singapore. They intentionally maintain a “safe distance” from each other in order to ensure the relationship can end without complications. They carefully hide this relationship from their families in China, and continue to contribute to their respective families through remittances and savings. In fact, having families in China often make both parties feel more secure about engaging in such an arrangement, as they know that there are clear limits to their mutual responsibilities.

“Temporary couples” as a frequently mentioned topic emerged from my ethnographic research on women’s labour migration from China to Singapore, for which I interviewed a total of 96 low-wage Chinese migrant workers in Singapore between September 2016 and June 2019.² During the fieldwork, many of my informants pointed out that Chinese female migrant workers around them, especially married women who migrated to Singapore alone, tended to engage in temporary intimate relations with male compatriot workers, which they called an “open secret.” Xiao Yan, an unmarried female factory worker, described how shocked she was when she found out that “nine out of ten married women would find a boyfriend after they came here for work on their own.”³ “This is very common in our factory,” she said, “I saw it with my own eyes that our male assistant team leader has such an improper relationship with a female worker. They are both already married with children in China!” Likewise, a male Chinese migrant factory worker, Ming, told me, “I can’t guarantee that every married Chinese female worker who migrated to Singapore alone is engaging in such a practice, but I dare say at least eighty-five percent of them do so.”⁴

¹ Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, “Chinese Migration to Singapore: Discourses and Discontents in a Globalizing Nation-State,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no. 1 (2013): 31–54.

² The informants consisted of 40 married Chinese female migrant workers (17 migrated alone and 23 migrated with their spouses), 25 unmarried Chinese female migrant workers, and 31 Chinese male migrant workers. All of the names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the informants.

³ Xiao Yan, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 11 April 2017.

⁴ Ming, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 16 May 2017.

The married women involved in such relationships also brought up this topic voluntarily in our conversations. They were very keen to talk about the practices of "others," placing themselves in the role of onlooker or eyewitness. When asked what they thought about the practice, they often regarded it as understandable and sympathized with the women involved, as they said that their life in Singapore was so boring and lonely. In contrast, few of the women were willing to reveal to me that they were in such relationships themselves, even though this became evident from my conversations with their female co-workers and through my prolonged observations. Some women were aware that I knew that they had temporary partners, but they seemed reluctant to describe such relationships to me as a friend. Their ambiguous attitudes towards this practice became even more puzzling when they repeatedly asserted that they migrated to work for the sake of their families. "Nothing is more important than family," one of them said, "otherwise, what is the point of travelling thousands of miles to work here?"⁵ For many women, a main benefit of cohabiting with a temporary male partner was that they could thus save and remit back home more of their wages to fulfil their family obligations.

Such moral ambiguity aroused my curiosity about what the practice of teaming up means to these married migrant women and how this arrangement is related to their life in general. It is not new that female migrant workers are confronted with multiple contradictions and have to make difficult choices as they pursue economic independence and autonomy while still upholding traditional gender roles and family values,⁶ but the context of the teaming up practice is historically specific, and the ways in which the women negotiate the challenges are arguably new. Drawing on my long-term ethnographic fieldwork, this article deploys the notion of suspension as a guiding concept to unravel the tensions and moral anxieties that the women experience with their temporary intimacies. In doing so, this article hopes to deepen our understanding of migrant women's agency and sexuality. The central research question is how women's engagement in temporary cohabitation practice is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the structural conditions in which they are situated.

The concept of suspension is pertinent in this case as it explains both the structural conditions that induce the teaming up arrangements, and individuals' perceptions and strategies in making such arrangements. Specifically, suspension first indicates migrant women's structural positioning in Singapore. As low-wage migrant workers, they are subject to a range of institutional constraints which place them in a suspended status. They are not allowed to settle down in Singapore or bring their family members with them. They can also be repatriated at any time. Suspension is also what they

⁵ Hong, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 18 January 2017.

⁶ See, for instance, Mary Beth Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labour Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

experience in their everyday migrant lives. Being treated as nothing more than temporary and disposable labourers, their normal life outside of work is suspended. In the absence of family, love, care, friendship, and basic privacy, they form a simulated family as a shelter to cope with the alienation and loneliness. However, closer observation reveals that the practice should not be simply understood as a reaction to the structurally imposed suspension of life. The women choose, and sometimes actively seek, temporary intimacy because they put the relationship in a state of suspension of their own making: they instrumentalize it as a “deal” that can help them not only maximize economic contributions to their families back home but also satisfy their own material desires. While they are acutely aware that the practice is morally ambiguous, they consciously mark it out as an exception that will be discarded once they return. This explains why they refrain from making moral judgements on it: given it is seen as a transient and exceptional phenomenon to be abandoned quickly, it should not be judged in ethical terms.

In order to further delineate the intertwining between the structurally compelled and the self-inflicted dimensions of suspension, I organize my analysis around the notion of demarcation. Inspired by the spatial thinking of gender and power relations in feminist scholarship,⁷ I suggest that the women’s agency is both demarcated and demarcating. It is demarcated because they are constrained by restrictive immigration policies and labour controls which allow little space for them to exert agency. The spaces inside and outside of work are both highly regulated, and the private sphere that is away from both work and home is the only domain where they can form plans and strategies of their own. Demarcated agency is thus a direct result of structural suspension. The women’s agency is simultaneously demarcating. They set clear boundaries to limit their intimate relations to the period of migration in Singapore, and cut it off from their life trajectories as exceptional, transient, and not to be judged. Their demarcating agency thus manifests suspension as an individual strategy and mental status.

More importantly, the notion of demarcation points to a specific way in which individual agency and power relations are mutually constituting. First, women’s demarcating agency is informed and constituted by the structural condition of suspension. Here, I draw on Butler’s insights on power and subject formation. Following Foucault, Butler points out that subjection is paradoxical as power does not simply dominate the subject but also forms the very conditions and processes of subject making.⁸ The strategies that the women employ to negotiate their suspended status are permeated by power

⁷ See, for instance, Rachel Silvey, “Geographies of Gender and Migration: Spatializing Social Difference,” *International Migration Review* 40, no. 1 (2006): 64–81. For more ethnographic studies that analyze women’s agency based on spatial analogy, see, for instance, Hyunjoo Jung, “Constructing Scales and Renegotiating Identities: Women Marriage Migrants in South Korea,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 21, no. 2 (2012): 193–215.

⁸ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1–2.

relations.⁹ Second, women's demarcating agency further reinforces their structurally suspended status and demarcated migrant lives. Following Mahmood's thinking of agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create,"¹⁰ the notion of demarcating agency stresses that the women's practice should be understood in relation to their migration goals that in turn are embedded within a specific social and historical context. While the women take up strategic ways to exercise their agency,¹¹ their transgressive practice is instrumentalized as a means to achieve life plans that are framed within hegemony.

This article also contributes to the emerging scholarship on migrant sexualities. Paying attention to the connections between spaces and sexuality, these studies have emphasized that transnational migration creates opportunities for migrants to express their transgressive sexual desires and play out alternative sexual identities.¹² In particular, migrant women's extramarital sexuality is often interpreted in terms of women's emancipation. For instance, Liu-Farrer shows that Chinese migrant women who are married to Japanese nationals tend to engage in extramarital relationships as a way to pursue romantic love and sexual pleasure, which is absent from the instrumental marriages they enter with their Japanese husbands.¹³ Hoang and Yeoh argue that for married Vietnamese female migrant workers in Taiwan, migration offers freedom to express their sexual subjectivities through extramarital relationships.¹⁴ Other studies focusing on migrants' sexuality read it either as a resistance against, or an escape from, hegemonic power. For example, Kitiarsa interprets the transient sexual intimacies between low-wage Thai migrant men and women in Singapore primarily as a reaction against the state's regulations and controls of migrants' sexual desires and

⁹ In an analogous way, Carla Freeman employs the concept of "entrepreneurial selves" to point out the entanglement of selfhood and labours, and illustrates that neoliberalism is "a dual project in which economic livelihoods and new subjectivities are being forged in tandem." Carla Freeman, *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–236.

¹¹ This has been widely recognized in feminist migration studies. See, for instance, Amrita Pande, "Intimate Counter-Spaces of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon," *International Migration Review* (Fall 2017): 1–29.

¹² See, for instance, Katie Walsh, Hsiu-hua Shen, and Katie Willis, "Heterosexuality and Migration in Asia," *Gender, Place & Culture* 15, no. 6 (2008): 575–579. Shirlena Huang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, "Heterosexualities and the Global(ising) City in Asia: Introduction," *Asian Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2008): 1–6.

¹³ Gracia Liu-Farrer, "The Absent Spouses: Gender, Sex, Race and the Extramarital Sexuality among Chinese Migrants in Japan," *Chinese Sexualities* 13, no. 1 (2010): 97–121.

¹⁴ Lan Anh Hoang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, "I'd do it for love or for money": Vietnamese Women in Taiwan and the Social Construction of Female Migrant Sexuality," *Gender, Place & Culture* 22, no. 5 (2015): 591–607.

practices.¹⁵ Walsh argues that the performance of transient heterosexuality amongst single British expatriates in Dubai is celebrated as an escape from domesticated forms of couple intimacy prevalent in the UK.¹⁶ This article highlights the position that migrant women's extramarital sexual practices do not necessarily undermine heterosexual normativity and conservative femininity. The women voluntarily conform to the hegemonic heteronormative notion of family and gendered division of labour when they perform their extramarital intimacies. Also, the extramarital relations are primarily sought by the women as a means to maximize economic contributions to their families back home as well as satisfy their own material desires. Thus, the article also confirms the observation that in contemporary Chinese society, marriage and sexuality have been deinstitutionalized, but family as a key social institution remains more intact.¹⁷

Exploring migrants' extramarital sexual activities requires long-term ethnographic immersion in the migrant community to build sufficient trust with the people being studied. My position as a native Chinese as well as a married female migrant in Singapore has helped facilitate this trust. My methods can be summarized as an ethnography of "open secrets": since my informants tended to be secretive about the couplings, only two of the women shared their own extramarital experiences with me after we became close friends. Most of my informants were reluctant to reveal their own practices but they were very keen to talk about the practices of "others" as an onlooker or eyewitness. Since I maintained long-term social interactions with them, I also witnessed first-hand some of the women's cohabitation practices as a friend. For most of my informants, although I was not able to verify with them directly what I heard about them, the information included in this article is substantiated by my observations about their behavioural changes as well as my conversations with other informants. In fact, the women's narratives are a valuable source of information as they not only could be verified by the women's behaviours that I observed later, but also told me about how the women made sense of, or refused to make sense of, their practices. Some sensitive materials that reflected their practices and attitudes were also collected through our interactions via social media platforms such as WeChat.

The article has two sections, examining the women's demarcated agency and demarcating agency respectively. The first section starts with a description of the larger contexts in which the women's migration occurred. It then shows how the women were placed in a state of structurally imposed

¹⁶ Katie Walsh, "It got very debauched, very Dubai!" *Heterosexual Intimacy amongst Single British Expatriates*, *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, no. 4 (2007): 507–533.

¹⁷ Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman, "Deinstitutionalizing Marriage and Sexuality," in *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China*, eds. Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 1–38.

¹⁵ Pattana Kitiarsa, *The "Bare Life" of Thai Migrant Workmen in Singapore* (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2014).

suspension when they migrated to Singapore for work, which resulted in the experiences of alienation and loneliness and induced the formation of temporary couples. The second section explores what the temporary couple arrangement means for the women, and details how they perform temporary intimacies while setting boundaries to prevent the relations lasting beyond the period of migration.

Structurally Compelled Suspension and Demarcated Agency

Migration as an Urgent Project

For the last several decades, Singapore has been the second-largest destination for low-wage labour migrants from China. While the early migrants were predominantly male construction workers, recent years have witnessed the growing presence of women in the migration flow, with the increase in the number of Chinese migrant workers in the manufacturing and service sectors.¹⁸ The majority of low-wage Chinese female migrant workers in my sample are from rural China. Born after 1980, they belong to a generation greatly affected by China’s economic reform and opening up that began in the late 1970s. Many of them grew up as left-behind children as one or both of their parents migrated for work internally or even transnationally. The women’s pre-migration experiences were profoundly gendered. As rural daughters, many of them experienced dramatic life events such as child fostering,¹⁹ early school dropout, and premarital pregnancy. These “turning points,” as they were clearly aware, were often a direct result of a traditional preference for sons. Most of the women had attended junior secondary schools or vocational technical schools only. Less than a quarter (or 15 out of 65) graduated from senior secondary schools. Only one attained a three-year college education. They normally started to work in their late teens. The women, especially those who are married, tended to have prior migration experiences. Most of them had migrated to work in low-paying factory and/or service jobs within China; many had also worked in other overseas destinations such as Japan and South Korea, hired through private recruitment agencies. Married women outnumbered unmarried ones. They typically got married in their early twenties and had their first child before

¹⁸ Based on my interviews with factory management, Chinese migrant workers constituted the majority of the production line operators in the electronics factories where I conducted research, and more than half of them were females. These factories are among the largest electronics factories in Singapore.

¹⁹ According to my informants, daughter fostering was common in some rural areas of China under the family planning policies. The parents normally sent the second or third daughter away to be raised by relatives or nonrelatives in order to have a son.

or shortly after marriage. Some married women migrated to Singapore for work with their husbands,²⁰ whereas others migrated on their own.

The majority of the female migrant workers in my sample who engaged in temporary intimacy are married women who migrated to Singapore alone. These women commonly expressed a sense of urgency when they articulated their motivations for their independent outmigration. This was mainly related to the greater economic pressures they faced after getting married and having children, which generally included saving money to buy new homes for their children's future marriages, paying for their children's education and other expenses, and saving up for their aging parents and their own old age in the future. For some of the women, they worked abroad in response to an urgent financial crisis that their family experienced. The women perceive working abroad as a temporary but fast solution to ease the financial burdens of their families owing to the higher wage and lower cost of migration.²¹ It is because of the "short duration with high returns" that they are willing to put their family life on hold and work far away from home.

The women's husbands normally had long engaged in rural-to-urban migration or worked with relatives to run small businesses near their home villages. While the husbands' incomes were not adequate to meet the rising living expenses, they never considered overseas employment to be a better choice. This is partly because of the narrow range of employment opportunities available to low-wage Chinese migrant workers in Singapore. They are allowed to work in certain sectors only. Some women's husbands who did construction work in China were unwilling to consider a construction job in Singapore as they found that the working conditions and salaries were less attractive. This confirms the observation that women's transnational labour migration often takes place when the men's role as an economic provider in the family is weak, which in turn provides migrant women with a rationale to engage in extramarital relationships.²²

The urgent desire to build wealth was further strengthened by age pressure. The women were mostly in their late twenties when they arrived in Singapore for work. I often heard them say that they must seize the chance of working abroad without delay, otherwise it would be harder to find overseas jobs once they got a bit older.²³ For them, migration is more like "a temporal

²⁰ Low-wage migrant workers are not allowed to bring their families with them to Singapore. The couples tended to look for jobs separately through private recruitment agencies and travel to Singapore one by one.

²¹ Based on my interviews, migrant workers recruited in many electronics manufacturing companies in Singapore are no longer required to pay recruitment fees to obtain their employment.

²² Hoang and Yeoh, "I'd do it for love or for money," 602–603.

²³ In Singapore, foreign workers (except Malaysians) who apply for a work permit must be below 50 years old. But employers in the electronics manufacturing sector, based on my interviews, tend to target migrant women below thirty years old, although this could be more relaxed if, for example, the women have previous factory work experience in Singapore.

rather than spatial project."²⁴ They often sought overseas employment once their children reached school age and were therefore less dependent. Most of them planned to return once their children moved up to higher grade levels and needed more parental attention to their studies. Many also mentioned that they must take advantage of the current phase of life to earn as much money as possible, as their parents-in-law were still young enough to help them with childcare. In addition to economic and age pressures, the urgency of migration was also driven by a desire for economic independence and autonomy. Since many of the women quit their jobs when they had children, migration gave them an opportunity to prove their self-worth and to catch up with society. By making contributions to their household economy, they sought to enhance their positions within the family, especially those who had only daughters.

While rural married women's independent migration is still viewed as a challenge to the traditional gender division of labour in some cases,²⁵ my female informants' urgent migration projects driven by family obligations often helped them gain legitimacy for their independent migration when they negotiated their decision with their spouses and other family members. In fact, their family tended to share the sense of urgency with them. A woman said that she worked abroad partly because her mother-in-law consistently brought up the topic of their neighbour's daughter-in-law who had remitted a lot of money back home by working abroad. Others emphasized their gender roles as caring mothers and dutiful daughters in order to win their families' support.²⁶ One woman, for example, convinced her parents-in-law to support her migration project by stressing that working abroad would allow her to provide better financial support to them in their old age. For many women, their migrant husbands' long-term absence in the families enabled them to make their own decisions on migration.

The Demarcated Migrant Life

While the decision to migrate to Singapore alone is certainly an expression of their agency, the women have little choice in terms of how they migrate, work, and live in Singapore. Nearly all the informants in my study migrated to Singapore through private recruitment agencies. As Biao Xiang points out, facilitated by the "migration infrastructure"²⁷ in Asia, low-wage migrant

²⁴ Biao Xiang, "The Would-Be Migrant: Post-Socialist Primitive Accumulation, Potential Transnational Mobility, and the Displacement of the Present in Northeast China," *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2, no. 2 (2014): 183–199.

²⁵ Yuzhen Liu, "Decisions to Leave Home: An Examination of Rural Married Women's Labour Migration in Contemporary China," *Women's Studies International Forum* 35 (2012): 305–313.

²⁶ Anju Mary Paul, "Negotiating Migration, Performing Gender," *Social Forces* 94, no. 1 (2015): 271–293.

²⁷ Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist, "Migration Infrastructure," *International Migration Review* 48, no. 1 (2014): 122–148. Also see Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist, "Infrastructuralization: Evolving Sociopolitical Dynamics in Labour Migration from Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2018): 759–773.

workers experience a process of “labour transplant”²⁸—that is, they are extracted from their hometowns and inserted in a foreign workplace. The space beyond the two points is minimized in their experiences. This “point-to-point” transnational labour migration control goes hand in hand with the “use-and-discard” policies governing low-wage migrant workers in Singapore.²⁹ Demarcated as a transient workforce that is to be repatriated, low-wage migrant workers are structurally excluded from the host society with little chance of settlement. The foreign labour policies are also highly gendered. Female migrant workers’ bodies are monitored more closely. They are tested regularly for pregnancy and infectious diseases, and are not permitted to become pregnant and give birth in Singapore. Those who breach the regulations must be deported immediately.³⁰ One woman told me that when she was warned during the job interview of the severe consequence of getting pregnant in Singapore, she assured the agents that she had a birth control device implanted after giving birth.

The majority of the women I interviewed worked in the manufacturing sector in Singapore, which is one of the major sectors where low-wage Chinese migrant workers are concentrated. Most of the women worked in electronics factories as production line operators. One of my informants recalled that when she started the job three years earlier, the work intensity and the twelve-hour rotating shifts made her feel so stressed that she had several nosebleeds. Due to prolonged standing, the women often had leg pain and swelling. Some complained that they had to wear long trousers and skirts all the time to hide their varicose veins, despite the heat. Hair loss was another common problem caused by working rotating and night shifts. A woman added that this was also because their hair was wrapped tightly in the dust-proof hooded jumpsuits all day long. The women also emphasized that their tedious factory work turned them into machines without feelings. One of them said, “It is totally a machine life. Every day we do the same job. We just work, work, and work ... Do you know how we have fun? We talk dirty jokes. Sometimes their jokes make me feel uncomfortable, but the factory life is extremely boring.”³¹

Most Chinese migrant factory workers live in rented accommodations assigned by recruitment agencies. These are often small, shared bedrooms in mixed-sex flats near factories. One of my informants recalled the shock when she discovered the living conditions that the agent arranged for her on the night she landed in Singapore. “When I entered the door, I was so

²⁸ Biao Xiang, “Labor Transplant: “Point-to-Point” Transnational Labour Migration in East Asia,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 4 (2012): 721–739.

²⁹ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, “Bifurcated Labour: The Unequal Incorporation of Transmigrants in Singapore,” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 97, no. 1 (2006): 26–37.

³⁰ Shirlena Huang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, “The Difference Gender Makes: State Policy and Contract Migrant Workers in Singapore,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, nos. 1–2 (2003): 75–98.

³¹ Chen Hua, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 15 November 2016.

stunned that I thought I was sold. I saw several strong Chinese male migrant workers with naked upper body smoking in the living room."³² In the dark, hot, and crowded flat, she and five other Chinese women were crammed into a small bedroom. She found out later that the "flat owner," who only appeared when collecting rent, was a sublessor. He purposely divided the small flat into smaller spaces to rent out for profit. My other informants who rented rooms sublet directly by local owners reported that they tended to be subject to more restrictions and surveillance. They were normally not allowed to cook at the rented house. A woman complained that her flat owner regulated how many times they could use the washing machine per week and how long they could take a shower. Another woman said that her flat owner was even more "terrifying" because he often opened their door without knocking to check if they were using the air conditioner.

Loneliness and Boredom

The stressful workplace and packed living quarters allow little space for the women to build a normal life. Instead of leading to a sense of solidarity among fellow workers, however, there is widespread mistrust, as evidenced by their competition for overtime work. Overtime work constitutes an essential part of a migrant's job as the basic salary is extremely low.³³ However, many women reported that the assignment of overtime work depended tacitly on their relationships with their Singaporean supervisors. A female informant told me that in order to obtain more chances of overtime, the workers compete against each other to curry favour with the supervisor, just like concubines compete for the favour of the emperor. She also mentioned that she tried to distance herself from her female compatriot workers as they often spread gossip and secretly lodged complaints against her, which made her feel very lonely.

The loneliness they experienced in the workplace was compounded by the sense of separation from the host society. This exemplifies the concept of "transnational encapsulation."³⁴ It denotes that even though temporary migrant workers physically move across national borders, they are kept isolated from the host society and denied access to social resources so that they can be easily sent back. Many informants acknowledged that although they had worked in Singapore for a few years, they knew little about it. "The life here is theirs (Singaporeans), not ours," said one of the women.³⁵ Before arriving in Singapore, she expected to learn some basic conversational

³² Jun, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 2 October 2016.

³³ The average basic monthly salary of the migrant women I interviewed was about 900 Singapore dollars; with fixed monthly allowances such as meal allowance, they received a fixed monthly salary of about 1100 Singapore dollars on average.

³⁴ Biao Xiang, "Transnational Encapsulation: Compulsory Return as a Labor-Migration Control in East Asia," in *Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia*, eds. Biao Xiang, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, and Mika Toyota (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

³⁵ Yan Zi, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 24 September 2016.

English during her stay, but she found that she was surrounded by compatriot workers most of the time. The sense of separateness was expressed even more powerfully by an informant who stated that she sometimes did not feel as if she was working in a foreign country.

When factory orders decreased, the workers I interviewed simply had no overtime to do. The several consecutive days off per week often made them feel extremely bored and anxious. No overtime meant little pay. In order to minimize their daily expenses so as to remit as much of their salaries back home as possible, they would spend most of their free time staying in the crowded rental unit. A woman who had worked in the factories in China mentioned that she used to hang out with friends or relatives on days off, but she said in Singapore going out was too expensive and most of the time she did nothing but lie in bed, talking to her family or watching TV programs on the mobile phone. The lack of companionship and friendship increased the feelings of boredom. Another woman told me that if she did not have overtime, she could just stay in bed all day.

Citing loneliness and boredom, my informant Yuan told me she missed her two sons very much. But when she considered the increasing economic pressures her family was facing, she said she must “grit her teeth,” as she and her husband had to build a new house for each son. Although she had remitted more than one hundred and fifty thousand yuan to her family back home since she came to Singapore three years ago, her husband did not want her to work abroad any longer. “He often says, you are digging yourself into a hole (*zì tao ku chǐ*),” she said.³⁶ But she knew what her husband was truly worried about. She used to share her selfies and express her loneliness on WeChat moments, but now she did not post anything that might look suspicious to her husband.

Team Up to Have a Life

Yuan’s husband’s suspicion was not groundless. Among the Chinese migrant workers who are separated from their spouses for a long time, seeking a temporary partner to build a simulated family life emerges as a response to cope with the alienation and loneliness. As Yuan revealed to me later, many of her female workmates ended up having temporary male partners behind their husbands’ backs, which she thought as understandable:

After all, people are not machine, but humans. If there is a person who is good to you, especially under the circumstance of working abroad alone for some time, you cannot resist it... They can take care of each other when necessary and have someone to accompany when hanging out Just find a partner while abroad without letting the families know.³⁷

³⁶ Yuan, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 10 November 2017.

³⁷ Yuan, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 10 November 2017.

The confined and mixed-sex working and living spaces where Chinese migrant workers are concentrated bring them into intensive interactions, which in turn induce them to team up with their opposite-sex compatriot workers. One of my female informants had witnessed many of her co-workers get together through daily interactions on the shop floor: “We are ‘locked’ to the production line all the time and see each other every single day We have little chance to get to know people outside the workplace, so it comes naturally that the women hang out with male compatriot fellow workers.”³⁸

Apart from the encounters in these spaces, many temporary couples meet through networks of friends and co-workers, as well as through social media such as WeChat and other online dating platforms. “People here pair up easily,” a female worker remarked, “as long as you drop a hint, the other person will surely know what you mean.”³⁹ In the typical scenario of an intimate encounter, it is often the man who signals the intention to a woman by striking up a flirtatious conversation at the workplace or social gatherings. If the woman gives her tacit consent, they will add each other as friends via WeChat and start to hang out together in their free time, which can quickly lead to the formation of temporary couples.

Self-inflicted Suspension and Demarcating Agency

I had initially understood the formation of temporary couples as a reaction or resistance to the structurally imposed suspension of life. As the saying well known to Chinese migrant workers goes, “Where there’s home there’s no work; where there’s work there’s no home.” When normal life was suspended, they sought temporary partners to “team up to have a life.” But I soon discovered that the reasons why the women engage in the temporary intimacy are more complex than simply seeking companionship and a sense of home away from home. They do so because they consciously put such practices in a state of suspension as well. They manage the intimacy as a mutually beneficial “deal” and set clear boundaries to limit it to the exceptional period of migration. They consciously suspend their ethical judgement and force themselves to be realistic and focus on the instrumental benefits this relationship brings. This self-inflicted suspension enables the women to reconcile multiple contradictions. This section details how the women perform temporary intimacies and how they negotiate the contradictions through boundary making.

Erotic Capital and the Glamourous Lover

For the migrant women workers, the arrangement of teaming up provides

³⁸ Li Mei, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 8 June 2018.

³⁹ Qin, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 24 March 2017.

an avenue outside of the factory to express their agency and sexuality. Haiyan, an unmarried woman who once worked in China as a beauty salon worker, found that she was much in demand among her fellow female workers for her professional advice about makeup. She pointed out that “they all wear unisex jumpsuit uniforms and face masks at work every day, but they are very keen to wear makeup and dress up outside working hours because they have ‘boyfriends’ to hang out with.”⁴⁰

The women’s performance of extramarital intimacies exhibits a strong “entrepreneurial spirit.”⁴¹ They strategically see it as a “deal” that can help them achieve both personal and family goals simultaneously, which they jokingly call “killing two birds with one stone”: since their male partners cover their rent and other daily costs, they can put their own salary aside to send back to their families in China. At the same time, they can earn extra money through the “deal” to satisfy their own material desires, which they are reluctant to spend their meagre wages on.

In exchange for the economic benefits, they consciously exploit their feminine beauty and sexuality, which confirms the concept of “erotic capital.”⁴² While daily expenses, allowances, and gifts are widely expected as the rewards from the “deal,” the women who are more physically attractive tend to hold greater bargaining power in choosing partners and negotiating allowances. Some of them are pursued by male compatriot workers who are in higher positions in the factory, such as that of foreman, or men who are employed in other sectors with better pay, such as bus drivers. These women often consciously deploy their erotic capital to ask for more economic benefits. There are also some beautiful women who choose to team up with single and handsome male compatriot workers, which helps them win “face” in the circle of temporary couples.

Since the women are aware that appearance is critical in manipulating intimate relations, they are keen to invest time and money to enhance their erotic capital. I was often told by my informants that once a woman paired up with a temporary male partner, you could tell by the changes in her appearance. The things they are most likely to use their allowance on or ask for as gifts are cosmetic and beauty products, clothing, and accessories such as branded bags. One day I praised one of my informants for taking such

⁴⁰ Haiyan, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 18 September 2016.

⁴¹ For the discussions on the entrepreneurial subjectivities of Chinese non-elite trans-migrant women, see, for instance, Melody C. W. Lu et al., “Multiple Mobilities and Entrepreneurial Modalities among Chinese Marriage Migrants in Malaysia,” *Current Sociology* 64, no. 3 (2016): 411–429. They argue that Chinese migrant women demonstrate a strong entrepreneurial sensibility as they actively capitalize on the asset at their disposal which is mostly intimate and reproductive labour to negotiate challenges in their migrations. While these studies offer an insight into Chinese migrant women’s agency, they have not paid enough attention to the contradictions the women experienced, in which their conformist agency often coexists with their entrepreneurial pursuits and individual gains, which result in self-inflicted suspension and demarcating agency.

⁴² Catherine Hakim, “Erotic Capital,” *European Sociological Review* 26, no. 5 (2010): 499–518.

good care of her skin. She told me that she kept using one facial mask a day as she often worked night shifts, which damaged her skin badly. When I asked the price of the facial masks, she said it was a present from a friend.

In order to maximize their material gains, some of the women seek multiple partners at the same time and keep looking for more profitable "deals." Xue, a married woman in her early thirties, is one example. Many of my informants knew her because she had multiple partners and often lived with one male partner but kept intimate relationships with several others. One of her co-workers revealed to me that Xue also had a Singaporean boyfriend who worked in a bank and met her through WeChat and that the Singaporean spent more than one thousand dollars buying her branded bags and cosmetics. The woman commented, "She lives like rich people."⁴³

This "showing off" often leads to competition among the women to maximize benefits from their respective relationships, but it also attracts strong moral condemnation from the women who are not involved in the practice. Jing, a married female migrant worker informant, remarked, "They think they are capable, smart and skilled at handling men ... They just want to earn quick money from men. If they get money in this way, how are they different from prostitutes?"⁴⁴ She said she was considered "an alien" among her fellow women workers. To satisfy her own material desires, she secretly took a part-time job as a house cleaner and made an extra three hundred Singapore dollars a month. In this way, she could buy herself some cosmetics and stylish clothing without using her salary, which she saved for her family.⁴⁵

Simulated Family Life and the Caring Wife

The teaming-up arrangement is about more than sex and money.⁴⁶ It is also about living a simulated family life, which involves daily companionship, partnership, emotional sharing, and mutual support. Here I turn to Bernstein's concept of "bounded authenticity."⁴⁷ While the concept is focused on commercial sex, it emphasizes that what is exchanged in such activities is genuine interpersonal connections within short-term sexual encounters. Likewise, the couple play their roles to make their temporary family life look and feel authentic.

Once the women team up with their male partners, they will try to move out of their crowded shared bedroom and find a double bedroom in a flat to move into together. My female migrant worker informant Lan and her

⁴³ Jun, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 14 April 2018.

⁴⁴ Jing, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 9 January 2018.

⁴⁵ In Singapore, low-wage migrant workers (or work permit holders) are not allowed to take on part-time jobs. They are tied to the employer and the industry sector as reflected in their work permit.

⁴⁶ There has been a great deal of discussion on transnational commodification of intimacy. See, for instance, Nicole Constable, "The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex, and Reproductive Labor," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 49–64.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

co-workers had shared a flat with a couple for some time. She did not know they were a temporary couple until she accidentally came across the woman chatting happily in a video call with her husband and children in her native dialect. When Lan asked about it later, the woman asserted that she was divorced.⁴⁸

In the simulated domestic sphere, the heteronormative family model is adopted. Since the men shoulder most of the daily costs for both, the women are expected to play the role of the caring wife and take on most household chores. Qiang, a male migrant factory worker whom I interviewed, acknowledged that he disliked cooking and had never cooked since he got married. He said his family had a clear division of work: he was responsible for making money outside the home while his wife was responsible for taking care of their child and parents as well as household chores. This gendered division of labour is often replicated in their temporary households. The men expect their female temporary partners to cook and do the laundry for them as their wives did at home. While many of the married women have become the primary breadwinners in their families back home, they voluntarily conform to traditional gender roles within their simulated households. Jing commented that one of her co-workers treated her partner better than her husband as she always spent hours preparing meals for her partner on her days off. “She is foolish,” she said, “I came here to free myself from housework, but she is even asking for more.”⁴⁹

In pairing up, the temporary couples find regular companionship and seek pleasure and relaxation in their leisure time, which “makes life less boring and lonely.” They are also filling a need for emotional communication. Especially, the men expect the women to be sympathetic listeners when they encounter unpleasant experiences at work such as suffering unfair treatment or being scolded by the bosses. For women, finding a partner can help fill the emotional void caused by the absence of their spouses. My informant Hong is one of the few women who confessed her extramarital intimacy to me. She said that since she worked abroad, she had never told her husband what happened to her, even when she experienced difficulties such as falling sick. “Because he is too far away to help me out,” she said. But having a temporary partner, she “can rely on him for support and protection when necessary.”⁵⁰

Setting the Boundaries

As stated earlier, the temporary extramarital cohabitation arrangement is premised on the mutual understanding that the relationship will never disrupt their respective families in China. While the migrant women team

⁴⁸ Lan, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 20 January 2018.

⁴⁹ Jing, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 9 January 2018.

⁵⁰ Hong, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 27 August 2017.

up with their male counterparts to have a simulated family life, they set clear boundaries to limit the intimacy to the suspended time and space and to mark it out as an exceptional phenomenon with an acknowledged end date. Hui, one of my female informants, explained it thus: "We are from different parts of China, and will only work here temporarily. If I say I want to 'take time to cultivate the relationship with you' (*chu ganqing*), would you believe it?"⁵¹

This clear temporal demarcation often in turn makes them feel free and secure to actively engage in the practice without being subject to ethical judgement. When my informant Xue knew her fellow worker Lan did not have a boyfriend in Singapore, she advised her that working abroad was the most convenient time to have fun and that she would no longer have the freedom when she went back home.

The temporary intimacy is also demarcated spatially. While the spatial distance from home creates convenience for migrants, as they are freed from the surveillance of families and home communities,⁵² the women are still cautious not to arouse suspicion. For example, many couples come from different provinces of China. They believe that this further reduces the risk of being discovered and that their paths will never cross again once they return. In order to prevent gossip which might reach their families' ears, some women hide their marital status from fellow workers or assert that they are divorced as a way to defend themselves. The couples' daily activities are also spatially demarcated to avoid attention. On a public holiday, I invited the women to hang out together. Hong replied that she was busy. Another woman explained to me that Hong's partner Zhao normally took her out when they were both off from work. The woman added that they were rarely seen in the area near the factory because they did not want to run into anyone they knew.

The partners in a couple also keep a "safe distance" from each other, in order to avoid making trouble, taking on responsibilities, and being hurt emotionally. One day, I chatted with a female worker and questioned, "Who can say there is no true love between the couple?" To my surprise, she replied that they were in fact more worried that their partners would fall in love with them. For this, the couple develop a variety of distancing tactics to avoid crossing boundaries. They collaborate to make sure not to disturb each other's family time. When one party has a video call with his/her family, for example, the other party will stay away. According to a female informant, the women clearly know their positions in such relationships, and thus they do not ask for an unreasonable amount of money from the men, but skillfully keep a delicate balance between benefitting from the relationships and

⁵¹ Hui, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 28 June 2017.

⁵² Walsh, Shen, and Willis, "Heterosexuality," 576.

maintaining their families. When they have conflicts or do not get along with each other, they will walk away from each other swiftly and peacefully. They dare not make trouble or go too far in the relationships because they are more concerned about losing their jobs and affecting their families as a result. “Singapore has very strict laws,” a male migrant factory worker explained, “once you have a problem you will be deported immediately.”⁵³ The most common tactic to deal with possible boundary crossings is to delete the other party from the WeChat contact right away to avoid getting entangled in an unwanted relationship.

Family is the Most Important Thing in the World

In contrast to the temporary intimacy that will be abandoned and eventually forgotten, family, as I often heard the women say, is the most important thing in the world, especially for a woman. They consciously draw a line between their intimate encounters in Singapore and their desired family life in China, which often helps them flee the current morally ambiguous moment. My informant Hui said, “Once I go back home, I will fulfil the duties of being a good wife and dutiful mother. I will live a peaceful life with my family and never come out again.”⁵⁴ She showed me the pictures of her newly built three-storey house and envisaged how she would decorate it after she returned home. The moral and emotional anxieties caused by her extramarital relationship were relieved by the imagination of her family life in the future. In such an imagination, her family, which she voluntarily left behind by migrating, was romanticized as opposed to the present ambiguous relationship, which was made to feel more transitory.

For the women, family is a fixed anchor that gives meaning to their demarcated migrant lives and their demarcating strategies. In cohabiting with Zhao, Hong saved most of her salary for her family and was planning to use some of her savings to buy a car for her husband when she visited home the year after. She and her husband lived apart much of the time since he migrated for construction work to another part of China shortly after they got married. She said that they had become accustomed to the long-term separation: “In order to build a better future for our family, we both need to work hard.”⁵⁵ After she came to work in Singapore, she persuaded her husband to find an ordinary job closer to their home in order to look after their two school-age children. Another woman, Xue, who was well known among my informants for having multiple partners, expressed to me her worries about her husband’s health, as he often felt unwell after drinking too much alcohol: “I often call him and advise him not to drink too much.

⁵³ Zhang Tao, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 2 January 2018.

⁵⁴ Hui, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 5 February 2018.

⁵⁵ Hong, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 10 March 2017.

Last time I went back home, I took him to the hospital for a comprehensive examination."⁵⁶

For some women, they might initially consider their extramarital intimacies to be an escape from their unhappy marriages or even sought long-term relationships with their intimate partners, but they tended to end up becoming more realistic. Shuyun had a bad relationship with her "irresponsible" husband, who liked gambling and lost a lot of money. After she migrated to Singapore, she met Liu, with whom she lived for almost three years. During the years, Liu went back to China for home visits twice and had his second son with his wife. When Shuyun considered filing for divorce with her husband as their marriage existed in name only, her co-worker Mei prevented her from doing that. "How come has he cohabited with you for such a long time but had a newborn baby with his wife back home?" She warned her, "You will lose out if you take it too seriously!"⁵⁷

The institution of the family still matters a great deal, even if there is no love left in a marriage. Most of the women are deeply conscious that they should control the emotions they invest in the temporary intimate relations to avoid further entanglements. An informant had this to say: "Women should be more realistic. Once a woman gives her heart to a relationship, she would pursue it at any cost. Her family will be destroyed, and her children will suffer. In contrast, an unfaithful husband will always gain his wife's forgiveness and be expected to return to the fold."⁵⁸ She implied that the social costs of divorce for a woman are extremely high, and thus divorce will never be a wise choice. This not only confirms previous findings that there are significant gender disparities in social acceptance of extramarital relationships, but also reflects "how marriage remains inextricably linked to the institution of family in contemporary Chinese society."⁵⁹

While I did not hear of any cases in which the extramarital practices led to divorce, they did raise serious suspicions among the women's spouses. My informant Meng suspected that her husband, who worked in Singapore as a forklift driver, was cheating on her because he sent much less money back home than before. With her mother-in-law's support, she decided to find a job in Singapore through a recruitment agency in order to "watch" her husband. However, Meng blamed the women involved for migrants' extramarital affairs: "You are after all married and have children, and you have to think about your children and do what's good for your children."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Xue, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 21 February 2018.

⁵⁷ Li Mei, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 8 June 2018.

⁵⁸ Hui, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 28 June 2017.

⁵⁹ Davis and Friedman, "Deinstitutionalizing Marriage and Sexuality," 14–28.

⁶⁰ Meng, in-person interview by author, Singapore, 1 April 2017.

Conclusion

This article investigates the temporary extramarital cohabitation practice among low-wage Chinese migrant workers in Singapore, and explains this unconventional form of intimacy by adopting the notion of suspension. The formation of “temporary couples” is, first, a response to the institutional setup that places low-wage migrant workers in a state of suspension. As temporary and disposable labourers, they not only have little chance to settle down, but also can be repatriated any time. In order to cope with the alienation and loneliness, they seek temporary partners with whom they can “team up to have a life.” But the women in turn put their intimate relationship in a state of suspension. They instrumentalize it as a temporary means to achieve their longer-term life goals, and justify it as an exceptional phenomenon that will be abandoned and forgotten about when their circumstances change.

By delineating the women’s demarcated and demarcating agency, the article first addresses our understanding of migrant women’s agency and sexuality. It moves beyond the dichotomy of resistance and subordination, and instead shows that women’s agentic actions often reinforce hegemonic power. Not only are they integral to its workings, but they help to shape its very form.⁶¹ Second, the article enriches the critical analysis of transnational migration and gender. While the women’s independent migration may open up possibilities for them to pursue greater gender equality, they carefully mark out their transgressive practice as an exception to avoid challenging the status quo. Their entrepreneurial manoeuvrings in turn further entrench existing gender hierarchies. Thus, the notion of demarcation deepens our understanding of transnational migration in a way that enables spatial and temporal demarcation. The view of transnational migration as an emancipatory process for women requires further investigation.

Third, the article sheds new light on the relations between individual agency and structural constraints. On one hand, the structural condition of suspension constrains the women’s agency in strictly demarcated domains, namely an ambiguous private sphere away from both work and family. It informs and shapes the ways the women rationalize and strategize their intimate relations in the private sphere. On the other hand, women’s proactive enactment of demarcating agency further entrenches the structural condition of suspension. For instance, the competition among the women for desirable partners and the ambiguities associated with the temporary pairing up practice create mistrust amongst fellow workers. Since every woman actively pursues individual gains outside of work for a faraway future, solidarity in the workplace among fellow migrant workers is undermined.

⁶¹ Carla Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

This further incapacitates the migrants from critical engagement with the present. Thus, individual agency and structural constraints are deeply intertwined in the current socioeconomic order; it is hard to imagine that individual agency alone, without collective interventions, could achieve significant changes.

Last, the practical implications of this research are significant. The extramarital practices among Chinese migrant workers not only bring about uncertainties to their marriages and family relations, but also help reinforce the stereotypes of immorality associated with Chinese migrant women in Singapore.⁶² These further exacerbate the vulnerable structural positions of the female migrant workers in both home and host societies. While the article is focused on extramarital cohabitation among Chinese migrant workers in Singapore, it calls for more attention to the affective and intimate lives of low-wage migrant workers in general, whose voices remain largely absent in policy making and public debates.

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March, 2021

⁶² Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, "Sexualised Politics of Proximities among Female Transnational Migrants in Singapore," *Population, Space and Place* 16 (2010): 37–49.

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“To Be a Little More Realistic”: The Ethical Labour of Suspension among Nightclub Hostesses in Southeast China

Jiazhi Fengjiang

ABSTRACT

This article explores the “ethical labour” of suspension—the conscious effort of deferring one’s ethical judgement and reflections in order to avoid irreconcilable ethical conflicts between one’s present activities and long-term goals. While people engage in ethical judgement and reflections in everyday social interactions, it is the laborious aspect of regulating one’s ethical dispositions that I highlight in the concept of “ethical labour.” Although it cannot be directly commodified, ethical labour is a form of labour as it consumes energy and is integral to the performance of other forms of labour, particularly intimate and emotional ones. This formulation of ethical labour draws on my long-term ethnographic research with a group of young women migrants working as hostesses in high-end nightclubs in southeast China. Many of them perform socially stigmatized work with the goal of contributing to their family and saving money for a dignified life in the future. Ethical labour is essential to their hostess work because it enables them to juggle multiple affective relationships and defer the fundamental ethical conflict. They express ethical labour through the phrase “to be a little more realistic,” making sure that they obtain what they want at a particular moment. But ethical labour does not simply mean pushing ethical questions aside. It is sustained by conscious effort and is overshadowed by fears of ageing and failure to achieve long-term life goals. Prolonged ethical labour often fails to resolve ethical conflict and may intensify one’s stress. My analysis of these women migrants’ situation contributes to the sex-as-work debate regarding women’s agency in work and their subjection to exploitation.

Keywords: ethical labour, mobility, emotional labour, hostess, sex work, gender, familism, China

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When I visited Lanlan in 2018, she had recently moved from Mu town on China's southeastern coast to the nearby industrial town known as Hu town to work there in a new high-end nightclub as a hostess.¹ She showed me around her new residence—a rented room as tidy and plain as the one she had rented in Mu town. This move, according to her plan, was to earn “the last bucket of gold” in a nightclub before making a full retreat back home to her newly formed family in a village where her husband, parents-in-law, and daughter were waiting for her. Lanlan's target was numerical: she hoped to save at least RMB250,000 (equivalent to USD38,000) in a year, which she saw as the minimum start-up-funds to open a shop in her husband's hometown. This project was so far the most intense and challenging one for Lanlan, both physically and mentally, as she had only two acquaintances in Hu town, women who had been her co-workers in Mu town's nightclub, and therefore she had little social support. But she felt compelled to move because she had just turned 26—the age considered the ceiling for hostesses in high-end nightclubs. She felt her time of being economically productive as a hostess was coming to an end. Lanlan was hopeful that by posing as a virginal 20-year-old newcomer to Hu town she would be able to use her old strategies for soliciting gifts from new customers and thus achieve her goal in one year. To get ready for this project, she had new plastic microsurgery done on her nose, and she started to apply her own makeup to save money. She conceded that she had to “be a little more realistic” (*yao xianshi yidian*) and needed to “compromise her dignity” (*fangxia zizun*).² Otherwise, she feared that she would never be able to escape the nightclub industry.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I found that many young women were like Lanlan—looking forward to quitting hostess work for a targeted dignified life in the future, a life with “economic independence and individual autonomy,” as they put it. This hoped-for life would also be a life free of the memories of their present occupation. There is, however, a seemingly irreconcilable ethical contradiction between their need to compromise their dignity in the present and their hope for a dignified life in the future. How do these young women navigate the liminal space between their present occupation and their long-term goals? Drawing upon Xiang's notion of suspension (*xuanfu*, literally hanging and floating) outlined in the introduction to this special issue, this article explores these young women

Evans and the participants of the suspension workshop for their critical comments and insightful conversations on the earlier drafts of this article. The revision also benefitted from the comments of the three anonymous reviewers. Finally, I thank Ka-Kin Cheuk, who offered the initial inspiration for this article and support in every stage of this project.

¹ Names of places, organizations, and people have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my research participants.

² Lanlan, interview by author, in person, 9 April 2018.

migrants' experiences, feelings, strategies, perceptions, and structural conditions in navigating this liminal space.

My exploration draws upon my ethnographic research with a group of young women migrants who were working as nightclub hostesses (*yechang xiaojie* in vernacular terms) in Mu town, an industrial county seat in Wenzhou on China's southeastern coast.³ The majority of the young women were born in rural inland provinces and had worked as typical migrant waged labourers before they started working as hostesses in their late teens or early twenties in Wenzhou. They all lived in rooms rented by the month in the same neighbourhood within a 15-minute walk of their workplace—one of the two high-end, beautifully decorated nightclubs in the town. During my fieldwork from 2015 to 2017, I got to know them in their major daytime social space—a beauty salon in the neighbourhood—through Wang Bing, a businessman, and his wife Xiaoling, the salon owner and beautician. During this period, about 15 to 20 young hostesses were regular customers of this salon, and they visited the salon on a daily basis to get made up before going to work. Most of them had been friends and acquaintances of Wang Bing and Xiaoling for many years. I spent long hours in the salon with the couple and these young women. I also spent time with the young women outside the salon space in their rental rooms, nightclubs, shopping streets, and dinner places. I became closest to Lanlan and another young woman, Dan, whom I spent much time with, sometimes with the salon-owning couple whom they had known since they started working in the nightclubs. In 2018 and 2020, I returned to the area for short field visits with my key interlocutors. Long-term participant observation and casual conversations were my main methods. Given my interlocutors' diverse experiences, this article does not attempt to tell a representative story of the entire population of young women who work as nightclub hostesses in China. Indeed, reducing them to a homogeneous group would erase their structural vulnerability on diverse and multiple levels. Instead, this article attempts to highlight the prominent experiences of a number of my interlocutors for whom the question of how to navigate between their present occupation and their long-term goals had become a compelling preoccupation in their daily lives.

In fact, the kinds of contradictions central to the experiences of my interlocutors are also widely documented by research on bar/nightclub hostess in other places in Asia. On one hand, several ethnographies highlight women migrants as desiring subjects who are able to appropriate gendered imaginations to achieve a certain degree of agency or autonomy via sex and hostess work. For instance, Zheng's ethnography on hostesses in Dalian, China, shows how underclass rural young women may subvert "the gender

³ The term *xiaojie* is a vernacular term that refers to the hostesses' profession. See Ding for a review of the popular use of *xiaojie* in China. Ding Yu, *Tashen zhiyu: Zhushanjiào liudongrenkou shequn teshuzhiye yanjiu* [Desire: Transitions and new possibilities for sex work in the Pearl River Delta area] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016).

and social hierarchy” in an oppressive system in pursuit of a modern and autonomous subjectivity through sex work.⁴ In a similar vein, Hoang’s ethnography on hostesses in high-end nightclubs in Vietnam suggests the possibilities of young women converting money they earn into social status and respect in their home villages through gift giving.⁵ Ding and Ho’s ethnographies on hostesses in the Pearl River Delta highlights women’s everyday tactics of expressing their desires⁶ as well as enhancing their self-esteem and emotional capacity through sex work.⁷ On the other hand, these young women also constantly evoke the moral devaluation and stigma attached to sex work in the broader society. In fact, almost all of my interlocutors carefully hid their work from their family and friends outside the nightclub circle and pretended they were doing a different type of job because they were explicitly concerned that their social circle would see their work as “shameful” or leading to a “loss of face” or revealing a “loss of self-respect.”⁸ They also cried when they were rejected by their relatives and friends who had discovered they were engaged in sex work.⁹ My interlocutors’ evocation of their “compromised dignity” echoes with studies elsewhere that link sex work to low self-esteem, depression, and negative emotions such as guilt and disgust.¹⁰

While these contradictory imaginaries of sex work are central to many women’s motivation for working in the industry and their desire to quit the stigmatized industry for a dignified life in the future, they are largely taken for granted and rarely analyzed. This article takes up this analytical stream by focusing on sex workers’ daily navigation of these contradictions. Based on my ethnographic research, I will show that these young women invest in the “ethical labour” of suspension in navigating the space between the present and the future. By ethical labour of suspension I am referring to the conscious effort of deferring ethical judgement and questions about one’s own activities in order to avoid the irreconcilable ethical conflict between one’s present activities and one’s long-term goals.¹¹ As my interlocutors put it, this conscious effort of navigation is captured by the phrase “to be a little more realistic,”

⁴ Zheng Tiantian, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 12.

⁵ Kimberly Kay Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currents of Global Sex Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

⁶ Ding, *Tashen zhiyu*.

⁷ Ding Yu and Petula Sik Ying Ho, “Sex Work in China’s Pearl River Delta: Accumulating Sexual Capital as a Life-Advancement Strategy,” *Sexualities* 16, nos. 1–2 (2012): 43–60.

⁸ See also Susanne Y. P. Choi and Ruby Y. S. Lai, “Sex Work and Stigma Management in China and Hong Kong: The Role of State Policy and NGO Advocacy,” *China Quarterly* (2021): 1–20, 8.

⁹ See also Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*, 166.

¹⁰ Teela Sanders, “‘It’s Just Acting’: Sex Workers’ Strategies for Capitalizing on Sexuality,” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 12, no. 4 (2005): 319–342.

¹¹ My conceptualization of ethical labour benefitted enormously from my conversations with Ka Kin Cheuk, who offered the initial inspiration and suggestions for this article, and with Xiang Biao, who helped me articulate the concept in a new light.

which means making sure that they get what they want in the particular moment. This often involves compromising their dignity to perform acts that are morally questionable or immoral at the social level. The ethnographic findings therefore also contribute to the long-standing sex-as-work debate regarding women's agency in work and their subjection to exploitation. In light of the ethnographic materials, this article first outlines my interventions in the sex-as-work debate. It then offers an overview of the ethical labour of suspension. It continues by examining how the ethical labour of suspension has become critical in the context of the nightclub economy, its varied manifestations, and the consequences of ethical labour. Finally, I will flesh out young women migrants' structural condition in the broader political economy.

Sex as Work: Empowering or Exploitative

Two major paradigms dominate the sex-as-work debate in academia. Briefly, the first research paradigm highlights the exploitative nature of sex work. This is often based on assumptions that sex workers are victims of human trafficking, coercion, drug addiction, and alcohol abuse and therefore need intervention.¹² In the Chinese case, these assumptions corroborate the socialist state's official discourse that constructs sex work as a forced and illegal occupation that necessitates rescue and rehabilitation by either the state apparatus or the voluntary sector. The second research paradigm challenges these widespread assumptions of victimhood by foregrounding the autonomous, empowering, and desirable aspects of sex work.¹³ Researchers such as Pan Suiming, Huang Yingying, and Li Yinhe and activists such as Chi Susheng and Ye Haiyan have been vocal in seeking legal and social recognition in China of sex work as proper work and of "sex workers" (*xing gongzuo zhe*) as workers who deserve equal labour rights.¹⁴ These efforts are primarily based on findings that criminalization of and police raids on sex workers exacerbate the exploitation of women.¹⁵ Politically, I stand with the efforts to decriminalize and destigmatize sex workers and hostesses because this is important to improve their working conditions. However, I learned that for many of my interlocutors, their main concern was quitting their work for a socially recognized livelihood, rather than seeking social, legal, and familial recognition and rights related to their current occupation. Like Lanlan, they constantly emphasized their desire to be "washed white"

¹² For example, see Shaobing Su et al., "Social-Context Factors, Refusal Self-Efficacy, and Alcohol Use among Female Sex Workers in China," *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 20, no. 8 (2015): 889–895.

¹³ See, for instance, Zheng, *Red Lights*; Hoang, *Dealing in Desire*; Ding, *Tashen zhiyu*.

¹⁴ Pan Suiming et al., *Xiaojie: Laodong de quanli* [Female sex workers: The rights of labour] (Hong Kong: Dadao Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Zheng Tiantian. "The Plight of Sex Workers in China: From Criminalisation and Abuse to Activism," *Made in China Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 86–91.

(*xibai*) with “proper work” in the future—a future unclouded by their current experiences. Hence, it is important to recognize the diverse demands and experiences of hostesses/sex workers in the industry rather than foregrounding one kind of demand featuring social recognition and legal protection in the battle to destigmatize sex work.

For instance, as Ding points out, the term “sex workers” could be problematic as some hostesses may refuse to be labelled as “sex workers” precisely because such an identification comes with more stigma than recognition.¹⁶ Ding suggests that her interlocutors prefer the Chinese term *xiaojie*, as it connotes being urban, young, virginal, and modern.¹⁷ It also grants the young women the agentive identity to construct their work as a form of “play” and rejects the mainstream “work” narrative embedded in the term “sex worker.” In alignment with Ding, I do not refer to my interlocutors as “sex workers.” This is because they themselves explicitly distinguish themselves from the sex workers on the streets or in indoor massage parlours. Sex work, using the broad definition as “the exchange of sexual or sexualized intimacy for money,”¹⁸ is precisely what my interlocutors attach stigma to and strategize to avoid. In fact, several of them had never engaged in sexual acts with customers. My interlocutors sometimes referred to their work as “doing public relations” (*zuo gongguande*), emphasizing the relational and interactive aspects of their work as well as consciously demarcating themselves from their imaginaries of stigmatized sex work.

Nonetheless, in contrast to Ding’s interlocutors, who prefer a “play” narrative to “work,” show little interest in finding alternative stable jobs, and have vague or no long-term goals,¹⁹ both work and long-term goals are central to how my interlocutors navigate their present and construct a moral imaginary of their work. It is precisely their framing of themselves as a labouring subject working hard to accumulate for a long-term goal that helps them cope with the stigma associated with their work. In fact, one major moral accusation that I heard often in the group was that someone was being “indulgent in play.” It is the labouring subject instead of the desiring and sexually pleasing subject that is the moral source that sustains their present occupation. Therefore, my proposition is that we should not conflate the diverse imaginaries and concerns of sex workers and hostesses into one group. This article focuses on some of the hostesses in high-end nightclubs who recognize sex work/hostessing as work and aspire to quit their hostess work for a socially approved livelihood in the future. A deeper understanding of this group’s concerns and imaginaries would help to better match the

¹⁶ Ding Yu, “Beyond Sex/Work: Understanding Work and Identity of Female Sex Workers in South China,” *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 2 (2020): 95–103.

¹⁷ Ding, “Beyond Sex/Work,” 100–101.

¹⁸ Susan Dewey and Zheng Tianian, *Ethical Research with Sex Workers Anthropological Approaches* (New York: Springer 2013), 3.

¹⁹ Ding, “Beyond Sex/Work,” 100.

efforts of the researchers and activists with the interests of these women migrants.

As such, this article's analytical approach goes beyond the aforementioned two major paradigms. Rather than foregrounding either the empowering or exploitative dimensions of sex and hostess work, this article draws on the approach Xiang proposes in this special issue, one that develops suspension as an "emic-etic term" through participatory research.²⁰ It attempts to explore nightclub hostesses' navigation of the contradictions from both their own perspectives and from an observer's perspectives, including their unsettling yet hopeful feelings, their agentive strategies of deferring present concerns to the future, and their experiences of feeling trapped as well as their limited capacity, conditioned by their structural positions, to achieve the social mobility they have aspired to. Thus, my analysis mainly relies on the data collected from long-term participant observations and casual conversations with my interlocutors. This article contains direct quotes from my interlocutors, but I do not take their statements at face value as representing "what they think." Rather, I try to present them as how they make sense of and represent their experiences through particular narrative forms in a particular conversational context that involves identity performance and meaning making.²¹ I also acknowledge that my interactions with my interlocutors and my analysis are influenced by my own positionality as a young Chinese woman. However, discussing my emotions and my reactions to my interlocutors in a reflexive manner is not the subject matter of this article.²²

Most of the research on bar hostesses in China has been done in larger cities, where rural young women are represented as "brokers of modernity" who have escaped rural familial life in search of a modern life in the cities.²³ This article takes into account the specific cultural-economic settings of county-seat towns that contribute to the local set-up of the high-end nightclub industry.²⁴ It shows how these young women's more conformist attitudes towards familism and gendered norms become perpetuating drivers for them to engage in hostess work and how the family becomes an ultimate circle of relations that pushes them to quit their hostess work. They are hence trapped in suspension.

²⁰ Xiang Biao, this issue, 233-250.

²¹ For reflections on this, see Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 75-78; Harriet Evans, *Beijing from Below: Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.

²² Cf. Dewey and Zheng, *Ethical Research*.

²³ Zheng, *Red Lights*, 5.

²⁴ See also Pan et al.'s comparative research in northeast and southeast China, which offers insights into different sex industry arrangements: Pan et al., *Xiaojie*.

The Ethical Labour of Suspension

My formulation of “ethical labour” draws insights from the concept of emotional labour and the recent “ethical turn” in anthropology. Emotional labour, in Hochschild’s original definition, “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”²⁵ An important theoretical insight of emotional labour rests on the distinction Hochschild makes between emotion work and emotional labour, corresponding to managing the private and social side of emotions. Emotion work is directed by individuals at governing their emotional exchanges in the private sphere. It is when one performs emotion work as a paid public act that is directed by “rules of feeling” monitored by others that one performs emotional labour. In the case of sex work, women need to perform intensive emotional labour to negotiate the commodification of their body and of intimacy,²⁶ which often involves “separating the body from the self.”²⁷ As Sanders’ study shows, one of the emotion management strategies women use is to create a “manufactured identity”—drawing clear boundaries between sex as private romantic relations and sex as a business strategy for financial gain.²⁸ It is this form of “acting,”²⁹ “performing,”³⁰ or playing the “role”³¹ of a sex worker that enables women to separate their self from their manufactured identity in the work setting.

While such strategies are also commonly found among my interlocutors, I suggest that this strategic separation of the self from work involves not only intensive emotional labour but also ethical labour as they are consciously managing and deferring their self-reflections while acting or performing a manufactured identity at work. Here, we may also draw an analytical distinction between the private and social sides of ethics to help formulate the idea of ethical labour as distinct from ethical work. The recent ethical turn in anthropology is particularly helpful here. A growing number of anthropological studies are attempting to move away from the Durkheimian perspective that views morality as a collective compilation of rules and values exclusively derived from social life to alternative paradigms that foreground individual ethical life.³² A particularly insightful development in this debate

²⁵ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7.

²⁶ See, for example, Sanders, “It’s Just Acting.”

²⁷ Maggie O’Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (London: Polity Press, 2000), 89.

²⁸ Sanders, “It’s Just Acting,” 323.

²⁹ Sanders, “It’s Just Acting.”

³⁰ O’Neil, *Prostitution and Feminism*, 84.

³¹ Gillian M. Abel, “Different Stage, Different Performance: The Protective Strategy of Role Play on Emotional Health in Sex Work,” *Social Science & Medicine* 72, no. 7 (2011): 1177–1184.

³² See, for example, James Laidlaw, “For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8 (2002): 311–332; Michael Lambek, ed., *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

is the concept of “ordinary ethics.”³³ The ordinary ethics approach recognizes both the universality of the question of “how one ought to live” and the particularity of how such self-questioning takes place in different contexts.³⁴ In this view, ethics is pervasive; it is *not* a practice distinct from other everyday life practices, nor does it operate in the same way everywhere. Furthering the debate on ordinary ethics, Stafford and his collaborators show in a collection of ethnographies about China that “explicit” or “conscious” ethical judgements, reflections, and decision making constitute routine and ordinary “aspects of human life.”³⁵

Following Stafford’s approach to ordinary ethics, my formulation of ethical work and ethical labour also addresses the explicit or conscious rather than the implicit or embodied ethical practices that are acquired through socialization. We may use the term ethical work to refer to explicit or conscious ethical practices in private realms, the kind that are well examined by anthropologists of China and are particularly evident in forms of the “divided self” struggling between diverse moral frameworks.³⁶ I use ethical labour to refer to the conscious ethical practice involved in regulating one’s ethical judgement and self-questioning, which functions as a backstage enabler for other forms of commodified labour. This focus on an explicit or conscious ethical practice also draws from Keane’s critical insights into the interactional foundation of ethical life.³⁷ Keane’s postulation that ethical reflections only arise through social interactions is critical here. Although people engage in ethical judgement, reflections, and dilemmas in everyday social interactions, it is the laborious aspect of regulating one’s ethical dispositions in social interactions that I highlight in the concept of ethical labour. Although ethical labour is not a form of labour to be sold or bought as a stand-alone commodity, it is labour inasmuch as it consumes energy, enacts physical activities, affects actors’ mental and physical health, and, most importantly, is integral to performing other forms of labour, particularly the intimate and emotional. It is precisely this backstage nature of ethical labour that makes it invisible and susceptible to the process of exploitation.

In the case of nightclub hostesses, ethical labour is a critical component of emotional labour and enables the commodification of the intimate, the sexual, and the emotional. Ethical labour involves explicitly managing one’s ethical dispositions—the pervasive judgements and evaluations of one’s own

³³ Veena Das, “Ordinary Ethics,” in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 133–149; Lambek, *Ordinary Ethics*.

³⁴ Lambek, *Ordinary Ethics*, 2–3.

³⁵ Charles Stafford, ed., *Ordinary Ethics in China* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5.

³⁶ See, for example, Arthur Kleinman et al., *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Liu Xin, *In One’s Own Shadow: An Ethnographic Account of the Condition of Post-Reform Rural China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Hans Steinmüller, *Community of Complicity: Everyday Ethics in Rural China* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

³⁷ Webb Keane, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

acts. The ethical labour of suspension is a particular form of ethical labour which involves consciously deferring one's self-judgement and reflections on the self. It has several dimensions.

First, women hostesses see some of their practices as ethically questionable at the social level. As mentioned earlier, they usually hide their actual work and tell their families they are working as waitresses, managers, or saleswomen who are selling alcoholic drinks in nightclubs. They typically sort their WeChat friend circles into several groups so that certain posts are only visible to certain groups and are hidden from others.

Second, most of them do not contest or attempt to subvert the mainstream stigmatization of their work. At the same time, their current socially unjustifiable practices become ethically justifiable when they understand these practices as a necessary step towards the dignified future life that they aspire to. For instance, they often refer to "economic independence" and "individual autonomy" as the social standing they will gain in the future. Unlike the individualized neoliberal subjects embodied by Korean sex workers in the US,³⁸ some of my interlocutors invoked a gendered ethics of sacrifice and care that conforms to familism. This involves fulfilling obligations or making sacrificial contributions to their natal family as filial daughters, to their children as caring mothers, or to their husband's family, which they draw upon as the basis of their ethical justification of their current sex work and the coping strategies they use to manage the stigma.³⁹ As the following section shows, in their long-term goals, family—whether it is their existing family or the family they wish to have—occupies an important place in their lives. Gendered roles in the family feed into their imagination of the future, which reproduces the gendered hierarchy in some cases and subverts it in others.

Third, in the present moment they have to struggle constantly in order to defer self-questioning and self-judgement. Accordingly, the ethical labour of suspension is an active and conscious effort that involves self-care and self-persuasion ("to be a bit more realistic") and is targeted at seeking social recognition not in the present moment but after this temporary period of suspension. This is most evident when they need to juggle multiple relations through physical mobility and temporal demarcations, which is explored in the following section.

Finally, ethical labour is not simply pushing questions aside. The labour is sustained by conscious effort and is overshadowed by fears about ageing and failure to achieve long-term life goals. Similar to emotional labour, which is often found to be labour-intensive and effort-intensive,⁴⁰ ethical labour is

³⁸ Sealing Cheng and Eunjung Kim, "The Paradoxes of Neoliberalism: Migrant Korean Sex Workers in the United States and 'Sex Trafficking,'" *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 21, no. 3 (2014): 355–381.

³⁹ See also Choi and Lai, "Sex Work."

⁴⁰ Ronnie J. Steinberg and Deborah M. Figart, "Emotional Labor since *The Managed Heart*," *Annals of the American Academy* 561, no. 1 (1999): 8–26.

often experienced as taxing, stressful, and painful. Due to its taxing nature, women usually start with a “quick in, quick out” approach to shorten their hostessing careers. As the final section shows, similar to emotional labour that induces a deep sense of alienation on multiple levels, prolonged ethical labour often fails to resolve ethical conflicts and may intensify mental stress.

Ethical Labour in the Context of the Nightclub Economy

As an important glue in private business deal making, the contemporary rise of the nightclub economy in Wenzhou goes hand in hand with the growth in private industry, the increased human mobility, and the accompanying informal rental room infrastructure since the 1980s. Since the economic reforms towards privatization and marketization in the 1980s, China's southeastern coast has enjoyed development from below. The local private economy is mainly composed of small- and medium-sized enterprises that are mostly buttressed by a close-knit social network of private financing and *guanxi* (social connections) that merges formal and informal economic practices.⁴¹ These private enterprises attract a large inflow of migrant workers from other provinces who work as waged labourers and businesspersons. Some of these sojourning migrant workers, both men and women, end up working in the nightclub industry, and they all reside in monthly rental rooms which offer them the flexibility and anonymity needed for continuous mobility. Unlike the formal rental market, monthly rental rooms operate in a legal grey zone without rental contracts and identification card registrations. These monthly rental rooms are usually located within a typical family house and thus are well hidden from outsiders, and their precise addresses are never advertised to the public. Tenants may stay for less than a month or up to ten years, on and off. Whatever the length, rents and leases are always calculated and paid monthly in cash.

During my fieldwork in Mu town, two officially registered nightclubs occupied the highest end of the local nightlife/sex industry in the new development area where my interlocutors were working. Unlike typical sex work, where workers offer sexual services for money, nightclub hostess work is ambiguous in terms of selling sexualized intimacy for money and involves complex boundary-crossing negotiations. This ambiguous boundary crossing also puts their work in a legal grey zone, or what they themselves understand as “playing the edge ball”; it is neither illegal nor completely legal. On one hand, they are officially registered at the local police station as “public

⁴¹ Xiang Biao, *Transcending Boundaries Zhejiangcun: The Story of a Migrant Village in Beijing*, trans. Jim Weldon (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Zhang Li, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

relations workers.” On the other hand, any commercialized sexual acts performed in the nightclub space or outside of it are in theory punishable. Furthermore, these boundary-crossing negotiations are an important means for hostesses to raise or maintain their “body price” (*shenjia*)—a common term that refers to the prospect of commercializing one’s body, contributing to a hierarchical valuation of hostesses in the nightclub circle. Usually, the more hostesses hold back from agreeing to commodified sexual acts with customers, the higher they are ranked. Giving ready consent to commodified sexual acts makes them second-class hostesses in the circle. Such ambiguity in hostess work necessitates the performance of ethical labour as a part of emotional labour.

Another factor that feeds into the enactment of ethical labour is the initial motivation of the women who take up hostess work in the industry: to earn money. Except for one local woman, most of my interlocutors were second- or third-generation migrants who were raised by grandparents in villages while their parents were working as migrant workers elsewhere. The majority were in their early twenties and were unmarried. But several married women maintained close contact with their young children who were being raised in their husbands’ villages. A number of them had had several years’ experience working in nightclubs and karaoke bars in cities of the Pearl River Delta before coming to Mu town. They told me that the hostess work in these towns in Wenzhou was more profitable than in larger cities, and they felt they had better prospects of marrying a local businessman in towns than in larger cities. Those who had not worked in nightclubs before usually had a history of working in laborious waged work before being introduced to work as hostesses.⁴² They described their initial entry as due to the allure of how easily nightclub hostesses seemed to make money. Sometimes a hostess’s one-night earnings might exceed their own income for an entire year of waged work.

For some of the women, the urgent need to earn money became a preoccupation at some point due to incidents related to family members (usually their extended family, including the husband’s family if they were married). Despite the varying degrees of urgency, all the young women shared an imagined future out there *after* this period of working as a hostess, which created a liminal space between the present and the future they aspired to. Most of my interlocutors adopted a “quick in, quick out” strategy with a clear target of termination of their hostess work. Some were only there for several months with a clear date of exit. Their present unceasing work was aimed at earning the target amount of money until the day they quit the nightclub so that they might embark on a conventional family life and secure

⁴² This is similar to Pan et al.’s findings in southeast China, where migrant women chose to progress from factory work to sex work in hopes of more financial gain and less physical labour. Pan et al., *Xiaojie*.

a better social-economic standing for the next generation. Their ethical labour of suspension was a necessity in this race against time.

Furthermore, the particular setup in the high-end nightclubs also offered them flexibility and the hope of reaching their target within a relatively short period of time. Although nightclub hostesses usually worked in one nightclub for a long, continuous period of time, all of them were self-employed. Unlike the transnational migration of sex workers in Asia that is heavily mediated by brokers,⁴³ the high-end nightclub industry in Mu town does not rely on brokers for the recruitment of hostesses. This is also very different from the way the high-end hostess industry is organized in larger cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In these larger cities, high-end hostesses or escorts are often employed by agent companies registered as “public relations” or “model” companies. These agent companies broker and allocate hostesses’ daily work. Being self-employed means that hostesses in Mu town need to broker for themselves. In order to develop relationships with reliable and generous customers and have a higher income, they need to cultivate close working relationships with the assistant managers (*lingban*) who are employed by the nightclub and are responsible for helping customers book rooms and commission hostesses. Involved in such mutually beneficial relationships, hostesses and *lingban* often socialize together, and hostesses only change *lingban* when one of them is no longer working in the nightclub.

Being self-employed also means that the women earn the full amount of the cash transferred from their customers without mediation, and their performance of emotional labour is crucial to receiving higher fees from their customers. In the nightclub, *lingban* set up standard hostess fees for each hostess, a minimum amount of cash that the customer must pay to the hostess directly for her company in the nightclub room. This part is not included in the bills the nightclub charges the customer. In 2017, the fees were in two grades: RMB550 and 650. Yet, a customer could pay a hostess as much as tens of thousands of RMB if he wished. With the help of *lingban*, some popular hostesses could earn a minimum of RMB2,000 in hostess fees each night working from one room to the next. An average monthly income for a hostess could easily be three to ten times what the average waged work paid in town.

In order to shorten their careers as hostesses, most of the women worked every day as long as they could in order to maintain a continuous income. Days they did not work were commonly called “days that are wasted.” For instance, many of them only took one trip a year back to their hometowns. This annual trip occurred around two weeks before the Chinese New Year,

⁴³ Cf. Sverre Molland, “Safe Migration, Dilettante Brokers and the Appropriation of Legality: Lao-Thai ‘Trafficking’ in the Context of Regulating Labour Migration,” *Pacific Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2012): 117–136; Johan Lindquist, Xiang Biao, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Introduction: Opening the Black box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility, and the Changing Political Economy in Asia,” *Pacific Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2012): 7–9.

and they had to rush back to work before the holiday started. The Chinese New Year is the busiest season for the nightclub industry for county-seat towns like Mu town, when all the businessmen return home. During the annual busy season from New Year's Eve to January 15 in the lunar calendar, all the prices at nightclubs are doubled. In order to maximize financial gains, nightclub companies pre-pay every worker and hostess about RMB50,000 for them to take home for a family reunion on their annual visit home so that the workers are ready to work nonstop in the busy season.

The journey of my key interlocutor Lanlan into the industry is a typical case. Lanlan was born in the early 1990s in rural Yunan. She had been working as a street vendor selling tea and blankets in Jiangxi. After she moved to Mu town, she worked on the shop floor in a local factory and then as a restaurant waitress before being introduced to work at the nightclub. She started working in the nightclub in 2010, first as a *lingban* with a monthly salary of RMB3,000 and then, very soon, as a hostess. In 2012, two years into her hostess work, Lanlan went back to Jiangxi for a blind date and married her husband in rural Jiangxi, and she gave birth to her daughter in 2013. Several months after Lanlan returned to Mu town, her mother-in-law had a stroke, and she then felt a much stronger urgency to earn quick money. She had to send the majority of her earnings back home, and she became “thoughtful” (*dongshi*), meaning she became more “realistic” about earning and saving money to prepare for adversities in life. Because of the urgent needs of her family, she stayed longer in the hostess work and was not able to take a “quick out” as she had planned. Lanlan was used to calculating her savings and spending; having her daily account in mind fuelled her daily work. Each month, Lanlan would send at least RMB3,000 to her husband. She also sent RMB50,000 to her natal family in Yunan as a contribution to their building of new houses.

Like Lanlan, many hostesses race against time to accumulate savings to meet their targeted long-term goal. Instead of having the objective of escaping from and negating rural life, rejoining family life back home in villages and towns is the desire that these young women have to defer for the present and yet try hard to realize in the future. Hence, achieving the desired state of “economic independence and individual autonomy” in the future ironically necessitates enormous ethical labour to defer judgement about their present work.

Ethical Labour between Multiple Relations

In this race against time, the ethical labour of suspension becomes most evident in the hostesses' strategies for juggling multiple relationships and roles. These relationships are spatially spread out and are temporally clearly demarcated: one-night customers versus temporary local boyfriends versus permanent family relations. The wisdom of the phrase “to be a little more realistic” entails deferring the hostesses' ethical self-questioning so that they

may draw a clear boundary between roles that are private and roles that are staged for financial gain.

To begin with, the night-time hostess work required the most intense performance of ethical labour and emotional labour. In a normal day, my interlocutors worked from around 7:30 p.m. until 2 or 3 a.m. in the clubs. They were paired with male customers to encourage them to consume more beer and do more singing in club rooms that resembled luxurious karaoke rooms. They engaged in intensive emotional labour to induce a certain feeling in their customers that would result in higher hostess fees. After escort work at the nightclubs, they might be approached by customers who wanted to perform sexual acts with them. At this point, they needed to strategize the negotiation and either reject the proposal or agree to it for a very high fee. Any sexual acts also ideally needed to be negotiated in the name of romantic relations instead of commercial relations for higher escort fees. I heard of cases where hostesses offered gifts to the *lingban* for a collaborative setup (*ju*) to allure customers to offer a much higher overnight escort fee that amounted to hundreds of thousands of RMB.

At the same time, the hostesses needed to carefully maintain their relationships with their long-term customers-turned-boyfriends, who were usually local married middle-aged businessmen. This is because the income they earned outside of the nightclubs from their intimate interactions with their local boyfriends, with or without sexual acts, comprised a major proportion of their income. Many of my interlocutors received gifts in the form of iPhones, jewellery, perfume, assistance paying bills, and cash gift via WeChat transfer from their customers, their pursuers, and their boyfriends on various occasions and on days of celebrations. Therefore, they needed to carefully plan birthday parties and strategize whom to invite to pay for which bills without causing conflict between their pursuers and their boyfriends. Similar to Tsang's findings about high-end sex work⁴⁴ these long-term intimate relationships also helped them to demarcate themselves from the stigma associated with sex work.

In order to juggle these multiple relationships, the hostesses needed to maintain a high degree of physical mobility. The common rule in the industry is that one should work in a region far away from home and therefore protect oneself from exposing the hostess work to one's hometown social circles. In addition, in order to prevent boyfriends, customers, pursuers, and co-workers from running into to each other unexpectedly, the hostesses typically shared the rent of an additional monthly rental room with a close friend who was also a hostess. For instance, Lanlan and one of her hostess friends had their own sleeping rooms in one place and co-rented another room at another location a ten-minute walk from their residences. They coordinated with

⁴⁴ Tsang Eileen Yuk-ha, "Neither 'Bad' nor 'Dirty': High-End Sex Work and Intimate Relationships in Urban China," *China Quarterly* 230 (2017): 444–463.

each other who would stay overnight in the room they co-rented in case of an unexpected visit from their boyfriends. Furthermore, some of the most mobile hostesses made Mu town their base camp and spent some days in another neighbouring town and some days in a city such as Shanghai. Such continuous spatial mobility allowed them to earn a much higher income by staging themselves as newcomers and yet also carried a higher risk of violence when they had little social support in a new place.

At the same time, the hostesses needed to strategize the engagement and disengagement of the self in multiple relationships and roles. Take Lanlan's experience as an example. One of the merits of hostess work, in Lanlan's view, was to accumulate "observations about all sorts of men."⁴⁵ After a couple of conversations with a man, she would quickly classify him into a type and strategize her engagement with him. She selected boyfriends from her pursuers who were businessmen who genuinely adored her and who did not have multiple sexual relationships. What's more, unlike other hostesses who maintained multiple relations with several local boyfriends at once, Lanlan usually kept one relatively long-term relationship with one local boyfriend at a time and only occasionally accepted requests for overnight escort from her customers. This was to maintain her "body price" at a high level since a single romantic relationship made her more "genuine" and "pure" by reputation than the other hostesses who kept multiple boyfriends. In Mu town, Lanlan had maintained a relationship with a married entrepreneur, Mr. Lin. Mr. Lin had been gifting her RMB2,000 per month for several years. Whenever he came to her nightclub room, she would receive an additional 3,000, which was many times her standard fee. Lanlan told me that Mr. Lin was someone who understood her and someone she felt "very close to." They would have lengthy conversations about many aspects of their lives that they would never share with their own spouses. They sometimes talked overnight without having sex.

Meanwhile, Lanlan was more rational than other hostesses in separating her life at home from her hostess work in Mu town, enabling her to maintain her image as a virtuous daughter, mother, and wife in the rural villages of Jiangxi and Yunan. Lanlan held daily WeChat video chats with her daughter while working in Mu town. The relatively large amount of the remittances she sent home also translated into a respectable position within her husband's family. Each time she went back to the village, usually once a year, she would be treated "like a queen" by the large family. That one week of the year was lived in a drastically different temporal rhythm than her life in Mu town. Unlike the late-night work schedule in Mu town, she would get up early and go to sleep early in her home village. Her husband and her mother-in-law would cook three big meals for her every day and discourage her from doing household chores. She would wear comfortable clothes and shoes and would

⁴⁵ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 August 2016.

not wear makeup. She would play with her daughter and go for hikes in the nearby mountains.

We can see that temporal demarcations and spatial mobility enabled the hostesses to juggle multiple relationships and roles. They needed to consciously make an effort to disengage the self when at work and to demarcate their commercial relationships from their romantic ones. Failure to make this effort commonly led to increased emotional distress. Indeed, in the beauty salon, one of the favourite topics among the young women was about each other's "good" and "bad" boyfriends and customers. Their stories of passionate and romantic love were always coupled with stories of abortions, illness, violence, betrayals, abandonment, and even suicide attempts. In these conversations, they would invoke the phrase "to be a little more realistic" to express the self-protective strategy of never investing oneself in romantic fantasies.

Consequences of Prolonged Suspension

Although the ethical labour of suspension enabled these young women to make boundary-crossing negotiations and juggle multiple affective worlds, it did not stop their self-reflection and did not eliminate their stress. A temporal fear—the fear of losing their youth—created tremendous anxiety about the likelihood that they would fail to achieve their long-term goals. In order to maintain a younger look, many of them regularly received plastic microsurgery because they would not be able to work in a high-end nightclub if they appeared more than 25 years old. At the same time, the demands of ethical suspension went somewhat against their instincts as they were inclined to judge, evaluate, and reflect on their customers', pursuers', and boyfriends' acts in order to protect themselves from potential harm. The continuous strain of pushing themselves to be more realistic and of practicing the ethical labour came at a cost. Instead of resolving the ethical conflict, prolonged ethical labour often intensified the women's stress. This section elaborates on the consequences of prolonged suspension.

To begin with, although these young women dressed glamorously, were able to earn a much higher income than local average waged work, and spent much money on drinking, food, and clothing, there was also a bitter aspect to their daily life. During the daytime, they had to spend a high proportion of their income and time to sustain their physical bodies so they could do their hostess work at night. Common bodily reactions to their long-term disordered diet, sleep, alcohol consumption, and stress included enteritis, stomach aches, diarrhea, menstrual cramps, no menstruation, and high fever. A range of illnesses often kept them in their rental rooms taking a nap, visiting local clinics, or, in the worst cases, taking days off work, thus demarcating their daily life as "daytime intravenous injection, night-time singing" (*baitian diandi, wanshang chang*), a sarcastic phrase Dan, one of my

interlocutors, shared with me when I was accompanying her to a local clinic for an intravenous injection. Indeed, conversations about health concerns and WeChat posts exhibiting photos of a clinic's injection room were among the most popular topics of conversation when they gathered in the beauty salon to get ready for their work at night. Although physical violence and drug addiction were rare in this circle, deteriorating health due to long-term illness was one of the factors that prevented them from working more than ten years in nightclubs.

Furthermore, although these young women were in a race against time to shorten their time hostessing, their sense that they never had enough money and the difficulties of transitioning to alternative livelihoods prolonged their stay in this work, giving them the growing sense of being trapped. Lanlan had tried hard to defer her ethical judgement, and yet her occasional resistance to “compromising” her dignity dragged her, as it did her co-workers, to overstay their time as a hostess:

Once you stay for too long, it takes you over and transforms your spirit, personality, and values about marriage. You have to be more realistic and take whatever means necessary to achieve your goals [of earning money]. Only this kind of person is fit for the nightclub work. People like me are just wasting the time and not earning enough money.⁴⁶

“Take whatever means necessary to achieve your goals” is another expression concerning ethical labour. It involves compromising one's dignity by soliciting money, accepting the alluringly high amount of WeChat transfers offered by male customers, and manipulating multiple affective relationships for one's own interests without investing much personal emotion, as well as being willing to agree to perform sexual acts. The ambience of earning money and calculating how much they earned every day with a deliberate effort of ethical suspension could become a heavy strain on some hostesses' mental and physical health. A common way they coped with the stress was by indulging in strong-tasting food and drinking even more after work despite knowing that the beer they consumed in nightclubs was mostly adulterated alcohol that was harmful to their health. Occasionally, hostesses would throw a banquet where most of the food was wasted. Then, they would drink heavily and cry together in a group. Those who were very depressed drank and cried each day after work. Not consuming enough carbohydrates (in an attempt to stay slim), coupled with daily heavy drinking, subjected some of them to severe mental health issues.

I heard Lanlan and several other hostesses talking about quitting nightclub work several times. Yet, exiting fully was difficult. Lanlan's target was clear when she moved to Hu town in 2018, but such targets were not always easy

⁴⁶ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 April 2018.

to reach. Earning the “last bucket of gold” before quitting was always easier to dream of than to attain. Even after reaching a partial target, they were often faced with a new need to earn a certain amount of money and hence deferred the day when they would quit the nightclub work. Some of them successfully accumulated several million RMB and yet were not able to quit the nightclub as they had hoped and lost their money to their boyfriends, who cheated them. The target, and hence the day they would quit the nightclub, kept moving. Even though some of the hostesses had quit for one or two years and transitioned to waged work, they came back to the nightclub work after some time. For instance, Lanlan worked as a salesperson in a wine shop in Hu town for about a year in 2019 and had a monthly income of about RMB10,000 to 20,000, which was three to six times the local average for wage work. Yet, she found the work more mentally draining than hostess work as she had to attend banquets with officials every night and drink a lot of wine. She became severely depressed in 2019. She told me she could not stop crying every night. Luckily, some of her friends comforted her and took her to hospital. After medication, she gradually recovered. Then, for several months she had a series of health issues, from pelvic inflammatory disease to acute gastroenteritis, that prevented her from working. This lasted until 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Lanlan spent a long time resting at home in her husband’s village, and she returned to Hu town immediately after the lockdown in March 2020. Yet, she had to take another week’s treatment to properly recover and be ready to work. When I visited her after the lockdown had ended, she had just resumed her hostess work in Hu town. She was thinner and was smiling much more than before. “Everyone is telling me that I smile much more. Do you know what it means to smile more?” Lanlan asked me. She paused. “In psychological theory, it means I am more confident.”⁴⁷ She told me that her long forced rest and disengagement from the nightclub life made her more appreciative of staying alone and being confident about her plan of quitting the nightclub and finding “proper work.” “Actually, the biggest motivation for me to quit was my daughter,” Lanlan told me. The unexpected lockdown during the pandemic allowed her to spend the longest time she had ever had at home with her daughter. She told me that she could feel that her five-year-old daughter needed her physical company much more strongly than when she was younger. At the same time, she also found out during the lockdown that her husband had been having an affair with a village neighbour. This sent her a signal that “it is time to quit” before the family became broken from within. “Between family and money,” she said, she chose family. Family was something “a woman must have.” She added, “If a woman doesn’t have a family, she doesn’t have a place of belonging,

⁴⁷ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 June 2020.

just like a wild ghost.” I heard this expression of the value of family repeatedly, spoken by many hostesses who planned to exit the nightclub industry and have a dignified life. However, family, in their terms, usually did not entail expectations about a romantic marriage relationship with their husband.

Lanlan was realistic about the possibilities for work and the difficulties of the transition after a full exit. She recognized that she did not have any “educational qualifications” (*xueli*) and hence would not be able to “understand professional terms.” But her strength was that she had “social experiences” (*yueli*) and was able to “help connect resources and mediate public relations.” There were several options in her mind. At one point, her favourite option was to open a beauty salon in her husband’s hometown. To achieve this, she needed to get training in makeup, plastic microsurgery, tattooing, nail art, massage, etc. This was a big decision because an apprenticeship in the beauty industry meant that she would not be able to earn money for one to two years. She could not train and do the hostess work at the same time as she would not be able to focus or think well in the daytime after heavy consumption of adulterated beer in the evenings. Furthermore, the recent pandemic had made her concerned about the financial risks of opening a beauty salon because several beauty parlours in Hu town and Mu town had gone bankrupt during the lockdown. She recently told me her new plan: “The best work I want to find is to work for someone on a stable salary of around RMB3,000 to 4,000 per month. Very uneventful and very good!”⁴⁸ In fact, she had figured out that the process of being “washed white” was quite straightforward—registering as an employee of a private enterprise and paying social security contributions for about two years.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to leave everything behind and find the kind of formal and stable employment that Lanlan hoped to have in her husband’s hometown. Indeed, as Pan et al.’s comparative studies also demonstrate, these young women’s underclass position in the larger political economy contributed to their limited chances for social mobility and decent work opportunities in the labour market.⁴⁹ In fact, it is also a common finding that hostess work does not necessarily improve women’s economic conditions as much as they had hoped.⁵⁰ Wang Bing and Xiaoling recalled that over the past decade, only two of the many young women they had been acquainted with had succeeded in accumulating enough capital and landing a good marriage through a short career as a nightclub hostess. The rest of them were trapped in a state of being unable to exit or of being downgraded to second-class hostesses as they aged.

⁴⁸ Lanlan, interview, in person, 9 June 2020.

⁴⁹ Pan et al., *Xiaojie*; Pan Suiming, and Huang Yingying, “Zhongguo donbei diqu laodongli shichangzhong dxing xingongzuozhe” [Women sex workers in China’s northeastern labour market], *Shehuixue Yanjiu* 3 (2003): 51–63.

⁵⁰ See also Ding and Ho, “Sex Work.”

The Predicament of the Ethical Proletariat

In conclusion, many hostesses working in high-end nightclubs navigate the space between their present occupation and their future goals through performing the intensive ethical labour of suspension. Instead of approaching hostess work as “play” or as a way to subvert the patriarchal hegemony,⁵¹ work and long-term goals were central to many of my interlocutors’ daily navigations between the present and the future. They raced against time in order to shorten their hostessing careers and made an effort to leave the hostess work behind in order to transition to the life they aspired to in the future—one that would conform to mainstream familism to varying degrees. As stressful as it could be to perform ethical labour, there were many forces that prohibited them from making a quick exit. Gendered familial obligations played a paradoxical role here. On one hand, a conventional family life with sufficient material wealth and social recognition with stable “proper work” back in their hometown provided the strongest impetus for most of them to sustain their ethical labour of suspension. On the other hand, their concerns about maintaining their marriage and securing a better future for their children also made them seek various ways to quit the nightclub and be “washed white.”

This paradox meant that their ethical labour ultimately often failed to resolve the fundamental ethical conflict between their present activity and their long-term goals, despite their intentions. They were like Xiang Biao’s description of the hummingbird in his introduction to this issue: “struggles hard but moves nowhere ... incapable of landing.”⁵² For many of them, their years of nightclub hostess work had a tremendously detrimental effect on their mental and physical health as well as their future family life. It was only when they were too ill to work and were forced to rest that they started to smile a bit more.⁵³ Moreover, the ethical labour they performed rested upon a particular gendered ethics of sacrifice and care. As underclass young women, the family that they had been contributing to might turn against them at any time once their husband or parents-in-law discovered their hostess work. Recently, Lanlan’s husband divorced her when the family found out the source of her huge remittances, leaving her with little savings. The filial daughter and caring mother once again became the object of moral blame in the patriarchal hegemony. She had not been able to see her daughter since the divorce, and she had to start working again for her last bucket of gold. These women migrants’ predicaments remind us that

⁵¹ Cf. Ding, *Desires*; Ding, “Beyond Sex/Work”; Zheng, *Red Lights*.

⁵² Xiang Biao, this issue, 233–250

⁵³ This is similar to what Ralph Litzinger has discussed in his paper on mine workers with black lung disease, which was presented at the “Suspension” workshop in Oxford on 17 September 2018, organized by the University of Oxford.

alongside our efforts to destigmatize and decriminalize sex work, we should also direct our efforts to tackling deeper levels of inequality.

Finally, I wish to extend the discussion of ethical labour to the wider political economy. In her classic thesis, Hochschild insightfully exposes the alienating effect of emotional labour and the exploitation of feelings in contemporary global capitalism. Following Hochschild, Macdonald and Sirianni refer to the frontline service workers and paraprofessionals who are under much more monitoring and external instructions than white-collar workers as the “emotional proletariat.”⁵⁴ Similarly, ethical labour takes varied forms, is critical to work in other contexts, and is performed by both men and women. For instance, the studies in this special issue, particularly the ones on female Chinese workers in Singapore⁵⁵ and on unskilled labour outmigrants in northeast China,⁵⁶ show people’s conscious holding back from ethical reflections. It is particularly labour intensive for those who need to monitor and regulate their ethical questioning in order to sell their labour as a commodity. We may call them members of the “ethical proletariat.”

Admittedly, people who are in a higher social-economic stratum may also perform ethical labour in certain contexts, but it is usually the underclass of a society, who have few alternatives for social mobility, who perform the most intensive ethical labour to the extent that it drains them mentally and physically. Rather than being caught up in ethical struggles in the context of the ongoing diversification of moral frameworks in China, these underclass young women migrants, who are primarily concerned about their material life and a dignified social standing, are prone to holding much stronger moral judgements and evaluations than the educated middle class. It is precisely their conformist attitudes towards certain moral values such as familism that make them less likely to seek to subvert the mainstream moral values and hegemony. It is also their strong moral judgements that make their conscious suspension of their ethical judgement labour intensive and energy draining. Accordingly, these members of the ethical proletariat are exploited not only in terms of their physical, emotional, and intimate labour, but they are also, and perhaps more fundamentally, exploited in terms of their own ethical labour to suspend judgement and self-reflection.

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, March, 2021

⁵⁴ Cameron Lynne Macdonald and Carmen Sirianni, eds., *Working in the Service Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 3.

⁵⁵ Yang Wei, this issue.

⁵⁶ Xiang Biao, this issue, 233–250

Chinese Workers in Ethiopia Caught between Remaining and Returning

Miriam Driessen

ABSTRACT

Ever since Beijing has sought to fuel domestic growth through Chinese-led development overseas—first under the aegis of Jiang Zemin’s Going Out Policy and more recently as part of Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative—thousands of Chinese have moved overseas for work. Africa has been one of the destinations of Chinese companies and their expatriate staff. Although we have learned a great deal about China’s mega-projects across the African continent, little is known about the certified engineers and experienced builders who carry them out. What brings them to Africa? And, more importantly, what makes them stay for years on end, even if they wish to return to China? In this article I zoom in on the lives of Chinese men employed in Ethiopia’s construction industry to show how three decades of domestic growth in China has pushed workers overseas, while jeopardizing their return. Workers’ lives are marked by double displacement. They are not only isolated from local African communities through a dormitory labour regime that controls their time and limits their mobility, but also, more importantly, they are displaced from social life in China. Domestic development has at once increased aspirations and made them harder to obtain, especially for men, who are expected to fulfill the promise of upward social mobility for themselves and their families. In order to realize aspirations and meet social expectations related to social reproduction, geographic mobility has become a necessity for men who cannot rely on family wealth or connections, forcing them into a state of suspension.

Keywords: China, Africa, mobility, labour, family, return, suspension, neo-familism

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We will return. We made up our minds when we prepared to go abroad. After all, we decided to move to Africa just to earn a bit of money, to gain a bit of experience and to expand our horizon. But why are we, one year after another, still in Africa?¹

The question posed by the author of “Unable to Remain in Africa, Unable to Return to China,” a piece that went viral on Chinese social media in 2017,² struck a chord with many Chinese workers in Africa who have asked themselves the same question. Taking on various personas, such as a boyfriend who has been given an ultimatum by his girlfriend in China, a husband who used to talk endlessly with his wife on the phone and now only calls her every once in a while, a father whose child no longer recognizes him upon his return home, and an adult son whose mother calls each day to tell him to get married, the author speaks to the dilemmas that many overseas Chinese men face. Representing different life stages, the personas have a shared dilemma: they are suspended, between China and Africa, the life they wish to live, and the life they are living.

Discussing the lives of Chinese workers—certified engineers and experienced builders—engaged in infrastructure construction in Ethiopia, I ask why they find themselves caught between remaining and returning. Official discourse classifies this group of workers as *waipai laowu ren* 外派劳务人员, often translated as “overseas posted workers.” This classification is somewhat misleading as these workers, in contrast to their counterparts in the past who were assigned overseas employment under China’s employment allocation system, *choose* to move overseas for work. They sign contracts with overseas branches of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or private companies with overseas projects. Workers’ self-classification as Chinese living in Africa—or, more sarcastically, as “peasant workers in Africa” (*feizhou nongmingong* 非洲农民工), like one of the characters in “Unable to Remain in Africa” describes himself in a photo taken on an evening out with his school friends in China—says more about them.³ While the former classification describes the workers’ transitory status, the latter reflects their low self-esteem vis-à-vis peers in China. Having to move to Africa is often viewed as a necessity or as a means to an end of creating a better life in China. Being in Africa, then, places one in a state of becoming, or yet to be.

The workers’ state of suspension emerges from continued aspirations and expectations of upward social mobility at a time in which slow growth, combined with rising living costs, have made these harder to obtain.

¹ Xiao Nie, “Daibuxiaqu de feizhou, hui buqu de zhongguo” [Unable to remain in Africa, unable to return to China], *Bobu Feizhou*, 1 September 2017.

² Nie, “Daibuxiaqu de feizhou, hui buqu de zhongguo.”

³ Some scholars, such as Emmanuel Ma Mung, have called these workers “temporary labour migrants.” See Emmanuel Ma Mung, “Chinese Migration and China’s Foreign Policy in Africa,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 4, no. 1 (2008): 91–109.

Suspension is a life strategy as well as a phase in life in which they are in constant search for better opportunities, putting not only routine life, but also family life and social reproduction on hold.⁴ Indeed, personal aspirations and social expectations are intimately linked to the family in China, forcing men, especially those who come from a rural background, to move away, and remain on the move, in search of better opportunities. “Some of them have earned enough money to find a wife and get married,” the author of “Unable to Remain in Africa” comments. “They believe that if they endure hardships for two more years, they can cover the advance on a mortgage. Yet when they have earned enough money for a house, there are the children....” In other words, at each life stage return appears to be in reach, were it not that the next life stage demands even more capital, requiring the men to stay in Africa, even if they wish to return.

To be sure, suspension is not a state of waitthood. Rather, it is a condition of frenzied activity and incessant movement, or “drifting” (*piao* 漂), as the allegedly directionless and agency-less movement of the disenfranchised is commonly called in post-reform China.⁵ The notion of *feipiao* 非漂, or Africa drifters, increasingly used to describe Chinese workers in Africa, captures the unsettled nature of their lives in Ethiopia.⁶ Those who are drifting attempt to create a better life for themselves and their families, as they are being pushed around by social pressures that are largely beyond their control. Even so, they retain hope for suspension to end—giving them reason to keep feverishly working and moving.

The aspirations and hopes for the future of Chinese workers linked to public works can be different from Chinese migrant entrepreneurs involved in the African trade, agriculture, and industrial sectors,⁷ some of whom are set on building a future in Africa and are creatively reshaping family arrangements.⁸ Among these entrepreneurs, a settler mentality has emerged.⁹ This is not yet the case for the workers I introduce in this article, who have set their heart on going back to reunite with their families and relish the opportunities offered by what many view as a more advanced life in China.

This article draws on field research in Ethiopia, where I resided in workers’

⁴ Biao Xiang, introduction to this special issue.

⁵ Pamela Hunt, “Drifting through the Capital: ‘Floating’ Migrants and Masculinity in Xu Zechen’s Fiction,” *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 6 (2016): 1–34.

⁶ Miriam Driessen, “Africa Drifters,” *Made in China Journal* 5, no. 3 (2020): 48–51.

⁷ See, for instance, Edwin Lin, “‘Big Fish in a Small Pond’: Chinese Migrant Shopkeepers in South Africa,” *International Migration Review* 48, no. 1 (2014): 181–215; Seth Cook et al., “Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana,” *World Development* 81 (2016): 61–70; Elisabeth Hsu, “Zanzibar and its Chinese Communities,” *Population, Space and Place* 13, no. 2 (2007): 113–124.

⁸ Liang Xu, “The Comforts of Home: A Historical Study of Family Well-Being among Chinese Migrants in South Africa,” *Asian Ethnicity* 21 (2020), no. 4: 507–525.

⁹ Yoon Jung Park, *A Matter of Honour: Being Chinese in South Africa* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

camps along road construction sites and witnessed the dormitory labour regime up close. I learned about workers' predicaments and hopes for the future over meals, from the passenger seat of trucks and pickups, and during lengthy interviews in the evening hours.¹⁰ Research for this paper was conducted in Addis Ababa and the Lower Omo Valley, southern Ethiopia, in 2017. My fieldwork in Ethiopia, however, stretches nearly a decade (2011 to 2020), and occasionally I also draw on older and more recent material. The article considers the experiences of Chinese workers across the corporate hierarchy, from project managers and civil engineers, to truck drivers and machine operators. Throughout, I use the generic term "worker" for all employees of Chinese enterprises in Ethiopia, irrespective of corporate rank or educational background. Even though divisions exist, blue-, grey-, and white-collar workers share a sense of suspension.

I start this article with a discussion of overseas workers from China in Africa. Chinese-run infrastructure projects absorb a significant number of Chinese workers, professionals and non-professionals alike, relieving pressure in the domestic job market. I subsequently shift to the "living at work" arrangements of domestic enterprises in Africa, exploring the differences between the dormitory labour regime that emerged in post-reform China and its overseas replicas that were established more recently. Spatial and social segregation, I argue, enhance a sense of suspension, although they are not the main sources of it. Workers' sense of suspension more importantly arises from their perceived displacement from social life in China. They have yet to realize personal aspirations and social expectations tied to social reproduction in China and the rigid normative life-course model on which it is founded. Yet in order to do so, they wind up in a state of suspension, in which they are unable to stay in Africa and unable to return to China.

Chinese Workers' Footprints in Africa

The success of China's involvement across the African continent is founded on a multitude of decisions made by individuals—pursuing their own interests rather than those of their country—to take up work overseas.¹¹ What we like to refer to as "China's footprint in Africa" rests in fact on the footprints of numerous individual Chinese who have made Africa their temporary or permanent home. Construction work is labour-intensive, and over more than two decades, Chinese-managed infrastructure projects have employed thousands of predominantly male expatriate staff, from civil engineers to cooks, accountants to machine operators, and laboratory technicians to on-

¹⁰ I use pseudonyms throughout the article to protect the identity of the interviewed workers.

¹¹ Nicholas Loubere, "Chinese Engagement in Africa: Fragmented Power and Ghanaian Gold," in *China Story Yearbook 2018: Power*, edited by James Golley et al. (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 2019), 211–215.

site foremen. Chinese companies involved in infrastructure construction typically work with an all-expatriate management team, right down to on-site foremen. Chinese staff make up between 10 and 20 percent of the entire workforce, depending on the availability of local labour and expertise.¹²

In 2018, the number of Chinese nationals sent to work on Chinese firms' construction contracts in Africa or to perform other labour services was 201,047, having dropped from a peak of 263,659 in 2015. Despite small fluctuations, the number of Chinese workers in Africa has been relatively stable over the past ten years. In Ethiopia, the number of Chinese workers went up from 5,378 in 2009 to 9,112 in 2018.¹³ Although central SOEs, the main contractors of infrastructure projects, still employed a handful of engineers who had been assigned their posts through the employment allocation system when they entered Ethiopia, most of these veterans have since retired. The majority of SOE employees now consist of permanent workers, often fresh engineering graduates recruited on campus, or contract workers recruited through online advertisements, and, occasionally, recruitment agents. A few old hands said that they had replied to job advertisements on television.

Central SOEs often outsource a major share of the actual building work to Chinese and Ethiopian subcontractors, which are either state-owned or, most commonly, privately owned enterprises. Chinese private subcontractors are reminiscent of labour gangs in mainland China, which are infamous for their employment practices. Often based on oral agreement, the relationship between the employer, or labour boss, and the labourers is highly asymmetric and exploitative. Wage arrears are rampant. Physical abuse is common. Most workers, however, swallow these practices, as they are heavily dependent on their employer and want to avoid harming the kin or native-place connections through which they were recruited.¹⁴

Chinese firms' employment structure in Ethiopia is marked by labour force dualism, akin to state-owned enterprises operating in mainland China.¹⁵ Apart from dividing expatriate and Ethiopian staff, based on race,¹⁶ corporate structure also draws a distinction between permanent and temporary

¹² Interview with Chinese engineer, Addis Ababa, 25 June 2019. This statement is also based on observations of various Chinese-run projects across Ethiopia, including in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region, Afar, Amhara, Tigray, and Addis Ababa.

¹³ John Hopkins University SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative, "Chinese workers in Africa," last updated on 19 February 2020, accessed 23 September 2020, <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa>.

¹⁴ Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labour Protest in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Sarah Swider, *Building China: Informal Work and the New Precariat* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Lu Zhang, *Inside China's Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), chapter 6.

¹⁶ Ivan Franceschini, "As Far Apart as Earth and Sky: A Survey of Chinese and Cambodian Construction Workers in Sihanoukville," *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 512–529.

expatriate staff, based on class. Localization is thus far limited to private firms, which seek to reduce costs by replacing expatriates with local employees. Despite the significant losses central SOEs incur in the infrastructure sector in Ethiopia and other parts of Africa, they continue to be protective of their permanent staff. In fact, these SOEs are required to meet an annual intake quota of fresh engineering graduates. When a firm, state-owned or private, seeks to downsize its labour force, temporary workers are most likely to be laid off first.

Despite disparities in terms of job security and wage levels, permanent and contract workers do in fact have much in common. They are nearly all born and raised in rural China. The first ones in their families to enjoy higher education, engineers have typically graduated from universities in second- and third-tier cities. Experienced builders, who serve as on-site foremen or machine operators, on the other hand, come from a background of work in China's domestic construction industry and were enticed abroad by a higher salary, or were, as some phrased it, "outcompeted" by younger and more educated counterparts.

Both permanent and temporary workers relocate to Africa in order to save money to buy a house and get married, or, in the case of older workers, to help sons buy a house with an eye to enhancing their marriage prospects. They hope to create a better life, if not for themselves then for their offspring. However, overseas salaries have become less attractive as wages and living costs in China are rising, affecting both permanent and contract workers. Contract workers nonetheless continue to renew their contracts for similar reasons as permanent employees choose to stay overseas. They constantly toy with the idea of resigning and returning to China, but they nonetheless stay in Ethiopia, which traps them into a state of suspension.

Spatial Segregation, Social Suspension

Both workers' lived lives in Africa and envisioned lives in China are conditioned by the camps in which they work and reside.¹⁷ In their fascinating discussion of conceptions and misconceptions of Chinese self-segregation, Yan, Sautman, and Lu point at the structural rather than subjective impediments that Chinese nationals in Africa encounter, including language barriers, anti-Chinese discrimination, and an unsafe environment, forcing

¹⁷ Scholars who have contributed to discussions on the dormitory labour regime in the African context, if under various denominations, include Ding Fei, "The Compound Labor Regime of Chinese Construction Projects in Ethiopia," *Geoforum* 117 (2020): 13–23; Ulrikke Wethal, "Workplace Regimes in Sino-Mozambican Construction Projects: Resent and Tension in a Divided Workplace," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, no. 3 (2017): 383–403; Ching Kwan Lee, "Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves," *The China Quarterly* 199 (2009): 647–666; Di Wu, *Affective Encounters: Everyday Life among Chinese Migrants in Zambia* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Chinese expatriates to live in bounded spaces, such as China towns or workers' compounds.¹⁸ As responses to the surrounding social environment, these factors are all *external* in nature. I suggest that *internal* factors, tied to the dormitory labour regime as well as workers' focus on work to invest in a better future in China equally cause a certain degree of self-segregation. In this section I discuss the effects of the dormitory labour regime on the suspended lives of workers. In the next section, I shift focus to the aspirations and expectations tied to envisioned lives in China that give birth to workers' sense of suspension in the first place.

Pun and Smith developed the concept of "dormitory labour regime" in reference to the organization of labour that emerged in southern China's factories in the 1990s.¹⁹ The provision of accommodation close to the factory was linked to a new mobility regime, in which the state enabled mobility yet restricted settlement. Rural migrant workers were allowed to reside in the city only if they had employment to support temporary residence. Dormitories not only facilitated the temporary capture of labour by the firm, but also the smooth circulation of labour.²⁰ Different from work units in the Mao period, which housed entire families and provided cradle-to-grave social security, these dormitories were designed to capture single workers on a short-term basis. The dormitory labour regime allows management to tightly schedule and control production. The focus lies in maximizing the utilization of labour services, instead of the reproduction of the next generation of labourers, as was the case with socialist work units.²¹

This single focus on labour holds true for Chinese workers' camps in Ethiopia and is reflected in nomenclature. Compound residents typically refer to their camp as *yingdi* 营地. Meaning camp, or barrack in a military context, or as a verb, to build or operate, *ying* describes a place (*di* 地) of work or business activity (*yingye* 营业). Indeed, the camp is not a residential compound, even if it consists of dormitories. It is in the first place a locus of production.

Chinese camps in Ethiopia are built of the same white-walled and blue-roofed prefabricated housing as can be found in China. Brick walls, barbed wire, chain link fences, improvised trenches, or cactus hedges separate the Chinese camps from their direct physical surroundings. Spatial segregation directs residents' focus to work, while abundant paraphernalia, such as the karaoke set, the basketball court, the Spring Festival decoration on the wall,

¹⁸ Yan, Sautman, and Lu, "Chinese and 'self-segregation' in Africa," *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 1 (2009): 40–66.

¹⁹ Pun Ngai and Chris Smith, "Putting Transnational Labour Process in Its Place: The Dormitory Labour Regime in Post-Socialist China," *Work, Employment and Society* 21, no. 1 (2007): 27–45; Chris Smith, "Living at Work: Management Control and the Dormitory Labour System in China," *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 20 (2003): 333–358.

²⁰ Ngai and Smith, "Putting Transnational Labour Process in Its Place."

²¹ Smith, "Living at Work."

and CCTV, switched on during meals, remind them of their lives in China—a homeland some have not lived in for more than a decade.

What is more, not only are the workers considered mobile—their camps are, too.²² The footloose nature of building work drives a wedge between camp residents and local communities. If one road project is completed, workers move on to the next project. Professionals may move even more frequently when their skills are needed on other projects. In this situation, it is hard to cultivate a sense of belonging. In fact, mobility gives rise to a sense of indifference. The temporary nature of projects, combined with workers' primary goal of creating a better life at home, makes them reluctant to invest in African societies—financially, socially, or emotionally. China remains their reference point.²³ To be sure, the domestic construction industry requires workers to relocate to far-flung regions in China.²⁴ However, the workers I interviewed felt there was a big difference: "In China, I can call my wife at any time of the day. Here there is the time difference."²⁵ Indeed, at the end of a work day in Ethiopia, the workers' families in China were fast asleep. The physical distance and the greater unfamiliarity with the environment further enhanced the workers' feeling of isolation from social life in China.

In the absence of family, camp residents develop a different type of sociality through intimacy with co-workers. Male bonding, the forming of close personal relationships with male colleagues, is central to making "living at work" bearable and occasionally even enjoyable, workers explained.²⁶ Communal life gives birth to a sense of *communitas*, a spirit of camaraderie or companionship, typically felt by people who experience liminality, or suspension, together. The corporate hierarchy nonetheless permeates social life in the camp and affects personal interactions, even at the table tennis table or the basketball court. Lower-level managers were reluctant to play against the project manager, and if they did, they could not let their superior lose.

If China is the reference point, how, then, does Africa figure in migrants' imaginations? Rather than a destination, Africa is construed as a transitory space that provides valuable opportunities to get ahead.²⁷ When Wei moved to Ethiopia to take up a position of logistics officer, he did not tell his parents that he moved to Africa. Instead, he told them that he went to work "outside" (*waidi* 外地)—a word that can refer to any place beyond one's hometown,

²² I thank Biao Xiang for this valuable insight.

²³ Jonathan Sullivan and Jing Cheng, "Contextualising Chinese Migration to Africa," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 53, no. 8 (2018): 1173–1187.

²⁴ Swider, *Building China*.

²⁵ Interview with mechanic, Hiwane, 8 December 2012.

²⁶ Interview with liaison officer, Meihoni, 31 May 2012, among others.

²⁷ Biao Xiang, "The Would-Be Migrant: Post-Socialist Primitive Accumulation, Potential Transnational Mobility, and the Displacement of the Present in Northeast China," *Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2, no. 2 (2014): 183–199.

yet is often taken to be somewhere in China. As a result of a shifting migration frontier, “outside” has come to encompass places further afield.²⁸ Cautious about upsetting his parents—Africa is widely viewed as unsafe by people in China—Wei stretched the meaning of “outside” to his advantage. In fact, this classification is telling of how men like Wei perceive the location of their workplace. For them, Africa is one stop on a longer migration trajectory. They do not intend to change their lives by moving to a promised land. Rather, by earning quick or easy money, they work feverishly to join rapid development in China.²⁹

The Chinese dormitory labour regime in Africa is reminiscent of its domestic counterpart, even though it is subjected to the host country’s regulatory context and has taken on distinct features.³⁰ In both the domestic and overseas dormitory labour regimes, the spatial confinement of labour facilitates the implementation of a tighter management regime in regard to working hours, mobility, and discipline. Employment conditions are in part disconnected from geographically rooted norms, trade unions, state regulatory frameworks, and “localized practices that normally emerge under geographically bounded social conditions, and which serve to form labour communities and increase workers’ living standards.”³¹ This separation is even more pronounced overseas, where Chinese workers are unfamiliar with state and non-state regulatory systems, lack social support networks, and may not speak the local language. Indeed, their unfamiliarity with the social environment increases workers’ dependence on their employer.

Second, the overseas dormitory labour regime constitutes what Chen and Liukkunen describe as a legal vacuum.³² Host state laws seldom permeate into the internal operations of the camps, making them semi-autonomous territorial units. Consequently, the legal status of camp residents is ambiguous, and their rights are uncertain and unenforceable. When disputes occur between them and their employers, they are unable to resort to effective dispute settlement mechanisms. Company management becomes a *de facto* governor of the camp, presiding not only over the working lives of its staff but also over workers’ personal time and space. Many Chinese workers in Ethiopia, especially blue-collar workers employed by private companies, complained in conversations and interviews about employment conditions. Suffering wage arrears and abusive working hours, they said that even the

²⁸ Interviews with a Chinese logistics officer, Kangaten, 5, 6, and 7 August 2017. Wei is a pseudonym.

²⁹ Xiang, “The Would-Be Migrant,” 192.

³⁰ Fei, “The Compound Labor Regime of Chinese Construction Projects in Ethiopia.” See also Lee, “Raw Encounters,” and Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

³¹ Ngai and Smith, “Putting Transnational Labour Process in Its Place,” 29.

³² Yifeng Chen and Ulla Liukkunen, “Enclave Governance and Transnational Labour Law—A Case Study of Chinese Workers on Strike in Africa,” *Nordic Journal of International Law* 88 (2019): 558–586.

labour conditions of the Ethiopian labourers were better than theirs. Although local builders were not supported by trade unions either, they at least could resort to local authorities and state courts to protect their rights.³³

A direct consequence of social unfamiliarity and legal disentanglement, the third difference lies in the period over which labourers are confined to work for domestic employers overseas. Job mobility among female factory workers in China's sunbelt, the location of Pun and Smith's research, was high, and job hopping popular.³⁴ The dormitory labour regime itself enabled the circulation of labourers, benefitting not only the employer but also the employees. In Africa, Chinese companies capture labour for a much longer period of time. Job mobility is low and job hopping limited. This is the result not only of geographical isolation, which impedes the search for a job, but also of the reality that expatriates' skills are often incompatible with job requirements at home. As a result, many permanent and contract workers work for the same employer in Africa for years.

The dormitory labour regime of Chinese firms in Africa is thus responsible for the long-term capture of labour, with significant implications for social reproduction. Thus far, scholars have focused on the consequences of the dormitory labour regime on *production*.³⁵ The impact of this regime on social *reproduction* is equally significant. The overseas version of post-reform China's dormitory labour regime not only engenders a separation of reproduction from production, but a suspension of reproduction altogether.

Suspension of and for Social Reproduction

Chinese workers' state of suspension emerges from pressing personal aspirations and social expectations that are tied to family life. Contemporary Chinese society has witnessed a reorientation towards the traditional heteronormative family, a trend that has been coined "neo-familism."³⁶ Neo-familism gives rise to a rigid life-stage model. Both men and women are expected to smoothly transition from one stage to the next as soon as they have passed a certain age. Life course normativity can put tremendous pressure on individuals who divert from the norm or are unable to live up to it.³⁷ And living up to the norm has become challenging for many Chinese

³³ Miriam Driessen, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

³⁴ See also Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (London: Random House, 2009).

³⁵ Ngai and Smith, "Putting Transnational Labour Process in Its Place;" Smith, "Living at Work."

³⁶ Derek Hird, "Xi Jinping's Family Values," *The Asia Dialogue*, China Policy Institute, 22 September 2017, accessed 6 October 2020, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/09/22/xi-jinpings-family-values/>.

³⁷ Susanna Choi and Ming Luo, "Performative Family: Homosexuality, Marriage and Intergenerational Dynamics in China," *The British Journal of Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2016): 260–280; Peidong Sun, *Shui lai qu wo de nü'er?* [Who is going to marry my daughter?] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuixue Chubanshe, 2012); Miriam Driessen and Willy Sier, "Rescuing Masculinity: Giving Gender in the Wake of China's Marriage Squeeze," *Modern China* (forthcoming), DOI: 10.1177/0097700419887465.

men, who are expected to carry the financial weight of marriage and that of establishing *and* maintaining a family in the face of rising living costs. They are forced to move away for better opportunities in an attempt to meet personal aspirations that are intimately connected with compelling social expectations. Only by moving domestically or overseas for work are they able to take up the roles of dutiful son, able husband, or responsible father in China. Yet even if migration is an avenue to meet expectations of male adulthood, it simultaneously engenders a state of suspension that postpones its very achievement.

Martin discusses the notion of suspension in relation to an entirely different section of Chinese society: urban middle-class women who study in Australia. They experience their studies abroad as a liminal period that affords them the freedom to experiment and defer major life course events such as marriage.³⁸ Even so, they remain torn between the rigid normative life-stage model that pulls them home on the one hand, and a more open understanding of life course on the other. In contrast to male Chinese workers in Ethiopia, young women in Australia thrive in suspension, indulging as they do in the self-autonomy it affords. Their “zones of suspension,” as Martin calls these temporal and geographic spaces, allow time for self-development. For male workers in Africa, by contrast, suspension generates anxiety and a nagging feeling of lagging behind.

Differences in experiences can be explained by each group’s motivations for moving overseas. Whereas the hope of meeting social expectations at home drive young men to Africa, an escape from these very expectations brings female middle-class students to Australia. What binds these groups, however, is the rigid normative life-course model in contemporary China, combined with gender ideologies, that guides and determines major life decisions and engenders mobility, for better or for worse.³⁹

Haunting Mortgages

In conversations and interviews, male workers often listed buying a house, getting married, and establishing a family as some of the major challenges they face in China. Young fathers added a no less crucial fourth challenge to this list: maintaining a family. The first step to marriage, everyone agreed, is a house purchase, which is certainly not an easy feat given skyrocketing house prices. And if workers managed to cover the costs of an advance payment on a house, they would be haunted by its up to 30-year mortgage.

Moving abroad is sometimes the only way out, as it was for Wei, a logistics

³⁸ Fran Martin, “Overseas Study as Zone of Suspension: Chinese Students Re-negotiating Youth, Gender, and Intimacy,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 39, no. 6 (2018): 688–703.

³⁹ Susanne Choi and Yinni Peng, *Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family, and Gender in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Willy Sier, “Daughters’ Dilemmas: The Role of Female University Graduates in Rural Households in Hubei Province, China,” *Gender, Place and Culture* (in press), DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2020.1817873.

manager employed by a private construction firm in southern Ethiopia.⁴⁰ Wei grew up in rural Shandong. With the help of a student loan from the government, he attended Shandong College of Arts, where he studied marketing communication. However, the job market in his sector was crowded when he graduated, and Wei became a salesman instead.

His girlfriend, whom he had met at college, hoped to settle in Jinan, Shandong's capital. Settling in the city meant buying a house, and Jinan's house prices humbled Wei. Average house prices in Jinan increased from about RMB8,500 (US\$1,382) per square metre in 2013, when Wei started looking at a house and earned a monthly salary of little more than RMB3,000 as a salesman, to RMB9,500 in 2016 and an all-time high of RMB17,500 at the start of 2019. House prices have dropped since then.⁴¹ Wei hesitated, whereupon his girlfriend became impatient.

Wei decided that moving overseas for work was his only option. Online, he found a job as a technician with a Chinese drilling company, a subcontractor of Sinopec, in Saudi Arabia. He was hired and offered a salary three times what he had made in China. Yet after a while his girlfriend begged him to come home, and he gave in. Not long after his return to China, however, she ended their relationship. Wei decided that he could not stay in China and applied for his current job in Ethiopia, confiding "it is the only way to buy a house."⁴²

"Only when you have a house, you have a family," the Chinese dictum goes. In contemporary China it is expected that a man owns a house upon marriage.⁴³ In the past, rural families extended their houses in the village to accommodate a new couple. Nowadays, the bride's family expects an apartment in the city, or at least the county seat. Chinese male workers in Ethiopia typically measure their income against purchasing power on the housing market in China, where homeownership has become a status symbol, especially with an eye to marriage. Symbolizing a man's ability to provide for his family, the purchase of residential property is a crucial and inevitable step in a man's life course. The size, quality, style, and most importantly, price and location, all matter in marriage negotiations.⁴⁴

To be sure, married men are not free from haunting mortgages. As soon as they have repaid the mortgage loan on their first property, they may feel they have to buy a second property as a means to invest in future returns, or for their sons' marriage down the road.

⁴⁰ Interviews with a Chinese logistics officer, Kangaten, 5, 6, and 7 August 2017.

⁴¹ Anjuke, "Jinan Fangjia," accessed 26 September 2020, <https://www.anjuke.com/fangjia/jinan2013/>.

⁴² Interview with logistics officer, Kangaten, 5 August 2017.

⁴³ Miriam Driessen, "Migrating for the Bank: Housing and Chinese Labour Migration to Ethiopia," *The China Quarterly* 221 (2015): 143–160.

⁴⁴ Peidong Sun, *Shui lai qu wo de nü'er?* [Who is going to marry my daughter?] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuixue Chubanshe, 2012).

Pressing Marriages

While a house is a prerequisite to marriage, marriage is a prerequisite to establishing a family. Marriage in China is nearly universal, and men, like women, are expected to get married when they reach a certain age.⁴⁵ In order to find a marriage partner and convince her to marry him, a young man working in Africa is faced with a conundrum: if he remains in Africa, it is hard to find a Chinese bride, but if he returns to China, he will not be able to earn the capital needed for a marital home or a bride price. Liang, a laboratory technician from rural Jiangxi, is stuck in this situation. His search for a marriage partner is tugging him back to China as much as it is forcing him to stay on in Ethiopia, where he earns a better salary.⁴⁶

Liang, 32 years old, is employed by a private construction firm. Prior to coming to Ethiopia, he worked for more than four years on a road project in Equatorial Guinea. A chain smoker who likes a laugh, Liang is serious about one thing: marriage. “When I am abroad, I have to rely on *xiangqin* 相亲,” he confided with a sigh. *Xiangqin* are blind dates, which his mother and elderly relatives arrange for Liang when he returns to China for his annual vacation. Liang summed it up: “In these kinds of situations, getting a bride is like buying a piece of meat [*mairou* 买肉]: one CNY for one *jin*, something like that. [...]. People come straight to the point. It is entirely different from dating [*tanlian'ai* 谈恋爱].”

Liang explained that marriage prospects for men like him are bleak. “A girl can choose between five boys. Of course, she will choose the boy with the most money!” Liang does not have enough money yet to get married, or at least so he believes. He spent most of his savings on his older brother’s bride price. Marriage, in Liang’s eyes, has become a problem. “There are too many men in China. Marrying someone has become really hard and very expensive.” His brother’s bride price amounted to RMB300,000. Liang contributed one third. In addition, he left his former position in Equatorial Guinea to his brother.

Liang had planned to buy a house in 2014 in Nanchang, the capital of his home province Jiangxi, in order to boost his marriage chances, but his annual vacation that year was too short. Since then, house prices in Nanchang have gone up steeply. Next time, he assured me, he planned to buy a house, provided his employer agreed to let him go. This seems unlikely: his employer has proven to have a hand in suppressing wages, and does not allow any workers to return to China until the project is finished.

Marriage expenses in China have increased significantly since the 1980s,

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman, eds., *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Deborah S. Davis, “Privatization of Marriage in Post-Socialist China,” *Modern China* 40, no. 6 (2014): 551–577.

⁴⁶ Interviews with laboratory technician, Kangaten, 24, 28, and 29 July 2017. Liang is a pseudonym.

especially for men.⁴⁷ In the countryside, the marital home and bride price have become a major economic burden for rural households, not least as a man's economic situation has come to determine his marriage prospects.⁴⁸ Poverty, then, is viewed as a major obstacle to marriage.⁴⁹ Competition on the marriage market is exacerbated by China's demographic imbalance. It is predicted that China will have more than 30 million excess males between the ages of 20 and 49 in 2025, more than 40 million in 2035, and around 44 million in 2040.⁵⁰ While demographers are still debating the exact number of excess men, Chinese workers in Ethiopia, like Liang and Wei, are acutely aware of the predicament this imbalance may cause.

Widely considered to be the foundation of the family unit, marriage is vital to the project of family realization and often seen as a duty vis-à-vis parents and other next of kin. Filial piety continues to carry great force across China. Wei admitted that, were it not for his parents, he would not mind staying single.⁵¹ Although socio-economic transformation has significantly transformed inter-generational relations,⁵² it has equally contributed to the persistence of filial piety as an ideal. It is acceptable, and in fact common, that adult children demand support from parents, but the failure to marry is unacceptable. These deliberations, which shape major life decisions, including moving overseas for work, are based on what Stafford terms "affective forecasting," the predictions people make in respect to the feelings of family members.⁵³ Considering these feelings, then, makes marriage a moral duty, while the fear of remaining unmarried looms large for men such as Wei and Liang.

Demanding Families

"When you love your family, why do you choose to leave your family?" the spouse of Chenghe, a Chinese surveyor in his mid-thirties, used to ask her husband, who had been in Ethiopia for six years. "This is a question I also

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Quanbao Jiang, Yanping Zhang, and Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte, "Marriage Expenses in Rural China," *The China Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 207–236; Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, eds., *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁴⁸ Quanbao Jiang and Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte, "Bride Price in China: The Obstacle to 'Bare Branches' Seeking Marriage," *The History of the Family* 17, no. 1 (2012): 2–15.

⁴⁹ Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, "Bride Price in China: The Obstacle to 'Bare Branches' Seeking Marriage."

⁵⁰ Kuangshi Huang, "Marriage Squeeze in China: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 12 (2014): 1642–1661, 1645–1646.

⁵¹ Interview with Chinese logistics manager, Kangaten, 5 August 2017.

⁵² Yunxiang Yan, "Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China," *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (2016): 244–257, see also Gonçalves Santos and Stevan Harrell, eds., *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

⁵³ Charles Stafford, "Being Careful What You Wish For: The Case of Happiness in China," *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 3 (2015): 25–43.

ask myself,” he concurred. “We both know the answer. I move away *because* I love my family.”⁵⁴ For the sake of the family and its security and well-being, men put domestic life on hold. In the past decades, millions of Chinese citizens have left their homes in search of better opportunities. Many remain on the move. Although he has a family, Chenghe feels that he still needs the salary he earns in Ethiopia to improve his life and that of his family members at home.

Gaofei, Chenghe’s colleague, told me that for men like him, social expectations remain a burden throughout one’s life. When you meet one expectation, another is waiting to be met—for instance, that of securing a better life for your son.⁵⁵ Children are expensive, Gaofei explained. “I don’t dare to have a second one. What if it is another boy? I will never be able to return to China.” His son is the main reason why Gaofei stays on in Ethiopia.

At the time of the interview, Gaofei had already overcome the first and second hurdles. He came to Ethiopia as a fresh civil engineering graduate in 2010, and met his wife, who works for the same firm, in Ethiopia. Fortunately, she was willing to marry him without preconditions. In early 2017 he bought a house in Xiamen, in his wife’s home province Fujian, for RMB48,000 per square metre. “At the peak of the house prices,” he concurred, yet added that his apartment, at a walking distance from Xiamen University and a good elementary school, is a *xuequfang* 学区房 (an apartment located near a school) and a *haijingfang* 海景房 (an apartment with a sea view) in one. He is certain that the value of his property will not depreciate. Meanwhile, the mortgage loan on his house, along with the future of his son, is keeping him in Ethiopia.

Longing to return home and join his wife in China, Gaofei resigned in 2014, trying his luck as a stock broker and trader. After losing rather than making money, he was forced to return to Ethiopia. While some returnees are successful, many are not. Returnees are often forced to compromise on a lower salary or on changing trades, which can be financially risky. Gaofei had no other option but to return and remain on the move. As a result, he has set himself a new goal. He intends to reduce the months that he spends in Ethiopia each year from ten to eight, thus allowing him more time with his family. His busy work schedule and Covid-19 restrictions have so far stood in the way of realizing his goal.

Motivations for migration in post-reform China are frequently framed in terms of self-actualization.⁵⁶ Certainly, casting off the sometimes-suffocating shackles of the extended family to stand on one’s own feet has been an

⁵⁴ Interview with surveyor, Mehoni, 11 June 2012. Chenghe is a pseudonym.

⁵⁵ Interviews with liaisons officer, Mehoni, 31 May 2012 and 19 January 2020. Gaofei is a pseudonym.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Ong, Aihwa, and Li Zhang, “Introduction: Privatizing China. Powers of the Self, Socialism from Afar,” in *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*, edited by Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 1–19.

important incentive for Chinese youth from the countryside to move away from home to the city. However, especially for young men, mobility is equally driven by “family-realization,” the moral commitment to advance the prosperity of the (future) family, which is linked to the emergence of neo-familism in China.⁵⁷ For individuals who are perpetually on the move, the family is imagined as the ultimate safe haven. At the same time, the hetero-normative neo-familial model reinforces the perception that men are the bread-winners and are to provide security for the family, forcing them to move away in search of opportunities that can help meet these expectations.

In short, young men are tugged in different, and at times opposite, directions. A house purchase requires a significant amount of money and savings over an extended period of time. Stable and well-paying jobs in China are hard to find and rarely pay enough to buy a house in the first place; yet marriage demands a man own residential real estate. The hypermobility of men like Wei, Liang, and Gaofei is a manifestation of anxiety that arises from compelling social expectations, or duties, related to a rigid normative masculine life-stage model. Unable to realize lifecycle events, they end up in a state of suspension.

Preserving Prosperity

The pressure of maintaining a family, and preserving its prosperity, can be felt over the entire course of an individual’s life. Over an Ethiopian coffee ceremony, water truck driver Fang explained to me why many Chinese men choose to move overseas for work. “In China, we share a cup of coffee with three people. In Africa, we enjoy our own cup of coffee. There are too many people in China. That is why we move away.”⁵⁸ Drawing on the common trope that China simply has too many people, Fang illustrates the fierce competition for resources experienced by him and many others.⁵⁹

Fang has the two sons that Gaofei feared to have. Neither of Fang’s sons, who are both in their twenties, is capable of carrying the burden of a house purchase alone. Fang’s eldest son is a driver, his youngest a salesman. One of the father’s reasons to relocate to Ethiopia for work is his wish to support his sons financially.

The long-standing Chinese ideal of filial piety, in which children, especially but not exclusively sons, support their parents financially, socially, and emotionally in old age, has made way for what Yan Yunxiang terms “descending familism,” in which resources flow downwards and the children and the grandchildren are the focus of attention and fatherly concern.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Derek Hird, “Xi Jinping’s Family Values.” Biao Xiang, “*Jia: zhanyou yu quzhu*” [Home: possession and eviction], preface of *Saodi chumen*, the Chinese translation of Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (Xining: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2018), 2–15.

⁵⁸ Interview with a driver of a water truck, Arba Minch, 20 July 2017. Fang is a pseudonym.

⁵⁹ This section is based on interviews with a driver of a water truck, Arba Minch, 19 and 20 July, 2017.

Through their unconditional support, fathers like Fang, as well as mothers and siblings, help their sons and brothers live up to the masculine norm in contemporary Chinese society when they fall short in their own efforts.⁶¹

Fang himself grew up on a farm with seven siblings. He was the eldest child. Some of his brothers and sisters still farm, while others, like him, chose to cast off their rural past. In 2015, at the age of 47, Fang moved to Ethiopia, joining a domestic enterprise that installed power transmission lines. He was assigned to drive a water truck for a much higher salary than he had earned before he was made redundant by his electrical contracting company in China—"outcompeted," as he put it. His expertise no longer fit a rapidly changing energy sector and its shift towards solar and wind energy. In fact, most of his co-workers in Ethiopia, all over 35 years old, are in the same boat. They moved overseas to continue earning a living in the sector in which some had worked their entire lives.

The income that Fang has earned in Ethiopia has enabled him to help his sons get ahead and build respectable lives. As the stories of Wei, Liang, Gaofei, and Fang show, realizing family ideals can result in tremendous financial pressure, and an income made overseas can help relieve this pressure somewhat. Wei, Liang, Gaofei, and Fang all perceived moving to Africa for work and staying on for years as a necessary evil. Building a life in China, while working in Ethiopia, created a state of suspension that many loathed. Yet rising living costs, combined with limited employment opportunities, forced them to sacrifice return, at least until retirement.

Conclusion

Chinese mobility to Africa is linked to Chinese society in transition, and the country's development trajectory. Prompted and supported by government campaigns, such as Jiang Zemin's Going Out Policy and, more recently, Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese state-owned and private companies have ventured overseas since the late 1990s. Chinese workers followed in their footsteps, assuming low- to high-level managerial positions. Their motivations for moving overseas, alongside their reasons for staying on, are intimately connected to their position on the margins of Chinese society and increased expectations of upward social mobility tied to family life and social reproduction.

Realizing each step in the normative masculine life course, from marriage to providing for one's son's marital home, has become more expensive; as a result, many men, in the face of this financial burden, have been forced

⁶⁰ Yunxiang Yan, "Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China," *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (2016): 244–257.

⁶¹ Driessen and Sier, "Rescuing Masculinity: Giving Gender in the Wake of China's Marriage Squeeze."

to move away, and, worse, to remain on the move. While overseas migration and the higher income it promises enables young men to live up to the roles of filial son, able husband, and responsible father, mobility simultaneously prevents them from taking up these roles. They find themselves in a double bind. The state of suspension this position creates is symptomatic of the slowdown of China's economy after decades of double-digit growth as well as a new bend towards neo-familism, combined with traditional gender ideologies that set out a man's or woman's life along a carefully measured timeline. Chinese societal pressures are carried over to Africa.

Aside from the aspirations and expectations to which envisioned family lives in China give birth, the overseas dormitory labour regime and its spatial segregation from local communities further enhances a sense of suspension. With its exclusive focus on production and at times despotic labour conditions, the dormitory labour regime leaves little room for social reproduction. It forces male workers to postpone critical milestones: buying a house, concluding a marriage, or establishing a family. Compelled to defer gratification, workers are unable to taste the fruits of their labour and enjoy a better life in China. They are left unable to remain in Africa, while unable to return to China.

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Suspension 2.0: Segregated Development, Financial Speculation, and Waiting among Resettled Peasants in Urban China

Yang Zhan

ABSTRACT

Since the late 2000s, many rural-to-urban migrants in China have lost their rural land to development plans, resettled in designated areas, and acquired formal urban residency. They stopped migrating, and have apparently ended their life of “suspension,” namely protracted mobility. While most existing research literature on this population foregrounds the issue of land dispossession, this article argues that, following resettlement, these former migrants’ lives can be more accurately characterized as a state of suspension instead of dispossession. Many resettled young adults, while having secured livelihood thanks to state compensation, are excluded from the technology- and capital-intensive developments to which they have lost their land. Some of these young people instead became petty speculators and rentier capitalists by liquidating their compensated assets through mortgages, private lending, rent, and other financial means. They are constantly waiting for the next investment opportunity and windfall gain. Although physically settled down and economically secure, they remain anxious and unsettled. They continue to orient their lives towards an elusive future rather than striving to transform the here and now, thus living in a state that I call “suspension 2.0.”

Keywords: resettlement, migrants, waiting, resettled peasants, rural to urban migration, suspension, escape suspension, segregated development, financial speculation, assetization, development induced resettlement, rent derived from state provided assets, new urban residents, imagined continuation of growth, resettlement housing compensation

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Introduction

In recent decades massive rural-to-urban migration has served as the basis of China's phenomenal economic growth. Venturing out of one's village to earn an income is the norm for China's rural population. The prospects of a better future, no matter how elusive and far-fetched, have been the impetus for hard work in the present.¹ This is what Biao Xiang has called "suspension"²: rural migrants endure hardship and family separation indefinitely for the sake of an imagined better future, to the extent that they disengage from the here and now. For rural migrants, the condition of suspension is made possible by both urban job opportunities and land-based safety nets back in their home villages.³

More recently, however, many rural migrants have apparently escaped suspension. They have lost their land and have been resettled in cities to make room for development projects. The resettled peasants⁴ stopped migrating, partly because they are not educated enough to be included in the capital- and technology-intensive development initiated by the state. At the same time, resettled young adults also choose not to migrate as they can rely on their parents' savings accumulated through decades' labour migration, and the parents' pensions provided by the government as part of the compensation package. The resettlement program also provides housing and social security for these new urban residents. The resettled peasants are excluded from the core sector of development but are incorporated into urban welfare schemes. Many of them live on financial speculation and rent derived from the assets provided by the state. In financial speculation, they wait for new investment opportunities and windfall fortunes.⁵ In sum, even though they cease to be hypermobile physically, resettled peasants continue to live in a state of suspension, in the sense that they live for an elusive future rather than strive to transform the present.

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¹ Yang Zhan, "'My Life Is Elsewhere': Social Exclusion and Rural Migrants' Consumption of Homeownership in Contemporary China," *Dialectical Anthropology* 39, no. 4 (2015): 405–422.

² Biao Xiang, "Hundreds of Millions in Suspension," *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration* 1, no. 1 (2017): 3–5. Also see Xiang, this issue.

³ Many have discussed the institutional arrangements for Chinese rural migrants. To name two: Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Chan Kam Wing and Li Zhang, "The Hukou System and Rural-urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes," *The China Quarterly* 160 (1999): 818–855.

⁴ The term "peasant" here refers to a social status defined by China's household registration system which also implies guaranteed entitlement to land, instead of an occupational category. As such "resettled peasant" is a category with special institutional significances.

⁵ They experience a version of making a windfall fortune through land compensation, which shapes this expectation.

Development-induced resettlement has attracted much scholarly attention, especially in the Global South. In addition to extensive study of the coercion and violence that occurs during the resettlement process,⁶ scholars have also critically assessed resettlement programs of various scales and kinds. Until now, though, scholarly efforts to assess rural migrants' livelihoods after resettlement have framed the issue through the lens of land dispossession.⁷ Taking a village in Sichuan as a case, Julia Chuang argues that once people lose their land they embark on proletarianization and many go on to become fully proletarianized workers.⁸ Tania Li, however, challenges the assumed linkage between dispossession and labour absorption, pointing out that in many Asian countries new jobs in manufacturing have not emerged to absorb this population. As neoliberal policies further remove existing welfare provisions, these rural populations lose their access to livelihoods and become surplus populations, barely subsisting on the edge of expendability.⁹ Adopting a similar position, Joel Andreas and Zhan Shaohua have warned that dispossession could end China's migration regime and potentially put China's rural migrants in a more precarious condition because displacement deprives them of social security.¹⁰

⁶ Many studies on resettlement have focused on the negotiations and struggles that take place during land dispossession. Please see Li Chen, Mark Wang, and Jennifer Day, "Dealing with Different Types of Chinese 'Nail Households': How Housing Demolition-induced Disputes were Settled in Urban China," *Geography Research Forum* 15 (2015): 62–86; He Shenjing, Yuting Liu, Chris Webster, and Fulong Wu, "Property Rights Redistribution, Entitlement Failure and the Impoverishment of Landless Farmers in China," *Urban Studies* 46, no. 9 (2009): 1925–1949; and Marl Wang and Kevin Lo, "Displacement and Resettlement with Chinese Characteristics: An Editorial Introduction," *Geography Research Forum* 35 (2015): 1–9. The present article, however, focuses on what happens after resettlement.

⁷ Scholarly assessment of land dispossession varies. There has been a "land grab debate" in which the consequences of dispossession have been critically assessed and compared in the contexts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Please see Griet Steel, Femke van Noorloos, and Christien Klaufus, "The Urban Land Debate in the Global South: New Avenues for Research," *Geoforum* 83 (2017): 133–141; and Tania Murray Li, "Centering Labor in the Land Grab Debate," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 2 (2011): 281–298. Sarah Rogers and Brooke Wilmsen, "Towards a Critical Geography of Resettlement," *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 2 (2020): 256–275. Sai Balakrishnan, "Highway Urbanization and Land Conflicts: the Challenges to Decentralization in India," *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2013): 785–811.

⁸ Julia Chuang, "Urbanization through Dispossession: Survival and Stratification in China's New Townships," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42, no. 2 (2015): 275–294; and Julia Chuang, *Beneath the China Boom: Labour, Citizenship, and the Making of a Rural Land Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

⁹ Tania Murray Li, "To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations," *Antipode* 41 (2010): 66–93. Other scholars have pointed out that, instead of incorporating more people into productive urban sectors, the contemporary world has become more exclusive. Bauman argues that the production of migrants, refugees, and outcasts is an outcome of modernization, a side effect of economic progress. Modern society has become a "factory of wasted humans." Saskia Sassen uses the term "expulsion" to discuss how various social groups are pushed to the urban fringes. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); and Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Joel Andreas and Zhan Shaohua, "Hukou and Land: Market Reform and Rural Displacement in China," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 798–827.

At first glance, the findings reported by Li and by Andreas and Zhan are confirmed by my case study because to some extent resettled peasants who are irrelevant to the segregated and upgraded labour market can be considered surplus to capital. But becoming surplus to capital as labour does not mean they are cut off from the economy or major institutions, particularly the state. I argue that two important conditions in addition to dispossession must be addressed.

First, we must consider the role of state compensations offered to peasants for their loss of land. Land entitlement has functioned as a social safety net or insurance for peasants, especially when they migrate to cities to work and face higher risks.¹¹ Land dispossession, as assumed by Tania Li, means the loss of social protection. On closer examination, however, we see that resettled peasants are placed into new urban welfare and distribution regimes. Many are incorporated into the urban welfare system and become subjects of state care that was previously unavailable to them.¹² This new regime of distribution is of great importance. As pointed out by James Ferguson, existing analysis of rural outmigration has been dominated by what he calls the productionist approach, which assumes the central role of wage labour in production as the main source of a population's livelihoods. Wage work has, however, become increasingly irrelevant to many rural-to-urban migrants. Many seek myriad forms of income redistribution and pursue survivalist activities in informal economic sectors.¹³ As a result, state care and the distribution of state care have become central in shaping new livelihoods for migrants and should be given more attention in attempts to understand the new conditions of suspension for resettled peasants.

Second, and more importantly, the lives of resettled peasants are shaped by trends towards housing financialization and assetization. Since the late 1990s, urban development in China has relied on housing commodification and assetization.¹⁴ If commodification is a process that makes originally non-tradable goods tradable, then assetization stresses "converting a commodity into a financial asset that can expect future value appreciation."¹⁵ As argued

¹¹ Wen Tiejun, "Nongmin shehui baozhang yu tudi zhidu gaige" [Social protection for rural populations and land reform], *Nongye jingji daokan* 3 (2007): 3–6; He Xuefeng, "Nongmin de fenghua yu tudi liyi fenpei wenti" [The differentiation of peasants and the distribution of land benefits], *Faxue luntan* 6 (2010): 104–110.

¹² Compared to China's urban social security network, its rural counterpart has not been well funded. It was not until recent years that the state expanded the rural pension scheme. Please see Ting Huang, "Local Policy Experimentation, Social Learning, and Development of Rural Pension Provision in China," *Pacific Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2020): 353–377.

¹³ James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Zhang Li's book focuses on the privatization and commodification of urban housing in China. It shows how privatized housing markets incorporate urban populations and shape the consumption culture among urbanites in China. Please see Zhang Li, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Chen Jie and Fulong Wu, "Housing and Land Financialization under the State Ownership of Land in China," *Land Use Policy* (2020): 104844.

by Wu et al., assetization also involves the “transformation of otherwise liquid property into a revenue-generating resource with recurring income streams.”¹⁶ Assetization stimulates the demand for housing assets and is crucial for the creation and expansion of China’s financialized real estate market. Relatedly, a sense of optimism towards the real estate market can be observed in urban China. As Michael Ulfstjerne points out, such an optimistic perception has even created what he calls “iron bubbles” in the real estate market;¹⁷ people collectively envision a future based on imagined continuation of growth and then act according to what they imagine. Many have become more aggressive in growing assets to cope with the increasing anxiety they feel about the difficulty of accumulating wealth through work.¹⁸ In these circumstances, even though China’s rural populations have long been excluded from formal financing, once they are resettled and compensated with resettlement housing, they become active participants in financial speculation. Particularly for young working-age resettlers, translating distributive benefits into profit-generating assets has become their central task. Some rent out their compensated housing units and become landlords. Some use their estates as collateral to borrow large sums of money for investments as they attempt to transform themselves from workers into small entrepreneurs or petty rentier capitalists. Others refashion themselves into private financiers or petty speculative capitalists in real estate development.

Considering the abovementioned aspects of migration and resettlement, this article focuses on a resettlement program in Chongqing, in southwest China. I pursue two goals. First, I provide an ethnographic account of how state compensation and assetization collectively redefine people’s livelihoods, family relations, and moral experience on the ground in Chongqing. My second goal is theoretical. By examining how people make use of state compensations, I complicate the often over-simplified image of urban redevelopment in China as stories of displacement and dispossession. I find Xiang’s multifaceted notion of suspension particularly helpful in synthesizing

¹⁶ Wu Fulong et al., “Assetization: The Chinese Path to Housing Financialization,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* (2020): 1–17.

¹⁷ Michael Alexander Ulfstjerne, “Iron Bubbles: Exploring Optimism in China’s Modern Ghost Cities,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 9, no. 3 (2019): 579–595.

¹⁸ Please see Zhu Yujing, “Caifu jiaolv yu zhongguoshi jinrong zhutihua: jiyu Wenzhou de minzhuzhi yanjiu” [Wealth anxieties and the making of financialized subjects in China: an ethnographic study in Wenzhou], *Xinan minzu daxue xuebao* 38, no. 9 (2017): 30–36; and Megan Steffen, “Willful Times: Unpredictability, Planning, and Presentism among Entrepreneurs in a Central Chinese City,” *Economic Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (2017): 251–262. Zhu’s work focuses on how market forces generate anxiety over wealth, which shapes new subjects who are more willing to take risks in financial markets, while Steffen points out that state-led development can also shape perceptions of risk. People can be unexpectedly rewarded, which induces an awareness that risks can be profitable. Most work on financial investment has focused on middle-class urban households. How rural villagers perceive risk and returns can be seen in discussions on the underground lottery in rural China: see Joseph Bosco, Lucia Huwy-Min Liu, and Matthew West, “Underground Lotteries in China: The Occult Economy and Capitalist Culture,” in *Economic Development, Integration, and Morality in Asia and the Americas* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2009).

my ethnographic materials as well as advancing theorization. In the following three sections, I elaborate on three dimensions of suspension: 1) suspension as a socio-economic structure defined by segregated development, 2) suspension as a strategy that enables financial speculation, and 3) suspension as an affective state of anxious waiting. These factors constitute the condition of suspension 2.0. I conclude the paper with additional theoretical discussion.

This essay is based on ethnographic research I conducted in Chongqing's Two River New Zone (*liangjiang xinqu*). From June to August 2019, I lived in the resettlement community and interacted with resettled peasants in both formal and informal settings on a daily basis. This relatively long period of participant observation laid the foundation for the multiple methods used in this ethnographic research and enriched my sensibilities of the post-resettlement condition where young adults ironically felt unsettled and out of place. In addition to participant observation, my fieldwork in Chongqing consisted of 42 in-depth, unstructured, and informal interviews over the course of three months. I recruited people through snowball sampling for my interviews. The first round of interviewees were equal numbers men and women, but of different ages and occupations. Resettled peasants were the majority, and my interviewees included village cadres, New Zone headquarters staff members, local community workers, street-level officials, and small business owners in the area. Thirty-five of the interviewees were resettled peasants between the ages of 18 and 35, which fits my definition of young adults in this study. In addition to field research, documentary research was also a crucial component of my research in Chongqing; the Two River New Zone headquarters provided relevant governmental reports on urban planning and compensation during my three visits there. Village-level cadres shared statistical data on outmigration and employment rates of their resettled village members. Other statistical data pertaining to the Two River New Zone program was collected online. My follow-up fieldwork, from April to June 2020, focused mainly on the life experiences of young adults. I conducted 20 unstructured interviews through online chats and video calls, recording their life stories, frustrations, and hopes. It should be noted that while statistical data is used in my study to sketch out general demographic and economic conditions in the New Zone area, the research itself depends on what Asad calls the "ethnographic mode of representation"¹⁹ instead of statistical representation. In a "typification approach," the generalization/argumentation relies on identifying what is "typical"²⁰ within the field under investigation. The essential task is not to codify abstract regularities but to identify dynamics within a social process, or, in Geertz's words, "not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them."²¹ Therefore, in doing

¹⁹ Talal Asad, "Ethnographic Representation, Statistics, and Modern Power," *Social Research* 61, no. 1 (1994): 55–88.

²⁰ Asad, "Ethnographic Representation," 71.

²¹ Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Vol. 5019 (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 26.

ethnographic study, I am less concerned about how to categorize resettled peasants based on given variables such as gender, income, or social class and more interested in how their experiences can serve as the entry point through which we understand systemic forces in Chinese urban development.

It is also relevant to point out that the Chongqing case is distinctive in its own right and at the same time indicative of a general trend. First, the case of Chongqing is distinctive because housing prices are relatively low and compensation packages are generous compared with those in other cities of similar size.²² These conditions made it easier for the resettled peasants to use their assets to participate in the financialized market. This essay therefore serves as a case study that provides data for further comparison. Meanwhile, the Two River New Zone is representative of the thousands of developmental programs in China's urban centres at all levels.²³ After the injection of RMB4 trillion in 2008 by the central government as a way to curtail the impacts of the global financial crisis, easy loans boosted real estate and infrastructural developments. Official statistics report that over 80 million rural households had lost their land by 2005.²⁴ New social groups emerged as a result of these resettlement projects. In metropolitan areas, resettlers are often called *chaierdai* (demolition kids), and in some rural areas the resettlers are nicknamed *tuerdai* (land kids).²⁵ This study is therefore also an effort to capture the general conditions facing these new social categories.

The Making of Resettled Peasants

In this section I explore how a group of peasants who had migrated to cities for work in most of their lives were resettled, thus becoming a new subject in urbanizing China. Resettled migrants are allocated to new settlements, with or without their consent, and are entitled to benefits that aim to provide

²² When the Two River New Zone program was introduced in 2010, the so-called Chongqing Model was already in progress. The case discussed in this paper should not, however, be singled out as representative of the Chongqing Model. The resettlement program and compensation scheme had little to do with experiments such as land certificates, in part because the villages affected by the New Zone program were located relatively close to the urban centres and were not included in the land-certificate experiment.

²³ Land-centred urban development can be seen in the work by George C. S. Lin and Wu Fulong, among others. Please see George C. S. Lin and Samuel P. S. Ho, "The State, Land System, and Land Development Processes in Contemporary China," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 2 (2005): 411–436; George C. S. Lin, "Reproducing Spaces of Chinese Urbanisation: New City-based and Land-centred Urban transformation," *Urban Studies* 44, no. 9 (2007): 1827–1855; and Wu Fulong, "China's Recent Urban Development in the Process of Land and Housing Marketisation and Economic Globalisation," *Habitat International* 25, no. 3 (2001): 273–289.

²⁴ Julia Chuang, *Beneath the China Boom* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 21. Also see Zhou Feizhou and Wang Shaochen, "Nongmin shanglou yu ziben xiaxiang: chengzhenhua de shehuixue yanjiu" [Moving peasants upstairs and sending the capital down to the village: a sociological study on urbanization], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 1 (2015): 67–84.

²⁵ In Chongqing, these terms are not used in local contexts; therefore, I use the general term "resettlers" to refer to the members of these populations.

a secured livelihood. They have become literal resettlers—sedentary residents—as a result of market forces, state policy, and family dynamics.

As a major development project, the Two River New Zone resettled a large number of peasants. The New Zone development was implemented when Chongqing was chosen by the Chinese State Council in 2007 as “the national experimental zone for integrating rural and urban development.”²⁶ At that time, it was acknowledged as one of the most important regional development programs in western China. In 2010, the Chinese central government set up a new administrative office to govern and directly oversee this massive state-led development project. Over a 10-year period, the program expropriated 15,320 acres of land and resettled 380,000 villagers.²⁷ In 2017, there were 293 companies in the New Zone, nine of which were Fortune Global 500 companies. At least 26 investment projects with guaranteed investment exceeding RMB1 billion were underway in the area, generating revenue of RMB199 billion per annum.²⁸

Tushu County was one of 33 county-level districts that was incorporated into the New Zone in 2009.²⁹ Located in the southeast part of the Chongqing municipality, Tushu County is about a one-and-a-half hour drive from the urban centre of Chongqing. Thanks to the Two River New Zone project, Tushu County has set up an industrial zone under the supervision of the New Zone administrative office. The urban development project in Tushu County forced nearly 90,000 villagers to give up their farmland and rural homesteads; these villagers were resettled into five residential communities located in the same general area. I conducted fieldwork at the Home of Harmony and Happiness (HHH hereafter) resettlement community. It hosts about 20,000 resettlers from seven administrative villages.

Renxin Village was one of the seven villages whose residents were resettled in HHH. As of 2019, 2,587 people lived in their resettled community HHH.³⁰ There were 740 resettlers over the age of 60, and 95 percent of these seniors had returned to the resettlement community and stopped working. This percentage exceeded the figures in neighbouring villages, in which fewer than 50 percent of seniors had retired.³¹ The younger generation had also

²⁶ Zhiyuan Cui, “Partial Intimations of the Coming Whole: the Chongqing Experiment in Light of the Theories of Henry George, James Meade, and Antonio Gramsci,” *Modern China* 37, no. 6 (2011): 646–660.

²⁷ This number was reported in a governmental report collected during my fieldwork in Chongqing in summer 2019.

²⁸ The statistical data mentioned in this paragraph can be found on the official website of the Two River New Zone. Please see <http://www.liangjiang.gov.cn/>, accessed December 15, 2020.

²⁹ The names of people and places mentioned in this paper (except for Chongqing and Two River New Zone) are all pseudonyms to preserve privacy.

³⁰ These data were provided by the Renxin Village Committee. As of 2019, Renxin Village’s population was 2,587, with 740 over 60 years of age. There were 804 people 45–59 years old, 741 people 18–44 years old, and 302 people 0–17 years old.

³¹ Many villagers in their 60s and 70s, whose village land had yet to go through land expropriation, still worked outside the village as temporary workers (*zagong*) or domestic workers.

become less mobile. More than 80 percent of the working-age population chose no longer to migrate.³² Considering that more than 90 percent of the population between the ages of 18 and 44 migrated to work in the late 1980s and 1990s, the current conditions indicate substantial changes in migration patterns and labour mobility.

Segregated Development through Industrial Upgrading

It might seem surprising that resettled young adults have chosen to migrate to Chongqing to find work, even as there are apparently more opportunities closer to home than ever before. After all, when news of the Two River New Zone Development Program circulated through Tushu County in 2009, much of the discourse in mainstream media was about economic opportunity, regional growth, and employment. The original plan promised that once the new industrial zone became a hub for manufacturing and a centre for technological innovation, more than 3,000 jobs would be created in Tushu County alone. Most of the new jobs have, though, gone to other migrants, not resettlers.

On one hand, the majority of the new jobs created are high-tech jobs and require relevant credentials. Yet fewer than 3 percent of the resettlers in HHH have college degrees.³³ This means that few have the requisite training to work in these new high-tech jobs. On the other hand, employment opportunities have been further constrained by the formalization of job recruitment. For most people born in the 1960s, rural-to-urban migration was realized through informal networks of families and village acquaintances. Personal references from relatives and friends were the most common means of landing a job. At present, the crucial components of labour recruitment are controlled by headquarters in remote locations. For locals seeking employment, the recruitment process relies primarily on documentation such as educational certificates and formal recommendations. The old channels of chain migration are no longer effective.

Moreover, low-end jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities are disappearing in the context of state-led industrial upgrading. Before being incorporated into the Two River New Zone, Tushu County and its neighbouring areas housed more than 70 small factories along the two rivers—mainly quarries, sand factories, and cement factories. Many small restaurants, mom-and-pop stores, and other services also proliferated to meet the consumption needs in the area. These small enterprises were mostly

³² Among the 804 persons aged between 45 and 59, 70% have returned to the resettlement community, including many who worked in other provinces as small-time entrepreneurs or wage labourers for more than a decade. Most of those who have not returned have “made it” and settled in larger urban centres. Those between the ages of 18 and 44 are even less mobile. The village committee cadre told me that among the 741 people in this age group, nearly 80% were living in the resettlement community, with many living with their parents.

³³ Author’s field notes, 9 April 2019.

invested in and managed by people with rural backgrounds. Even though many factories were heavy polluters and operated in a “grey area” without formal registration or permission, they absorbed many unskilled migrant workers through networks of family, friends, and fellow villagers. Since the new developmental program was put in place, the New Zone administrative office has forced some of these businesses to close because much of the physical space needed by these small-scale operations was expropriated. Since 2016, the city government of Chongqing has intensified its regulation of small factories in response to the central government’s pressure to ensure compliance with environmental protection measures. According to a local official, Tushu County alone has shuttered 500 private small-scale enterprises during campaigns focused on industrial upgrading and environmental protection.³⁴

Previous studies have shown that rural populations are facing a segregated or two-tiered labour market.³⁵ Such populations have very limited access to formal employment and are largely channelled into informal labour sectors. Since the beginning of market reforms, and for an extended period afterwards, such informal arrangements have expanded and contributed significantly to the economy.³⁶ The Chongqing case demonstrates, though, that while segregation persists, formal sectors have been encroaching on informal sectors in the context of industrial upgrading. Spaces that had previously been dominated by low-skilled migrant workers are being squeezed out. Fewer and fewer low-skilled jobs are available to local residents. The remaining job opportunities, such as those associated with guards and factory workers, are often outsourced from formal sectors. There are few such jobs and they are not attractive to resettlers.

Segregated development has generated a sense of loss among resettlers. “Now there are just no opportunities like before. In the 1990s, if you had a few thousand yuan in your pocket, you could make a lot of money if you did things wisely,” Lao Xi told me, recapping a series of stories from his own life that he shared with me.³⁷ He opened a small noodle shop in 1992 and made over RMB20,000 in one year, which made his the first “10,000-yuan household” in the county. When I met him in 2019, though, Lao Xi had just closed his small cement factory. He blamed himself for his bad judgement

³⁴ Author’s field notes, 15 April 2020.

³⁵ Please see Cindy C. Fan, “The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders: Migration and Labor Market Segmentation in Urban China,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 1 (2002): 103–124; and Meng Xin and Zhang Junsen, “The Two-tier Labour Market in Urban China: Occupational Segregation and Wage Differentials between Urban Residents and Rural Migrants in Shanghai,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 29, no. 3 (2001): 485–504.

³⁶ Philip C. C. Huang, “China’s Neglected Informal Economy: Reality and Theory,” *Modern China* 35, no. 4 (2009): 405–438.

³⁷ Author’s field notes, 15 July 2019.

because he “did not see that the state could ever be so cruel.”³⁸ Many resettled peasants have experienced similar feelings of loss. Compared with how the older generation felt, the sense of optimism once associated with migration and work is dissolving. Many young resettlers recognize that they might not be able to participate in the economy as their parents did decades ago. They no longer foresee a future that will be, necessarily, better than the present. They do not anticipate that other locations may offer more, or better, opportunities.

Nevertheless, resettled peasants seem to recognize and accept the reality that they have been largely excluded from the upgraded labour market and are losing opportunities to participate in the local economy with either their land or their labour. Most of the resettled peasants identify with the state’s emphasis on efficiency and progress and have no intention of opposing this trend. Qingqing, a 37-year-old resettler, said to me: “One cannot oppose the direction of history. The city has to develop. We are the people without much education. I just hope my son can get a college degree and live a better life.”³⁹

The State-Seniors-Youth Chain of Distribution

As demonstrated above, segregated development runs the risk of creating what Bauman calls “wasted lives,”⁴⁰ or what Tania Li has termed a “surplus population,”⁴¹ as resettlers are marginalized in development projects. While this transpires, the state also compensates and provides for its subjects. Once villagers sign land expropriation contracts with the state, they become subjects of state care—a condition most had never experienced as peasants or rural migrants.⁴² Because state care is often handed out to families and then distributed among individuals, in many cases state care and family care are experienced as inseparable benefits. In other words, in resettlement communities, families cannot care for their members without the state and vice versa. This makes the state an intimate component of their lives.

The most important compensation offered by the state is resettlement housing. Such compensation is household-based. This means that the compensation is calculated according to household size measured by the number of members and that each household has to determine who will be the legal property owner(s) when the state hands over resettlement housing to each household.⁴³ Distributive benefits are mediated by family relations. Individuals need to negotiate with the state as families, while simultaneously

³⁸ Author’s field notes, 15 July 2019.

³⁹ Author’s field notes, 15 April 2020.

⁴⁰ Bauman, *Wasted Lives*.

⁴¹ Li, “To Make Live.”

⁴² In China, control over labour mobility has been partially realized through the exclusionary urban welfare system. For more detailed discussion, please see: Alan Smart and Josephine Smart, “Local Citizenship: Welfare Reform Urban/Rural Status, and Exclusion in China,” *Environment and Planning A* 33, no. 10 (2001): 1853–1869.

⁴³ Each household member was guaranteed RMB80,000 in compensation.

negotiating within their families. In HHH, most couples co-own their properties. Even though there are cases where families designate infants as property owners,⁴⁴ the older generation tends to accrue more benefits than the young.

While the pension scheme, however, is not household-based, pension incomes are often distributed inside the household. Because China's nationwide policy requires individuals to pay for social insurance for at least 15 consecutive years to receive their urban pensions, the state retroactively pays resettlers' social insurance premiums once they reach retirement age. This means that the pension scheme would immediately benefit those who have passed retirement age. For working-age people, however, the social insurance payment is much lower: women between the ages of 40 and 54 (and men ages 45 to 59) would receive 10 years of retroactive insurance premiums. The rest receive only five years of retroactive premiums. This means that the government expects working-age people to find employment so that employers pay for their social insurance. In 2019, most seniors in resettlement housing received pensions of at least RMB1500 per month, payments that increase by 5 percent per year. Former "barefoot doctors"⁴⁵ and village teachers receive special subsidies (around RMB3000 per month) and therefore their retirement pensions can be even higher. Thus seniors have the most stable incomes in the resettlement community.

The compensation and the pension scheme privilege the elderly, so young adults depend increasingly on their parents, so much so that a village cadre complained to me that "the young people are living off their parents (*kenlao*)! Back in our day, we earned our money with our sweat and blood so that we could support our parents. What a shame that the young people have tossed this tradition away!"⁴⁶ His comments are consistent with my observations in the HHH, where those over age 60 find themselves continuing to be "the pillars of families." As a result, when tracing the route of distributive benefits, it is fair to say that the community lives on a state-seniors-youth distribution chain. I am not arguing that all of the resources passed down from seniors to their children are distributive benefits from the state; much of their wealth was accumulated during their years of migratory work. It is however indeed the distributive benefits such as housing and pensions that allow them to spend less, to save more, and then to pass down more to their children.

⁴⁴ I thought only adults could own real estate, but villagers kept telling me that they could have anyone as the property owner, and in some cases infants were legal owners.

⁴⁵ "Barefoot doctors" were farmers and healthcare providers who received minimal medical training and worked in rural villages in China. The barefoot doctor model was prevalent in China's socialist era and ended in the 1980s.

⁴⁶ Author's field notes, 12 June 2019.

Once, I was having a casual conversation with Dong, a returned migrant worker, in his living room. His cell phone rang. He looked at the phone, put it aside, and his body grew stiff. After a short silence, he told me it was his son who had called and said he had not spoken to him for a month. “He wanted RMB50,000 from me, saying that he needs it for a business investment opportunity. How could I trust him? He went to Chengdu with his friends to do some business without consulting me, and came back penniless. Now he just put his hand under my nose and asked for money?! No way!” Overhearing our conversation, Dong’s wife Xia came into the living room, patted Dong on the shoulder and said, “The generation gap is real, but families are families.” Roughly 10 days after my casual chat with Dong and Xia, I ran into Xia again on the street. She said Dong had decided to give their son the money he asked for, explaining that “we can live well on our pensions. After all, families are families.”⁴⁷

On both occasions when Xia said “families are families” she used the expression to confirm family values. Although morally questioned in public, *kenlao* is very common and expressions like Xia’s lend the practice a modicum of legitimacy. This echoes what Yan Yunxiang has described as “descending familism”⁴⁸ or what Andrew Kipnis has called “child-centred relatedness.”⁴⁹ Yan, Kipnis, and many others have all situated the changing patterns in household composition within larger socio-economic contexts such as the decline of social trust, urbanization, the formalization of education, and so forth. In HHH, however, descending familism in the form of *kenlao* seems to have taken on new meaning. It not only emerges in the context of state compensation as a cultural phenomenon, but it also functions as a social device through which state care is negotiated and actualized. After all, without the principle that families are families, wealth cannot be passed down generational lines. Thus, *kenlao* has become an indispensable component of the state-senior-youth distribution chain. Furthermore, in some cases, this distribution chain entangles the experience of the state with the experience of family.

The state-seniors-youth chain of distribution can seem highly ironic once it is considered in relation to the segregated development in the area. In segregated development, resettled young adults are marginalized and the

⁴⁷ Author’s field notes, 25 June 2019.

⁴⁸ Yan Yunxiang, “Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China,” *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 2 (2016): 244–257. In his later work, Yan uses the notion of neo-familism to theorize the phenomenon. Please see Yan Yunxiang, “Neo-familism and the State in Contemporary China,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 47, no. 3 (2018): 181–224. The descending familism is not unique to China; other East Asian countries also witnessed a similar chain of distribution in the process of industrialization. Please see Yun Ji-Whan, “The Myth of Confucian Capitalism in South Korea: Overworked Elderly and Underworked Youth,” *Pacific Affairs* 83, no. 2 (2010): 237–259.

⁴⁹ Andrew Kipnis, “Education and the Governing of Child-centered Relatedness,” in *Chinese Kinship: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 204–222.

post-resettlement distributive scheme becomes the major resource through which young people insert themselves into urban development and participate in urban consumption. In this context, state compensation can, ironically, increase the family burden instead of relieving it as intended. This further explains why, at the household level, *kenlao* is also experienced as ironic: seniors hope their children will live prosperous lives, enjoying marriage, children, and wealth. Yet, their children's pursuit of "the good life" often means they must share the burden. Before their children are married, seniors need only to provide basic support such as housing. Among households with unmarried children over the age of 18 that I interviewed, 17 out of 20 lived in resettlement housing owned by their parents. This was a means of reducing the cost of living for them. However, when young adults are married, many parents invest their life savings in down payments for urban housing units. All nine married young men between the ages of 23 and 37 that I interviewed told me that their parents had paid their down payments. The burden only grows once the younger generation has children, because grandparents often become the primary care providers for their grandchildren. The burden becomes even heavier for seniors if they have children who are ambitious. Then they likely face pressure to support their children's entrepreneurial endeavours. Like Dong and Xia's son, many young adults depend on their parents to jumpstart new businesses.

New Livelihoods: Assets, Speculation, and Risks

Resettled peasants are not only reluctant to start migration journeys, but some of those who had previously migrated have returned and "resettled" themselves. It would be wrong, however, to assume that withering labour mobility naturally equates to ending the state of suspension. Resettled young adults may choose to remain physically in their hometowns or end migratory life, but they continue to embrace a life strategy that sends them rushing into the future. Therefore, it is fair to argue that they have adopted suspension 2.0 as a new life strategy. To put it more precisely, even though many resettled young adults still take on odd jobs, their central concern has been generating stable income through assets and properties instead of work. Compared with urban middle-class households, resettled peasants are related to speculation more precariously as the informal credit system with which they often engage can suddenly lapse or fail. Yet, at the same time, resettlers become more firmly attached to financialized markets and asset-based income because assets and properties are their preferred way to participate actively in urban development projects, either as landlords, rentier capitalists, or speculative capitalists.

Wang had stopped working as a tour bus driver in Yunnan Province and returned home to Tushu County. He explained his decision by pointing to what had changed in the real estate market in Tushu County. In 2009, the

average price for residential real estate was just over RMB3000 per square metre. Ten years later, it had tripled, surpassing RMB10,000 per square metre. Owning housing through compensation during the real estate boom has provided a disincentive to work. As Wang told me: “There is no point of working because their annual income would only equal 2 or 3 square metres in the real estate market. Think about it! My whole yearly income cannot even allow me to buy a bathroom! This really makes me feel that it’s not worth it to take low-paying jobs.” Wang then shifted the conversation. He regretted not buying a second housing unit when he had the chance in 2009: “If I had had good judgement, I would have gotten one more housing unit,” he told me. “If I had done that, I would be able to rent out my extra apartment for money. But at that time, very few people would have had that kind of vision.”⁵⁰

Indeed, situated in upgraded industries and newly acquired state care, many resettled peasants, like Wang, have developed aspirations to transform their property into sources of income. The most common way to do so is to rent out housing obtained through compensation. Even though housing was handed over to resettled peasants as a distributive benefit by the state, such housing is easily liquated into income streams in the form of rent. The rental housing market has been strong thanks to the introduction of upgraded industries in the area, especially after 2013 when a cloud-computing company set up its base near HHH. The company hired several hundred migrants, many of whom were in need of rental housing. In HHH, about 20 percent of the resettled families own one or two extra HHH housing units. In other cases, many young resettlers choose to live with their parents so they can rent out their compensation-based housing unit for rental income. The average rental income per unit is RMB2000. By 2019, HHH had become one of the major residential compounds providing rental housing to cloud-computing company employees.

Rental income is, to be sure, modest, so to generate higher returns many resettled young adults participate in development projects through informal credit and finance schemes. In the early 2000s, an informal credit system began forming in Tushu County. The bar for participating in this financial system is very low. One can lend out RMB2000 for interest returns of 2 percent a month. It is not surprising that many resettlers have become creditors, hoping to reap quick profits. After the introduction of the New Zone program in 2009, new real estate projects started to proliferate in the area and drove up demand for capital significantly. Since then, the informal lending network has started to expand and institutionalize. In the 1990s, informal lending was achieved mainly through interpersonal connections, while in the late 2000s many investment companies proliferated and worked as intermediaries between debtors and creditors.

⁵⁰ Author’s field notes, 5 August 2019.

Most speculative capital goes to real estate—or to be more precise, the so-called small bosses in real estate. Some small bosses procure land from local governments, use the land as collateral to secure large sums of money, and then use that money to develop and sell real estate properties. Some small bosses are contractors who need large sums of capital to fund construction because developers will settle accounts only when projects are finished. The “small” descriptor has nothing to do with the size or capacity of these businesses. It means only that such real estate developers are self-made entrepreneurs who operate outside the purview of the government superstructure (*tizhiwai*); they often come from rural backgrounds themselves.

Banks are reluctant to lend money to these small bosses. Even banks that do so lend out only about 50 percent of the value of the collateral involved in a loan.⁵¹ Therefore, many small bosses depend increasingly on private creditors who are recruited through informal credit systems. The returns here can be very high. Many private creditors charge interest rates of between 2 and 3 percent per month. In some cases, the interest rate can go as high as 5 percent. Many resettled young adults have participated in informal lending schemes as creditors. Xiao Huang was 32 years old when she first lent money through an investment company in 2014. Within a year, she earned RMB 50,000 in interest for her RMB200,000 principle. Afterwards, she worked full time in informal lending in a chain investment company which helped many resettled peasants lend money to various small bosses and debtors.

Financial speculation involves risks, and in informal lending the risks often have more to do with state policies than the market itself. The most recent blow to the informal credit system occurred in 2015 when the Chongqing city government implemented new regulations to formalize real estate development. These regulations hit the informal lending network hard. In the past, as long as a structure was erected above ground, developers could pre-sell the properties to recoup their capital. According to the new regulation, though, no sale is allowed until an under-construction building is at least halfway to completion. Additionally, the new regulation requires all developers to pay off their loans and fees before they engage in presale transactions. This further cuts into the capital circuit for many small bosses, who no longer have sufficient collateral to obtain additional loans to sustain the circuit. Some developers have been unable to settle their payments to small bosses because they had to use their money to clear bank loans and state levies. Generally speaking, these new policies have rendered most small bosses insolvent. As a result of this chain reaction, many resettled peasants lost their investments overnight. Xiao Huang lost RMB300,000 as a creditor. At first, she thought about pressuring the small boss to pay back her money,

⁵¹ The percentage was much higher before. Some small bosses told me that a bank was willing to lend out 70 percent of the value of collateral in the 2000s.

but she gave up that hope when the Chongqing city government implemented strict regulations over coercive debt collection in 2018. “What can you do? You cannot even send over people to knock on the debtors’ door anymore.”⁵²

In response to the dissolution of the informal credit system, many resettled peasants quickly turned to safer investment options and turned their cash into assets. To take Xiao Huang as an example again, once the informal credit system no longer generated reliable returns or cash flow, she shifted overnight from creditor to debtor status. In 2017 and 2018, respectively, she took out loans from the bank and purchased two more housing units in commercial housing markets outside HHH. By 2019, she owned five housing units in total and paid a mortgage of RMB8000 each month. “Once I rent them out, the houses pay for themselves. They are after all the most reliable investment.” Xiao Huang provided investment tips to me like an experienced financier.⁵³

After the dissolution of the informal credit market, many resettlers have retreated from informal lending and are no longer participating in urban development with speculative capital. By the time I visited the resettlement community in 2019, only those who had crucial social connections could still manage to liquidate their assets and insert themselves into development projects for high, more or less guaranteed returns. Guo Ming was still a young man at age 24. He had no college degree and had been working in casual jobs since the age of 19. In 2017, his uncle, who had worked in construction for over 20 years, referred Guo Ming to a manager at a construction site. The manager told Guo Ming that if he owned trucks, or even cranes, he could rent them to construction companies for a profit. Soon Guo Ming asked his parents to mortgage their compensation-provided housing to make the RMB200,000 down payment on a cement truck at a sale price of RMB 580,000. Afterwards, Guo Ming earned a monthly income of roughly RMB70,000.

Suspension 2.0: Waiting in Moral Anxiety

For resettled peasants, resettlement creates as much or even greater moral ambivalence than the hypermobile life in suspension that characterized migratory life.⁵⁴ Here, moral anxiety is linked directly to newly acquired distributive benefits. On one hand, resettled peasants have a sense of entitlement to distributive goods and rely on these benefits to move out of suspension. On the other hand, entitlement also renders them morally

⁵² Author’s field notes, 25 April 2020.

⁵³ Author’s field notes, 25 April 2020.

⁵⁴ The discussion of moral anxiety among people in suspension can be seen in Biao Xiang, this issue. A more concrete ethnographic case can be found in Biao Xiang, “The Would-be Migrant: Post-socialist Primitive Accumulation, Potential Transnational Mobility, and the Displacement of the Present in Northeast China,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2, no. 2 (2014).

suspicious and inferior in the eyes of their neighbours and society more broadly. Perceived as akin to a free lunch, the benefits are immaterial to the resettlers' own efforts or capacities and thus are not culturally associated with self-worth or respect earned from others. The resettlers are regarded as parasitical, lazy, and living on luck rather than will and hard labour. The result can feel morally questionable: the more benefits one has, the more contempt one may experience.

Moral anxiety also results from new relationships with work. If rural migrants are incorporated into the labour regime to sustain China's continued economic development, then resettlers are displaced so that the economy can advance more rapidly without them. Resettlers become a less important segment of the labour force as their labour and time become marginalized, or even irrelevant, to the economic development machine. Work is however a central source of moral legitimacy to the Chinese. As Mun Young Cho forcefully demonstrates in her ethnographic work in Northeast China, the ability to work carries so much value that, where the social welfare system (*dibao* system) leads to disparagement of those who lose the ability to work and therefore excludes those most in need of welfare.⁵⁵ It is not hard to imagine that young people who are not committed to a stable job and are excluded from the labour market are also targets of contempt.

Dong, Renxin Village's most successful businessman, told me that he sold his resettlement housing to maintain distance from his fellow villagers. In his eyes, the resettlers on government pensions were too "backward and lazy" to be around. "It doesn't feel good to be back because I can sense the negative energy around here. People in the resettlement community are not forward-thinking. Many of them are sitting around and doing nothing. You can tell that I am not like them because I don't play cards or mah-jongg. Those games are for people who have nothing better to do," Dong commented while accompanying me at the resettlement community.⁵⁶ Later, I heard that some people refuse to marry because "you can't get married if you have compensation housing," as this type of housing indicates "a lack of ability to succeed in the market."⁵⁷

In the face such moral ambiguities, resettled young people enter new livelihoods based on income generated by assets and financial speculation. Even though the form of livelihood is new, the old mechanism of suspension remains at work, as the present for these people remains displaced and hard to reclaim. There are two reasons for this. First, contempt from the outside and moral anxiety from within push young adults to look beyond the here

⁵⁵ Mun Young Cho, "On the Edge between 'The People' and 'The Population': Ethnographic Research on the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee," *The China Quarterly* (2010): 20–37.

⁵⁶ Author's field notes, 17 June 2019.

⁵⁷ Du et al. touch on this issue in their article. Du Huimin, Jing Song, and Si-ming Li, "Peasants are Peasants': Prejudice against Displaced Villagers in Newly-built Urban Neighbourhoods in China," *Urban Studies* (2020): 0042098020911876.

and now. To a large extent, financial speculation goes beyond the economic domain and acquires moral dimensions because it can potentially help young resettlers transcend existing moral dilemmas and acquire moral legitimacy; through financial speculation, jobless resettlers can prove their diligence. People living off their parents for years can prove their self-worth. It is also through speculation that people can transcend segregation and achieve new futures for themselves and their children. Second and probably more importantly, financial speculation is future-oriented in nature. As pointed out by Arjun Appadurai, managing the future has become a crucial part of contemporary society.⁵⁸ Professionals manage the future with statistical data, turning uncertainties into likelihoods. Compared with investors and financiers, resettled young people have little professional knowledge about how to manage their financial futures, yet their attachment to an imagined future elsewhere is equally strong. Compared with life in the resettlement community, life elsewhere is much more appealing.

Despite the shared tendency to displace the present and gravitate towards imagined futures, life after resettlement has distinctive features and therefore should be called suspension 2.0. The most salient difference is how time is perceived and organized. In the 1980s, one of the most famous slogans in China was: “Time is money.” It was around this historical moment that time became a resource to be managed with intention and purpose. Time was to be used to help the country catch up with peer states and to help ordinary people self-actualize. It was under this zeitgeist that rural populations in China embraced the mechanism of suspension and migration for employment. They threw themselves into the development machine in hopes of coming out changed or repositioned. “We were like the ants on a hot plate!” said one of my informants when he described his erstwhile days of migration.⁵⁹ He was referring to situations in which people changed jobs and physical locations frequently to sustain a sense of hope and purpose—the condition of suspension.

Now, in suspension 2.0, resettled young adults do not experience time as scarce or fleeting because time is no longer an active resource through which they engage work and build new realities. Instead, time has become closely linked to risks, opportunities, and losses, and oriented toward speculation. It is timing, rather than time itself, that becomes key in financial speculation. As a result, only a few points on an individual’s personal timeline hold great meaning. The rest of their time is used to identify or wait for new opportunities, which may or may not materialize.

Between purposeful moments lies the state of waiting. We all wait. But chronic and systematic waiting is distributed unequally among us. Waiting

⁵⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition,” *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* 14, no. 4 (2013): 649–650.

⁵⁹ Author’s field notes, 25 June 2019.

has been identified as the most prominent feature of subaltern people after the 1960s.⁶⁰ There are many living thus suspended in waiting, such as the unemployed, refugees, squatters, and others in various parts of the world. Previous studies have offered nuanced accounts of these modes of waiting. In his work on Indian youth who “timepass,” Craig Jeffrey identifies two types of waiting: unemployment-induced waiting and strategic waiting.⁶¹ In the Indian case, youth engage in social protests and prolong their education as forms of waiting. In June Hee Kwon’s study of transnational Chinese immigrants in South Korea, waiting is a form of labour that enables mobility and provides the foundation for migration circulations.⁶²

Waiting as experienced by resettled young adults in Chongqing differs from the abovementioned cases because the modality of waiting is informed by the rhythm of financial speculation instead of work. Between investment opportunities, waiting can be quite leisurely. Young people spend most of their time, day and night, hanging out together. They play for hours: tennis, cards, and video games. They have teas and lunches and dinners. They see these activities as ways of coping with the void. In HHH alone, there were more than 30 teahouses run by resettled peasants themselves, which translates into about 90 residents per teahouse. On summer nights, the teahouses are packed with people who will not leave until after midnight. Waiting gives people an abundance of time. But abundance triggers the problem of void (*kongxu*)—a word used by my informants in Tushu County.

Second, waiting is highly speculative for resettled youth. It is a manifestation of the financialization of life, a tendency that people plan life according to financial logic. Even though many interviewees told me that “the best time for doing finance has passed,” they continue searching for the next “wind gate” (*fengkou*), a term roughly translated to mean an investment opportunity. Their radar for the next *fengkou* is always on and they are waiting for the next windfall. In the process of searching for new investment opportunities, people bond with one another and exchange information about business and investment opportunities. “You’ve got to keep in touch with people. Opportunities will knock on your door if you are prepared,” Xiao Huang

⁶⁰ Please see Rebecca Sutton, Darshan Vigneswaran, and Harry Wels. “Waiting in Liminal Space: Migrants’ Queuing for Home Affairs in South Africa,” *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34, nos. 1–2 (2011): 30–37; Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010); Jean-François Bayart, *Global Subjects: A Political Critique of Globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007); David Bissell, “Animating Suspension: Waiting for Mobilities,” *Mobilities* 2, no. 2 (2007): 277–298; Ghassan Hage, *Waiting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2009); and Manpreet K. Janeja, and Andreas Bandak, eds. *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁶¹ Jeffrey, *Timepass*.

⁶² June Hee Kwon, “The Work of Waiting: Love and Money in Korean Chinese Transnational Migration,” *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (2015): 477–500.

said to me as she explained why she played cards with friends twice a week.⁶³ In their everyday practices, though, they still search for investment opportunities and distance themselves from employment and work.

Third, unlike the Indian youth who prolong their education to wait for employment, young resettlers in China take on casual work while waiting for the next windfall. Hopping from job to job becomes common because few people count on jobs to transform or transcend their present circumstances. Among resettlers between the ages of 18 and 35, fewer than 30 percent (according to the local cadre) had maintained stable jobs for at least two years.⁶⁴ Many had tried low-paying jobs such as security guards, construction workers, or factory workers. Yet they often quit after two or three months because of overwhelming feelings of worthlessness. Some jump from job to job in the hopes of encountering bearable if not meaningful work. However, reality often thwarts their wishes, and they change jobs again. Even for those who remain in stable jobs, their goal is no longer to amass savings quickly, but rather simply to make ends meet.

Waiting displaces the present. Therefore, while people no longer migrate for work, they have not escaped suspension and they have yet to claim the present. In fact, through resettlement programs induced by urban development, many people have entered suspension 2.0: They are morally anxious, socially secure, and financially aggressive.

Conclusion

Building upon Biao Xiang's notion of suspension, this article explores how urban development and rural-to-urban resettlement programs in Chongqing have generated new patterns of livelihood, lived experiences and subjectivities among the resettled peasants. My central observation is that resettled young adults, rather than having put their suspended lives behind them, have simply transitioned to suspension 2.0. Suspension 2.0 carries at least three layers of meaning.

First, as explained by Xiang, suspension is closely linked to what he calls "complexed development," in which "the dynamics point to different directions and yet are entangled."⁶⁵ Chongqing's Two River New Zone is clearly an example of complexed development: While resettlement programs cause land dispossession, they also incorporate peasants into the urban welfare regime and compensate them with urban housing. Urban development programs marginalize resettled young adults in the upgraded labour market, but such programs also allow them to speculate in financialized housing markets and urban development. Financial speculation both

⁶³ Author's field notes, 20 April 2020.

⁶⁴ Author's field notes, 14 June 2019.

⁶⁵ Xiang, this issue.

enriches and deprives residents, at different points of time; therefore, the experience of development is mixed and contradictory. Social marginalization and economic participation can take place simultaneously. Relative upward mobility that accompanies their newly acquired access to urban welfare coexists with heightened vulnerabilities in the labour market. In general, people find it very difficult to articulate their relationship to the new development model.

This article unpacks complexed development a step further by demonstrating how complexed development manifests itself in the private lives of resettled peasants. My ethnography shows that the family has become a central site where the differentiating force of the market and the incorporating force of state welfare intersect. This in turn creates bittersweet ambiguities in family relations. Complexed development, as described in this essay, secures migrants' livelihoods but fails to bring about a sense of "settled-ness."

Second, suspension 2.0 also refers to a conscious life strategy. If Xiang's interpretation of suspension is concerned with how people strive to "move fast in order to stay still" through migration,⁶⁶ then suspension 2.0 refers to a life strategy of resettled young adults that speculates on assets and compensation as a main source of income without engaging with productive employment. For decades, the life of villagers in China was defined by their temporary and circular labour mobility. Now, in suspension 2.0, the combined effects of state interventions, family relations, and market forces have rendered migration no longer a necessity. Resettled peasants earn money with newly acquired assets as petty speculators and rentier capitalists. The logic of suspension is still at work: The resettled young adults continue to disengage with the present in pursuit of an elusive future. They also continue to be economically daring and socially conservative, having little interest in questioning or transforming the status quo when they are busy getting ahead.

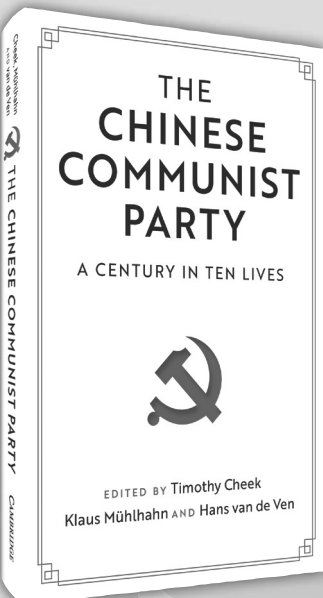
Third, suspension 2.0 also manifests itself as a mental state in which resettlers wait anxiously for the arrival of a better future without any clear sense of what might come or why the present could lead to an imagined future. Such an effect is also a key component of suspension 2.0. As pointed out by E. P. Thompson, "class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled on cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms."⁶⁷ In other words, the recognition of shared experience preconditions the formation of class identities. Yet, suspended in waiting, resettled young adults are reluctant to embrace their shared experience as a subject for critical reflections or as a basis of identities. They instead hope for something

⁶⁶ Xiang, this issue.

⁶⁷ E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Open Road Media, 2016),

different. Their disengagement with the here and now in part results from the fact that their experiences are contradictory. More importantly, the resettled young adults' attitude that turns their life project into a waiting process for the future means that they neither embrace nor reject their social positions. This may explain why we hardly witness social processes that can be called class formation despite the dramatic social stratification in China.

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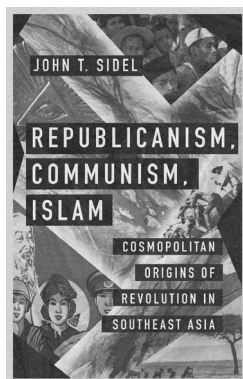
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Documenting China's Garment Industry: Wang Bing's Portrayal of Migrant Workers' Suspended Lives within the Contract Labour System

Sjoukje van der Meulen

ABSTRACT

This essay examines two films by the Chinese documentary filmmaker Wang Bing about temporary migrant workers in small, privately owned garment workshops in Zhejiang Province, China: *Bitter Money* (*Ku Qian*; 2016) and *15 Hours* (*Shi Wu Xiao Shi*; 2017). Wang's films portray Chinese garment workers' lived experiences of "suspension," as defined by Biao Xiang in this issue, in unique cinematic ways. Social sciences have paid close attention to the experiences of migrant workers, but art documentaries use audiovisual and aesthetic means to explore their everyday reality, producing what D. MacDougall calls distinctive "affective knowledge." Wang's films are usually categorized as part of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, known for capturing social issues through observational methods. In this essay, I identify Wang's works with the aesthetics of "slow cinema" and a global documentary trend in the visual arts as theorized by T. J. Demos in *The Migrant Image*. Based on close observation coupled with empathetic insight, Wang develops his own subjective method to portray people in a transformed and still changing China, where suspension is a common state of being. Ultimately, Wang's films not only make the personal experiences of migrant workers visible and tangible, but also problematize their underlying, collective condition of suspension due to the contract labour system and associated hypermobility. The suspension approach suggests a productive way of bringing documentary art and social sciences into dialogue.

Keywords: Wang Bing, garment industry, floating population, slow cinema, migrant image, migration, hypermobility, suspension

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This essay focuses on short-term contract migrant workers in the Chinese garment industry, as portrayed by the Chinese filmmaker Wang Bing in his documentaries *Bitter Money* (2016) and *15 Hours* (2017). In both films, Wang focuses on privately owned, small businesses, as they represent “an overlooked segment of the workforce in the industry.”¹ I suggest that the two films capture the experience of “suspension” of transient workers in this sector as a result of hypermobility between the countryside and cities, as well as between factories, in unique cinematographic ways and with remarkable human sensibility. His protagonists are seen as suspended between their perennially temporary jobs and their rural homes, between poverty and dreams for a prosperous life. They are friends and co-workers, yet all alone in key moments. They are freed from the countryside, yet are confronted with the harsh reality of the city. I argue that the filmmaker effectively portrays the suspended condition of these migrants by using a method of close observation related to the suspension approach articulated by Biao Xiang: “Based on this notion [suspension] we aim to develop an approach that will open migration up as a lens for developing general social critiques, and, more importantly, facilitating migrants’ problematization of their experiences and the larger contexts.”² Wang broadens and deepens our understanding of migrant workers’ experiences of hypermobility and suspension through audiovisual means of documentary film, in a way complementary to the anthropological and political-economic analyses developed in other articles in this special issue.

The major reason for choosing these two films about the garment industry (aside from the simple fact that they have received hardly any academic attention) as a case study for this special issue is that they rather unambiguously portray migrants’ experiences of suspension in their daily lives. Moreover, Wang’s films are widely discussed in the international press as representing a very different view of contemporary Chinese society than that of the mainstream media, with a focus on real people in difficult socio-economic conditions or living under some of the horrors of the Maoist communist legacy. Wang caught the attention of the international film community with *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, a nine-hour documentary (2002). Since this debut film, he has produced more than 15 films, such as *Crude Oil* (2008), *The Ditch* (2010), *‘Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013), *Three Sisters* (2012), and *Dead Souls* (2018). His documentaries are screened at international film festivals and art exhibitions (Venice International Film Festival, Toronto Film Festival, Documenta Kassel, etc.), but are censored in China for addressing politically sensitive topics, such as the dismantling of a once glorious Maoist-era factory (*West of the Tracks*), re-education camps (*The Ditch*, *Dead Souls*), a

¹ Ivan Franceschini, “The Swan Song of Chinese Labor NGOs: Wang Bing’s ‘Bitter Money’ (2016) and Wen Hai’s ‘We the Workers’ (2017),” *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 157.

² Biao Xiang, this issue.

madhouse (*Til Madness Do Us Part*), and rural poverty (*Three Sisters*). This does not mean that the films cannot be viewed in China, as they can be bought as pirated DVDs,³ but it does mean that he chooses not to work through official channels.⁴

In academic literature, Wang's films are usually placed in the so-called New Chinese Documentary Film Movement, known as the "Sixth Generation,"⁵ which emerged in the 1990s and is characterized by low-budget films, on-the-spot realism (*jishi zhuyi*), and the use of handheld cameras, with the aim of visualizing social problems in Chinese society and representing people in the lower strata of society who cannot represent themselves. Although Wang's films relate to the Sixth Generation's legacy in both method and intent, Wang himself refuses to place his films in the straitjacket of the Chinese film tradition, preferring to refer to renowned filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Andrei Tarkovsky,⁶ both crucially important for the development of art cinema. Taking Wang's films out of their strict Chinese context, I will relate his films to the aesthetics of slow cinema and a global documentary trend in the visual arts, which T. J. Demos relates to "crisis globalization" in *The Migrant Image* (2013).⁷ Many of Wang's films depict the state of suspension in which most Chinese migrant workers in low-skilled sectors find themselves, but I have selected these two films about the garment industry because they well represent the era of growing global economic inequality, as described by Demos. Wang, meanwhile, is working on his third film on the subject, *Shanghai Youth*, which is expected to be released towards the end of 2021.⁸

Before proceeding with a critical analysis of the two completed films in this series, *Bitter Money* (2016) and *15 Hours* (2017), it is important to contextualize Wang's documentary films in the Chinese garment industry.

³ Caroline Renard, et. al., "Interview with Lihong Kong," in Wang Bing, eds. Caroline Renard et al. (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2015), 81. The films can be found in stores, even if not on the shelves.

⁴ In Wang's words: "In order to be released in China, my movies would have to pass censorship from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. I have never applied for this censorship exam and I never will. Ever since the beginning of my career, my one and only wish has been to be able to express whatever I want. So I will never let other people 'examine' my movie. I don't need the approval of anyone." Michael Guarneri and Jin Wang, "Interview: Wang Bing," 22 February 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yruoywh>.

⁵ A key publication on the Sixth Generation is Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, eds., *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: for the Public Record* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010). For a focused discussion of the differences between the Fifth and Sixth Generation, see Lin Xiaoping, "New Chinese Cinema of the 'Sixth Generation,' A distant Cry of Forsaken Children," *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002): 261–284.

⁶ Wang Bing, interview by author, via WeChat, 15 January 2021. With sincere thanks to Biao Xiang, who translated and moderated this conversation.

⁷ T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image, The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xiii–xv.

⁸ Information from Jean-Fabrice Janaudy, deputy director of Les Acacias, distributor of *Jeunesse de Shanghai*. Email exchange with the author, 21 March 2020.

Although the spectacular growth of this sector in China (and beyond)⁹ has slowed down over the past decade, the Chinese textile and apparel industry is still the largest producer, consumer, and exporter of clothing worldwide: it has both the largest domestic market and is the global leader, thus contributing in no small measure to China's reputation as the world's factory, even as this status is shifting from a predominantly exporting country to a domestic consumer and service economy. Short-term contracts are the main form of employment in the Chinese garment sector, although a distinction must be made between the duly registered factories, including those acting as suppliers of international brands, and the private companies with flexible business models; whereas employment is relatively stable in the former (with contracts for two or three years), job insecurity is much greater in the latter. Wang focuses on the latter, i.e., small businesses that operate on a "just-in-time" model in which workers are hired during busy periods and their contracts are terminated during the off-season. In the opening scene of *Bitter Money*, it becomes clear that the teenage girl about to move to the city is going to work in one of the smaller workshops, and in *15 Hours* the size of the workspace alone is proof of that.

Most of the migrant workers in the Chinese garment industry, such as the ones in Wang's films, come from poor rural families and are part of the co-called "floating population," a term officially used by the Chinese National Office of Statistics to categorize rural to urban migrants who frequently move from place to place.¹⁰ They are young, born after the eighties and often after the millennium; most are between the ages of 15 and 24, although a significant portion are 25 to 40 years old—*Bitter Money* and *15 Hours* show a mix of these generations. Zhao, Liu, and Zhang explain that the younger generation of migrant workers (born after 1980) differs from the first wave of migrants (born before 1980) in several important ways, including the younger age at which they start working and their increased mobility: "The new generation of migrants are generally more mobile and more involved in interprovincial migration."¹¹ However, Franceschini, Siu, and Chan conclude that the younger generation differs only in some aspects, but not in others, so the generation gap can be overestimated.¹² Beyond this generational debate, it is clear that the workers in Wang's films are

⁹ Neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh are serious competitors for the Chinese garment industry.

¹⁰ "Floating population" is an official term used by the National Bureau of Statistics of China. The floating population has been decreasing since 2015. See <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>.

¹¹ Liqiu Zhao, Shouying Liu, and Wei Zhang, "New Trends in Internal Migration in China: Profiles of the New-generation Migrants," *China & World Economy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 21.

¹² Ivan Franceschini, Kaxton Siu, and Anita Chan, "'The Rights Awakening' of Chinese Migrant Workers: Beyond the Generational Perspective," *Critical Asian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2016): 422–442. The authors are particularly interested in the generation issue from the perspective of labour activism: Is it true that the younger generation is more aware of their legal rights and more willing to defend those rights?

representative of a much larger group whose lives are, in the words of Xiang, *xuanfu*: suspended, “hanging and floating.”¹³ Wang states that there are 18,000 private manufacturers in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province (where both films were shot), with more than 300,000 migrant workers working under flexible employment contracts.¹⁴

Working conditions in the garment industry are characterized by long hours, often late payments, and a limited social safety net. When the workers break down for various economic, psychological, and social reasons—“the bitter side” of trying to make money in the city—they move to another factory in search of better pay and working conditions or a new social environment. Although for millions of migrant workers the situation has improved in recent years as the result of the increasing demand for higher wages, the decreasing pool of available workers, the relaxation of governmental policies regarding the *hukou* system, and increased social benefits, for the majority of migrant workers—as this article aims to underscore with the documentaries of Wang—the current state of affairs is still not optimal. In their “suspended” condition, the migrants live in a daydream of getting rich, but in reality they remain trapped in their factory life. Siu offers an up-to-date and detailed account of the continuity and changes in the daily life of Chinese factory workers from the mid-1990s to 2015, providing a good background for both of Wang’s films.¹⁵

“Complexed developments,” presented in this issue as an analytical tool for understanding the contradictory forces that condition the phenomenon of “suspension” in twenty-first-century China, are also an integral part of the Chinese garment industry. The complexities and contradictions are found at various levels of government and between the interacting local, national, and global spheres of the sector. Due to the short-term contract labour system, migrant workers are deliberately kept in a “suspended” state, reinforced by the difficulty of fighting for their rights, let alone forming a union. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) not only has a monopoly, but also an institutionalized conflict of interest between promoting party policy and defending the interests of workers—although, of course, the official ideology is that the two coincide. In this contradictory dynamic, Chinese labour activists can defend legal rights (which they have been doing since the mid-1990s) but are cracked down on when the workers’ movement tries to enter the realm of collective bargaining aimed at negotiating and changing

¹³ Biao Xiang, this issue.

¹⁴ In both *Bitter Money* and *15 Hours*, Wang indicates that there are 18,000 private garment factories/workshops in Huzhou, but he gives different numbers for the actual migrants working in the sector in this region (more than 300,000 versus more than 200,000). This difference is due to the fact that in the first case the non-interprovincial local migrants are included. There are also many unregistered workers. Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

¹⁵ Kaxton Siu, “Continuity and Change in the Everyday Lives of Chinese Migrant Factory Workers,” *The China Journal* 74 (2015): 43–65.

such rights. According to a recent article in *Pacific Affairs*, the reason such more activist labour NGOs have been targeted by the Chinese government (since early 2010) is that “[i]n China, working-class politics is an ideological contradiction.”¹⁶ Since the CCP is founded on defending the workers’ cause, the party still needs a monopoly on workers’ discourse for its continued credibility. Or, as the authors put it: “The CCP’s claim to represent the working class prohibits the latter from exerting a political voice outside of the strictures of Party discourse.”¹⁷ Although China is a member of the International Labor Organization (ILO), it also does not accept the provisions on freedom of association. All of this is why Slavoj Žižek describes contemporary China as the ideal capitalist state: “Freedom for the capital, where the state does the dirty work of controlling the workers.”¹⁸

Wang’s films focus on the migrants’ own perspectives and experiences and show how they “feel, calculate, and struggle” (Xiang)¹⁹ inside the contract labour system; yet importantly, Wang’s films represent their lived experiences through documentary film instead of academic text. Documentary film is often used to document social reality as it can capture the bodily presence and behaviour of people in their physical surroundings, drawing viewers into their world with all their senses and emotions. David MacDougall makes a distinction between “descriptive knowledge” and “affective knowledge” to explain the different knowledge production of scientific text and visual documentary.²⁰ So even if the migrant’s perspective has been addressed in text-based social research, it has a different impact and outcomes when represented in film: Wang’s documentaries contribute to an affective knowledge of the social, psychological, and emotional aspects of migrant life, thus providing a fuller picture of what suspension looks and feels like, how it is lived and experienced. The realities of the suspended lives of migrant workers conveyed in his films can be appreciated by a broad audience. This is evidenced by the media attention and the many awards and prizes Wang’s films have received: they have an eye-opening effect.²¹ Like social science researchers, Wang has a clearly defined research area, the garment industry in Huzhou, and spends extended periods of time on site, closely following the daily life of a social group: the migrant workers. *Bitter Money*, for example, was edited from more than 2600 hours of filmed material shot between 2014

¹⁶ Ivan Franceschini and Christian Sorace, “In the Name of the Working Class: Narratives of Labour Activism in Contemporary China,” *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 4 (December 2019): 644.

¹⁷ Franceschini and Sorace, “In the Name of the Working Class,” 644.

¹⁸ Manuel Ramos-Martínez, “The Oxidation of the Documentary,” *Third Text* 29 (2015): 2.

¹⁹ Biao Xiang, this issue.

²⁰ Oliver Fahle, *Theorien des Dokumentarfilms zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag GmbH), 177.

²¹ Among them, for example, the Orrizonti Prize at the 69th Venice International Film Festival (2012), Eye Award and Film Prize (2017), and the Golden Leopard Award at the 70th Locarno Film Festival.

and 2016, “a period during which Wang lived and shared the lives of the people in the textile factory district of Huzhou [...]. Such a way of observing by means of sharing time and spaces with social actors is an essential component of Wang’s filmmaking process.”²² The main cinematic approach Wang uses in filming is the careful observation of the people he connects with and whose lives he chooses to portray. In the literature, this approach is often associated with the “observational method,” or “observationalism,” which strives for a certain objectivity in the representation of social facts. The question to be addressed in this article is whether this term is fully applicable to Wang’s films, especially given that the filmmaker does not associate his own approach with observing facts, or documenting objective reality. Still, his method of close observation has an affinity with empirical research in the social sciences (participatory observation). It also deeply resonates with the suspension approach, which problematizes social reality from within—that is, from the subject’s preconceptual experiences instead of from previous concepts and predetermined criteria.

Bitter Money (*Ku Qian*)

Bitter Money follows three young people leaving their Yunnan hometown to go to work for the first time in one of the busiest cities of China’s east coast, a place with the highest number of part-time workers. [...] Money has never been important in Chinese society, as now everyone wishes to become wealthy. However, the reality is that everyone lives in a daydream.- Wang Bing²³

The three young migrant workers Wang refers to in his director’s statement appear in the first chapter of *Bitter Money* (2016), where he follows two girls and a boy on their way to a private garment workshop in Huzhou (figure 1). The scene depicts the long journey by bus, followed by an overcrowded train and taxi from rural Yunnan Province to Huzhou in Zhejiang, a major manufacturing hub in southeastern China. The opening scene of the film is set in the youngest girl’s childhood home, where a peasant family gathers on and around a living room couch; they feast on fresh fruit (pears, a bag of cherries), and the TV is on in the background (figure 2). In the middle of the sofa sits a cheerful-looking girl in a track jacket, who will soon be leaving home to begin her journey to her new factory job in Huzhou. The conversation centres on her identity card, which incorrectly states that she

²² Elena Pollacchi, “Extracting Narratives from Reality: Wang Bing’s Counter-Narrative of the China Dream,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 11, no. 3 (2017): 220. There are different figures on the number of hours filmed, but in my conversation with Wang he firmly indicated 2600 hours. Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

²³ Wang Bing, “Directors statement,” *DVD Bitter Money* (New York: Icarus Films, 2016).

Figure 1



Source: Wang Bing, *Bitter Money* (2016). Courtesy Icarus Films

Figure 2.



Source: Wang Bing, *Bitter Money* (2016). Courtesy Icarus Films (This picture shows Xiao Min).

is two years younger than she actually is, 15 instead of 17. Her brother thinks everything will be fine because she was not hired in a big factory.

The opening scene consists of one long take, which lasts about five minutes. The first three minutes consists of a static shot, after which the camera angle is changed twice to capture the faces and expressions of other

family members (such as the mother or brother) sitting around the couch. The long take draws the viewer completely into the living room of this family, so that we focus on these people and their conversation—there is not much else to see. But the long duration of the shot also gives us time to experience family life in the countryside, including the sense of what it means to be at home and have a home in the first place. The atmosphere is good, family members tease each other, they laugh, and yet the girl named Xiao Min may already be in the daydreaming state that Wang is talking about in the above quote. She is not yet aware of the balancing act that will mark the suspended life that lies before her: on one hand trying to build a new life in the city, on the other meeting her family's expectations of earning money and then returning to the village (to get married).

Min is just one of the rural-to-urban migrant workers that Wang encounters and decides to follow with his handheld digital camera. There is no storyline or script, just a following and documenting of the journey of these three young people (Min and her two travelling companions, one of them a cousin), wherever they go and whomever they meet. Min radiates the sense of optimism young migrants have when they leave the countryside for the city, with the prospect of making money. But as the film's title "Bitter Money" betrays, reality quickly catches up. The title was chosen carefully by Wang after discovering that the phrase "bitter money" is a jargon that everyone in the region understands: "Over the course of the shooting, I understood why they call work bitter money: all these workers have migrated to Huzhou from other regions, with the hope of making money. The word "bitter" alludes to the discriminations that the individual has to face when he is away from his native place, the hardships and sadness a person has to face when he is away from home to earn money."²⁴ The hardships become apparent in the next real-life character, Ling Ling, an emotionally unstable woman Min meets when she arrives at the children's clothing workshop, and the next person Wang decides to follow with his camera. Ling is caught in an abusive marriage and wonders if she should return to her home village. She lives in a suspended state, between two worlds: on one hand in the harsh reality of her current life as a factory worker and oppressed woman, on the other the constant desire to escape it—and in the background is her village, where she and her husband left their son behind. With the shaky mobile images of his portable digital camera, Wang captures her anguished state as he follows her through the narrow hallways of rented apartment buildings, the streets of the city and into her husband's store, where she and her husband end up in a violent fight. The dynamic between misery and hope also characterizes the life of her husband, who tries to work himself up by running his own little shop to build himself and his family a different future outside the garment factory

²⁴ Guarneri and Wang, Interview: Wang Bing, 22 February 2017.

(figure 3). Wang portrays their heated emotions by alternating the restless, mobile images with static close-up shots that focus on their inner mental states: after the fight, he films Ling for half a minute from a stationary camera position, while she is standing motionless and indecisive, arms folded, late at night, on the sidewalk of a street. Wang does the same with her bad-

Figure 3



Source: Wang Bing, *Bitter Money* (2016). Courtesy Icarus Films (Ling Ling).

tempered husband, who sits on a barrel in front of his shop and rages on his wife to a friend. The film's chapter on this couple is important because it makes palpable for the viewer how the system of short-term contract labour in the garment industry leads to a prolonged state of suspension with psychological and social consequences for the lives of migrant workers; for example, relationship problems are not confronted, but simply prolonged. Wang expresses an awareness that the relationship troubles are caused by the state of worry this couple is in—typical of suspended life—when he says: “However, there are no real issues between Ling Ling and her husband, there are no major sentimental problems. It is just this anxiety that exists in the air between them.”²⁵ While understandable due to the persistent state of unresolved issues, the viewer is still surprised to see the two in the final scene, late at night, bundle children's clothes together on the street, as if nothing had happened; it is counterintuitive, emotionally strange, and yet it makes their situation perfectly clear.

²⁵ Guarneri and Wang, Interview: Wang Bing, 22 February 2017.

Wang portrays many other migrant workers who are stuck in their suspended lifestyle, which they seem to accept as fact and with which they try to cope as best they can. Some of them play a lead role in the film, others pass by briefly. Wang films them all without any intervention or questions, he just observes and documents their concrete experiences and emotional states—that is his main cinematographic approach. Another example is Chen Yuanwei, a handsome young man who breaks down after only eight days. He shares his feelings with an empathetic female co-worker, but also interacts directly with the cameraman. In *The Corporeal Image*, MacDougall distinguishes three types of cameras, each of which reflects a different approach to the subject: the responsive, the interactive, and the constructive camera. Given Wang's intention to document the everyday reality of people, he primarily uses what MacDougall describes as the "responsive" camera, "which observes and interprets the subject without provoking or disturbing it. It responds rather than interferes."²⁶ But because the behaviour and movements of Wang's protagonists co-determine his film's direction, sometimes a situation arises where not responding is not an option and the camera suddenly becomes "interactive," such as when Chen looks and talks straight into the camera, gives his analysis of the working conditions in the garment industry in response to the cameraman, and lists the problems one by one, then packs his things, gets into a taxi, and disappears, in search of better luck in one of the larger factories. From the perspective of how suspension looks and feels beyond what can be described in text, an intriguing moment arises when Chen hesitates, packed and ready, at the top of the stairs, in the darkness of the hallway. Capturing this moment in another long take of one agonizing minute, it is in this physical and emotional hesitation, this tangible procrastination, that the disturbing experience of "suspension" is felt most poignantly.

The scene represents a real soul-searching moment, a clear example of *jiujie* (figure 4), not only in common Chinese of having to make difficult choices, but also the challenge of putting into practice conflicting choices, such as deeply criticizing working conditions but still continuing the work.²⁷ Chen does what all workers are considering: to give up and get out. "Everyone seems to be stuck," as Franceschini puts it, "looking for a way out."²⁸ In fact, all the characters are well represented by the image of the hummingbird, used as a metaphor for suspension by Xiang, and described as "frantically vibrating its wings, striving to sustain itself in the air."²⁹ Wang effectively captures this state of anxiety on film: "everyone lives in worry." He explains:

²⁶ David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.

²⁷ Xiang explains suspension through *jiujie* in detail in this issue's introductory essay.

²⁸ Ivan Franceschini, "The Swan Song of Chinese Labor NGOs: Wang Bing's 'Bitter Money' and Wen Hai's 'We the Workers,'" *Critical Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2020): 158.

²⁹ Xiang, this issue.

Figure 4



Source: Wang Bing, *Bitter Money*, 2016. Courtesy Icarus Films (Chen Yuanwei).

“This is the changing China. Factories of the past still had a collective spirit. Workers’ lives were related to the factories [...]. That is no longer the case for production units today—now there is a contract-labour system everywhere.”³⁰

Another important cinematographic choice Wang makes in this film, besides using long takes, is to avoid any plot development—there is no such thing as a story. In this sense, the film opposes traditional documentary models, and is closer to the more experimental film tradition of the art documentary, which uses alternative strategies and techniques, such as “duration” and “non-narrative.” None of the characters described above have been truly developed, they are only followed by the camera for a certain amount of time, intuitively determined by the director in contact with the people he follows. The focus is on how people feel, rather than a predetermined and imposed storyline. Franceschini describes the way the film is constructed to come into contact with tangible human experiences: “In *Bitter Money*, Wang Bing never follows characters towards the completion of a narrative arc—they appear briefly and are nowhere to be seen. While this can be very disturbing to the viewer, it also serves as a reminder of the impermanence and uncertainty of China’s floating population. With its lack of structure and half storylines, the film reflects the confusion and transience of migrant workers’ lives.”³¹ The experience of suspension, in short, is built

³⁰ Wang Bing, “Filming a Land of Flux,” *New Left Review* 82 (July-August 2013), 124.

³¹ Franceschini, “Swan Song,” 159.

into the structure of the film or into the edited order of the filmed material. Wang confirms to Cutler that the structure of the film was deliberately chosen: “[Wang] felt that wandering had become an important theme of Chinese contemporary life, and that he therefore chose to structure the film as a swaying of focus from one character’s story to another’s. As the people wander, Wang shows them caught between worlds: Rural and urban, and also imaginary and material.”³² This counter-narrative logic is also reminiscent of Tarkovsky, whom Wang refers to as one of the filmmakers he greatly admires, and who also dropped plot development in some films.³³

Having shown how Wang succeeds in depicting and allowing people to experience tangible suspension in *Bitter Money*, the question remains as to how to interpret his film and which observational style he uses more precisely. The most insightful analysis of *Bitter Money* to date comes from Pollacchi.³⁴ According to her analysis, Wang represents personal stories from everyday life that go against the official ideological story of the Chinese dream. Since Wang’s films focus on social groups that have largely remained outside of China’s economic success story, Pollacchi suggests that his films should be read “as a corpus of works addressing the contradictions imbued in China’s rise as a super-power.”³⁵ She also elaborates on Wang’s method of close observation. Although, paradoxically, *Bitter Money* received the award for best script at the 2016 Venice Film Biennale, Pollacchi insists that there is in fact no script. Stories are rather found and discovered in the daily lives of the people he happens to meet and follow—“found choreography,” as Chevrier calls Wang’s accidental methodology³⁶—and with whom she sees him building a relationship of trust. Interestingly, Pollacchi describes all this as a participatory process: “This process of shooting and connecting ‘stories’ via ordinary people, often workers of different sorts, is common to nearly all of Wang Bing’s documentaries shot in the diverse corners of China. It allows viewers the process of getting to know the people.”³⁷ In the end, Pollacchi identifies Wang’s unscripted and personal way of documentary making with “immersive observation.”³⁸

The observational method of the new Chinese documentary movement, or the “Sixth Generation,” has been analyzed by many experts.³⁹ Most

³² Aaron Cutler, “Bitter Money and an Economic Order,” *DVD Bitter Money* (New York: Icarus Films, 2016).

³³ Jean-François Chevrier, “Wang Bing: Living Forms,” in *Wang Bing, The Walking Eye*, eds. Diane Dufour, Dominique Païni, and Roger Willems (Amsterdam: Roma Publications, 2021), 801.

³⁴ Elena Pollacchi, “Extracting Narratives from Reality: Wang Bing’s Counter-Narratives of the China Dream,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 11, no. 3 (2017): 217–231.

³⁵ Pollacchi, “Extracting Narratives,” 218.

³⁶ Chevrier, “Wang Bing: Living Forms,” 801.

³⁷ Pollacchi, “Extracting Narratives,” 221.

³⁸ Pollacchi, “Extracting Narratives,” 220.

³⁹ See Berry, Xinyu, and Rofel, eds., *New Chinese Documentary*, or Lin, “New Chinese Cinema,” 91–115.

members of this school engage in “filming from the bottom up, rather than the official perspective of looking at society from the top down,”⁴⁰ just like Wang. Ramos-Martínez therefore places Wang’s observational style in the Sixth Generation. He notices though that the observational mode of representation has led to a veritable discourse in film studies, with both critics and supporters. Criticism focuses on everything from voyeurism and a naive approach to hidden ideology and quasi-scientific objectivity, while the proponents of the method instead see it as a practice that allows the filmmakers to encounter the world in concrete terms, “to insert themselves into the world, relinquishing their privileged perspective in favour of an openness to being shaped by particular situations and relationships they encounter” (close to Pollacchi’s idea of “immersive observation”).⁴¹ The observational method, then, has to do with relinquishing control: “This ‘ceding control’ requires that the observer avoids speaking for, or on behalf of the observed.”⁴² Ramos-Martínez further argues that there is something unique about Wang’s approach, especially in the way he radicalizes the observational method. To explain what he describes as Wang’s dual approach to objectivity and subjectivity, Ramos-Martínez interprets his observational method through the figure of the “silent witness”—a role tailor-made for Wang, as the director has indicated that he is a quiet person and always wants to remain in the background. The silent witness is a person who is “there” but does not intervene in the situation he is witnessing. Wang can be seen as a silent witness, as he patiently follows his subjects with his camera, without communicating with them during filming (with rare exceptions). And yet, he is always present, he can be seen, felt, heard: his breathing, footsteps, change of camera angle, everything betrays his physical presence. This applies not only to *West of the Tracks* (2002), the film Ramos-Martínez analyzes, but also to *Bitter Money*, where we hear Wang walking up and down the stairs, witnessing the change of the camera angle or his shadow being projected onto the wall. Ramos-Martínez calls this Wang’s “corporeal camerawork.”⁴³ This gives the director a position between observer and witness, someone who both keeps his distance and comes closer, who “between participation and non-intervention” can claim to be objective and subjective at the same time.⁴⁴

The observational method in documentary film is even more complicated than Ramos-Martínez already describes because it is philosophically related to essential phenomenological questions. There is a truth claim behind the observational mode of representation, which differs depending on the chosen

⁴⁰ Lu Xinyu, “Rethinking China’s New Documentary Movement: Engagement with the Social,” in *New Chinese Documentary Film*, eds. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 24.

⁴¹ Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 5. The author quotes Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz here.

⁴² Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 4–5.

⁴³ Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 7.

⁴⁴ Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 7.

interpretation of the status of phenomena and how we can know them, through pre-conceptual experience, consciousness, or a combination of both. It is therefore not surprising that a variety of phenomenological perspectives have been developed in documentary film, which are summarized in Wahlberg's *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (2008).⁴⁵ While these phenomenological questions are important, this article focuses more on the extent to which Wang's observational method touches on the suspension approach. In this context it is relevant to know how the director himself conceives of his own method. In my conversation with Wang, he stated very clearly that he is not concerned about objectivity, that his films are "completely subjective and personal, and that objectivity is not a goal."⁴⁶ He is interested in getting to know Chinese people as thinking and feeling beings, as well as their individual experiences with and reflections on their social realities. Therefore, he creates relationships with people and documents their lives as truthfully as possible in a silent (cinematic) dialogue. An objective representation of social reality only occurs afterwards, when these subjective experiences are brought together; or, in Wang's precise words, "objectivity means the common points of multiple subjectivities."⁴⁷ This is exactly where Wang's method of observation intersects with the suspension approach, presented as an approach that should "speak *about* and speak *to* the subjects at the same time."⁴⁸

15 Hours (*Shi Wu Xiao Shi*)

Wang's understanding of the method of close observation as a subjective pursuit with potentially objective outcomes clarifies the editing process in *Bitter Money*. In all referenced literature, the authors focus on Wang's observational method and related "script-less" observing and recording of reality. But the reality, of course, is that 2600 hours of material has been reduced to just 2 hours, 48 minutes, which means that the choice of what material gets used, and what gets cut, represents a major intervention by the filmmaker. In the selection, organization, and montage of the material the filmmaker shapes the film into the narrative he wants to tell—his interpretation of the individual stories he filmed. This subjective ordering, in other words, is also present in a film with a deliberate non-narrative structure, such as *Bitter Money*, and further undermines the idea of an objective representation. It has become clear from all of the above that the term "observational method" is somewhat problematic for Wang's films, on one hand because the term is associated with the concepts of objectivity and

⁴⁵ Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 12–22.

⁴⁶ Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

⁴⁷ Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

⁴⁸ Xiang, this issue.

the truthful representation of facts (while Wang has a more subjective approach), on the other because a Chinese filmmaker like Wang is then almost automatically placed in the Sixth Generation—where he does not feel at home. Given that most of the debate surrounding Wang's films revolves around the method of observation in its various (phenomenological) interpretations, I will analyze his next film, *15 Hours* (2017), employing a more neutral term, defined as an aesthetic style rather than an objective method: slow cinema. Its distinguishing features, as the name indicates, are also explained in terms of temporal aesthetics, including the long take, to create an experience of duration that encourages contemplation rather than narration. Slow cinema is a better reference than the observational method, because Wang calls the long take an aesthetic choice.⁴⁹ Slow cinema, a term that appeared in cinematographic circles in 2010, also lifts Wang out of Chinese film history and places his films in a global context, associated with filmmakers such as Tsai Ming-Liang (Taiwan), Béla Tarr (Hungary), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), and others.⁵⁰

15 Hours (2017) is very different from *Bitter Money* in terms of structure, content, and atmosphere, even though the subject remains the same: the garment industry in Huzhou. This time, Wang focuses on a factory in Zhili, in the northern part of Huzhou, where children's clothing companies are clustered. *15 Hours* differs primarily from *Bitter Money* in that it was made as a single-shot movie, which means that a day in the life of migrant workers in this small workshop was filmed non-stop for 15 hours, as long as the average working day of the migrant, divided into two HD files (due to the maximum storage capacity of one file).⁵¹ The mood of the film is quite different too: the misery gives way to a more positive sense of solidarity and camaraderie among the migrant workers. This documentary is related to slow cinema as described by Romney (who coined the term in 2010),⁵² namely as a type of film that "downplays events in favour of mood, evocativeness, and an intensified sense of temporality."⁵³ Like the observational method, slow cinema is characterized by a focus on everyday activities and by long takes, but it is less burdened by the discourse on objectivity.

⁴⁹ Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

⁵⁰ The term was mentioned in the British film journal *Sight & Sound* by Jonathan Romney, then picked up and criticized by editor Nick James, together sparking a wider debate about "slow cinema" in several UK (online) journals and newspapers, including *The Guardian* and *Frieze*. See Jonathan Romney, "In Search of Lost Time," *Sight and Sound* 20, no. 2 (2010): 43–44; Nick James, "Passive Aggressive," *Sight and Sound* 20.4 (2010): 5, and Nick James, "Being Boring," *Sight and Sound* 20, no. 7 (2010): 5.

⁵¹ The film consists of two HD files, each of which is 7 hours and 55 minutes (including pre-titles, information blocks, credits, etc.). Source: Information sheet on *15 Hours*. Received from Galerie Chantal Crousel.

⁵² Romney, "In Search of Lost Time," 43–44. See also note 46.

⁵³ Rebecca Catching, "Chinese Slow Cinema: A New Filmic Rhythm and a Cinematic Conscience. Exploring Notions of Time, History, Memory, Absence, and Allegory in the Works of Chinese Authors," *Yishu* 19, no. 1 (January-February 2020): 25. Catching herself extends the term slow cinema to Chinese documentary films.

Documenting China's Garment Industry

15 Hours starts early in the morning, at sunrise, when everyone gets up very slowly, comes out of their apartments, and the activity starts in and around the complex. The opening shot, subtitled “Zhili Town, Xisheng Road, Children’s Garment Factory,” shows the building with the factory workshop on the first floor, while the dormitories are on the floors above (figure 5).⁵⁴ So, all in one building, the workers just have to go down the stairs to work.

Figure 5



Source: Wang Bing, *15 Hours* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

Figure 6



Source: Wang Bing, *15 Hours* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (Lunch break).

Most of the film takes place in the space of the workshop itself, where we see the workers at their rattling sewing machines for hours, chatting intermittently. During breaks for lunch and dinner, the workshop empties and Wang follows the workers in the outside corridors (figure 6). In the evening the lights go on, while the work just continues. The film ends in the now dark corridors, where workers find their way to their dormitories in a relaxed atmosphere. The final shot is of a messy dormitory entry, subtitled again with the name and address of the workshop, mirroring the beginning of the film. In contrast to *Bitter Money*, Wang never enters the workers' private space in *15 Hours*, so that the ethical concerns raised by the earlier film never arise.⁵⁵ In fact, the whole psychological dimension is absent in *15 Hours*—or perhaps one could say “suspended,” left hanging in the air. It is up to the viewer to relate, emotionally or not, to what they see, to imagine how such a day would feel.

In *15 Hours*, Wang uses slow cinema in its most radical form: he turns on the camera and shoots until the end of the working day, moving through the space with the workers, or choosing a static camera position, changing only the camera angle from time to time, all without any obvious breach of the 15-hour timeline continuity, except for that one cut due to the end of the first HD file.⁵⁶ This radical documentary approach (it really takes 15 hours to view the entire film) might explain why so little has been published about this film, namely only some reviews in (art) journals and abstracts and reviews on Internet sites. And what has been published often contains errors, because the entire film has not been seen. Although there is qualified academic literature on other Wang films, it is simply still missing for *15 Hours*. Another explanation for the limited bibliography could be that this film is sponsored and produced by the Galerie Chantal Crousel and thus predominantly shown as a single or double screen art installation in cultural institutions and major exhibitions, such as the Documenta in Kassel. Working

⁵⁴ Interestingly, Wang is very clear about the factory address in this film. This is in line with a new ethical trend in the fashion industry. Many quality fashion brands mention the addresses of the factories where their clothes are made to reduce the exploitation of workers. Some even identify individual workers on the labels of individual pieces of clothing. See for example <https://studiojux.com/blogs/meet-the-team>.

⁵⁵ A rather difficult moment to digest in *Bitter Money* is when a middle-aged man named Huang Lei lies on his ragged bed and is filmed in a sad, miserable state of drunkenness (from a high camera angle for minutes on end, gradually in close up), while checking on his phone how much money he has left. Since this is a real person, who may not be aware of the possible public ramifications of this film, is this still ethically acceptable? Such and other ethical issues are discussed in journalistic reviews, see for example Leo Goldsmith, “Wang Bing’s Typically Complex ‘Bitter Money’ Observes a Chinese Garment Factory,” *Village Voice*, 16 January 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y72xlu6u>.

⁵⁶ *15 Hours* is not only split between two tapes, but was also filmed by two people, Wang and another cameraman, otherwise “it just wasn’t physically feasible.” Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

with a gallery offers a filmmaker creative freedom, but the downside is that the film is not easily available as a DVD or in “on demand” format.⁵⁷

Still, it is imperative to watch the full 15 hours to disentangle the meaning of the film, as slow cinema is not only manifest in the length of a film, but also in its details. Precisely because of the slowness of this type of film, details that would otherwise go unnoticed are made tangible. “Slow Cinema seeks to investigate,” Catching writes, “small and mundane worlds, immersing the viewer in the diegetic space of the film.”⁵⁸ One of the elements that Catching singles out to achieve this deepening of the cinematic experience is sound, which in slow cinema often consists of ambient sound, the sound present in the filmed location. Sound is certainly an important factor in Wang’s film. Due to the slowness of the film and his zooming in on the hard labour of the different workers, who each perform different actions (for example, one is busy with the zippers, the other with the legs or the back pockets), the space that at first sounds like one big clatter of sewing machines, gradually becomes more of a symphonic orchestra of all kinds of machines that make different sounds in different rhythms. Every worker in Wang’s film uses the sewing machine differently: some try to sew the pants in a balanced rhythm, others frantically try to finish as many as possible and that nervousness or frantic anxiety is reflected in the rattling and tempo of their machine.

“The slow cinema movement filmmakers,” Catching explains, “use sounds to create a faithful documentation of the lives of the characters.”⁵⁹ To further take the migrant workers out of their anonymity and humanize them, Wang introduces every worker who agreed to participate in the project. As soon as the workers start sewing in the early morning, he films them on their sewing machines, but with every new worker that his camera focuses on, he gives a caption with name, age (ranging from 20 to 40), home town and province (different provinces, but especially Anhui), and how long they have worked in Zhili (from 1 to 5 years, most around 2 or 3). You get to know them: conscientious Chen Anxia is the first to encourage everyone to work, Liu Chencheng confesses that he watched TV late and feels drowsy, and Dong Jianghong brings up the subject of snoring in his dorm (figure 7).

Another aspect that emerges from Wang’s slow cinematic approach is the full-length recording of the conversations that the migrant workers have during the working day, thanks to the simple fact that the editing process is omitted. While Wang obviously still makes certain choices, his field of action is largely limited to the workshop space, where he only changes the camera angle or the duration that he chooses to focus on a worker or corner. Most

⁵⁷ I would like to thank Marie-Laure Gilles of Galerie Chantal Crousel for providing me with access to the film.

⁵⁸ Catching, “Chinese Slow Cinema,” 30.

⁵⁹ Catching, “Chinese Slow Cinema,” 30.

Figure 7



Source: Wang Bing, *15 Hours* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

conversations are about predictable things, such as eating breakfast, lunch, or dinner, or topics related to work, such as how to do certain things, where to find materials, or what the boss expects. It is also noticeable that quite a few jokes are made during work. Wang also gets involved in these sometimes, such as in the scene where a male worker tells him to take some pictures of his co-worker He Long (which, in fact, he is already doing), who in his turn says, “I can pose for the camera,” and, “It’s no problem being filmed.” Wang maintains his role as a silent witness here, but the scene is interesting because it is another moment when the “responsive” camera turns into an “interactive” one (MacDougall), showing that in this role Wang is not merely acting as an outside observer. “Between observer and witness,” writes Ramos-Martínez, “observational filmmakers oscillate between the inside and the outside of the event.”⁶⁰ He elaborates: “As witnesses, with all the ambiguity that this figure implies, they negotiate their position within the observed (via their silence, their bodily presence, the camera’s presence).”⁶¹ Another aspect that becomes apparent during these casual conversations, including the scene where the young men laugh about being filmed, is that the atmosphere of *15 Hours* is indeed different from *Bitter Money*, where the psychological disappointments and “bitterness” about facing all kinds of social and personal problems, rather than making money, dominates. Given this focus on human suffering, *Bitter Money* can easily be interpreted as an indictment of the exploitative system of the globally operating garment industry, in an upgraded Marxist critique of global capitalism and its flexible labour system (short-term

⁶⁰ Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 7.

⁶¹ Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 5.

contracting, unstable jobs, fluctuating incomes) as proposed by Standing through his concept of precarization⁶²—Wang's films are indeed often associated with "precarity." According to Ramos-Martínez, citing Maurice Meisner, the Chinese government has "particularly repressed the visibility of the labour question," while films such as Wang's and those of other filmmakers of the Chinese documentary movement have developed an "exceptional critical visualisation of labour struggles." In Ramos-Martínez's words: "Post-socialist cinema makes visible the scale of this conflict: the precarisation of the world's largest industrial proletariat is producing 'the world's largest and most rapidly growing army of the unemployed.'"⁶³ And yet, the Chinese situation is not so easily understood by Standing's economic analysis, written as it is from a Global North perspective, where there is a crumbling social welfare state to support the growing flexible labour market with temporary contracts and diminishing job security—a breakdown of a socioeconomic system rather than a build-up of a new one, as in China. The label "precariat" does not seem so applicable in *15 Hours*: the hardships of the garment workers are not lacking, but they exude a more optimistic sense of participation. The viewer gets a good sense of this atmosphere when the camera moves from one worker to another in the workplace and then reflects a person's activities for minutes on end, revealing that person's state of mind. It is in such scenes that the association with Antonioni arises, another filmmaker to whom Wang refers and who was an expert in evoking moods through long takes. The workers talk to each other, joke with each other, listen to music, or are busy with the mobile phone in between. The overall mood is one of hard and tedious work, but also of a shared sense of humanity and solidarity. *15 Hours* can perhaps be better understood with what Mathews calls "low-end globalization," a form of globalization that is not read from the perspective of multinationals, but in relation to the lives of individuals in search of opportunities away from home: all sorts of transient migrant workers, from small business owners to sex workers and asylum seekers, all of whose lives are marked by suspension.⁶⁴

Conclusion: The Migrant Image

Bitter Money and *15 Hours* are closely related films, and were also conceived as such, as a series, with a third film, *Shanghai Youth*, still in the making. That they are related is also evident from the fact that where the first film

⁶² Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

⁶³ Ramos-Martínez, "Oxidation of the Documentary," 2.

⁶⁴ Gordon Mathews, *Ghetto at the Center of the World, Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2011), 13. Gordon Mathews develops his concept of "low-end globalization" in relation to the seventeen-floor building complex Chungking Mansions, where temporary workers from all over the world (South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, etc.) stay in cheap and neglected guest houses, usually on short-term contracts and visas.

ends, the second begins: the final scene in *Bitter Money* shows the migrant workers packing clothes to ship in the street late at night, while the same thing happens (although in a different factory) at sunrise at the beginning of *15 Hours*, where workers are finalizing the packages before the cargo is collected for transport (figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8



Source: Wang Bing, *Bitter Money* (2016). Courtesy Icarus Films (ending).

Figure 9



Source: Wang Bing, *15 Hours* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (beginning).

Yet at the same time the films are vastly different, both in their cinematic structure, aesthetic approach, and in the message being conveyed. The first film, *Bitter Money*, depicts the migrant workers' experiences caused by their suspended lives from a psychological-emotional perspective, in a constant alternation between distance shot and close-up, mobile and static images interwoven into a loose structural whole of separate scenes surrounding one or more "characters." This sharing and experiencing of the lives of migrant workers is done in a way that is really only possible through a temporal medium such as film, which, as MacDougall puts it, produces sensory or "affective knowledge." Indeed, many of the moments I have discussed in my analysis of this film address "the corporeal aspects of images and image-making" in MacDougall's sense, that is, "concerned with the moment at which [...] meanings emerge from experience, before they become separated from physical encounters."⁶⁵ The migrants' preconceptual experiences are expressed and felt in long takes in which the filmmaker follows the psychological stages a character goes through, then zooms in sharply on an emotional experience (or an alternation of both cinematic techniques). *15 Hours* is a very different film, in the sense that here the space of a single factory is actually filmed non-stop, while the migrant workers are at work—the camera is used more in the sense of video, as a direct recording, without any editing, only framing (but this is also basic, as the filming mainly takes place in one workspace). The result is not a subjective representation of the workplace, created by the (silent) interaction between the filmmaker and his subjects, but a much more objective and acutely faithful representation of a working day in the lives of migrants. The long close-ups of *Bitter Money*, which intensify the psychological and emotional moments, do not appear in *15 Hours*. The long takes are there, and so are close-ups, but they are less personalized and psychologized because they primarily film workers on the work floor, not in free time or private spaces. *Bitter Money's* often nervous mobile camera has been replaced by a much more static camera (with a few exceptions, when Wang walks through the hallways). All of this makes for a different atmosphere in *15 Hours*, which counterbalances the "bitter tone" of the earlier film with a more optimistic and participatory spirit, despite the hard and monotonous work. The two films can be seen as complementary in the sense that only together do they give a good picture of what suspension looks and feels like in the personal lives (*Bitter Money*) and daily work (*15 Hours*) of migrants, including the contradictory feelings of "precariousness" and a positive, collective sense of participation. And only together do they paint a more objective picture of the prevailing state of suspension in the garment industry at some point in history and Chinese society, as intended by Wang's consistently used, subjective method of close observation with ultimately objective results.

⁶⁵ MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image*, 1.

Through this methodological approach Wang represents the Chinese garment industry quite differently from other films on the topic, such as the award-winning *China Blue* (2004) by Israeli-American filmmaker Micha Peled, whose film is a clear indictment of working conditions in the Chinese garment industry in a classic Marxist way.⁶⁶ Wang contrasts this with another perspective, which can be less clearly described as “political.” Wang’s films, as Edwards and Svensson point out, are not confrontational: they do not directly challenge the Chinese government, nor are they activist.⁶⁷ Wang observes and reveals without defending a specific cause, Renard confirms.⁶⁸ At the same time, Wang’s films seem to function as a form of social criticism and even have an implicit political effect. Wang creates images of a different China than propagated by the Chinese government, as Pollacchi has convincingly demonstrated. Ramos-Martínez describes Wang’s films as a “critical visualisation of labour struggles.”⁶⁹ Edwards and Svensson conclude that Wang’s films “are about fostering critical reflection on China’s contemporary reality.”⁷⁰ Altogether, a seemingly endless debate has developed as to whether or not Wang’s films are political in nature. Certainly from a Western perspective, it is often believed that because his films are censored in China, they should be political. Wang himself has a clear view on this debate, as the following quote shows: “I am interested in the personal, inner life of the individuals who live in Chinese society. What I try to do is just to look at life and put my personal experience and my past in relation with other people’s personal experiences [...]. In fact, in the China of today, the real ‘political films’ are those that carefully avoid mentioning anything political.”⁷¹ Consistent with Wang’s statement, my own reading of his films diverges from the political discourse and interprets them as a form of problematization from the inside out of specific phenomena in Chinese society, such as suspension.

The claim I hope to have substantiated is that Wang’s films have added value to the sociological, anthropological, and economic-political analyses of hypermobility and suspension. Documentaries that problematize a sociological issue can contribute to the social sciences because they lead to different kinds of insights and awareness than scientific research, as underscored by MacDougall’s notion of “affective knowledge.” The audio-visual and expressive possibilities of documentary film allow filmmaker and

⁶⁶ *China Blue* received a lot of media attention when it appeared and an award from Amnesty International.

⁶⁷ Dan Edwards and Marina Svensson, “Show us life and make us think: Engagement, Witnessing and Activism in Independent Chinese Documentary Today,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 11, no. 3 (2017): 161.

⁶⁸ Caroline Renard, “Introduction,” in *Wang Bing*, eds. Caroline Renard et al. (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2015), 10.

⁶⁹ Ramos-Martínez, “Oxidation of the Documentary,” 2.

⁷⁰ Edwards and Svensson, “Show us life,” 163.

⁷¹ Michael Guarreri, interview with Wang Bing, Paris, 8 April 2014, <https://bit.ly/31ZbSKk>.

viewer to dialogue with the experience of the other in their own working and living environment. With the exception of anthropology, visual methods are historically distrusted in the social sciences, in part because they are associated with the essentially creative nature of art, as opposed to the reliability of scientific facts. In a review of approaches to visual anthropology since the 1970s, MacDougall criticizes that anthropologists have used visual methods as merely an additional tool to their research, not as another form of anthropology: film and other visual methods, he insists in "New Principles for Visual Anthropology," explore dimensions of social life other than those defined in verbal and quantitative terms.⁷² According to Ferguson, the traditional view has changed: "More recently, social sciences have come to embrace visual methods as a valid strategy of social enquiry and as a way that has the potential to illuminate parts of the social world that other methods may be less equipped to explain."⁷³ But both MacDougall and Ferguson still write from a scientific perspective, while Wang makes no statements about science at all, nor does he worry about scientific justifications—he is a documentary filmmaker in the slow cinema genre, including its precursors in art cinema, such as Antonioni and Tarkovsky. Wang's method is deliberately subjective, and that is the strength of his documentaries. In conclusion, one could say that Wang sees his documentaries as a means of personal expression, in which he explores himself and his relationship with others. Therefore, his work has less in common with science and more with art, so if his films add anything to the social sciences it is precisely in their capacity as art. Wang describes art as follows: "Art is the reality of the people, it is what we think, how we question our lives; Art is a question, a look at oneself."⁷⁴ In our conversation, the director added that art concerns "individuals' perceptions about history, which will reflect other individuals' experiences."⁷⁵ In the above, I have already discussed how his films relate to the aesthetics of slow cinema, but his films about the garment industry also intersect with documentary trends in the visual arts in a global context.⁷⁶ In *The Migrant Image*, Demos examines documentary forms that have emerged in the current global era in contemporary art and which, as he writes, "mobilize the image as much as imaging mobility."⁷⁷ Chapter after chapter, he demonstrates how artists explore "mobile lives" (of refugees, migrants, etc.) by reinventing the documentary form in a global context with imagery that share an ethical imperative. Chinese artists are not included in the book, but I maintain that

⁷² MacDougall, "New Principles of Visual Anthropology," in *The Corporeal Image*, 264–275.

⁷³ Tristan Ferguson, "Using Visual Methods in Social Science Research," in *Social Research Methods*, 3rd edition, ed. Maggie Walter (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

⁷⁴ Renard, "Introduction," 9–10.

⁷⁵ Wang Bing, interview, 15 January 2021.

⁷⁶ It is no coincidence that his films are picked up in art, where they are regularly shown on multiple screens in art spaces and exhibitions such as Galerie Chantal Crousel, Eye Museum, or Documenta.

⁷⁷ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, xv.

Wang's films about migrant workers in the garment industry fit into this new documentary trend, even though he is a filmmaker—so is Steve McQueen, who is included. McQueen's *Western Deep* (2002), about black workers in the South African mines, or Ursula Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle* (2006–2007), about human trafficking in North Africa for migrants trying to reach Europe, explore the possibilities of art documentary in new ways, with the aim of establishing proximity to those who are underexposed, if not invisible in the global order.⁷⁸ According to Demos, artists and filmmakers who problematize migration share similar questions and goals, such as: "How is it possible to represent artistically life severed from representation politically," and what are "new artistic strategies [...] with which to intervene in the cultural politics of globalization in critical and creative ways."⁷⁹ Like these artists, Wang seeks new ways to not only represent underexposed people, but also to empower them. And like them, he mobilizes innovative aesthetic strategies to achieve this goal, such as non-stop filming in *15 Hours*, or the rhizomatic structure and restless mobile camerawork in *Bitter Money*. It goes too far in the context of this analysis of his films to also discuss the imaginative artistic strategies of other documentary artists and filmmakers such as Biemann and McQueen, but in-depth analyses of their artistic methods can be found in Demos' book.⁸⁰ By relating Wang's films to Demos' global migrant image, they take on a critical dimension in what the author calls "crisis globalization," further specified as "the growing inequality between the global north and south"—even if the director has no political aim. By developing a conceptual terminology for (new) forms of migration that characterize our time, Demos recognizes that "it is questionable whether even 'migration' remains both capacious enough and the most accurate term to describe the multiple forms of movement and singular expressions of dislocation in contemporary experience."⁸¹ For the hypermobile migrants in the Chinese garment industry, the concept of "suspension" has been presented here as an alternative, focusing less on the movement of migrating from one place to another, but rather on the "in-between" state this movement results in for the workers concerned.

Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands, March 2021

⁷⁸ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 33–54 (McQueen) and 201–222 (Biemann).

⁷⁹ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, xv.

⁸⁰ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 33–54 (McQueen), 201–222 (Biemann).

⁸¹ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 3.

BOOK REVIEWS

ASIA INSIDE OUT: Itinerant People. Edited by **Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. vii, 326 pp. (Maps, B&W photos, illustrations.) US\$45.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-674-98763-0.

Itinerant People is the third volume in the trilogy, *Asia Inside Out*, an ambitious transdisciplinary project edited by two historians and an anthropologist with deep expertise in the region. Each volume in the series coheres around a fundamental conceptual rubric and seeks to subvert it, or turn it “inside out.” The first volume, *Changing Times* (2015), upends conventional periodizations of Asian history. The second volume, *Connected Places* (2015), dislodges static categories of Asian geography. This third and final volume disrupts fixed analytic categories of many sorts, including geography, nation, ethnicity, religion, and language, by showing how different sets of boundaries and identities come to the fore (or recede) when tracing the movement of Asia’s peripatetic people.

The introduction orients the reader to the notion of Asia (conceptually and empirically) as an accordion-like space which waxes and wanes depending on who or what is in motion. The stated objective is not to present new paradigms for the study of Asia so much as to expose hidden crosscurrents elided by pre-existing ones. Each of the 12 case studies meticulously excavates, through ethnographic or archival research, hitherto unexamined, lesser studied, or historiographically hidden mobilities across the continent. Collectively, the chapters in the volume range over half a millennium of history and a vast swath of territory extending from Istanbul to Tokyo. It is the specialist’s zoom lens deployed in each chapter, combined with the panoramic sweep of the volume as a whole, which give both concrete and lofty expression to the idea of Asia as an “incongruently organic entity” (21).

The book invites the reader to follow the fascinating journeys of a diverse array of “sojourners and seekers.” They decamp either voluntarily or under duress, crossing rivers and oceans, lingering in port cities, oasis towns and littoral regions, in pursuit of various and sundry endeavours, among them commerce, medicine, religious pilgrimage, political/religious activism, sport, music, entrepreneurship and sheer survival. In many cases the objects and ideas in circulation are as central to the analysis as (and sometimes more so than) the humans who carry them. Examples include Leung’s examination of China’s centuries-in-the-making *materia medica* and the medical knowledge it codified, Ludden’s study of cowry shells exchanged on the frontiers of the Qing and Mughal empires, Teng’s focus on a pioneering cookbook written

by a “Chinese food evangelist” in America during World War II, Chekhab-Abudaya’s analysis of Islamic pilgrimage manuscripts, such as traveling miniature Qu’rans in different regions of the Islamic world, and Erami’s study of Persian carpets moving to new markets in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Geographic hubs or junctures figure prominently in many chapters due to their importance as crucibles of invention and dissemination. Leung’s essay, for example, highlights the maritime Lingnan region as a key geographic node for the integration of different medical traditions and the consolidation of a coherent “southern” East Asian identity during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Ludden highlights the centrality of the island port of Syhlet in North Bengal where tribal Khasias formed an itinerant coastal culture in the heart of “cowry country” before it was dispersed by British imperialist forces. Drawing on their ethnographic research on the efflorescence of Islam in the southeastern Chinese port cities of Guangzhou and Yiwu, Xiang and Ma coin the term “mobility assemblage” to highlight the dynamism that results when multiple migration streams intersect in one hub. “Hubbing synergy” (244) is the term used by Ching to capture the importance of historical connections built between multiple hubs over time. Her essay traces the emergence of a distinctive Cantonese soundscape and a linked Cantonese-speaking culture in the triangulated space between Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macau, and later Shanghai.

If hubs constitute the geographic junctures which draw people, objects, and ideas from unlikely places into dynamic encounters, historical disjunctures propel and disperse them to new destinations. Macro-forces such as collapsing political orders and epistemic shifts can turn princes into paupers and displace values, aesthetics, skill sets and entire worldviews. Picket narrates the harrowing tales of exiled and abducted elites searching for new footholds in Persianate Asia at a moment when encroaching nationalisms and vernacular knowledge forms threaten to displace the Perso-Islamic ecumene. Alavia considers the case of two nineteenth century Omani princes whose mobility and profiteering in the Indian Ocean arms and slave trade are propelled by the decline of empire. Tamara Loos shines a new light on Siamese Prince Prisdang and his iconoclastic vision of a unified Buddhist ecumene, cultivated during his decades in exile at the turn of the twentieth century while hopscotching across imperial Asia. The exceptionally creative ways forced-sojourners such as Prince Prisdang, the Omani Princes, and Perso-Islamic elites adjusted to cataclysmic change and the connections that sprang from their movements, make them, in the words of the editors, “intriguing symbols of Asia ‘inside out’ in singular, human form” (14).

Scholars and serious-minded students of Asia will find the ground-level analysis of expansions and connections across time and territory in this volume fascinating and instructive. Students unfamiliar with Asian and premodern world history may struggle to absorb the density of empirical detail or appreciate the radicalness of the historical revisioning. And yet,

the non-chronocentric, unbounded vision of Asia the volume presents is imperative to grasp for anyone who seeks to apprehend Asia as it actually is (and was) rather than how it is imagined to be. With the anomalous exception of the Cold War fragmentation of states and regions, integration and connectivity across the Asian continent is the historical norm. To recognize this, as the volume encourages us to do, helps us see more clearly the cross-regional and non-Sinocentric connectivities that knit Asia together today, in ways that are at once divergent and descendant from the past.

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CAREN FREEMAN

ASIA'S REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century. *Studies in Asian Security.* By Andrew Yeo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 264 pp. US\$70.00, cloth. ISBN 9781503608443.

Andrew Yeo provides a comprehensive account of the development of alliances and regional institutions in the Asian (or rather: Asia-Pacific) region from the postwar period towards the present. He groups together a broad range of institutions such as the US “hub-and-spoke” military alliances, multilateral *economic* (APEC, RCEP) and *security* fora (EAS, ARF) as well as issue-specific or ad hoc regimes such as the Six-Party Talks, under the umbrella term of regional architecture. Architecture in his definition is “an institutional framework that provides actors with structures for governance” (7). As such, it is a key element in understanding the immensely complex contours of regional interaction under conditions of increased geopolitical competition. As Yeo asserts: “[t]he unfolding regional architecture sheds some light into Asia’s future order” (162).

The book’s is organized as follows. In chapter 1, Yeo unpacks his many definitional criteria—a must for scholars of regional security—and propounds his novel historical-institutional perspective. The remainder of the book’s seven chapters then proceed chronologically through an historical account of the inception of the post-war (bilateral) “Alliance Consensus” (chapter 2), “Change and Continuity 1989–1997” (chapter 3), “Rising Regionalism: 1998–2007” (chapter 4), “Complex Patchwork: 2008–2017” (chapter 5), to the present—“America First, China’s Rise, and Regional Order” (chapter 6), and ending with chapter 7, “Conclusion.”

Asia’s Regional Architecture provides a rewarding journey into the scholarly and practical debates on the topic and is expansive in scope and detail. Among its many contributions, the historical-institutional perspective adopted and applied by Yeo to explain the evolution of Asia’s regional architecture has much to recommend for assisting in a better understanding of why the “complex patchwork” looks the way it does. It also offers a refreshing alternative to the mainstay IR research traditions

of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, whilst transcending them. Yeo argues that by tracing developments back through temporal processes and events, a particular institutional path can be discerned, one which often has entrenched and self-replicating effects (path dependence) (5). This explains what he calls the “institutional layering” (6) upon the foundation of early postwar US alliances through a succession of complementary multilateral institutions, and their subsequent interactions. Following this process institutions emerged, adapted, or were discarded in accordance with the desires of their proponents (architects) inscribing the region with aspects of both change and continuity.

Another valuable contribution of the book is the exploration of the undertheorized relationship between “security architecture” and “security order.” Yeo posits that the regional institutional architecture forms a site within which competing actors seek to advance their proffered visions of regional security order, which will then be reflected in their preference of institutional mechanisms and the design of them. He argues “the future of regional order—that is, the patterns of interaction between state actors—requires thinking more seriously about Asia’s regional architecture—the overarching institutional framework(s) that provide actors with governance structures that help shape order” (3). The resultant prevailing regional order will be the (negotiated) product of competing designs by various “architects” (state or multi-state actors). This dynamic is under-explored in the scholarship and much misunderstood, so Yeo’s incisive intervention on this score is exceedingly welcome.

Additionally, Yeo’s book is packed with interesting insights and reflections upon (security) institutions, especially alliances. The introduction of the notion “alliance consensus” is particularly illuminating in the way it bridges the international and domestic (two-level) game aspect of alliance behaviour. He argues that the strength of alliance relations (with the US) in target states is dependent on the ingrained shared perceptions and understandings among domestic elites (socialization) and how embedded they become in their own national security strategies (31). This is particularly notable in the Japanese and Australian cases as this reviewer can testify. This provides an interesting counterpoint to the dominant balance of power/balance of threat structural explanations currently at the heart of alliance theory.

Yeo’s work, as he acknowledges, has been much-influenced by Georgetown University’s Victor Cha, and this is evident in Yeo’s employment of the “complex patchwork” descriptor of regional architecture and his interpretation of the US alliance system, particularly its origins. Through his institutional-layering notion Yeo views multilateral bodies such as the ASEAN-plus suite of pan-regional institutions largely as a supplement to the central US alliance system, but this is debatable. For example, as ASEAN allies such as Thailand, the Philippines, and perhaps South Korea arguably begin to drift away from Washington on the basis of a weakening alliance consensus, and

China sets up competitive and potentially antagonistic architecture including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (which receive comparatively limited treatment in the book), such assumptions begin to appear less tenable. That is, the prior dominance of the US alliance system is relatively diminishing. Beijing, as a rising power is on record as being thoroughly antagonistic to the US alliance system upon which American engagement in the region is predicated (158). The tensions between bilateralism and multilateralism, including alternative Chinese-led organs of regional governance, are being exacerbated, no matter how resilient (in some cases, Japan and Australia) the US alliance system remains. This is further reflected in the book's overall American-centric accent throughout. Though the author has consulted a small sample of the most prominent scholars from other states/regions, the narrow bandwidth through which countries outside the US are filtered does feel a little lacking in depth and nuance (South Korea being an exception). This is not by any means a serious problem, and is understandable given the scope of the literature required for such a comprehensive enterprise, but may grate a bit with those beyond America's academic confines. Additionally, the contemporary reader may ponder how the rising power of India, and the new concept of an "Indo-Pacific" region may further transfigure a strategic landscape in which the US role continues to diminish; but this is largely beyond the scope of the book, which is bounded by rather anachronistic American conceptions of a "Pacific Century" (chapter 3) rather than an "Indo-Pacific" one. As the author concedes, "historical institutionalism does better in explaining and describing the past than in predicting future action" (174).

Overall, Yeo's book serves as an outstanding primer on how the institutional landscape developed the way it did and why. It is an absolutely essential addition to the literature on regionalism and security architecture in the Asia-Pacific, and comes highly recommended for students, scholars, and practitioners alike.

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SMART CITIES IN ASIA: Governing Development in the Era of Hyper-Connectivity. Cities. Edited by *Yu-Min Joo and Teck-Boon Tan*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020. 224 pp. US\$140.00, cloth. ISBN 978-1-78897-287-1.

Few recent ideas have equally captivated the imaginations of politicians, corporate strategists, and citizen activists as much as the Smart City. The ubiquitous and pervasive application of information and communication technology (ICT) like big data, Internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), or robots is widely identified as a means to make cities smarter and

more sustainable at a time when 55 percent of the global population resides in urban areas, produces 60 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions and consumes 78 percent of the world's energy.

Critics of the Smart City decry it as an evocative slogan that high-tech companies, entrepreneurial politicians, and international consultants employ in order to advance their agendas. To gain a clearer understanding of this ambiguous concept, it is necessary to cut through the hyperbole and examine how existing smart city policies are actually assembled in *specific* places, how they are filled with meaning, and how they are implemented.

Smart Cities in Asia—Governing Development in the Era of Hyper-Connectivity, edited by Yu-Min Joo and Teck-Boon Tan, is a timely addition to the ongoing debate about the local manifestation of this globally circulating policy idea. The editors point out that so far smart city debates have crystallized mainly around Western examples, in cities which face very different urbanization issues and are marked by contrasting governance traditions and socio-cultural contexts. Apart from some canonical examples of smart cities in Asia like Songdo in Korea and Singapore's Smart Nation, the authors argue, the Asian region with its rapidly expanding megacities has been critically understudied. The volume presents ten empirical case studies that help to develop a clearer understanding of why and how national and local governments are pushing the use of ICT to optimize urban processes and city governance.

Part 1 presents the cases of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, South Korea, and Japan. The Four Asian Tigers and Japan share a history of strong developmental states that have robustly guided economic development and embraced cutting-edge technology with the aim of "catching up" with the advanced economies of the West. Smart city initiatives are advanced in many of these contexts as a national development goal.

Chapter 2 exemplifies this with Singapore's famous Smart Nation initiative of 2014. It is the latest national development strategy, which is built on a foundation of four decades of technological innovations and digitalization master plans, promoting an informatization of the island state long before the term smart city had come into fashion. Since its independence in 1965, economic competitiveness has been regarded as key to the survival of this resource-poor country. Singapore also initiated the ASEAN Smart City Network in order to increase its standing as a regional and global leader in the field and has partnered with governments across Asia for the actual construction of intelligent cities.

Similarly, chapter 4 shows how Taipei has formed its own international smart city network, called Go Smart. Through this city diplomacy initiative, Taipei is not only seeking to establish itself as a hub for global smart city development, but also to promote direct "people-to-people relations" (68) with local governments around the world, in a bid to help overcome the country's diplomatic isolation. Moreover, owing to Taiwan's authoritarian past, a highly active civil society has pushed for citizens' access to decision-making

processes, which has led to a strong emphasis on participatory governance in smart-city policies.

Chapter 5 discusses the experience of South Korea and highlights the importance of proper conceptualization and framing of smart city policies. The country was one of the global leaders in the domain and pioneered advanced computing technologies for efficient city operations as early as 2003. Expectations were high, and the Korean public anticipated nothing less than “totally transformed city operations and citizen life” (79). However, the resulting “ubiquitous city” was a largely technology-centric, vertical approach, conceived as a series of discrete smart solutions and not as an innovation-oriented horizontal process, stressing “continuous innovations, using technology as a tool, not an end” (79). The ensuing disappointment led to a “smart city winter”: a decade-long development slump during which only a few intelligent city projects were rolled out.

Part 2 of the book contains the cases of the “two Asian giants,” India and China, the two most populous countries in the world, where a substantial number of smart city policies and concrete projects are being implemented by the national governments. Most famous here is India’s Smart City Mission of 2015, with the stated goal of building 100 smart cities country-wide within five years. Lastly, part 3 discusses second-tier smart cities in the two ASEAN countries Indonesia and Thailand, as well as Songdo in Korea.

The book is strongest when chapter authors develop their own conceptual ideas and approach their subject critically. By highlighting the political and socio-cultural contexts, the authors of the chapters that work best help us to understand why and how smart city policies are assembled in specific localities.

The volume is at its weakest when chapter contributors merely list policies and instruments one after another and don’t challenge the techno-centric smart city narrative claiming that technology will automatically fix all urban problems. Moreover, a concluding chapter is much missed, in which the editors would contrast the different studies around common themes like the relationship between national and local governments and tech companies, the role of citizens in the making of their smart cities, and policy mobilities between different Asian countries and elsewhere, to name but a few.

Finally, when the editors suggest that smart city developments in Asia are “in stark contrast to the more sceptical perceptions and privacy concerns found in the West” (2), it would have been rewarding to see what exactly they understand as critical differences and what as common ground. In this context the famous scenes of anti-surveillance protesters in Hong Kong come to mind, when the protesters tore down smart lamp posts in 2019 out of concern that the China-friendly government could use these for face recognition.

Clearly, how data is being used and by whom is something that should concern all citizens around the world.

SECULARISM, DECOLONISATION, AND THE COLD WAR IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA. By Clemens Six. New York: Routledge, 2018. xii, 305 pp. US\$149.95, cloth. ISBN 978-1-138-05202-4.

Secularism, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in South and Southeast Asia is a compelling and ambitious book by Clemens Six that proposes to shift the study of secularism from the margins of global history to the centre. In the process, it recasts our understanding of secularism from a Western-oriented, constitutional, or legal, practice of separating the state from religious affairs—and vice versa—to something far more nuanced and inclusive: “a comprehensive effort to accommodate religious diversity by locating the state beyond individual religious communities in a mode of strategic difference” (2). In this light, Six contends, it is a project undertaken by state and non-state actors to manage religious pluralism that, in the case of South and Southeast Asia, was shaped by the transnational “processes” of the Cold War and decolonization with “far-reaching consequences for the power structures, social relations, and political hegemonies within the societies concerned as well as in the international arena” (2–3).

Six makes his case through five case studies that examine how “religion was redefined as a political subject and relocated within society” in the avowedly secular states of India, Malaya, Indonesia, and Singapore as they transitioned from imperial rule to postcolonial state formation (6). These societies, he argues, shared many “questions and challenges” that arose from the dynamics of the Cold War and decolonization: “territorial integration, inter-religious violence, social and political reform, communism” and “mounting socio-economic problems” (10). Each of these concerns shaped, and was shaped by, the particular society’s secularism project.

Before getting to the case studies, however, Six opens with a chapter that examines the transnational exchange of ideas between actors in these four states about “how to organize religious pluralism after colonialism” and establish functional state and/or social institutions to sustain this diversity. These ideas, he continues, emerged “in close consideration of Western philosophy and history” but “were infused with local intellectual traditions and thereby translated to meet the specific requirements... historical challenges and social conditions” of a particular time and place (14–15). From there, he moves to Delhi, India after Partition with the first two case studies which deal with the way “urban space” was used to define and implement a “postcolonial secularism” (15). First, he looks at inter-religious conflicts that broke out over places of worship as they were intimately associated with the political and social position of Muslim and Hindu organizations in India’s postcolonial (and post-Partition) society. Second, he explores the Delhi government’s effort to deal with the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as it violently

harassed India's Muslim population, challenging the government's claims that India was a secular state.

The subsequent chapters introduce the Cold War, examining how it shaped the dynamic between the state, society, and religion in the waning days of Britain's control of Malaya and Sukarno's rule in Indonesia. The Malayan case considers the opportunities the Cold War presented Christian missionary groups who were working in the New Villages—a counterinsurgency initiative designed to separate the rural population from communist guerrillas and win them over to the government's side—to define secularism through their social reform activities. The Indonesian example examines the prominence religion played in the mass violence against the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) in 1965 and 1966 as Christian and Muslim organizations found common cause in their opposition to the PKI's vision of a secular state and social structure. The final case is a comparative study of religious schools in the secularism projects of Java, India, and Singapore as these postcolonial states embarked on education reform. To stay relevant, private religious schools promoted a more secular education that emphasized math and sciences to produce graduates capable of being more productive members of society. However, they were still forced to contend with the problem of teaching religion as a subject—as it was part of their identity—and how it would be funded in a secular state.

Each case demonstrates how secularism projects consisted of a negotiation over the location of religion relative to the state carried out by a range of groups including intellectuals, local militias, women's movements, youth organizations, missionaries and school officials who were all trying to defend their position amidst the turmoil of the burgeoning Cold War and the postcolonial moment. Often, secularism was used as a means to promote religious freedom as it created room for religious groups to maneuver as they sought to redefine the delicate boundary that existed between the state bureaucracy and religion.

This book is engaging, well-written, and extensively researched, drawing from archival sources in nine countries across South and Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America and an exhaustive array of secondary source material. It is also novel in its argument and strategic in its use of case studies, very effectively demonstrating how secularism should be conceived as a project undertaken by state and non-state actors that transcended social and national boundaries. Finally, Six's book makes a very convincing case for moving secularism studies to the centre of twentieth-century global history, making it a must-read for scholars of international and global history, secular and postcolonial studies, and the Cold War.

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THIRSTY CITIES: Social Contracts and Public Goods Provision in China and India. By *Selina Ho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xv, 295 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$120.95, cloth. ISBN 978-1-108-42782-1.

Water. Development, and indeed life, is impossible without it. Yet delivering clean, accessible water to citizens has and continues to be a vexing challenge for governments worldwide. What explains this, especially in areas of the world where the needs are especially acute? Selina Ho's *Thirsty Cities: Social Contracts and Public Goods Provision in China and India* offers a fresh and trenchant explanation for why China is able to provide urban residents "uninterrupted access to drinking water while only a little more than half of Indian urban residents have access to two or three hours of piped water supply per day" (3). Through a masterful comparative study of four cities (Shenzhen, Beijing, New Delhi, and Hyderabad), Ho forcefully argues that any study of public goods provision must go beyond a simple examination of regime type and utilize a more holistic approach, one which recognizes the importance of both formal and informal institutions and places them at the center of analysis.

Ho's study is multi-faceted and moves smoothly between a critical view of state-society dynamics, national policy shifts, and local-level maneuvering. Like layers of an onion, each section of the book can be pulled back to reveal nuanced insights into how and why these cities reached differing heights of success. In this sense, Ho offers a useful way of not only understanding public goods provision and governance, but also the divergent strategies and outcomes in China and India. Ho's study skillfully integrates seemingly disparate theoretical approaches and unifies them under the compact and elegant frame of social contracts. Conceptualizing the social contract as a "certain set of ideas, principles, and precepts that guide and inform actions of state actors and ordinary citizens of a country" (7), she argues that these informal, unwritten expectations can and do influence how state officials prioritize key public goods and work to deliver them. In China, for example, citizens expect the government to deliver development and prosperity (especially in urban areas). When coupled with strong state capacity and coordination, the result is sustained access to clean drinking water in Shenzhen and Beijing. By contrast, a strong populist bent in the Indian social contract often collides with socialist welfare promises and pro-growth policies, undercutting the state's ability to undertake cohesive, effective action to expand clean drinking water access in New Delhi and Hyderabad.

Ho's analysis drills down even further and highlights the extraordinarily complicated bureaucratic mazes in China and India and underscores the daunting challenge of organizing and synchronizing a plethora of social and political interests to realize the objective of accessible drinking water. In fact, the case studies meticulously detail how municipal authorities enacted a dizzying number of policies and regulations and reorganized agencies to

form an effective, viable urban water management network in China. In comparison, Indian authorities were hampered by numerous constraints, including limited state capacity and fragmentation and even the continuing presence of the so-called “water mafia” in New Delhi. These case studies—a tale of two cities twice over!—provide the rich soil from which Ho’s broader insights grow. They also underscore her tremendous grasp of micro-level dynamics and her keen ability to draw out the broader national implications of these developments.

Despite the book’s important findings, some questions nevertheless linger. While Ho makes a persuasive case for the “stickiness” of social contracts, what is less clear is why certain parts of these contracts seem to stick more, better, and longer. In the Chinese case, for example, Ho emphasizes a remarkable consistency in popular expectations of government performance over time: fulfill the historic “mandate of Heaven” or lose legitimacy. Yet countless instances of official malfeasance and periodic anti-corruption campaigns suggest that Chinese officials often struggle to fulfill their end of the contract. Given such variation in performance, one must wonder whether revamped performance incentives and the allure of career advancement (both figure prominently in post-Mao Chinese administration) intersect with, and even play a major role in, reshaping the informal norms that are supposed to guide their actions. By contrast, is it merely India’s fragmented history that explains why populism and patronage politics now seem to overshadow more traditional expectations of those in power? To be sure, there are no easy answers to such questions. To her credit, Ho does acknowledge that social contracts are not eternal: the terms of the agreement can and do change over time. Still, addressing these concerns more precisely (perhaps in a future book) can help shed additional light on how historical legacies, public demands, as well as incentive structures combine to shift developmental trajectories in decisive and consequential ways.

Selina Ho’s *Thirsty Cities: Social Contracts and Public Goods Provision in China and India* is an outstanding work that will undoubtedly attract the interest and attention of those interested in questions of institutional design and performance, state-society relations, and development in China and India. Advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and scholars alike will want to engage with and think deeply about the vital questions regarding state autonomy, social embeddedness, and accountability that Ho raises. In this regard, this book provides a useful lesson that all state leaders (even those in authoritarian systems) must deliver at least a basic minimum of goods and services to their citizens if they are to ensure the regime’s survival and legitimacy.

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CALVIN CHEN

ANTI-JAPAN: The Politics of Sentiment in Postcolonial East Asia. By **Leo T. S. Ching.** Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2019. xii, 163 pp. (Figure, B&W photos.) US\$23.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-4780-0289-5.

Leo Ching has provided us with a welcome addition to the academic studies that focus on the ongoing tensions in East Asia relating to Japan's imperial past and the legacy of conflict in the region. His key theme is anti-Japanism (in China and South Korea) contrasted with its constitutive Other pro-Japanism in Taiwan, arguing that anti-Japanism in East Asia is "the failure of decolonisation [and] ... a manifestation of the changing geopolitical configuration of the region under the demands and strains of global capitalism" (3). The failure of decolonization itself is seen as a result of the post-Cold War context of American hegemony and a Japanese failure of de-imperialization (8). The anti-Japanism and pro-Japanism that has ensued represents the shifting of power relations in East Asia in the post-Cold War era today (15).

What Ching's book does to set it apart from what is a fairly crowded field is to situate his analysis across the disciplinary boundaries of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and the burgeoning studies of affect and emotions. His case studies draw on a wide range of well-chosen cultural representations including film, literature, documentaries, and social media. In this way he offers a fresh and nuanced look at the complexities of anti- (and pro-) Japanese sentiments which so often dominate the political, social, and cultural agendas in the region.

The introduction charts the evolution of anti-Japanism in East Asia from its earliest manifestation in Korea and Taiwan in the late 1940s, through Hong Kong in the 1970s, to Chinese and South Korean protests over disputed islands and comfort women in the last decade or so. It also highlights the pro-Japanism in evidence in Taiwan, not just amongst the younger generation with their infatuation for Japanese popular culture, but also amongst the older *dōsan* generation, many of whom harbour a strong nostalgia for Japan. It then sets out the conceptual framework describing four distinctive attributes of anti-Japanism and pro-Japanism as narratives, performative acts, sentiments, and temporary fixes, which together allow for a range of positions on Japan. Thus, Ching notes that anti-Japanism is not static and while the form might be similar, "the content is often directed at local and present concerns that may or may not have anything to do with Japan" (14).

The chapters that follow consider different aspects of anti- and pro-Japanism starting with an analysis of the anti-American film *Gojira* and Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* in chapter 1, which serves to demonstrate the failure of decolonization in early postwar East Asia. Chapter 2 considers the uses of the term *Riben guizi*, or "Japanese devils," in Chinese popular culture, arguing that use of the term "performs an affective politics of recognition stemming from an ineluctable trauma of imperialist violence" (38). Chapter

3 is a careful study of the sentiment of shame about sexual violence in the context of South Korean “comfort women,” analyzed through Byun Young-Joo’s documentary trilogy. Moving on to Taiwan, chapter 4 explores the theme of nostalgia among the older generation of Taiwanese by analyzing recent Nihonjinron-style writings, while chapter 5 takes a different tack and considers representations of love, or rather the “political concept of love” (100) through an analysis of four films (*Gojira*, *Death by Hanging*, *Mohist Attack*, and *My Own Breathing*) which Ching argues “offer glimpses of possibility for transnational and sub-national intimacies and affective belonging that transcend love of the nation and love of the same” (18). Chapter 6 develops the argument about the potential for a different type of reconciliation: “reconciliation otherwise” (120). Using the novel *Exceedingly Barbaric* and the documentary film *Finding Sayun*, which offer different perspectives on two key historical events in Taiwan (the 1930 Musha Rebellion and the story of the Bell of Sayun), Ching outlines the possibilities of a non-state, transnational, inter-generational reconciliation. This point is further explored in the epilogue, which discusses the student-led protests in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan of 2014 and 2015. Ching suggests that these new movements “have the potential to forge transnational and regional political initiatives that can contribute to inter-Asian dialogue and activism” (133) through their shared characteristics, such as the importance of popular culture as a “common grammar,” concerns about the rise of China and the “general sense of precarity among young people in the region” (133).

Each chapter is carefully argued and the analysis is rigorous. I agree with the author that state-level reconciliation has fallen short, and that there is the “possibility of reconciliation without state intervention” (129)—indeed there were signs of this in the 1990s. But the reality of the situation at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century—with heightened tensions over the comfort women issue between Japan and South Korea and limited prospects of a deeper rapprochement between China and Japan—seems to have mitigated against substantive progress in that regard. This is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book and deserves to be read widely, not only by undergraduate and postgraduate students of the region, but by general readers looking for a perceptive and accessible insight into an important, timely, but complex topic.

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CAROLINE ROSE

FATEFUL DECISIONS: Choices That Will Shape China's Future. *Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center. Edited by Thomas Fingar and Jean C. Oi.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 448 pp. US\$35.00, cloth. ISBN 9781503611450.

This book brings together some of the most eminent scholars of the study of contemporary China, with the aim of creating a “well-informed and well-integrated analysis of the challenges, choices, and constraints that Beijing faces” in the coming years (x). Fourteen chapters are organized into three sections: institutions and instruments of governance, domestic policy choices and constraints, and external ambitions and constraints. A final chapter by Andrew Walder discusses China’s “national trajectory” in a comparative perspective. While the aim of the book is laudable, the volume is marred by the uneven quality of the chapters and a lack of tight organization around a single analytical framework and organizational structure. Moreover, the choice of issues is perplexing. For example, there is a chapter on the role of high-speed rail in the Belt and Road Initiative, but there is nothing in the volume about the serious environmental challenges China’s faces.

In the introduction, editors Fingar and Oi set out the central premise of the volume: “that specific policy choices will provide important clues about the extent to which top leaders have decided to stick with, reinvigorate, or depart from the model that has yielded success during the past four decades” (3). Their model of causality, then, is based on the choices made by actors as they try to manage “hundreds of complex, interconnected challenges” (3). The model is nicely nuanced, paying close attention to the factors that shape choices and, notably, to the key role played by contingencies. The analytical framework that guides the book takes as the starting point the leadership’s own stated goals and then asks questions about the constraints that shape policy choices and their efficacy. As Fingar and Oi look at recent developments in China, they see an approach to decision-making that consistently privileges the goal of preserving the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) monopoly of political power and minimizing any threats to the status quo. This has led to decisions to “revitalize institutions and methods from the past” in order to strengthen party control (13), with, according to Fingar and Oi, many negative consequences. Although this chapter is strong, it breaks little new ground in terms of approach or conclusions.

Part one is the strongest section of the book. Three of the chapters provide big-picture analyses of important areas of governance. Alice Lyman Miller reviews Xi Jinping’s push to achieve greater centralization of power, but challenges the view that collective leadership has given way to strongman rule. In her analysis, President Xi’s enhanced role reflects a consensus at the top that stronger leadership is needed to break policy deadlocks, while Xi’s actual power remains circumscribed. Although the centralization of power may inhibit economic innovation, Barry Naughton’s chapter shows in striking

fashion just how much effort the CCP is putting into promoting economic progress through a combination of practical initiatives and “utopian-fringed visions” (52). He calls this emerging program “grand steerage.” Naughton’s cogent analysis provides a highly insightful guide to the issues and factors to watch as the program proceeds into an uncertain future. In her chapter, Oi uses an examination of the central government’s effort to rein in local government debt to shed light on the current dynamics of central-local relations. The analysis is lucid and insightful, shining a light on the complex and uncertain effects of the centralization drive on the behaviour of local officials and the ability of the party to continue to create economic growth and dynamism. In the end, Oi argues that Xi’s approach to addressing local government debt has failed to address the underlying causes of the problem and, indeed, has created new instability in the system.

The other two very strong contributions are in part three, focused on external ambitions and constraints. Thomas Fingar’s cogent analysis of the “Sources and Shapers of China’s Foreign Policy” is exemplary in how it provides a useful guide to the dynamics of foreign policy in the coming years. Fingar disagrees that China has become a revisionist power, instead arguing that China has not abandoned its foreign policy approach of the past four decades. It continues to pursue party and nationalist objectives primarily by working within the existing system, seeking to play a more active role in reshaping it in pragmatic fashion. Ho-fung Hung’s chapter on “China and the Global South” agrees with and extends Fingar’s analysis. Hung argues persuasively that China’s “engagement with the Global South has much in common with the motivations, methods, and trajectories of other countries that have ‘gone abroad’ for economic reasons...” (270). As a result, China’s pursuit of overseas opportunities ends up deepening its dependence on the current rules-based order, while presenting numerous challenges that may be novel to China’s leadership, but that are familiar to students of history.

Yet the main weakness of this volume is that it includes chapters which add little to the big-picture analysis of “choices that will shape China’s future,” while ignoring issues that are clearly of vital importance. Quibbling about what is and is not included in an edited volume is often inappropriate, adding little to scholarly discourse. However, the editors state: “we think we have included the most important and consequential policy arenas” (28), thus inviting an examination of their choices. First of all, two chapters on the Belt and Road Initiative are far too narrow in scope, adding little of consequence to Hung’s comprehensive analysis. And a chapter in the domestic policy choices section uses an in-depth statistical analysis of human capital formation to make the mundane argument that the government needs to invest more in human capital development so as to maintain economic growth. These chapters, and a couple of others, take up space that could have been more productively occupied by direct analysis of challenges that are widely recognized as being critical in shaping China’s future: ensuring

the cohesion and legitimacy of the CCP, managing challenges to party/government policies, addressing inequality, and preventing ecological and environmental catastrophe. In particular, the scale and scope of the damage to China that would be caused by unmitigated climate change, ecological decline, and pollution mean that choices made in these areas will be the most consequential of all. Scholars of China would be well advised to recognize, in their work in a variety of research areas, the importance of these issues in shaping the ability of the CCP and China's people to achieve their goals in the coming decades.

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THE THIRD REVOLUTION: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State. *By Elizabeth C. Economy.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiv, 343 pp. (Graphs, B&W photos.) US\$27.95, cloth. ISBN 978-0-19-086607-5.

Xi Jinping's rise to power since 2013 has prompted a major reassessment of US foreign policy towards China. In this regard, US policymakers are faced with two substantial issues. The first is the widespread Cold War-era belief that economic liberalization will inevitably lead to political liberalization; US foreign policy has been guided by the assumption that economic liberalization and global integration can bring greater openness to China. The second issue is an insufficient attention to domestic conditions in China; policy analysis has often been conducted by geopolitical strategists with little understanding of the internal workings of the Chinese state.

Elizabeth C. Economy, a seasoned China specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations, seeks to overcome these problems in *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. Economy accomplishes two admirable objectives in this work: she dissects how the evolving domestic political situation under Xi and China's foreign policy intersect, and she generates a set of recommendations for US policy makers. Drawing on a wide range of sources including media reports, existing scholarship, and her own fieldwork in China, Economy weaves together an excellent account of the changes and continuities in Xi's China, particularly in the areas of politics, economy, and foreign policy.

The core of Economy's analysis of China's "third revolution" is Xi's political centralization. In chapter 2, Economy details the various political manoeuvres that Xi has employed to build a control mechanism, including the elevation of his personal power, the launch of ideological campaigns, and the enlargement of party leadership in the media, among others. This centralization process fundamentally distinguishes Xi's era from those of his two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, during whose administrations state decision making was characterized by collective leadership. Chapter

3 examines the Chinese government's success in dominating state-society relations in the age of the Internet. The new Chinese state has constructed, in Economy's words, a "Chinanet" that controls the flow of information both within the country and from outside of it. Contrary to some political analysts' expectation that the Internet can serve as a "political change accelerator," Xi has expanded the technological and human resource capacity of the state to successfully rein in any "vibrant virtual political space" (57) that appeared before he took office.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 highlight the nature of the state-led economy under Xi. Economy zooms in on three complex governance challenges—SOE reform, innovation, and environment—that are "at the heart of Xi's drive to modernise the economy" (13). Economy's thorough documentation of China's half-hearted efforts to conduct market reform since the Third Plenum in 2013 suggests that Xi will guide the state sector to "incur ever-high levels of debt, consume valuable credit and provide few new jobs" (120). At a time when media and scholarly interest have focused on China's innovation capacity, Economy spots a major flaw in Xi's innovation model, namely that the continued dominance of the Chinese state in the country's innovation ecosystem leads to a "significant waste of resources and inefficiencies" (150). Economy also uncovers similar problems associated with the excessive role of the state in tackling environmental issues.

Economy finds that the most drastic changes under Xi's China are in the area of foreign policy. In chapter 7, Economy provides a deep understanding of how Xi broke away from Deng Xiaoping's principle of low-profile foreign policy. She captures a wide range of policy issues, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the South China Sea, Arctic exploration, and the relationships with Taiwan and North Korea. Economy's analysis indicates clear limitations in Xi's vision to recast China as a great power, in particular that the state's aggression is believed to "often undermine the government's effort to improve its soft-power standing" (219). She is also sceptical about China's capability to take a global leadership role, emphasizing that it cannot yet place global responsibilities ahead of its own national interests.

Economy's recommendations for US policy making in the concluding chapter are as insightful and well written as her analysis of China. She does not endorse a containment strategy, arguing instead that the long-standing strategy of the US to "engage but hedge" still has "the virtue of orienting the relationship on a positive trajectory while nonetheless protecting U.S. interests in case China's intentions are malign" (235). She advocates a long-term strategy that relies on both proactive diplomatic engagement with China and cooperation with traditional democratic allies. She also remains attentive to the scattered discontent from different segments of Chinese society, therefore thoughtfully recommending that US policy makers "must remain attuned to the potential—however unlikely—for China to experience significant social unrest" (249).

Economy's examination of Xi's China could have benefitted from a discussion of the state's approach to rein in major business leaders. Since the era of Jiang Zemin, the Communist Party has increasingly integrated itself with the private sector by allowing business elites to join the Party and by encouraging Party members to go into business. Under Xi, has the state's strategy shifted from a model of co-optation and cooperation with the private sector to one of more control? Shedding light on this important question would have strengthened the book's evaluation of the new Chinese state.

Overall, *The Third Revolution* is an excellent example of high-quality academic research on China with a strong policy focus. The book is written in a journalistic style and is thus very readable, and would benefit anyone interested in China's new political landscape and future growth prospects.

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RELIGION IN CHINA. *China Today.* By Adam Yuet Chau. Cambridge; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019. xiii, 250 pp. (Map, B&W photos.) US\$27.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-7456-7916.

Most studies on Chinese religion are based on the differentiation of religious groups and practices into doctrinal classifications and then studies of each of these groups, as well as comparisons between these groups within a given context, such as the Buddhist and Christian responses to Chinese authority during the Reform and Open Era from the early 1980s. Some may position this classification into a historical or developmental framework to gauge the development or evolution of these groups, for example, regarding the origin and development of Chan (Zen) Buddhism; others may approach such groups from social, political, cultural, or economic perspectives in order to study the interaction of these groups with external elements, for example, Christianity and Chinese culture. In his new book *Religion in China*, Adam Yuet Chau proposes a new anthropological approach for interpreting the religious dynamics of Chinese religion by focusing on the functionality and phenomena of religious activities in the context of relational dynamics that effectively disregards the doctrinal differences within and between religious groups. Based on his fieldwork and published studies, Chau focuses on the following relations: cosmic entities (order, hierarchy, and relations between deities through religious practices); location of religious venues and festivals; ritual providers and clients; communities and networks; and state and religion. He emphasizes how religion functions to reaffirm and reshape doctrines, as well as to rebind communal relations across geographical boundaries. Chau also stresses the importance of the family unit, which often served as the primary *loci* of religious activities.

With this new frame of reference, Chau provides a fresh lens for

understanding religious dynamics in China that goes beyond the traditional doctrinal-textual tensions between religions, such as between Buddhism and Daoism, and focuses on the important social function of religion, regardless of confessional differences, in shaping and reshaping Chinese society. He provides clues to understanding the subtle and often sensitive nature of religion-state relations, such as the case of tree-planting at Longwanggou Temple in Northern Shaanxi by an environmental group from Beijing that can be seen as purely a civil and secular activity, yet one that takes place in a religious milieu resulting in a closer interaction between the state and religious groups. This is a common form of interface where both parties, despite ideological differences, can cooperate, with each side interpreting the relationship to its own advantage. Chau's approach provides a refreshing portrait of Chinese religious dynamics that opens many new lines of socio-religious inquiry that may cast new light on our understanding of religion in China. One example of this is the concept of *ling* (efficacy), which can be seen in terms of religious orthopraxy versus orthodoxy that echoes the White Cat/Black Cat analogue of Deng Xiaoping, and may initiate new discussions on the popularity of so-called evil cults, such as the Church of Almighty God or Falungong, that had drawn huge number of followers but which were banned by Chinese authorities as heterodox. Or another new line of enquiry may perhaps be the re-examination on the ecclesial structure of the House Church (Protestant) Movement, as this Christianized form of familial-communal-based religious practice is similar in structure to other Chinese religions that are also familial-communal based. Also, ritual provider-client relations may shed new light on the often family-based succession of ritual providers, even in non-traditional religious milieus, such as among the Chinese Christian churches, as many of these successions are based on family heritage despite the fact that Christian communities are supposed to be democratic and meritocratic. Such phenomenon may indeed be new evidence of the sinocization of religion.

While this book may perhaps be the first major attempt to interpret Chinese religion from a functional and relational perspective, there is room for Chau to enhance the credibility of his argument, perhaps in future writings. For example, he has made extensive use of one particular case from Northern Shaanxi to advance his thesis, and yet this case may reflect a very particular cultural-religious milieu not necessarily applicable elsewhere in China, or even to Southern Shaanxi, where the cultural-religious temperament, and even diet and climate, are rather different from Northern Shaanxi. Therefore, field data from other locations may be needed to provide a more comprehensive picture of religion in China since the country is hugely diverse in virtually all aspects of life. Also, the efficacy of citing cases from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese Mainland alongside one another is questionable due to the huge socio-political differences between these three places, especially in terms of the local religious policy that conditions

religious activities. For example, with the pilgrimage in Taiwan, the linkages between temples cannot be easily replicated in Mainland China due to the economic and political situation there. Also, perhaps in the future the writer may want to include some of the New Religions, such as Ba'hai and LDS, that have been introduced to the Chinese-speaking world over the previous decades, but especially in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and to interpret these from his new referential frameworks to determine whether these New Religions also fit his thesis. After all, we are living in a globalized world and Chinese religion cannot be immured from the rapidly changing landscape of global religious dynamics, especially new religious movements.

Overall, this is an excellent piece of serious academic work that opens new doors for the study of Chinese religion. It should not be missed by serious students of the field.

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THE CHINA-INDIA RIVALRY IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA. *Edited by T. V. Paul.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018. ix, 286 pp. (Tables, figures, maps.) US\$36.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-62616-600-4.

As power across all measures continues to shift from the West towards Asia, in the apparent realization of the much-lauded “Asian Century,” the study of Asia’s two largest states remains of ever-critical importance in global politics. As the main behemoths who look set to shape the contours of International Relations—and hence its underpinning order—as the 21st century progresses, appreciating the various dimensions of China-India relations is of increasing importance and pertinence to scholars, students, and policymakers alike. In addition, with strategic competition resurfacing between the United States and China (and the related balancing role of India taking on a much-scrutinized importance in these dynamics), and the Indo-Pacific region arguably becoming the most critical area of study in international relations, understanding the enduring China-India rivalry gains ever greater resonance. It is furthermore a bilateral relationship that, because of its centrality to contemporary Asian affairs, combined with the massive economic size of these two states, effectively *pulls* other major regional actors, such as Japan and Australia, towards their influence. It is within such a febrile and compelling context that this latest volume, edited under the aegis of T. V. Paul—a long-standing analyst and observer of these states and the region—enters our academic consciousness, and to which it seeks to make a lasting contribution.

Professor Paul has collected some of the most influential, as well as upcoming, voices on China-India relations from North America and Asia to investigate the key interplays and challenges facing relations between Beijing

and New Delhi. These scholars acknowledge the intrinsically multi-faceted nature of the India-China relationship, which frequently oscillates between conflict and cooperation, much to the consternation of regional observers. They are also critically informed by the wider structure of international relations—not just in terms of balance of power politics but also the ever-deepening globalization. In this volume, these themes are well covered in chapters ranging from the *sources* of this oscillation—territory (Mahesh Shankar), status (Xiaoyu Pu), conceptions of the world order (Manjari Chatterjee Miller), balancing strategies (Zhen Han and Jean-Francois Belanger), resource competition (Calvin Chen), and water disputes (Selina Ho), to their underlying *strategies*—strategic cultures (Andrew Scobell) and nuclear deterrence (Vipin Narang), to their possible *mitigation*—globalization (Matthew A. Castle) and global governance (Feng Liu).

What chimes throughout the volume is the sense that China-India relations are beset by rivalry on all fronts; not just the much-reported border disputes, but also emerging trade configurations (China's "Belt and Road Initiative" versus the Indo-Japan "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor"), regional leadership in South and East Asia, competition over resources (most pressingly water) and oft-competing world views and strategic cultures. Yet at the same time, these two also have a range of shared interests: both wish to benefit from globalized liberal trade in order to modernize and develop their societies, both desire a more prominent role on the global stage, and both wish to be suitably recognized as great powers by their peer powers. On this basis, as Paul notes, "enduring rivalries do not need to be intense and... they can be made less conflictual through mitigating actors and diplomatic choices that parties make" (5), which is a highly welcome and convincing refrain amidst other—frequently realist theoretical—analyses that actively seek to frame the China-India rivalry as doomed to direct conflict and all-out-war in the not-so-distant future. So too is the explicit desire for a broad theoretical and methodological plurality, with the volume's contributions not being beholden to a fixed analytical reference point, and instead embracing—and thus reflecting—the complexity of these relations through the deployment of diverse analytical frameworks, which ostensibly stretch across the available spectrum.

The biggest question the volume raises is how these two Asian giants might successfully overcome their perceived reality, associated narratives, and—most importantly—their toxic shared history, in order to eradicate notions of rivalry from their relationship? As each contributor notes in their own way, despite their differences there are increasingly areas for positive and tangible engagement between China and India, which significantly offset more negative pressures. What underpins their contemporary interactions however are also increasing power fluctuations within the international system between West and East, which is *magnifying expectations* as per what kind of future the two sides will engender. Without such intrigues, and

without American and other strategists being quite so obsessed with the rise of China (and more than likely the rise of India in the next decade or so), these burdens could be diminished and provide the space for China-India relations to flourish. This observation is not to say that unexpected events and shocks will not have the capacity to unwind closer ties, but that key to resolving perceptions of enduring rivalry is to create, sustain, and normalize perceptions of enduring stability. Such a new narrative—and the actuality of day-to-day relations—would benefit both sides, for whom regional stability are the keystones upon which their development, modernization, and status ambitions rest.

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THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: A History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. *By Yang Jisheng; translated from the Chinese and edited by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian. New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2021. 768 pp. US\$40.00, cloth. ISBN 9780374293130.*

Author Yang Jisheng, observer-participant during the first years of the Cultural Revolution, provides us with a privileged viewpoint on how China descended into the chaos of civil war. From his account, supported by extensive documentary evidence, we can enrich the lessons now accumulated from the previous work of other scholars. Importantly, it takes as a reference point the “anti-rightist” and forced march campaigns of 1957–1962. The party leadership responsible for the national catastrophe fended off critics (most notably, Liu Shaoqi for promoting “capitalist restoration”) not by backing away from the ultra-radical program but rather by deepening the “continuous revolution under [the guidance of] the dictatorship of the proletariat” (19). Here we find the prelude to the Revolution proper in the Socialist Education Movement (1963–1966). With an estimation of tens of thousands killed, it can be taken as a true dress-rehearsal. That is, far from a popular uprising, the continuation of the Revolution was a calculated maneuver by the leading inner circle of the Chinese Communist Party to consolidate its position.

Beginning in chapter 4, the account (much of it first-hand) of the waves of red terror and factional retribution, bewildering as their methods cruel, describes how the peculiarly virulent settling of intra-party scores of this kind is endemic to totalitarian systems. Readers will find their eyes turning away from the text in chapters that describe the sadistic violence perpetrated by all sides, that only came to an end with the death of the tyrant in 1976. In the end it is evident, by any objective measure, that none of the factions (neither their leaders nor the rank-and-file followers deceived into participating) deserve a positive historical judgement. At the same time it is correct to identify, as the core chapters do, the fuel that fed the rebellion

of the various tendencies of the Red Guard: a deep resentment against the government apparatus responsible for the Great Famine/Leap Forward. Here, however, we take note of a departure from the absolute objectivity that is required in this case of urgent political assessment: an implicit bias finds its way into the detailed narratives, one that leans subtly, but unnecessarily, in the direction of sympathy for the far-left “rebel” detachments. We can understand how the gasoline, cynically supplied by Mao and Jiang Qing to persecute their opponents in the party echelons, kept the cities burning. But from the beginning the planned mobilization, that eventually got out of their control, was never about what it appeared to be in the exalted slogans at the street level. This minor defect aside, the study is framed correctly (by the preface, chapter 1 and chapter 29): that progress toward rule of law in China will depend on presenting the full and unvarnished historical record of the events culminating in 1976, thus gaining an understanding of how the great dictator and his party, from the 1950s onward, evolved toward outright despotism. While a degree of free discussion of the Cultural Revolution is permitted today, it barely scratches the surface so as to preserve the vestiges of the cult of personality.

Most of the bewildering characterizations of “counterrevolutionary,” “revisionist,” “right-deviating opportunism,” etc., were no more than arbitrary categories that served as tags devoid of meaning outside of the jockeying for polemical advantage. But one of the labels hurled at some factional opponents turned out to be strangely prescient: “capitalist-roader.” Some form of the Reform and Opening, putting an end to Mao’s two-decade voluntarist “hell on earth” (xxiii), ending definitively only with the purge of his closest followers, was almost inevitable, and would be implemented by a layer of the bureaucracy that had not completely lost its senses. It was as predictable as *doi moi* in Vietnam, Perestroika and the fall of the Berlin Wall. With all its contradictions, the free-market road in China lifted the country—spectacularly, by all objective material measure—out of misery to economic super-power prosperity, a seeming “miracle ... freeing the long-confined potential of China’s workers” (616). If not to the perennially maligned layer of “revisionists” grouped around Deng Xiaoping (for different reasons, deservedly so after Tiananmen 1989), the task would have fallen to others.

As chapter 29 outlines, new tasks face the fledgling movement for democracy. For a parallel proposal, readers are encouraged to study the text of Charter 08, the related observations of its principal framer, and the broader discussion of implications in the review of *The Journey of Liu Xiaobo: From Dark Horse to Nobel Laureate* in the *China Review International* (vol. 20, nos. 1-2). Even as a witness at Tiananmen Square to the repression of 1989, Liu came to recognize that there was something real, a kernel consisting of a new popular consciousness, in Reform and Opening, that would give impetus to a resurgence of this movement.

The concluding chapter graphically shows how the ruling bureaucracy

consolidated its dictatorship as it singled out the Gang-of-Four aligned factions for punishment, to impose stability. The evidence of the massive expansion of internal security forces of the present regime while, not coincidentally, selectively appropriating features of personality cult-type governance, stands as one of the most important lessons of the historical period ending in 1976.

The most striking contrast of the book is revealed to us at the end, between the indoctrinated “rebel” Red Guards and the reform-minded vanguard of the April Fifth mobilization (in the wake of Zhou Enlai’s death) giving rise to the Xidan Democracy Wall of 1978, precursor to the movement of a generation with a completely different awareness, during the decade of the 1980s. The former were confused persecutors/victims imbued with the official state ideology of class struggle, the latter, self-educated and genuinely independent with a clear political program of their own. For the Democracy Wall movement, which had finally “liberated people’s thinking” (556), the Cultural Revolution was the last straw. As chapters 25 to 27 recount, it was the extenuating conditions of exhaustion, after twenty years of CCP-controlled “struggle,” that had finally come to a head.

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THE ABE DOCTRINE: Japan’s Proactive Pacifism and Security Strategy.

By Daisuke Akimoto. New York: Palgrave Macmillan [an imprint of Springer Nature], 2018. xv, 246 pp. (Illustrations.) US\$179.99, cloth. ISBN 978-981-10-7658-9.

THE ICONOCLAST: Shinzō Abe and the New Japan. By Tobias S. Harris. London: Hurst Publishers, 2020. 392 pp. US\$29.95, cloth. ISBN 9781787383104.

Japan’s recently resigned Prime Minister Shinzō Abe is often described as one of Japan’s most influential prime ministers ever, yet despite first becoming prime minister in 2006 at the age of 52 (Japan’s youngest prime minister to date) and being Japan’s longest-serving prime minister, there had not been a comprehensive English-language biography of Abe until now. Moreover, while there have been many articles and several books that have examined Abe’s policies as prime minister, including his foreign policies, the continuing evolution of Japan’s expanding regional and global security roles under Abe’s influence merits an additional volume on this subject. Together these two books offer in non-specialized language accessible to a general reader detailed coverage of Abe’s family ties to politics, entry into politics, rise to the premiership, and style and substance of governing—with a special focus on the likely legacy of Abe’s policy choices while in office.

The Iconoclast provides the more sweeping scope of the two books, beginning with the roles of Abe's family forebears in Japan's early constitutional history in the nineteenth century all the way through the early months of the global Covid-19 pandemic that swept the world in 2020. *The Abe Doctrine* examines one of Abe's most visible legacies as prime minister, the revamping of Japan's security policies and institutions, and the expansion of Japan's security-provider roles regionally and globally—an issue area that Harris also covers in a more chronological fashion. Both works utilize extensive Japanese- and English-language secondary literature as well as a wide range of media reporting and Japanese government documents. Moreover, both are solidly grounded in academic scholarship while focusing more on the policy outcomes and back stories to aspects of Abe's life and continuing legacy.

As a comprehensive biography, Harris's monograph devotes over half of its 335 pages of main text to the years prior to Abe's extended term as prime minister, from December 2012 through September 2020. Although with a natural focus on the extended Abe family, the early chapters of the book also provide a concise and clear introduction to the world of Japanese politics from its emergence as a constitutional monarchy in the late nineteenth century through the rise of Japan as an imperial power, its defeat in the Second World War, and its re-birth as a democratic, economic superpower in the postwar period (chapters 2 and 3). General readers should find of interest the powerful political family that Abe descends from, including that both his grandfather (Nobusuke Kishi) and his great uncle (Eisaku Satō) were postwar prime ministers, and that Abe succeeded his father (Shintarō Abe, who rose to become foreign minister) in his Diet seat. It is useful that Harris includes a one-page family tree at the start of the book to help illuminate the somewhat Japan-specific traditions related to adoption that pepper Abe's family tree—which explains, for example, why Abe's brother (current Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi) has a different surname from Abe. This section of the book reads more in the spirit of a biography, providing amusing anecdotes and vivid imagery of Shinzō Abe's world in his early years.

Sixteen additional chapters continue in a largely chronological progression from Abe's election as a member of the Diet in 1993 (chapter 4) through various leadership roles and ultimately to his first, brief term as prime minister in 2006–2007, then back “in the wilderness” (chapter 10) and “the comeback” (chapter 11), and then in the final seven chapters on Abe's policies, governing style, and legacy as prime minister from 2012–2020. These chapters read both as a biography of Abe as well as a chronicle of major political and foreign policy developments in Japan from 2006 to 2020. It is useful to see the (geo)political context of Abe's rise and time in power, but also makes it difficult for Harris to maintain a cohesive narrative and assert broader points beyond the chronology. Still, as the only available comprehensive English-language biography of Abe, perhaps better to have

erred on the side of inclusion to allow for a diverse pool of readers to find the information and context they seek.

Harris draws on a wide range of sources, including general scholarly literature in English, but in particular is able to utilize several Japanese-language biographies of Abe which are liberally cited throughout the book (though, unfortunately, Japanese-language citations are listed only in Japanese characters and without English-language title translations). Ninety-five pages of notes to the main text reveal a rich treasure-trove for scholars wishing to pursue specialized topics further, particularly for those who read Japanese. Harris's varied background as a doctoral student, writer of a long-lived political blog on Japanese politics, and consultant on Japan is evident in the impressive breadth of sources and analysis.

There is not one key take-away in Harris's tome. Instead, Harris generally presents multiple viewpoints on Abe's policies and his legacy, leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions on what inspired his actions. The final two chapters and the afterword focus on potential legacies in foreign and domestic policy. While Harris frames these final pages as essentially a toss-up regarding whether Abe will have a memorable set of legacies, he also makes two important points related to the future of Japan: first, that "Abe demonstrated the limits of strong leadership" (326); and second, that "Japan's most momentous decisions still lie ahead" (326). The latter point is developed by listing the many challenges Japan faces (economic, diplomatic, and demographic among them), which Abe could not have reasonably been expected to have solved despite his longest-ever years as prime minister. The former point, however, about the limits of executive power in Japan, illustrates well the special set of talents Harris brings to his analysis, matching an evident fascination with the minutiae of Japanese politics with a broader, scholarly interest in Japan's political development. This reviewer's view is that there are several candidates for Japan's most influential postwar prime minister, but agrees that only time will tell whether Abe will be placed in that group.

The so-called "Abe Doctrine" provides a bridge between the two books reviewed here, which Harris initially mentions in chapter 12 and develops further in chapter 13 and beyond. Harris writes that Abe's "approach to the world was distinct enough from the Yoshida Doctrine's vision of Japan's place in the world to merit a new name—the Abe Doctrine" (224), but apart from listing a number of different aspects of Abe's vision, it is not clear from *The Iconoclast* which tenets would define this new doctrine, and how we would measure if it continues beyond the Abe era. Akimoto seeks to address this question, though he is also not able to clearly articulate what defines an Abe Doctrine beyond difference to his predecessors' approaches.

Like *The Iconoclast*, Akimoto's book also benefits from his varied career path, including as a former professor as well as a political secretary in Japan's House of Representatives working with the minority coalition partner to the ruling party, the Kōmeitō. The Kōmeitō is supported in particular by the

religious group known as the Sōka Gakkai, which espouses as one of its core principles an interest in global peace. As such, the party is widely seen as exerting a moderating influence on Abe's goal of Japan engaging in more proactive security policies, a point Harris also stresses and which Akimoto explains in his chapter 4 discussion of the Diet debates over the important new security legislation passed in 2015 that constitutes one of Abe's most enduring legacies.

The Abe Doctrine consists of eight substantive chapters plus a very short introduction and conclusion. Two of the chapters that have been published previously as scholarly articles are also the chapters that provide the greatest new contributions to our understanding of aspects of what Akimoto and others (including Harris) have come to call "the Abe Doctrine." The book also includes a 31-page bibliography of Japanese and English sources (largely government documents and media reporting) and an 11-page index.

Just as *The Iconoclast* covers more ground than just Shinzō Abe, *The Abe Doctrine* also addresses more than just Abe—in particular engaging with the very meaning of Japan's "pacifism" and how Abe sought to coopt the term by repeatedly using a Japanese phrase that directly translates as "proactive pacifism" (*sekkyokuteki heiwashugi*), but is more commonly in English translated as "proactive contributions to peace." Akimoto explains this distinction in his first substantive chapter (chapter 2) and continues an examination of this theme throughout the volume. For those who do not speak Japanese, or are new to this subject area, this chapter will be of particular value to understand an important theme in postwar Japanese foreign policy beyond just the Abe Doctrine focus of the book. Similarly, readers new to this topic will find useful the following chapter's overview discussion of 15 potential security scenarios (or "cases" as Akimoto calls them) that Japan might face in the future and that the Abe government sought to explain to the Japanese public during the lead up to passage of the new security legislation in 2015. Those who follow Japanese security policy more closely will be familiar with the graphics included in the chapter from countless Japanese television broadcasts that illustrate the cases, but still may find useful the concise summaries and commentary provided by Akimoto in this chapter.

Subsequent chapters of the Akimoto volume address more directly the so-called Abe Doctrine, including the final substantive chapter (chapter eight) that notes that this term "Abe Doctrine" is not (yet) in wide use in Japan but rather is a contestation point among scholars and analysts that gets to the essence of the Abe legacy. Before that sum-up discussion of whether the Abe Doctrine amounts to a new "grand strategy" for Japan, chapters four through seven examine specific and important aspects of the Abe administration's security policies that might be construed as aspects of an Abe doctrine: exercising the right of collective self defense (chapter 4), strengthening of ballistic missile defense (chapter 5), deepening the

Japan-US alliance (chapter 6), and the latest case of Japan's contribution to United Nations Peacekeeping [in South Sudan] (chapter 7). Not much new ground is covered in these chapters, which to some extent have been overtaken by developments since the publication of the book, but the overviews are concise and well-convey the main challenges Japan (and Abe) has faced. Moreover, each of these case chapters further develops the central theme of the book about "the legal and political implications of the [2015] Peace and Security Legislation" (3).

In sum, Akimoto's *The Abe Doctrine* provides a very solid introduction to the complex terrain of Japan's military security policies that increasingly have both breadth and depth beyond what most readers will be familiar with—without deluging the reader with details or using difficult jargon. Akimoto also weaves in references to the major international relations theories and some of the latest scholarship from these schools of thought, but a detailed analysis of any one of these schools is not the goal of his book. After finishing the book, a reader will come away with a nuanced understanding of the complexity of Abe's legacy and be better able to explore the many threads of this legacy and the motivations behind Abe's decisions in other scholarly and popular writings.

Japan's political system has a history of former prime ministers continuing to serve in the Diet and also of playing a backroom role in advising the government. Abe's grandfather, former Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, served for almost two decades in the Diet after he stepped down as prime minister, and even longer in a backroom role. Although Shinzō Abe resigned for health reasons in September 2020, his relatively youthful age of 66 (at the time of this writing) suggests that both his legacy and future contributions will continue to shape Japanese politics and foreign policy for many years to come, and thus that a careful read of these two fine books is well worth the time both for scholars and for other watchers of Japan and the Indo-Pacific region.

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ANDREW OROS

THE BUSINESS REINVENTION OF JAPAN: How to Make Sense of the New Japan and Why It Matters. By *Ulrike Schaede*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. xiii, 261 pp. (Figures.) US\$30.00, cloth. ISBN 9781503612259.

Ulrike Schaede's important new book makes us reassess some of what we imagine Japan to be in the realms of business, regional politics, and international relations. Japan has quietly come up with a new strategy to coexist and compete with its giant neighbour China, a country which has been the focus of far more academic and policy attention. She calls this Japan's "aggregate niche strategy" and it positions Japan as an "agile, technically

sophisticated leader in a set of advanced products and industries critical to the global supply chain” (3–4). How this transformation came about without upheaval, its scope and limits, and what it portends for Japan in the global and regional political economy form the subject matter of this book.

The heart of Japan’s new strategy is “the pursuit of a series of niches that, in the aggregate, result in a sizable and lucrative presence on the innovative frontier” for Japanese companies, ahead of their competitors (72). One component of building this string of aggregate niches is strategic repositioning. Schaefer refers to her earlier work to draw attention to the long-evolving strategies among Japanese businesses to strategically reposition themselves for upstream core competition in the new digital economy: first choose-and-focus, then upgrade or pivot (74–75). Many of Japan’s well-known companies and conglomerates have spent decades closing down or shedding non-core business units, and they are helping to move Japan structurally away from its old industrial architecture focused on large-scale efficiencies in mass production (5). As much as possible, firms are choosing to focus their capabilities on the business of critical inputs in which they are becoming even more important in global supply chains, and which can turn out to be an important means for governments to exert political leverage in regional relations (69–70).

These inputs tend to be marked by strong and fairly predictable global demand and high profit margins, and are leading Japanese businesses towards structures that emphasize “small-batch deep-technology innovation” (5). Ideally, they are segments of the supply chain that are “upstream, difficult-to-make, and difficult-to-imitate,” reflecting a recognition that not all links in a supply chain are equally valuable, and underscoring a necessity if Japan is to remain competitive in the face of determined companies from South Korea, Taiwan, and China, among others (72–73). In industry after industry in Asian supply chains—smartphones, smart electronic motors in cars, vehicle power steering, carbon fiber, advanced sensors, medical and office automation equipment—Japan, invisibly, dominates product segments on the insides that may be small but are critical for anchoring subsequent production of other parts and goods (76–80). “Japan inside” means that we may all be brushing up against Japanese products every day without being aware of doing so. Even as Japan’s growth has slowed and America’s attention drifted, the aggregate niche strategy has helped position Japan as the “anchor of global supply chains and a central player in Asia” (95).

The process of reinvention is hardly uniform across the corporate landscape and shows the struggles that companies and workers face as they look for ways to exit some of their legacy businesses. This is just as true for small unknown companies as huge brand names such as Panasonic and Sony, both of which have had difficulties in breaking away from heritage technologies; nevertheless, they are still standing and carrying on, with collective net profits estimated at \$11 billion and 400,000 employees (93).

The difficulties and less-than-straightforward path towards reinvention also draw attention to a second, far more difficult, culturally infused component that underpins the new strategy: organizational renewal. This means that even as companies devise new or upgraded competencies to push forward, they must also pay attention to the reorganization of management processes to thrive in the marketplace of adaptive innovation. In turn, this draws attention to what she defines as Japan's "tight" cultural context—with strong behavioral norms about what is right and socially responsible—in which businesses operate. Schaede's point is not that the tight culture is positive or negative, bright or dark, but rather that it is a reality in which corporate changes in trajectories and identity need to navigate deeply held and widely shared preferences (31–42). The tight culture both constrains and shapes corporate options. The evolution and context raise deeper issues of corporate choices about speeding forward or providing stability, creating value, and employment.

Nobody can be sure of the right trade-off but the cases of Panasonic and Sony suggest that, while costly, there may be societal advantages to doing things contrary to pundit advice. Indeed, right at the start Schaede pinpoints the remarkable resilience of the country's social underpinnings in the face of deep and even prolonged social crisis, and points to a fundamental consensus over what may have made it possible. She suggests "[t]his is because ... Japan as a nation has prioritized stability over economic growth, slow adjustment over stock price indicators, and prosperity for many over profit for a few" (13).

The test of an informative work is how much it makes you rethink your own work and those of others. Schaede's findings have made me consider upgrading parts of my co-authored book a decade ago, and to reevaluate players who shape the competitive geography of the defense-industrial base (Saadia M. Pekkanen and Paul Kallender-Umezu, *In Defense of Japan: From the Market to the Military in Space Policy*, Stanford University Press, 2010). One specific aspect of that research was to trace the role of corporations in producing space technologies, such as rockets and satellites. In light of Schaede's work focused on Japanese businesses—as well as both older and newer works by other leading scholars that draw attention to production networks, supply chains, geopolitics, and the broader international relations of Asia (John Ravenhill, "Production Networks in Asia's International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, edited by Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot, Oxford University Press 2014, 348–370; and Etel Solingen, ed., *Geopolitics, Supply Chains, and International Relations in East Asia*, Cambridge University Press, May 2021)—I am inclined to pay far more attention to the nitty-gritty of supply chain segments, positioning on the "smile curve," and the very idea of "Japan inside" in understanding the production of the country's strategic space technologies across borders. Schaede's book not only advances our view of the possibilities for Japanese business reinventions on a variety of

technology frontiers, but also the broader nature of linkages that underpin the prospects for prosperity and security in Asia and beyond.

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SAADIA M. PEKKANEN

URBAN MIGRANTS IN RURAL JAPAN: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-growth Society. By *Susanne Klien*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020. xviii, 232 pp. (B&W photos) US\$90.00, cloth. ISBN 978-1-4384-7805-0.

This timely study about the growing number of Japanese urbanites relocating to rural areas provides some cautionary tales about unrealized dreams and the long shadows of mainstream norms. Due to the pandemic, in the last half of 2020 there was a net outflow of residents from Tokyo to other prefectures for the first time in twenty-five years, sparking speculation of what this portends in terms of employment practices, lifestyles, demographic trends, and Japanese society. Overall, Klien is cautiously optimistic about, “the huge potential rural areas hold with regard to providing migrants with more agency and self-determination over their lives” (68) and how this will transform Japan for the better.

Based on one hundred and eighteen interviews with “neorurals” during 2009–2017, including thirty-five women, Klien complicates the uplifting narrative of rural and personal rejuvenation that prevails. In her view, media coverage of this trend is overly positive, overlooking the real difficulties and disappointments that many migrants experience. She notes that, “the flip side of hope and aspiration is risk and insecurity” (xiv) and for many, a better quality of life remains elusive, in many cases because the migrants become too busy to enjoy the countryside. Even so, she finds that most are satisfied with their choice even as they struggle with overwork. Explaining the apparent contradictions, Klien finds that, “Moratorium migration [is] a fuzzy grey zone where work, lifestyle, leisure, self-realization, and precariousness all blend into one” (xxvi).

This multi-sited immersive ethnography provides rich detail about the lived experience of these migrants and how most were unable to escape the work-centred life that for many was the prime reason for relocating. In general, Klien finds that male migrants are more likely to replicate their work-centred urban lifestyles while, “Female settlers seem more focused on creating work that is compatible with their families, if they have one” (179).

There is much to be learned about the impact of 3.11 on urban migrants and the devastated local communities of Tohoku they relocated to. The volunteers/migrants left behind corporate drone lifestyles to take on the challenges of helping communities recover and make a difference in working at small underfunded NGOs or as entrepreneurs. There migrants found something missing from their urban orbits and satisfaction in helping those

who were coping with loss, some slowly settling in while others moved on. Klien interviews five female migrants and the various choices they made in adjusting to rural Tohoku and searching for a sense of belonging and purpose. Regardless of educational attainment, Klien observes that, “more often than not they tend to act in ways that imply an internalization of patriarchal norms and endorsement of traditional gender roles” (44). Yet in this she divines a strategy for women to “co-opt ingrained patriarchal norms to pursue their aims” (45), navigating around the constraints as “gentle shadows.”

The growth of Japan’s precariat of non-regular workers in low paid, dead-end jobs is a major push factor for migration, while the lower costs of living act as a magnet. The precariat constitutes thirty-eight percent of Japan’s labor force and its members can find similar jobs in rural areas where their limited incomes go further. It also seems many migrants appreciate the slower pace of country living with lower social and emotional pressures.

Moratorium migration also gives people a chance at self-reinvention and exploration, but others remain misfits. Ironically, one male loner with limited social skills and little interest in engaging locals, worked as a community volunteer for regional revitalization. Unsited to the job, he embraced the isolation and seemed untroubled by his marginalization, confiding that his relocation helped him to stop, “worrying about what other people think of him, since so many of his suggestions were rejected or met with lack of understanding” (78). Such are the blessings of distance from censorious relatives and acquaintances.

Others feel the pressure in paradise because incomes are low, and time is swallowed by work and social obligations. *Urban Migrants* explores how difficult it is for migrants to escape mainstream norms and values as they navigate the riptide of agency and anomie in their adopted communities.

Klien, however, also encounters youth who find in mobility a means of downshifting and remaining untethered rather than obsessed with upward career mobility. These “social mavericks,” according to Klien, are change agents who, “veer from conventional life courses by opting for alternative practices” (90), and in doing so pioneer new ways of living and working. She expresses optimism about how increasing employment precarity is propelling individuals to “carve out a niche for themselves in their quest for a sustainable future that both provides a livelihood and is emotionally satisfying” (91). In this sense, mobility can be an empowering path to self-reinvention and personal growth, but it’s also fraught with risk.

Most people don’t make a living by doing what they enjoy, but the possibility of doing so beckons. Here we meet a few lucky ones who, through serendipity, planning, and hard work are able to tap their networks and entrepreneurial skills to establish rural niches. It also helps, Klien notes, to come from means and have high social capital. Others improvise, cobbling together various jobs while finding small joys in rustic pleasures, but Klien

reminds us that many migrants “become so engrossed in their work that in many cases there is no divide between work and leisure anymore” (104). Most migrants seem to live continually on the cusp of realizing their ideal lifestyle, if only they had more time and less work.

Moreover, the anxieties of risk abound as, “Many lifestyle migrants grew up in protected middle-class households with housewife mothers and breadwinning fathers, and they find themselves in the position to fend for themselves for the first time” (142). These younger migrants are children of the “lost decades” when hope faded along with faith in the Japan, Inc. model of life-time employment and the security it ostensibly conferred on their parents’ generation. They may not find fulfillment in their rural idylls, but relish “the convenient state of permanent limbo” (143) living in the present free from the tyranny of aspiration and planning for the future.

These inspiring tales from the field help us better understand the contradictions, improvisations, and anomie that shape migrants’ countercultural search for self-growth. There’s lots to like in this cool Japan of mavericks and renegades, even as they scramble to make ends meet. Yet, despite Klien’s upbeat take on the prospects for this quiet revolution, it’s hard to avoid a gnawing sense that the powerful social patterns and norms she identifies will remain powerful constraints for the foreseeable future. Here’s hoping I’m wrong.

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JEFF KINGSTON

BEYOND THE GENDER GAP IN JAPAN. *Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies. Edited by Gill Steel.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019. vi, 275 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$25.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-472-03770-4.

Japan is one of the most economically developed countries in the world and is the only non-Western country that is a member of G8. Despite this economic achievement, the representation of women in politics and corporate management is the lowest among G8 countries and even lower than that of many developing countries. The book, *Beyond the Gender Gap in Japan*, edited by Gill Steel, examines the complexity of women’s labour and political participation in Japan. A number of studies about Japanese women have provided analysis of the ways they experience gender inequality and how its perpetuation is maintained in Japanese society. The strength of this edited volume is its focus on the change in the representation of women over time and the agency of women in making their life and family lives better despite gender-based constraints. The collection of 14 essays, each highlighting the experiences of a different group of women, showcases diversity in their life choices and responses to the gendered-based constraints in both the

corporate world and politics. By doing so, the book gives an intricate and dynamic picture of Japanese women that is different from the static image of women victimized by sexism that is painted by the rankings of the several international gender equality indices such as the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index and the United Nations Development Program's Gender Inequality Index.

The book consists of four sections, three of which are dedicated to studies of Japanese women's broader political participation. However, it starts with a section on "how women live (and want to live)" (23). Despite the high level of women's labour participation, traditional gender expectations that correspond with and reinforce a nuclear family with a breadwinner husband and homemaker wife still severely limit women's advancement into managerial positions. Womenomic policies meant to increase the number of women in managerial positions have mostly failed because the long-standing corporate custom of long work hours and unwavering dedication to work has never changed (chapter 1). In addition, even if men are willing to accept a new role that includes housework and childcare, most of them continue to embrace the internalized masculine expectation of career success (chapter 2). However, women are actively shaping their lives to promote their own welfare by strategically choosing which activities they engage in during their free time (chapter 3) or even remaining single (chapter 4).

The next three sections are dedicated to women's broader political participation. Section two focuses on "how and why women participate in politics" (101). It highlights a contradictory influence of traditional gender expectations—particularly motherhood—on women's political engagement (chapters 5 and 6) and the role of women's divisions in the Liberal Democratic Party in mobilizing support and influencing public policies (chapter 7). The last chapter in this section discusses the rise of Koike Yuriko, a prominent female politician who was elected governor of Tokyo, and the ways she navigated the masculine national political scene (chapter 8). Section three addresses "how public policy tries to influence private behaviours" (167). It discusses the politics of everyday life used by both women activists and the government for different political interests (chapter 9), the limitations of promoting three-generation households to address the issue of childcare (chapter 10), and the government's effort to manage gender stigma in the international community (chapter 11). The last section examines the "uneven change in women's representation" (313). It analyzes the representation of women in local and national politics and their different roles in the government and policy-making. Despite the majority of Japanese citizens accepting political leadership by women, their advancement into national-level elected office has been slow because of a lack of critical resources such as money and an associational support base, women's primary role as homemaker and caregiver, and masculine work expectations typically observed in corporations. On the other hand, we have

seen a substantial increase in the presence of women in local elected offices. Local politics tend to deal with issues that directly affect women and their families and participation allows them to stay in their communities (chapter 12). Even in national-level politics and policy-making, the representation of women in the cabinet, advisory councils, and ministry bureaucracy has also significantly increased since the 1990s. The high level of discretion in appointing ministers, low employment constraints for serving in the councils, and the gender quota required for hiring agency bureaucrats have all led to a higher representation of women compared with national-level elected office (chapter 13). The last essay argues that the national gender quota and the political system with its larger districts will increase the representation of women in national-level elected office.

Overall, this book offers an excellent collection of essays that show the complex and diverse life choices that Japanese women make within their gender-based constraints. Steel argues that changes in corporate customs and structure, the introduction of the national gender quota, and electoral system reforms are necessary for women's advancement into national politics and higher positions in the corporate world. However, she also notes that Japanese women generally do not demand significant change because they "benefit from the security the system engenders" (17). Is reform possible or even desirable when women themselves do not call for it? This is the question that remains unanswered.

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AKIKO YASUIKE

INTO THE FIELD: Human Scientists of Transwar Japan. By *Miriam Kingsberg Kadia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. xviii, 317 pp. (Maps, B&W photos.) US\$30.00, paper. ISBN 978-1-5036-1061-3.

Into the Field is a well-written, meticulously researched intellectual biography of anthropologist Izumi Seiichi (1915–1970). Second, it is a study of his transwar generation of human scientists, whom Kadia dubs the "men of one age" or "field generation." Third, to contextualize Izumi's career, it offers short introductions to topics including the Japanese puppet Mongol state of Mōkyō; the development of American studies in Japan and Japanese studies and area studies in the United States; the "Inca boom" in Japan; ethnic Japanese in Brazil; pre-Incan civilizations in Peru; student protests of 1968; and concepts including race, culture, objectivity, modernization, and Nihonjinron. Readers may be frustrated by shallow coverage of topics in their field while being inspired to learn more about others.

The structure is chronological, but Izumi's varied career means each chapter focuses on a different topic. It begins with fieldwork in the empire. As an undergraduate at Keijō Imperial University in Japan's colony Korea,

Izumi was inspired by reading Malinowski to study “primitive” people. He joined an advisor on fieldwork sponsored by the Kwangtung Army in an Oroqen village near the Manchukuo-Soviet border, where he supplied subjects with opium in return for interviews. Izumi’s report was published in *Minzokugaku kenkyū* (Japanese Journal of Ethnology), and the next year he studied a different Tungusic group and published another article, all before he graduated.

We get little feel for Izumi as a person or a scholar here. Kadia describes his academic writings but rarely quotes from them or from his autobiography. Yet through these early experiences, Kadia describes characteristics of imperial human science: fieldwork in remote strategic locations, government or military sponsorship, newspaper publicity, “objectivity” and “scientific” knowledge as goals, a focus on *minzoku* (translated as race-nation) rather than simply race, and blaming signs of cultural and social decline such as opium use and language loss on Chinese influence while describing Japanese imperialism as benevolent.

After war began in 1937 one more feature was added: large group fieldwork. Izumi played a leading role in two expeditions, to Mōkyō in 1938 and to New Guinea in 1943, supported by universities, government, corporations, newspapers, and the military. Kadia quotes the leader of the Mōkyō expedition explaining that “[s]cholars are the front line of the march ... humble troops in the culture war on the Asian continent” (44). The research reports assigned Japan a moral responsibility to rescue Mongols and other ethnic groups from Chinese exploitation, but Kadia notes that these expeditions provided little useful information for policy makers or military planners. They were more successful in generating public fascination with exotic “others” through newspapers, documentaries, and exhibitions, and building up academic fields, including ethnology. Importantly, they established group fieldwork as standard, and cemented personal and institutional ties by bringing together diverse groups of scholars in remote locations where, supplied with prodigious quantities of alcohol, they learned more about each other than the people they were studying.

In the postwar period they adapted to—and helped create—new national aims and values, funding sources, and global connections that closed off some research possibilities and opened up others. Japan’s human scientists and America’s pioneering postwar Japan scholars began to build personal and institutional relationships and establish programs that still exist. But Kadia also emphasizes how research done to support imperial Japan was turned to American Cold War uses, as in the Human Relations Area Files project that translated studies on strategically important areas, including Izumi’s report on the Mongolian expedition, with CIA funding.

In the postwar period, explains Kadia, the ideals imposed on and accepted by Japan were democracy, capitalism, and peace, and since achieving

these meant building a “cultural nation” (*bunka kokka*), culture became the key subject of analysis for human scientists. Izumi helped build Japan’s first cultural anthropology program at the University of Tokyo. He also began a series of studies on migration within and beyond Japan: villagers in Hokkaidō, Koreans from Jejudo in Tokyo, and later, pioneering work on Japanese emigrants and their descendants in Brazil that made him a founder of Nikkei studies.

One reason Izumi looked abroad for research opportunities, suggests Kadia, was an “ethnographic refusal” experience when he was chastised by an Ainu interviewee for “exploiting us” (139). From 1958 to 1969 he conducted archaeological digs in Peru. There he not only changed scholars’ understanding of Andean history but developed new methods that included assembling interdisciplinary teams and collaborating with local indigenous communities and scholars. Although his discoveries at Kotosh were from the Chavín era (going back to 900 BCE) and far earlier, they ignited an “Inca boom” in Japan because Incas were the familiar symbol of Peru’s past.

Kadia argues that the Inca boom pushed aside lingering concerns over war guilt and “ushered in a new, more positive formulation of Japanese identity: Nihonjinron, or the ideology of Japanese uniqueness” (184). This reviewer is not persuaded. Kadia points to a 1966 book by Masuda Yoshio arguing that both the Incas and Tokugawa Japan were isolated and ethnically pure, managed their states efficiently, and were skilled at cultural borrowing. Such ideas could just as well be a result as a cause of Nihonjinron. Kadia herself offers another explanation: “the very success of modernization led to the creation of a national identity that returned attention to racial and cultural sources of Japan’s supposed preeminence” (186).

In her final chapter, Kadia argues that by the upheavals of 1968 the “men of one age” realized that their cherished objectivity had limitations and that modernization had costs, but did not admit responsibility for supporting the state before 1945. Therefore “it was they who inaugurated the changes that ultimately forced them and their worldview from authority” (190). Of course none of this was unique to Japan, as she acknowledges. Kadia asserts that the next generation of human scholars rejected objectivity and embraced Nihonjinron. One wishes she had qualified this. Surely only part of that generation “trained an analytical gaze on the Self with the goal of understanding and reinforcing Japan’s contemporary economic dominance” (214).

Kadia is critical of Izumi and his generation for several things, including their wartime work and their failure to understand the complaints of student protestors in 1968, but she leaves final judgements to the reader. This book nicely complements Andrew E. Barshay’s work on social scientists (*The Social Sciences in Modern Japan: The Marxian and Modernist Traditions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). *Into the Field* is an

important, thought-provoking, impressively researched contribution to our understanding of how human scientists shaped Japan's views of itself and others in the twentieth century.

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TIMOTHY S. GEORGE

OTAKU AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IMAGINATION IN JAPAN. *By Patrick W. Galbraith. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019. 325 pp. (B&W photos, illustrations.) US\$27.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-4780-0629-9.*

However one might wish to define them, the *otaku* form one of the more interesting social groups to emerge out of recent Japanese cultural history. At once a product of Japan's heady economic prowess of the late 1980s (*otaku* continue to be defined in part by hyper-consumerist knowledge and behaviour), and yet also of the collapse of that same economy (so that people also see the *otaku* as forming an alternative to—or even a critique of—contemporary capitalist social formations), there seem to be contradictions built into the very idea of the *otaku* as a new social form. This is a contradiction, then, that would seem to have clear relevance for anyone interested in the social implications of late modern capitalist life. Much more simply, *otaku* are also the latest marker for Japan as a place of creative cultural difference—a “weirdness,” in Patrick Galbraith's terms, that only enhances a now decades-long global fascination with them.

Galbraith knows this world well. He has been impressively prolific in his writing about *otaku* culture, and this book brings together much of his work in a coherent, broader picture. It presents to us Galbraith's deep commitment to, and detailed understanding of, this world; in many ways, it is an *otaku*'s book on the *otaku*. Galbraith is careful to reference his points with frequent citation of related scholarly works—but he typically does not pursue those related arguments in great depth, choosing instead to stick to his own careful descriptive approach. It is thus of relevance to academic concerns, but it is also a book that will be easily accessible to a more popular readership.

The book is structured in part as a history, and in part as an ethnography of *otaku* life in contemporary Japan (and to an extent, across the globe). As a history, the focus is on some of the contexts within which “*otaku*” traits and interests emerge. Here, too, there is an insider's fascination with detail, that nonetheless is important for an understanding of a bigger picture. We see, for example, Miyazaki Hayao deciding at one point that he hates the *otaku*; this small moment points to a much larger set of distinctions developing within Japanese popular culture that would be worth pursuing. The book also gives emphasis to the terms and conditions of desire that appear typical of mass culture anywhere, but that in these cases are more strictly definitive of the *otaku* world. In particular, ideas of gendered relations point to a

unique conception of gender, that does not easily translate across markets or cultures. At the same time, Galbraith openly states that he's approaching this world principally from a male otaku's perspective (even while he then interestingly complicates what a "male" otaku is)—this might reinforce the questionable idea that otaku culture is mostly masculine. I'd be very interested to hear more from the women involved, but perhaps that will come from Galbraith's next work.

For this reader, the book most fully comes to life in its more ethnographic sections (which, it should be noted, seem to derive from fieldwork done especially around the early 2000s). Reading carefully, one can see in Galbraith's descriptions some of the truly fundamental change Japan has undergone since the 1980s bubble economy, with (arguably) maid cafes displacing the whole "salaryman" world of after-work hostess bars that were so central to an earlier social era. And the depiction of maid cafe regulars is deeply instructive—showing social relations based simply on "qualities" derived from well-known fictional characters (so that a cafe regular might simply desire that quality, and seek out anyone with that quality, regardless of age, gender, etc.). Reading passages like these, one truly starts to feel the deep-set differences in sociality that therefore do seem to define a truly unique, distinct social world.

The book is framed as an anthropology of imagination, and in particular the ability to imagine a new world. There are real, effective glimpses of some of the multitude of ways in which this does happen. But at times it's not really clear where the boundaries of something like an otaku identity might lie. Is it only men? And is it a Japanese or a global social identity? National, international, or transnational? It seems to be all of these, but with boundaries of difference at each level—and so it would be helpful to hear more on what these differences might be.

More generally, Galbraith tends to return to a basic set of binaries that run through each of his arguments: almost everything is depicted as an opposition of the fictional vs. the real; 2-dimensional vs. 3-dimensional; "weird" vs. normative (or "Cool"); and national vs. non-national. Although these thus seem to be organizing ideas, they remain at times somewhat elusive (what's really at stake in calling something "2D"?). And Galbraith himself seems to want to escape these binary sets—hinting at ways in which the performative quality of otaku life, for example, means that their playful characters are neither simply fictional nor crudely "real." Or, by the last chapter, that the otaku world is neither simply national nor transnational. But the book shows how difficult it is to escape these modes of social thought, and for the most part tends to return to a reliance on them.

Ultimately, the book is very effective in raising the more fundamental question that seems to be begged by this world, as to *how* different the difference of otaku life really is. Are otaku types in fact the harbingers of a kind of sociality that is genuinely new and unseen, even within other

hyper-consumerist mass cultural societies? Similarly, does the category of “subculture” need to be fundamentally rethought in view of this world? Galbraith at least points us in the direction of some possible answers, in his vivid description of differently-imagined lives that are certainly not just imaginary. In the process he has produced a book that is replete with elements of interest for scholarly and non-scholarly readers alike.

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THOMAS LOOSER

REFRAMING DISABILITY IN MANGA. *By Yoshiko Okuyama. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020. xxi, 213 pp. (Illustrations.) US\$62.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8248-8236-5.*

Reframing Disability in Manga begins and ends with a personal statement, each one providing the answer to a broad question concerning the purpose of the author's study of the portrayal of disability in manga. The introduction asks, “Why disability?” while the afterword asks, “Why manga?” Manga is a medium capable of inspiring intense affective attachment to stories and characters, while disability is a deeply intimate issue that affects the sense of individual identity of almost every human being, regardless of whether they choose to identify as “disabled.” Yoshiko Okuyama's decision to bookend her monograph with her own experiences is an apt way to frame her work as a conversation with the reader, as well as an indication of the sensitivity of her treatment of potentially uncomfortable topics.

Reframing Disability in Manga contains seven chapters in addition to the short introduction and afterword. The first two chapters establish a theoretical framework for discussions of media and disability, and each of the remaining five chapters focuses on a broad category of disability. Understanding that many readers may not be familiar with the manga under consideration, Okuyama has structured each chapter to include short “case studies” that are visually distinct from the main text. Each case study introduces a specific manga title, profiles its artist, and includes a high-quality cover image. The well-structured organization of each chapter renders the monograph accessible to non-specialist readers interested in representations of disability in manga and other forms of popular entertainment media, including transnational cinema and superhero comics.

The first two chapters contextualize disability within Japanese history and media culture. “Theorizing Disability” provides a number of key Japanese expressions informing discourses of disability, from religious terms such as *inga* (karma) to social media buzzwords such as *kandō poruno*, a loose translation of the pejorative “inspiration porn,” which activists use to refer to ableist depictions of disability as an adversity that can and should be overcome for the benefit of able-bodied people. “Media and Disability”

further contextualizes the topic of disability within international discourses of media representation and social justice. This chapter serves to provide readers unfamiliar with disability studies with a concise yet thorough introduction to the field and includes the perspectives of academics and activists speaking from within different countries, cultures, and legal systems.

Each of the following five chapters focuses on a specific category of disability. The third chapter, "Portrayals of Deaf Characters," challenges the trope of the action hero "supercrip" in *seinen* manga by examining depictions of deaf characters "as real human beings who demonstrate their deafness authentically through the use of real signs" (48). Okuyama seeks to demonstrate that the common graphic portrayal of deaf people as characters with supernaturally attuned senses and an almost magical ability to lipread is far removed from reality, and that this gap in public perception can be closed by more nuanced representations.

The fourth chapter, "Gender and the Wheelchair," continues the discussion of the previous chapter regarding how accurate portrayals of physically disabled people can address the common notion that disability only exists as a condition to be cured. Partially because of the relative paucity of mobility-impaired manga heroines, this chapter focuses on men who use wheelchairs to navigate sports, love, and their sense of masculinity. Of special note is Okuyama's reading of Inoue Takehiko's bestselling basketball manga *Real* (*Rearu*). Among the manga titles discussed in this book, *Real* is perhaps the most widely translated and thus the most accessible to readers with limited Japanese. Okuyama expands on this investigation of the intersections between disability in the fifth chapter, "Narratives of Blindness," which focuses more on female characters in *josei* manga intended for more mature readers.

"Heterogeneity of Autism," the sixth chapter, begins the chapter with a short summary of the recent transnational movement to reconfigure the stigma of "developmental disorders" (*hattatsu shōgai*) into a more inclusive understanding of neurodiversity. This discussion will be of special interest to instructors working in higher education, many of whom have been asked to accommodate neurodiverse students without receiving any background training in the difficulties these students face while navigating inflexible educational systems as they struggle to define their own identities. Building on the gender politics of the previous chapters, Okuyama also touches on how reading sensitive portrayals of "ordinary, utterly exhausted mothers who have been battling [stereotypes regarding their children's autism] without a community support system" can contribute to our understanding of the social pressures faced by mothers in contemporary Japan (123).

The final chapter approaches transgender and queer identity as a "disability." The author understands that this is problematic and foregrounds the chapter with a lengthy apology. Nevertheless, after this introductory apology has been concluded, "dissociative gender identity disorder" is treated with the same methodological approach as the disabilities covered in other

chapters. The author's choice of texts in this chapter serves to emphasize this disconnect, as narrative elements that had been previously critiqued in the context of disability tend to form the core of many stories shared within the LGBTQ+ community. To give an example, a queer protagonist overcoming difficulty in order to be accepted by their straight friends and family is often the happy ending to coming-out narratives, and it is difficult to view such stories through a lens that sees "inspiration porn" as detrimental to the concerns of identity politics. The author's ambivalence is clear throughout the chapter, which reads as oddly defensive at times. Although Okuyama provides an entirely reasonable justification for why a chapter on queer and transgender identity would be included in a book about disability, it is still a slightly uncomfortable addition.

Any of the chapters in *Reframing Disability in Manga* could stand on their own as teaching materials, particularly as supplements to curricula on global approaches to disability or the portrayal of minority identities in popular media. The clarity of Okuyama's writing and the well-defined structure of each chapter contribute to the accessibility of the monograph, which is of interest to experts in the field of Japanese studies as well as to readers with broader research interests. The accessibility of Okuyama's study is apt because, as many activists operating within academia and on social media have argued, "manga can serve as an agent of social change and can challenge the reader's perception of normalcy and bias toward people with disabilities" (150).

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SPECIAL DUTY: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community.
By Richard J. Samuels. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019.
xxvii, 355 pp. (Tables, figures, B&W photos.) US\$32.95, cloth. ISBN 978-1-5017-4158-6.

As with his other publications, Richard Samuels has written an ambitiously large book that mates prodigious description with incisive analysis. The title of the book comes from *tokumu kikan*, the name of special duty units established by the Japanese imperial military in the 1930s for covert action (xvi). The book has chapters introducing the theory and practice of intelligence, and five historical case studies: its birth and growth from 1895 until 1945; accommodating defeat during the Cold War; what Samuels calls tinkering with failure from 1991 to 2001; reimagining possibilities, from 2001 and 2013; and "reengineering," from 2013 until 2018, thereby setting up the Abe administration as an agent of change.

Chapter 1 reviews the theoretical literature on intelligence, illustrated with many concrete examples. One might quibble with the fact that most examples are drawn from the US, with far fewer examples (excepting Japan

itself) from the UK, France, or Germany, and even fewer examples from non-Western countries. This is disappointing, given that Samuels quotes the first director of Japan's Defense Intelligence Headquarters, the country's largest image and signals collection organization, as claiming that the UK "model is closer in size, scope, and historical relevance" (13). An important message from this chapter is that Japan perennially suffers from three intelligence deficiencies that plague intelligence agencies elsewhere, but afflict Japan even more: group think, siloism (or stove-piping), and weak political control of intelligence agencies as part of a wider pattern of weak political control over bureaucracies.

Samuels identifies three drivers of change in intelligence: external environment, or strategic, change, technological development, and failure. He further distinguishes six elements of intelligence: collection, analysis, communication, protection, covert action, and oversight. However, one can question whether covert action belongs. This seems to be an artifact of institutional design in many countries, if not the conventional use of the term "spy," rather than a concept intrinsically linked to other elements of intelligence (25–27).

At least once Samuels appears to equate intelligence success with success itself, almost equating knowledge with power. As social scientists know from painful experience, possessors of knowledge are often simultaneously bereft of the power to act on that knowledge. Samuels calls the capabilities of Commodore Perry's "black ships" an intelligence failure for the Tokugawa (xvii). However, it is not clear that even if the shogunate had possessed perfect intelligence, the bakufu could have been better prepared. In fact, one could even call the shogunate's response an intelligence success since they did not underestimate Western military capabilities as China had during the Opium War, and thus did not suffer the same disastrous consequences (of which Edo was well aware). Arguably, the Tokugawa made the right mix of concessions that staved off attack while not conceding too much. If there was an intelligence failure, it was domestic: the failure to see how concessions to Perry could destabilize the bakufu, leading to its collapse 15 years later.

The Cold War chapter argues that Japan's intelligence community laboured under the twin burdens of delegitimization as an extension of Japan's anti-militarist delegitimization of armed forces, and subordination to its US ally. Dependence produced intelligence tensions under the surface, as the US reportedly blocked Japan from acquiring surveillance satellites, and the GSDF kept the code names of its intelligence units secret from their US interlocutors, illustrating "a long undercurrent of resentment of Japan's subordination to its US partner" (xv, 234). According to Samuels, the Japanese intelligence community "only recently has begun the delicate process of freeing itself" from US dependence "by enhancing indigenous capabilities without denying itself the benefits of U.S. intelligence support" (xv). Others have identified this process as Japan's decentering

from exclusive dependence upon the US as its sole security partner (Paul Midford, Wilhelm Vosse, eds., *New Directions in Japan's Security: Non-US Centric Evolution*, Abingdon, 2020).

Chapter 6 deals with Abe's "reengineering of the intelligence community" since 2013, starting with the Designated State Secrets Law (DSSL). It is worth noting that preparations for this law began during two previous DPJ cabinets. Samuels insightfully observes "Japan's discourse on state secrets migrated from its past preoccupation with the experience of wartime authoritarianism to a more universal concern for the preservation and health of democratic norms" (207). Yet he does not confront the reason for this, namely that Abe's version of this law included illiberal criminal penalties for journalists who publish state secrets. In other words, this was arguably the first postwar security-related law that directly challenged liberal democratic norms.

The second major change Samuels analyzes is the reform of the National Security Council and the creation of the National Security Secretariat under it, also in 2013, for the purpose of overcoming siloism and producing all-government actionable intelligence that would respond to policy makers' needs. Samuels credits this "reengineering" to Abe as a "relentlessly focused prime minister who was distinguished by his willingness to expend political capital for intelligence reform" (216). Given that others have found Abe to be more focused on ideology than on traditional security (Bryce Wakefield, "Centered on the fight within: the inward-looking nature of the Japanese debate on constitutional reinterpretation with a diluted US focus," in Midford and Vosse, eds., *New Directions in Japan's Security*, 27–43), one wonders whether some of this "relentless focus" should be credited to former Foreign Minister Machimura Nobutaka, who was a driving force for intelligence reform. Samuels credits Abe's reforms as the first serious reengineering of postwar intelligence institutions, but reform that has nonetheless been modest (the NSS has less than 90 employees, 212) and of mixed success.

Samuels argues that Abe's reforms were intended as "a security hedge," a "prudent course in the face of declining US capabilities relative to China." The Abe administration essentially was "positioning the alliance to transcend the alliance should it become necessary" (253). Summing up the limitations of Abe's reengineering, Samuels observes that "stovepipes never went away, and a robust HUMINT (human intelligence) capability has yet to arrive" (255). It is also striking that most of this reengineering took place in 2013 and then appeared to stall, with the Abe administration by 2015 rejecting a "Nihonban CIA" HUMINT organization "as moving too far and too fast" (254).

Overall, Samuels plots the trajectory of Japan's intelligence community as "like a sine curve—one in which Japan's intelligence infrastructure expanded, receded, and now is poised to expand again" (255). However, his own account raises questions over whether that expansion stalled by 2015. The first significant academic book in English, Samuel's magisterial work on

Japan's postwar intelligence community will be the standard work on the subject for years to come.

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PAUL MIDFORD

ELUSIVE LIVES: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia. *South Asia in Motion*. By Siobhan Lambert-Hurley. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. ix, 281 pp. US\$29.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-5036-0651-7.

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's *Elusive Lives: Gender, Autobiography, and the Self in Muslim South Asia* is a deeply researched, sophisticated, and beautifully written study of South Asian Muslim women's autobiographical life writing from the earliest known examples to the late twentieth century. Lambert-Hurley brings rich perspective to her study. She has studied the voluminous life writing of Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum in her monograph on this important princely ruler, edited a travel account by Sultan Jahan's grandmother, and introduced a memoir written by Sultan Jahan's granddaughter. She also co-edited an account written by the iconoclastic Atiya Fyzee (who reappears in the book at hand). Lambert-Hurley has also been deeply involved in collaborative work on life narratives, participating in a project on "Women's Autobiography in Islamic Societies" (2010–2011) and co-editing a volume (*Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia*, Duke University Press, 2015) stemming from a multi-year project focused on women's life writing. In contrast to these and similar projects, this book ambitiously sets out to move beyond studies of discrete texts and rather to generalize about her sources.

Each of the book's five chapters takes on an elegantly simple dimension of these generalizations: "*what, who, where, how, and why,*" topics that are informed, Lambert-Hurley adds, by the historian's *when* throughout (21). Lambert-Hurley's first contribution is to demonstrate to skeptics that a considerable body of Muslim women's autobiographical writing exists. In chapter 1, she explores the variety of forms that are encompassed by "autobiographical writing," her preferred term, pondering her own intellectual journey as she dismisses, for example, documents such as letters or diaries in contrast to items constructed into a single narrative, or weighs the appropriateness to her project of novels that hew to the author's life. Her criterion is "the constructed life" (55) and extends to texts like travelogues, reformist literature, edited letters and diaries, interviews, and speeches, as well as to what are explicitly presented as memoirs and autobiographies. In the end, her archive was some 200 texts in multiple languages, including English, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, Bengali, and Malayalam—with language choice often shaped by the imagined audience. The sociological material presented in chapter 2, not surprisingly, identifies the authors as elite and educated, a point reinforced in chapter 3 with the survey of the

geographical provenance of the texts. Authors are, typically, “courtly women, educationalists, writers, politicians, or performers” (91), who write to record their accomplishments. Lambert-Hurley’s quest in assembling these texts, often following a chain from one relative or other connection to another, yields unusual insight into the creation of a project’s archive.

A second important contribution of the study is Lambert-Hurley’s analysis of the texts from the perspective of “self-presentation” or performance, which puts to rest a second theme of skepticism she encountered as she began her project: that the texts would not be very useful factual documents “as if Ranke and his notions of objectivity had never died” (29). The issue, as she shows, is not a matter of facts but an author’s self-presentation through her experiences and aspirations in a particular socio-cultural milieu. Chapter 4 stands out as a particularly successful demonstration of this approach with an analysis of four versions of an English-language account by the well-known actor, Begum Khurshid Mirza. This example also serves to illustrate the importance of attentiveness to a text’s production, a third important contribution of the study. Design and format (including here a manuscript original, journal serialization, and books published in India and Pakistan respectively) provide meaning to a text. In this case, a range of participants—family members, editors, publishers, and designers—edited and added to the text, are still presented in the voice of the putative author. Successive editions variously emphasized such topics as Begum’s early life in India or later in Pakistan, her enmeshment in an elite family, and her different professional achievements in ways relevant to feminist, Pakistani, and Indian audiences among others.

What about the book’s purview? Why women and why Muslims? In chapter 5, Lambert-Hurley astutely tests the differences between men’s and women’s writing in examining the abundant texts of the illustrious Tyabji family, finding far more overlaps in content than European models positing marked gender difference might suggest. What about the Muslim demarcation? One justification for a focus on Muslim women, Lambert-Hurley suggests, is the heritage of Perso-Arabic traditions of life writing, such as inclusion of family genealogy, emphasis on luck or other contingencies, modesty, and the centrality of relationships. A further justification is author writing that shows their achievements by new standards of women’s respectability (*sharāfat*) stemming from reform movements. However I am unconvinced that these earlier literary traditions are relevant, or that these characteristics are specific to Muslim writings. Most importantly, Lambert-Hurley justifies the Muslim demarcation on the experiences of *parda* and emergence from seclusion, often drawing comparisons with Middle Eastern Muslim women’s life writing about these experiences.

What would a comparison with non-Muslim South Asian women’s texts demonstrate were one to control as many variables as possible? So many generalizations about South Asian Muslim women, as other studies have shown, are dependent on such characteristics as poverty or location, not

Islam. Lambert-Hurley in fact often cites authors working on non-Muslim South Asian texts that show similar patterns. Why, then, reinforce the South Asian view—so pernicious in India today—that Muslims are properly understood only in relation to Muslims elsewhere? How different are these texts from those of non-Muslim South Asian women? What new questions, generalizations, and differences, would these comparisons yield? Who do writers compare themselves to (if they do)?

Parda in these texts is typically presented in terms of early restrictions that are then overcome, a trope represented, for example, by one writer whose words begin and end the book. Parda often serves to structure a heroic narrative characteristic of much life writing and, in this case, also plays to audience expectations. But is this particular version of restrictions on women enough to justify a separate Muslim category? As for parda/seclusion of feelings, are Muslim women more “elusive” than anyone else in what they reveal and conceal as they write? The “unveiling” of intimacy, personal feelings, and so forth characteristic of Muslim writers is surely true of more recent writing generally.

Given that Muslim women are in fact the subject of this stimulating book, and that what defines them above all is a story of achievement, would it not have been better to drop the implicit stereotype of the title and replace “*Elusive*” with something like *Accomplished Lives*?

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ANIMAL INTIMACIES: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas. By **Radhika Govindrajan**. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. xiii, 220 pp. (B&W photos.) US\$27.50, paper. ISBN 978-0-226-55998-8.

Animal Intimacies is an evocative monograph on the entanglements between animals and rural residents of the Central Himalayas. Govindrajan's scholarship brings attention to the more-than-human relationships that exist in everyday life in Kumaon, and contributes to feminist scholarship on kinship and relatedness. Consistent with the orientation of multispecies ethnography, this work treats animals as subjects with agency and emotion, while adding a critical dimension to its engagement with particular, individual animals, instead of only engaging with them as part of a collective or abstract category of *animal*. In doing so, Govindrajan engages with animal subjects just as she does with human subjects, while always keeping a careful eye on the ontological differences and power differentials between the two kinds of subjects.

On the sacrificial goat in chapter 2, for instance, Govindrajan highlights how *paharis* wrestle with the liberal, “modern,” and often distant view on

animal sacrifice as barbaric in its religiosity, in which goats are offered to the *devi* in lieu of first-born sons. Their relationship with goats, however, entails everyday intercorporeal practices of care in their raising, which leads to genuine feelings of loss and grief upon their sacrifice, emphasizing labour, love, and death as components of kinship.

In chapter 3, Govindrajan continues to draw on the fractures between distant policy, this time, from the Hindu nationalists' violent, casteist insistence on cow protection, and the actual embodied and emotional relationship between people and the animals they care for in a multispecies rural economy that hinges on "collaborative survival" (drawing from Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). The difference in the relatedness people share with a Jersey cow as opposed to a *pahari* cow, is further seen in the distinction between insider and city monkeys, made in chapter 4. The arrival of *bahar ke bandar* (outsider monkeys) create a space for paharis to articulate anxieties around state neglect, land commodification in the mountains, the decline of agriculture, and uneven geographies of development. But for paharis, these animals are not just metaphors (89), but actors who condition the material lives of humans in specific ways. City monkeys are aggressive and dangerous enough to destroy native flora and fauna, cause significant losses of potential harvests to farmers, and discourage cultivation. That courts and activists consider the translocation of monkeys to other sites a humane solution of controlling their population reveals inattention not only to the material effects on paharis, but also the tendency of rhesus monkeys to settle near humans, and the breakage of the monkeys' own social bonds in this method of conservation.

In addition to emphasizing this role of institutions in mediating conservation, the narrative about and around the runaway pig in chapter 5 illuminates the colonial logic inherent in upholding distinctions between the wild and the domestic, the natural and the human, and the animal and the human, as if there is a nature out there that is ever unmediated by human activity. The most fascinating demonstration of the co-constitution of human and animal subjectivities comes from the *pahari* women's tellings of and speculation around sexual relationships with bears in chapter 6. In these narratives, women are able to articulate sexual desire, resistance to patriarchy in their everyday lives, and the gendered dimensions of relating to animals through labour.

One of Govindrajan's key ethnographic interventions is in immersing herself in the lives of animals, spending time, observing, and tracing their *individual* lives much as an ethnographer would with human subjects. Indeed, the most poignant moment in the book involves Govindrajan seeing "something" in the gaze of a female juvenile loner monkey, and recognizing in it, a reciprocal connection the monkey shared with a human—one that she is bold enough to call "love" (118). The boldness, however, never once

feels heavy-handed, and instead remains suggestive, even vulnerable in its emotive capacity. Govindrajan is fuelled by “the latent possibility” of other worlds (123) and imagination in her open-ended theorizing that succeeds in drawing in the reader while never attempting to tie happy or neat bows. That may be the book’s biggest accomplishment.

Govindrajan’s success with evoking place emerges partly from her willingness to make herself visible in the narrative. In her note on method, she acknowledges her own relatedness to her (human) informants, who let her into their world, “as a friend, as a daughter, as a sister, and as a sister-in-law” (28). One wishes that she had taken the chance to dwell on the uneasiness of interrelatedness, insider-outsider dynamics, and the differences and hierarchies inherent in connection, in the relationship between the ethnographer and the research subject, much as she does between humans and animals. If relatedness is always a “partial connection between beings who come to their relationship as unpredictable, unknowable, and unequal entities” (25), more-than-human ethnographies like Govindrajan’s only draw emphatic attention to the always-partial, incomplete translation of how subjects think, feel, and act. Therefore, aren’t all interlocutors, human and nonhuman alike, “intimate strangers,” despite the ontological differences between the two? Are there new radical possibilities that come to light through the study of nonhumans, in acknowledging the unknowability of *all* research subjects, in how we do ethnography itself? How might we reconcile intimacy with unknowability and power relations in knowledge production? *Animal Intimacies* raises these questions among many more.

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FICTION AS HISTORY: The Novel and the City in Modern North India.
By Vasudha Dalmia. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019. xvi, 442 pp. (B&W photos.) US\$95.00, cloth. ISBN 978-1-4384-7605-6.

Fiction as History is a carefully crafted book, in which Vasudha Dalmia weaves together a social history of urban North India by bringing together strands of knowledge located in diverse disciplinary practices. The book is an extended commentary on eight major Hindi novels published between the 1870s and the 1960s. By focusing on the cities of Lahore, Delhi, Agra, Allahabad, Lucknow, and Varanasi, the book traces the emergence of Hindu middle classes and their negotiations with colonial and nationalist forces. The discourse concerns aspirational middle-class Hindu youth and their struggle with colonial urban modernity through notions of love and friendship, perceptions of privacy, attitudes to women’s work, and relationships within households. Dalmia argues that “the radical social transformations associated with post-1857 urban restructuring, and the political flux resulting from social

reform, Gandhian nationalism, communalism, Partition, and the Cold War shaped the realm of the intimate as much as the public sphere” (back cover).

According to Dalmia, there are “three reasons that determined the selection of these novels” (7): first, the urban context of these novels, which is in stark contrast to great peasant novels, the core of Hindi literature; second, the focus on young people striving to stabilize themselves in a social position; and third, the novels’ depictions of the political climate of their time, a climate which deeply shaped young people’s personal lives. The characters in these novels represent a wide array of middle-class youth belonging to various social, religious, and political backgrounds. The women and men are seen struggling with disparate value systems and ideologies while exploring their sexuality, romantic love, and conjugality. The novels are deeply marked by the times in which they are located: political beliefs, lifestyles, and the way young people lived and aspired. These novels cover a particular period in the history of India, located at the cusp of colonialism, anti-colonial struggle, the partition/independence, and nation-building in post-colonial India.

The book opens with a detailed introduction and has eight chapters organized into two sections. Each section is composed of four chapters, followed by an epilogue. A detailed and incisive introduction brings together themes which outline the framework of the book. These include discussions about the multivocality of the novel as a genre, the history of Hindi novels, Hindi publishing in North India, the restructuring of north Indian urban spaces after 1857, the rise of the middle class in north India, and finally, changing notions of nation and self in theoretical debates around modernity and modernism. The first section, titled “Towards Modernity,” deals with the twin forces of colonial modernity and Indian nationalism that transformed urban lives both at the level of the personal and the political. This section is composed of four novels: Lala Shrinivasdas’s *Pariksha Guru* (The Tutelage of Trial, 1882), Premchand’s *Sevasadan* (The House of Service, 1918) and *Karmabhumi* (Field of Action, 1932) and Yashpal’s *Jhutha Sach* (False Truth, 1958–1960). The second section, “Modern Conundrums,” deals with the arrival of modernism, when the ideals and promises of modernity are questioned and the merits and demerits of nationalism and electoral politics are debated. This section is based on the critical evaluation of Dharamveer Bharati’s *Gunahon ka Devata* (The God of Vice, 1949), Agyeya’s *Nadi ke Dvip* (Islands in the Stream, 1948), Rajendra Yadav’s *Sara Akash* (The Entire Sky, 1951), and Mohan Rakesh’s *Andhere Band Kamre* (Dark Closed Rooms, 1961). Instead of writing a summary of all the chapters, the epilogue, “Looking Backward, Looking Forward,” focuses on connecting the salient dots across the novels, especially focusing on women and their negotiations with structures of power. Dalmia argues that as the novel in Hindi matures, ways of perceiving women become more complex and nuanced (426).

The book appends the growing corpus of literary urban studies in South Asia. Dalmia’s thesis that “through their attention to detail, their minute

documentation of shifts in structures of feelings, novels are often a record of social history in ways that social history itself is not" (406) is humble yet stimulating. It raises a set of crucial questions about the relationship between history and literature. Can we read fiction as history? For those who believe in the spirit of unified knowledge this may be a non-question; however, for disciplinarians this is an important question, at least analytically. If fiction can be read as history then why do novelists decide to become novelists and not historians? It is a well-known fact that historians have long used literature as an important source for understanding the past. In the last few decades, literature has relinquished this role to the social sciences. Social scientific paradigms have become important in literary studies. Literature is much more than just a political discourse. Literature is historically, culturally, and religiously situated, but literature is not a historical discourse only because it is primarily an existential discourse. At the core of all literature, there is a specific individual who has in a way experienced a certain existential catastrophe or crisis. For a Marxist or feminist, the individual can be understood through a theoretical gaze, but for a novelist, an individual is a person. Novelists do not speak for the characters and their suffering. Literature is about the being and the other. Narratives are all about this struggle between the self and the other. The closest discipline to literature is philosophy. Literary texts, just like those of philosophy, can take you to the innermost layers of a human being. If a text is merely sociological, then it is not literary. This book successfully unpacks these complex issues.

I read this book while I was teaching a course on urban anthropology. In the Indian context, anthropological literature on cities is scarce for the period covered by the novels under discussion. Although Dalmia does not deal with a number of issues discussed in contemporary urban anthropology, I found this book to be an amazing supplement to my reading list, as it offered details about urban transformation and associated urbanism. Vasudha Dalmia's effort is unquestionably praiseworthy on another count, as the book introduces eight significant Hindi novels to the English-speaking world.

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CHAKRAVERTI MAHAJAN

ALTERNATIVE VOICES IN MUSLIM SOUTHEAST ASIA: Discourse and Struggles. *Edited by Norshahril Saat, Azhar Ibrahim. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020. xvi, 230 pp. US\$29.90, paper. ISBN 978-981-4843-80-5.*

Whether real or perceived, the beliefs of conservative Islam are a key concern for political scientists when evaluating the effect of Islam on democracy and political stability. *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia* joins a growing series of volumes which flip the script. Instead of focusing only on the expanding influence of conservative Islamists, this book highlights the progressive, liberal, and non-mainstream side of Muslim communities.

Who are the alternative voices in Muslim Southeast Asia? In contrast with conservative and fundamentalist Islamist groups, the alternative voices are religious actors who seek to reform Islamic beliefs and practices to adapt them to modernity, democracy, and plural societies. While the relatively new conservative strand of Islam (referred to as resurgent or revivalist in the edited volume) is seen as the dominant ideology in Islamic politics, its beliefs and political positions cannot be understood without referencing the views of its ideological opponents. *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia* is a timely addition to the literature on Islamic discourse in plural societies, aiding researchers by shining the spotlight on the role played by alternative Islamic voices in Muslim communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

While the edited volume is divided into three sections with a total of twelve chapters, the chapters all overlap in descriptive and substantive content. Therefore, I find it more useful to structure the review along the major contributions across all the chapters to the wider literature on Islamic political discourse in Muslim communities. I identify two major contributions within the edited volume: 1) the identification of the alternative Islamic voices and the structural conditions that shape their place in Muslim communities; and 2) the evaluation of the substantive ideological beliefs and political positions held by the alternative Islamic voices. The following paragraphs will expand on each major contribution.

The first contribution of the edited volume is the identification of alternative Islamic voices and the challenges they face. Azhar Ibrahim (chapter 6), Mohd Faizal Musa (chapter 10), and Ahmad Najib Burhani (chapter 12) dive deep into the rich history of these alternative voices and how structural conditions shape both their place in Muslim communities and their impact on Islamic discourse. This is an understudied aspect of Islamic discourse in Southeast Asia and the richness of detail makes the edited volume a great resource for future scholars to turn to for a more comprehensive understanding of social movements in contemporary Muslim communities. Additionally, the edited volume gives roughly equal weight to the ideological opponents of the alternative Islamic voices—the conservative and fundamentalist Islamic groups. Norshahril Saat (chapter 1) and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman (chapter 5) contextualize the phenomenon of conservative Islamic resurgence in Malaysia and Singapore, while Norshahril Saat (chapter 8), Zainal Abidin Bagir and Azis Anwar Fachrudin (chapter 9), and Ahmad Suaedy (chapter 11) look at how religious conservative elites have successfully captured elements of government institutions and mobilized the Muslim electorate for political gain in Malaysia and Indonesia. The authors argue that alternative Islamic voices diagnose problems in Muslim communities and seek to reform society but are rebuffed by conservatives who are suspicious of liberal reforms. Azhar Ibrahim (chapter 4) and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman (chapter 5) provide great examples of this—while alternative Islamic voices preach liberal reform, conservative groups identify

liberalism as the cause of moral decay and actively work to suppress these alternative voices while agitating for a more fundamentalist “return” to Islam as a solution to societal problems.

The second contribution of the edited volume is the evaluation of the substantive ideological elements of the alternative Islamic voices. Azhar Ibrahim’s (chapter 4) main argument is that alternative Islamic voices are those with the necessary moral will and intellectual rigor to call for religious reform that will allow Islam to remain relevant today. Syed Farid Alatas (chapter 7), meanwhile, locates the philosophical core of progressive Islam in the ideal of moderation and progressive values inherent to Islamic tradition. These chapters provide a solid counterargument to the conservative refrain that progressive Islamic reform is only a Western ploy to weaken the faith of adherents.

Although *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia* is a timely addition to the study of religion in plural societies and should be required reading for scholars who want an overview of Islamic discourse which does not focus only on the conservative Islamic groups, my praise for the edited volume comes with some caveats. The edited volume at times seems to cover too much and too little. On one hand, the sheer range of actors grouped under the umbrella category of “alternative voices” across varying contexts and the lack of an overarching framework across the cases (beyond the presumed shared progressiveness of all alternative Islamic voices) makes it difficult to conduct a systematic comparison. A more restricted selection process focusing on a specific group of alternative Islamic voices consistent across all cases might serve to demonstrate similarities and differences for deeper analysis. On the other hand, the Philippines is a conspicuous absence in the country case selection. Its absence serves as a reminder that more scholars need to engage in fresh comparisons between the Philippines and the typically selected Muslim community cases (Malaysia and Indonesia) that do not repeat the old security studies approach.

None of the above diminishes the edited volume’s contributions. Overall, the focus on structural and rational choice arguments makes this edited volume a useful complement to the gamut of studies on Islam in politics and society which emphasize cultural interpretivist arguments. Such arguments not only avoid treading the well-worn path of cultural relativism, but also aid in generalizing the contributions in this edited volume to a wider audience. The influence of religion on government, regime type, and society is an enduring question given the current zeitgeist, and the lessons learnt from Muslim Southeast Asia will be a welcome contribution to the wider world.

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MOHAMED SALIHIN SUBHAN

DEMANDING IMAGES: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia. By **Karen Strassler.** *Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020. xiv, 329 pp. (Illustrations, B&W photos, coloured photos.) US\$29.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-4780-0469-1.*

Karen Strassler takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride through Indonesia's turbulent democratic developments of recent years—including stages of disappointment, fear, and tragedy, but also periods of joy, hilarity, and hope. To set the scene, the book opens with a photo-essay montage of full-colour images. Fake money stickers, screenshots from celebrity sex scandals, urban graffiti, political rally selfies, photographs taken at protests, and posters of a slain activist reflect the variety of images in circulation in the years following Indonesia's democratic transition in 1998. To understand the production and reception of these images Strassler introduces the concept of an "image-event"—"a political process set in motion when a specific image or set of images erupts onto and intervenes in a social field, becoming a focal point of discursive and affective engagement across diverse publics" (9–10). With a more open political system and advances in media technologies, Strassler argues that Indonesians have increasingly engaged with politics through images. In turn, the affective and evidentiary force of images has reshaped politics. Through an in-depth study of various image-events, Strassler concludes that despite the initial euphoria over Indonesia's democratic transition, by 2014 "a transparent and open public sphere, under conditions of Indonesia's capitalist media landscape and entrenched structures of inequality and corruption, could not deliver on the promise of democracy" (243).

Each of the book's seven chapters begins with a key incident that set in motion an image-event, which in turn is tracked throughout the chapter in text and visuals. Each image-event is situated historically within post-independence Indonesia, and supportive insights are drawn from a wide array of scholarly works.

The introductory chapter begins with the emergence in 2013 of nostalgic images of Indonesia's former authoritarian leader, Suharto. These images were quickly countered by iconic images of Munir Said Thalib, an Indonesian human rights activist murdered in 2003. After a discussion of the debates these compelling images triggered, the chapter introduces key concepts of image-events, public visibility, media ecologies, and the author's ethnographic approach.

The six subsequent chapters are loosely chronological. The first two concern the time period immediately around the democratic transition. One focuses on the 50,000-rupiah bill, which had Suharto's face on it, and how it was modified, circulated, and used by artists and activists to highlight corruption under the authoritarian regime. The next chapter deals with the controversy surrounding the rape of Chinese women during riots in 1998.

Strassler argues that because the victims refused to come forward due to fears of stigmatization and state retaliation, the debate was shaped by the absence of images of public testimony or of the crimes themselves.

The next two chapters consider two 2008 laws that placed restrictions on individual freedoms—specifically, regulating the Internet and criminalizing pornography. In the former, Strassler explores how images and videos of sex scandals are dissected and authenticated by self-professed experts such as Roy Suryo, as well as by the media and the general public. In a new era of democracy, this process reveals a public obsessed with secrets and anxious for truths. The other chapter focuses on a little-known artwork, Pinkswing Park, which featured images of a partially naked male soap opera star. It became a public spectacle after hardline Islamists condemned it as pornographic and offensive to Islam, thus pitting themselves against progressives.

The final two chapters cover the years 2013 to 2014. The first examines public image-events from the streets of Yogyakarta in 2013, which raise the question of whether that city's explosion of street murals, graffiti, and advertising was symptomatic of a healthy democracy or a situation spiraling out of control. The concluding chapter studies political participation and volunteerism by analyzing images of presidential candidate Joko Widodo's supporters, as well as the crowdsourcing efforts undertaken to ensure that all votes in the 2014 presidential election were counted fairly.

Understanding Indonesian politics through image-events is a novel and insightful approach to interpreting political debates in the public sphere. The wealth of detail contained in the book clearly demonstrates that since democratization, Indonesian politics "has become a politics of turbulent image-events rather than staged and static appearances" (11) that were typical of the previous authoritarian era. Strassler's description of images as "evidentiary" (ones that provide authoritative proof or truth) versus "ludic" (images that are playfully reworked, such as parody) effectively captures differences in the goals and interpretation of images across a number of chapters. Her conceptualization should be very useful to other scholars.

Another strength of the book is Strassler's ability to shed new light on lesser-known issues. She has studied Indonesia in depth through repeated visits over the last two decades, including extensive ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with local activists, artists, photographers, and reporters, in addition to the rich array of traditional and digital media sources that she has accumulated over the years.

Strassler also draws on an impressive range of scholarly works from anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, literary criticism, media studies, and the visual arts. However, since her core question is how Indonesia has lived up to the promise of democracy, her degree of engagement with political science seems somewhat thin. Indeed, the term "democracy" and its meaning in Indonesia could have been discussed more fully, as it is left largely open to interpretation. In addition, some issues relating to the promise of

democracy, such as the explosive separatist and communal conflicts in the peripheries, sweeping electoral reforms and the subsequent legislative and regional head elections, extensive decentralization, and a turn to populism, are not addressed.

These quibbles aside, *Demanding Images* is a fascinating, entertaining, and insightful read. A one-of-a-kind book on Indonesia, it will appeal to those interested in Indonesian media, politics, and society, as well as those who want to understand how images affect politics in our more complex media environment.

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COLM FOX

THIS IS WHAT INEQUALITY LOOKS LIKE. *By Teo You Yenn. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019. 312 pp. (B&W photos.) US\$19.00, paper. ISBN 978-981-14-0595-2.*

Teo You Yenn's *This is What Inequality Looks Like* (TIWILL) is arguably the most pivotal book ever written on Singapore's inequality. Quoted in parliament, selling 30,000 copies within three years, and sparking extended national debates over the next few years, TIWILL breathed new life and insight into discussions of inequality in Singapore.

Clearly written and thoughtfully constructed, TIWILL's portrayal of poverty, perpetuated by inequality, effortlessly resonates beyond academic audiences without losing theoretical richness. Vivifying Singapore's poor in the public imagination with heartfelt depictions of their daily lives, TIWILL elicits empathy while provoking awareness of how Singaporeans themselves might perpetuate the structures that trap the impoverished.

Leveraging ethnographic insights from visits to Singapore's rental public housing neighborhoods from 2013 to 2016, Teo juxtaposes families' everyday experiences against prevailing narratives of meritocracy and economic survival. These narratives obscure and justify the plight of these families, Teo argues, culminating in a policy system focused on self-reliance through employment and traditional family structures. The result is "differentiated deservingness," an idea Teo introduces to depict how Singaporeans have "different types of access and degree of public support depending on who they are and how they live" (173). In other words, one's income heavily influences access to quality public goods and services like healthcare or housing.

Arguing against a "script" of "normal" behavior that renders the choices of lower-income families as "bad" (36–37), TIWILL illustrates how material poverty significantly constrains the options of the impoverished; how it reduces their agency, and snowballs disadvantage for their children even as parents from these households struggle to provide them the same

opportunities and life experiences as others. These dynamics also strip the poor of dignity by judging them against “normal” ways of living. When unable to meet these standards, outcomes are misattributed to their personal failings rather than structural conditions.

Overall, Teo’s arguments that systems shape individual outcomes and that bettering the situation for the poor must go beyond financial transfers to changing prevailing narratives and how Singaporeans think about privilege, poverty, and inequality are spot on, and pose a sobering challenge for Singaporean society. However, no single work can comprehensively address an issue like inequality and TIWILL’s methodological limitations leave open questions on the comprehensiveness and accuracy of some insights.

First, Teo argues upfront that TIWILL is an “ethnography of inequality rather than a catalog of poverty” because it situates “the lives and experiences of a group within the larger social context” (19). However, while the title promises an exposition on the state of inequality, the book focuses on a specific group of low-income families, for whom the analysis of unequal structures appears primarily taken to explain their experiences. Essentially, the ethnographic approach—where “data is generated through repeated visits to the same neighborhoods, through many informal conversations... through observations of interactions and space” (283)—fails to deliver an overview by omitting perspectives of groups beyond those interviewed.

By failing to narrate even in rough terms what these other groups experience, Teo overlooks their perspectives and contributions to the structures and narratives that stratify Singaporean society. Even limited to inequalities arising from socioeconomic status (Teo deals briefly with issues of ethnicity), TIWILL’s rendering of inequality omits even oft-mentioned groups like the so-called sandwiched class, said to benefit from neither economic growth like higher-income groups, nor the social policies that cater to lower-income groups.

Explicit comparisons are generally limited to Teo’s own experiences or the expectations of “middle-class respondents” on what was “normal” (107–108) drawn from interviews in 2002–2003. This exclusion of broader perspectives renders the book a tale of poverty, particularly that of rental housing residents in the eight neighborhoods Teo visited, and the structural forces that produced it. Not inequality as many other Singaporeans might understand or experience. This omission is critical since one reason inequality fails to be recognized and acted upon, as Teo rightly points out, is the way society collectively thinks about it.

Moreover, it is not always clear where this dominant narrative comes from. TIWILL variably refers to the state’s official statements, policy design, Teo’s interviews with the aforementioned middle class, and perceptions of the interviewed families. This is particularly problematic when these expectations of “normal” are painted as seemingly ubiquitous and uncontested. While TIWILL’s warm reception implies general resonance with its version of

events, breaking down this larger narrative by its sources and their specific contributions helps identify areas of contention and change over time, and to nuance its insights.

For instance, in explaining why some reject depictions of poverty in Singapore, Teo posits indignation against any perceived disruption of “national narratives of economic development, growth, wealth, prosperity” (235). This national narrative is then partly attributed to institutions and personnel dealing with poverty, who frame it “primarily in individual terms, very much in accordance with the ethic of individualism and differentiated deservedness of a neoliberal capitalist state” (216).

Yet, an examination of official narratives reveals an articulation of desired reforms not unlike what Teo advocates for in TIWILL. For example, in 2013, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unequivocally stated: “Today, the situation has changed. If we rely too heavily on the individual, their efforts alone will not be enough... And there are some things which individuals cannot do on their own and there are other things which we can do much better together. So, we must shift the balance” (Singapore Prime Minister’s Office, “National Day Rally Speech,” tinyurl.com/4mf26t5k). Whether this has successfully translated into policy is beside the point (my own work has argued that it has, but not enough; “Inequality and the Social Compact in Singapore,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies*, 36, no. 3 [2019]). But simply knowing the official narrative has shifted necessitates nuancing some of TIWILL’s analysis and conclusions.

That said, the limits of Teo’s approach in delivering the promised look at inequality in Singapore does not begin to threaten TIWILL’s prominent position as a cornerstone text for understanding the state of the poor and inequality in Singapore. A must-read for anyone interested in Singaporean society and the forces that reproduce it, TIWILL is a priceless foundation for developing a deeper appreciation of the struggles of those left behind in a country labelled as “crazy rich,” and how to help them.

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DISTRIBUTIVE POLITICS IN MALAYSIA: Maintaining Authoritarian Party Dominance. *Politics in Asia.* By *Hidekuni Washida*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. xiii, 229 pp. (Tables, figures) US\$155.00, cloth; US\$28.98, eBook. ISBN 9781138634510.

For decades, Malaysia’s Barisan Nasional (BN) was one of the world’s few dominant parties among electoral authoritarian regimes, and it stood out even more for its unique coalitional structure. These outstanding features attracted scholarly attention to explain such electoral dominance,

including distribution of state largesse, authoritarian controls over media and public institutions, malapportionment and its resulting rural bias, and gerrymandering to alter the ethnic composition of the constituencies. BN's cohesion and electoral strength derived from a range of factors surrounding its con-sociational model, patron-client relationships, and developmental quid pro quo of votes for projects.

Distributive Politics in Malaysia, by Hidekuni Washida, arrives at an opportune time. The fall of BN in 2018 and return to government within a loosely cobbled Perikatan Nasional coalition in 2020, underscore the relevance of systemic analyses. The doctoral thesis from which this book derives follows the long timeline of the Alliance's, and then BN's, two-thirds parliamentary majority for a combined half century—with the exception of the 1969–1971 emergency interregnum—from 1957 to 2008. BN's loss of the two-thirds majority in 2008, and further erosion of parliamentary seat majority in 2013, added salience to the subject. As noted in the book's preface, the 14th General Election of 2018 gave new impetus to look back on the BN's long dominance. But Pakatan Harapan's collapse in early 2020 renews interest in, and relevance of, research on the maintenance of power in Malaysia—even if the dominance and cohesion of eras past has been replaced by more fluidly forming pacts.

This quantitative study introduces original approaches and modifies previous research, striving to add complexity and nuance commensurate with the subject. Readers have much to imbibe from extensive and rigorous statistical analyses on public expenditures, cabinet appointments, and redistricting, as well as public opinion polls in Malaysia.

Washida makes a substantial contribution to the extant literature by investigating the role of resource distribution in electoral durability; he distinguishes his analysis by focusing on Barisan Nasional's efficiency, the coalition's ability to incentivize elites to undertake electoral mobilization without massive financial resources. The book also sets out to investigate conflict management within the ruling coalition and the decline of party dominance, notably the recurrence of intra-party leadership battles—within the BN's hegemon, United Malays National Organization (UMNO)—which Washida argues, demonstrates the inadequacy of conventional approaches to distributive politics premised on elite-level discipline.

The book builds its conceptual framework around a theory of “elite-level mobilization agency,” presenting an insightful rubric that interacts two motivations of party leaders: buying off votes—especially where winning margins can be narrow—and dependence on the mobilizing support of elites. While the discussion is quite technical and applies a customized lexicon, non-specialists can, with some effort, grasp the underlying intuition even if the terms are foreign, and locate the study's hypotheses within a theoretical context. Nonetheless, readers would benefit from a clearer presentation of the hypotheses, especially as they are repeatedly referenced in later chapters

by a numerical-alphabet combination (1a, 1b, etc.) that is difficult to trace back to the theoretical chapter.

Among the insightful concepts is a four-quadrant matrix, with closed autocracy (based on inner circle loyalty and lesser need for elite mobilization) and electoral authoritarian regimes like Malaysia (characterized by incentivized support and higher dependence on local elites) in opposing corners. Washida also distinguishes different modes of leader-elite relationships, which can be cultivated by the leader through providing “career rents” (ministerial portfolios) and resources for mobilization (constituency funding), thus foreshadowing his argument that the literature lacks attention to the utilization of career rents.

The book also provides some instructive contextualization of Malaysia: an historical overview through the lens of mobilization agency, and a brief discourse on federalism, focused on “collusive agency” between central and state governments. These chapters offer informative and engaging discussions on development planning and expenditures, alongside the imperatives of rural development and its pacts on UMNO—especially the party’s centralization, which emerged in response to electoral setbacks. The bureaucracy also became increasingly politicized, and utilized as a distributive mechanism to rural Malay constituencies, as local elites became integral for filtering up development plans and for electoral mobilization.

The empirical portion of this book contains four parts, respectively focused on federal development funding, ministerial portfolios, malapportionment and gerrymandering, and the Asia Barometer Surveys. The author must be commended for assembling a voluminous data bank from myriad sources. Accordingly, the findings are extensive and distinctive.

Washida reiterates his departures from conventional approaches, including the argument that electoral results beget developmental reward. Integrating principal-agent aspects into the framework, he investigates the incidence of “[p]rospective commitment through impartial budget appropriation” (90), which arises from information asymmetries—i.e., the centre is unable to fully know local political conditions. The study finds impartial allocation for affiliated states (governed by BN). While higher vote shares for BN do not translate into more development allocation, there is evidence of conditional development funding disbursements. States that vote overwhelmingly for BN, for example, receive relatively more funding. Arguably, disbursement of party funding, instead of development expenditure, is a more pertinent outcome variable. Such data will be more difficult, and perhaps impossible, for longitudinal study to obtain, but the limitations—and advantages—of using development allocation could be more critically discussed.

The analyses of ministerial portfolios go beyond the simple outcome of appointments to a formulation of “portfolio bonus,” interacting portfolio shares with parliamentary seat shares. The chapter on redistricting deploys

the author's original GIS-generated data to provide finer-grained insights on the incidence and impact of re-delineation exercises, particularly in 2003. Public polls furnish data for statistically informing the electoral shock of 2008, the continual downward slide of 2013, and BN's response—and some precursors to its defeat in 2018.

All in all, this substantive, meticulous, and incisive book will be a valuable resource in Malaysian political studies. Non-specialists may need to exert more to digest the material, but it will surely spur debate in select circles. The formalized and nuanced quantitative findings richly complement existing literature, and provide grounds for continual study—perhaps adapted toward understanding coalitional maintenance rather than dominance.

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HWOK AUN LEE

PEOPLE AND CHANGE IN INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA. *Edited by Diane Austin-Broos and Francesca Merlan.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 208 pp. (Figures, maps, B&W photo.) US\$62.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8248-6796-6.

The edited collection, *People and Change in Indigenous Australia*, explores the concept of personhood through various ethnographic accounts of life in remote Indigenous Australian communities. The editors begin by locating the collection within a discussion of the anthropological literature on personhood and, in particular, Marilyn Strathern's description of Melanesian people as "the plural and composite sites of the relationships that produced them" (*The Gender of the Gift*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1988, 13). They then move into a discussion of how this anthropological literature has developed to explore Indigenous personhood in an Australian context, including a discussion of the highly influential works of Fred Myers (*Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986) on Pintupi concepts of autonomy and relatedness, on demand sharing and reciprocity as foundational to Aboriginal personhood (B. Samson, "A Grammar of Exchange," in *Being Black*, ed. I. Keen, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press: 1988, 157–177; N. Peterson, "Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure from Generosity among Foragers," *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 4 [1993]).

More recently, the field of Australian anthropology has begun to consider the role of the state and non-Indigenous people engaged in the Indigenous industry and how conscious these people are of the broader culture and whiteness that often invades their work (T. Lea, *Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts: Indigenous Health in Northern Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008; E. Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia*, Oxford: Berghan, 2015).

The Warlpiri people of the central Australian desert are the focus of three chapters in the collection—those by Musharbash, Burke, and Vaarzon-Morel. The chapter by Musharbash is engaged in a scholarly conversation around the meaning of relatedness in contemporary Warlpiri society, which is significantly more sedentary due to the impacts of colonization (44). In these experiences in which relations are sometimes forced into close residential proximity, Musharbash describes the emotionally exhausting processes of managing “bad relations with kin” (46). In his chapter, Paul Burke traces the lives of four Warlpiri women living in the broader diaspora who have placed themselves beyond the usual cultural norms by moving away from networks of family and kin, and the demands that maintaining these relationship entails (39). Burke describes the ways in which these women are able to exercise their autonomy; in the case of Dulcie up to:

...the risky outer limits of such self-assertion; for example, by overriding the sensitivities of grieving relatives and threatening non-attendance at a funeral; by making initial wisecracks and refusals to drunken male relations seeking food from her; by teasing and already wild and disruptive drink about the likely extramarital affairs of his wife; by pulling funny faces at her grandchildren during a break in sorry business. (31)

All of these acts are potentially personally dangerous, and one final act that goes “too far” is where Dulcie enters into a relationship with a violent schizophrenic alcoholic boyfriend (32). Finally, Vaarzon-Morel’s chapter considers how relational aspects of Warlpiri personhood, such as those present in the relationships between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* (translated as traditional owner and manager) have been more recently transformed suggesting changed relations between people and country (89).

A second major theme of the volume is the transformations in conceptions of personhood amongst Aboriginal children and youth in various remote locations. Chapters by Eickelkamp, Mansfield, and Dalley discuss children and young people in response to ideas of how relational ontology and the idea of relations as intrinsic to sense of self underlies Aboriginal personhood (S. Poirier, “The Dynamic Reproduction of Hunter-Gatherers’ Ontologies and Values,” in *Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, eds. J. Boddy and M. Lambek, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2013, 55). In his chapter, for example, John Mansfield tracks the changes to Murrinhpatha relational conceptions of personhood as informed by social connections through totemic systems, into spaces where young men—while still engaging with kinship structures—are also embracing elements of heavy metal and gang culture.

The final theme of the volume is discussion of the moral aspects of personhood in remote Aboriginal Australia. The chapter by Gaynor McDonald considers the way in which “allocative power” over the distribution of certain goods and objects is central to the ideas of “caring and sharing” that prefigure Wiradjuri personhood. Carolyn Schwarz discusses how

Christianity has been largely overlooked in the literature on personhood in Australia, and offers her own ethnographic encounters with Yolngu people in Galiwin'ku settlement. Schwarz describes the tension between relational modes of personhood and persons in conversation with the church who are "fundamentally individuated subjects; the person is a bounded and possessive individual" (147). Finally, an afterword to the volume is provided by Victoria Burbank tying together the themes of ethnographic empathy and the capacity to understand emotional affect in cross cultural contexts, and why the expressions of anger and shame can be understood as responses to relational personhood.

This volume provides important insights into contemporary personhood in remote Aboriginal Australia. It would have been fascinating if more attention had been paid to these concepts in urban Australia, where the majority of Indigenous Australians live. Perhaps this could be a future volume?

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STOBHAN McDONNELL



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Sébastien Lechevalier is an economist and a professor at EHESS (School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, Paris), specializing in the Japanese economy and Asian capitalism.

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