

**A different place in the making:  
The everyday practices of rural migrants in Chinese urban  
villages**

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**A DIFFERENT PLACE IN THE  
MAKING**

*The Everyday Practices of Rural Migrants in Chinese  
Urban Villages*

YAN YUAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirement of the University of Westminster for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents an ethnographic research into two Chinese urban villages, where thousands of rural migrants who were bureaucratically categorised as ‘floating population’ established their settlements in the city. The goal of the research is to display the place-making process through the everyday practices of the rural migrants in their urban settlements and to examine the relationship between this place-making process and the formation of the migratory identity in contemporary Chinese urban society. Based on long-term participative observations and in-depth interviews, an impressionist picture is painted to depict the lived world of rural migrants in this small, marginal, yet complex, colourful neighbourhood. This picture contains vivid snapshots of various aspects of people's everyday life in the place, including street life, tenancy relationships, neighbourhood interactions, housing forms, television and public telephone consumption, as well as festival celebrations, most of which are put into academic documentation for the first time. All these scenes commonly affirm the active engagements of the rural migrants in the place-making politics of this unique urban locale and their flexible emplacement in the locality, which defies the ideological construction of this group as always displaced, floating, and out of place in the city. More importantly, the urban villages, as the principal geographical form of rural migratory settlement in Chinese cities, provide a prime example of the ‘progressive sense of place’ in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Chinese urban society that is featured by multiplicity, fluidity, and connectivity. At the same time, this research distinguishes itself from previous work on the same subject with its sharp focus on the place-making process occurring at the micro and banal level. It has discovered that people's daily activities like dwelling, walking, street gathering, telephone calling, deliver an empowering space where place is not constructed by conscious planning and design, but by bodily doing and living. Beyond the phenomenological geography of lifeworld which tends to be depoliticised, the study sheds light on the question of asymmetries of power and socio-economic inequities in the lifeworld in the urban villages and tries to represent the rural migrants' spatial struggles in the place as a tactical resistance that does not necessarily direct towards some end or form, but has the potential to undermine and deflect the totalising ambitions of the dominant power strategies. The above insights drawn from the two urban villages are not only informative in understanding Chinese rural migratory communities in the urban setting, but also revelatory in awakening the sense of place and grasping the complexity of the broader place-making politics in the late modern and transitional society.

**Keywords** place-making; everyday life practices; migratory settlement; spatial struggle; Chinese rural-urban migration; ‘urban villages’

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## **Declaration**

**I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.**

## PREFACE

Five years' PhD study for me was far beyond a mere intellectual exercise, but a bodily, emotional, and spiritual self-exile that put my will and ability to the unprecedented test. Like a pilgrim looking towards the West as the modern cultural and academic centre, a dream rooted in Chinese scholars' minds for generations, I left my warm home in China and embarked on an adventure in Britain in 2006. Like the experiences of many other fellow students, PhD study was not always exciting and enjoyable. On the contrary, most of the time it was boring, isolating, frustrating, or sometimes even depressing, especially for a student like me who has to overcome language disadvantage and try to integrate my previous academic training with the standards of the Western system. In addition to the pressures from study, I also underwent many struggles that every migrant has to face in a foreign land, from frequent house moving to repetitive visa applications to enduring cultural adaptation, which constantly swung me between unsettlement and settlement, exclusion and inclusion. All these experiences forced me to re-think many fundamental ideas that I would have never questioned in a sedentary life, such as place, space and home. The wonders and puzzles of these ideas did not only fuel my passion for research but also constituted the bedrock of my academic enquiry. My personal experiences as a dream seeker and a traveller also in a way bridged the gap between me and my studied group, who engaged in a different form of migration but were equally on the move driven by the dream of the modern age and desperate for a sense of home and place in displacement. To a certain extent, my PhD research was conducted as a mental dialogue of one traveller with other travellers. Observing, listening and dwelling on the stories of their journeys will eventually help me to make clearer sense of my own journey.

This dissertation could not have been finished without the supervision of Dr. Roza Tsagarousianou. When I initiated my research in 2006, my previous academic interest was largely limited to media and mass communication studies and I had never received any formal academic training in human geography and migration studies. I am so grateful to my supervisor for her inspiration and instruction that encouraged me to break out of my old boundary and seek a broader horizon. I also appreciate the great interest and confidence she showed towards my work and her respect for my independent thinking, which empowered me to persist and progress even at the most difficult times.

Another person who offered me crucial help is Prof. Colin Sparks. Although he did not give my research direct supervision, as early as 2005, he invited me to the University of Westminster as a visiting scholar sponsored by the China Scholarship

Council (CSC). It was during this one-year study and following his advice that I obtained a chance to do doctoral research in Britain. After I started my PhD, he also showed great interest in my progress and gave prominent comments on my work on many occasions.

During these five years, I have benefitted greatly from the environment of the University of Westminster, particularly the support from the School of Media, Art, and Design and Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI), which offered me a full scholarship for three years. Many thanks to my second supervisor Dr. Xin Xin, PhD Programme Director Anthony McNicholas, Research Administrator Erica Spindler, as well as many friends and colleagues who studied together with me. I am also indebted to Michael Pattison, of the Foreign Languages Faculty at Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, who devoted huge efforts to editing and proofreading my dissertation.

The outline and some materials of this dissertation have been previously presented at different events, including the Joint Doctoral Symposium of Four London-based Universities in 2007 and 2008, CUC/ICA Conference on ‘The Harmonious Society and Civil Society’ in Beijing in 2007, the Joint Symposium of the University of Westminster and Stockholm University in 2008, and the Annual Conference of China Media Centre (CMC) in the University of Westminster in 2009. Thanks also to the chairs and audiences at each of these events for their valuable comments.

The last but most heartfelt thanks are for my family. The highest cost of this luxury voyage was the long-time separation between my husband Hanchang and me. But the physical distance between us has never stopped his self-giving love and support. It was totally because of his efforts in running our home in China on his own that I was able to set off on this journey to such far off places. His devotion was also demonstrated in his participation in the initial stage of my fieldwork, which enabled me to settle down in the community more easily.

Equally precious was my daughter Pan’s company during all these years. Thanks for her understanding of the pressure I had, which very often triggered my bad temper towards her. Her sweet affection was my best remedy whenever I had a low mood. What made me more gratified and proud was to experience her daily growth in her teenage years. By braving many unexpected difficulties, she has proved her determination and ability in almost every aspect of her study, which makes her future very promising. Indeed, having my own work progressing parallel with my child’s growth in such a close way made the last five years the most beautiful chapter in my life so far.



# Introduction

*From Hongshan Square, I biked northward along Zhongbei Road, the east section of Wuhan's 28-kilometre inner-city ring road. After only some four minutes, I saw on my left hand side an eye-catching ad-poster hanging high in the sky at the entrance of East Lake Road West: 'East Lake Hotel— A Place Where You Can Feel at Home.' Following the ad, and at the end of the road I arrived at an international four-star hotel. Right outside the iron gate of the hotel, Xiao Fang was waiting for me in the autumn afternoon sunlight. 'Where do you live?' I asked. 'There.' she answered while turning her face to the west. Along her line of vision, I saw, immediately off the road, a narrow, winding street stretching forward through crowds of stalls and buildings, which led me to a different place....*

Field note, 9 October 2006

What was recorded here was my first entry to Gaowang and Wujiawan, two of the so-called 'urban villages' in Wuhan, a unique geographical form where thousands of rural migrants like Xiao Fang made their homes in the city. Many years ago, 15-year-old Xiao Fang left her home village in Huanggang County and came to Wuhan to be my live-in babysitter. When my child turned four, Xiao Fang left my home and looked for somewhere else to live in the city on her own. After that, not having a city *hukou* or any special skills, all she could do was waitressing or cleaning, and for her accommodation she had to keep moving from one dormitory to another offered by different bosses. One day, Xiao Fang told me she was going to marry a chef who came from another rural village. They were going to live together in a rented room in Gaowang village. Although I had lived in the city all my life, I had hardly ever heard of the place until I asked Xiao Fang for a visit in 2006. It was then I realised that in fact it was less than a mile away from my home.

My previous blindness to the existence of the places like Gaowang and Wujiawan in my own city is not exceptional among normal urbanites in today's China. The past thirty-two years of reform and opening-up have brought China breath-taking developments that at times shocked the world. With GDP persistently increasing at around 10 percent per year,

the urban population in China is accordingly growing at around 4 percent per year.<sup>1</sup> As one of the driving forces of such dramatic growth, the massive rural-to-urban migration since the 1980s has driven an officially estimated 12 million peasants to seek work in the city,<sup>2</sup> forming probably the biggest population flow in history. However, what is even more astonishing is the invisibility of such an immense scale of mobile population in the mainstream urban landscape. As a work force, they have penetrated into every fabric of urban life, but as citizens, they are institutionally banished from the urban system. Under the prolonged rural-urban divide household registration system, those who come from the countryside and live in the city without an urban *hukou* are still not counted as urban population, nor even as ‘migrants’, but as ‘floaters’ or ‘outsider population’, who are perceived as temporarily sojourning in the city but still belonging to their rural origins. Such population control and social belonging regulation enable Chinese cities to make the most of the cheap labour of the rural outsiders without incurring the heavy costs of accommodating them, so that a highly ordered and good-looking image of a city can be maintained alongside its rapid growth. The idea has been crystallised into a manifesto overtly or covertly stated by many municipal authorities in recent years, praising China’s urbanisation as ‘urbanisation free of shantytowns’ (Zhang et al., 2003: 931). In a sense, most of the cities in China seem to deserve this praise. Unlike what one might assume, the Chinese government’s strength in controlling the urban space has not been weakened by the prosperity of the market economy. Under the state’s pervasive governance deep into the neighbourhood life of the city, there is little room for the classical forms of shantytowns to be built and occupied by rural migrants as their urban settlements, as has happened in Lagos, Mumbai or other developing cities. There can be little doubt that the worldwide existence of shantytowns or slums represents the worst of urban poverty and inequality and has posed huge challenges to human society (UN-HABITAT, 2003). But the alleged non-existence of the shantytown in contemporary urban China is nothing to celebrate. Its purpose is to create an illusion of a one-dimensional city and top-down modernity where the challenges of population mobility in the process of urbanisation is dealt with not by including and integrating, but by suppressing and banishing. In this illusion, not only has the institutional inequality over rural migrants in formal systems been legitimised, but also the rights of rural migrants in seeking their urban settlements through informal approaches has been denied. Having been intoxicated with such an

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<sup>1</sup> According to data from CIA World Factbook and World Urbanization Prospects (UN Habitat, 2007 Revision) by UN Habitat.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Research Report on the Problem of Chinese Peasant Labour*, Organised by the Research Office of the State Council of China, published on *Reform (limited readership publication)*, 2006, Issue 5, Beijing.

illusion for a long time, people tend to be reluctant to face a fundamental question: if there are really no shantytowns in Chinese cities, then where are the places that millions of rural migrants could live? How can such massive scale of population really be floating over the city without any place in which to settle down?

In this sense, my visit to Xiao Fang's home in Gaowang and Wujiawan was rather enlightening. It broke the illusion and unearthed a covered facet of the city which I once supposed I had known thoroughly after having lived there for many years. It struck me not only with the distinctions of the landscapes between the place where Xiao Fang lived and place where I lived, but also with the fact that these two distinct landscapes, two different ways of life, could exist in the same city in such surprisingly close proximity without being recognised (maybe my personal relationship with Xiao Fang was also like this, both distant and close to each other at the same time). It was this paradoxical feeling between familiarity and strangeness, closeness and distance that generated my fascination with the two urban villages. This was not just a curiosity about a totally strange place inhabited by others, but an aspiration to visualise a close but unrecognised world as part of the city I live in.

To picture this hidden island in the city, I started my ethnographic work in Gaowang and Wujiawan. But my intention is not to picture it holistically, but more particularly from the perspective of their rural migrant dwellers. I chose such stance not simply because they are the residents who have made up the majority of the population in the area as the result of continuous influx during the past decades, but also because they are the group in the city who has been largely marginalised, and therefore whose voice could provide us with an alternative vision of the place and the city. But this stance does not point to the reduction of the place into an enclave of rural migrants, for I did not want to close my eyes to the constant encounters of rural migrants with the indigenous residents and other actors, who equally dwelled in the place and imprinted on the place their own investments and identities. Neither do I intend to isolate the rural migrants' settlement practices in the two urban villages from the tidal transition both the city and the nation are undergoing in the post-reform age. This transition has, over the past decades, been underlying the transformation of the place from two rural villages to a migrant urban settlement site. It is also fundamentally determining the fate of the place in the future landscape of the city. Even for the rural migrants' themselves, the classical image of enclave does not fit with their identification with the two urban villages, for their embedment into the urban

villages is far from fixed or exclusive in their migration trajectory. Given such multiplicity and fluidity, it is out of my attempt to present a holistic picture of the place as an enclosed community or a cultural (sub-cultural) territory. What I attempt is to capture a snapshot revealing contingent conjuncture where a group of Chinese rural migrants have their trajectory of migration and settlement intersected with the shifting process of a small place in the transitional urban China of the recent past. I understand my exploration as a dual mission: to re-ground the rural migratory subjects to the place of their urban settlement on the one hand, and to re-value the people-place relationships in this locale on the other.

From the theoretical perspective, my research can be seen as a response towards one of the focal debates in recent academic enquiry joined by the multitude disciplines of social science, which sees a recent renaissance of the concept of place as a dynamic tool in re-asserting the geographical and spatial importance in the on-going dialectical process of modernity, a touchstone for critical social and cultural theories coping with the challenges posed by the growing power of networks on the one hand, and the springing voices of locality and authenticity on the other. In this context, the romanticised and essentialist notion of place once nurtured by the humanist geography has been put under scrutiny, while a progressive and dynamic notion of place is rising in academic thinking. Our imagination of place has turned from a status of *being* to a process of *becoming*, wherein place it is no longer a fixed point bonded by geographic territories in the opposition against power of flow, nor an authentic identity exclusively pertaining to any singular insider. On the contrary, it is imagined as an arena where movements from various dimensions encounter, contest, and negotiate, an outcome of co-production by multiple social actors. It is this imagination opening up the richness of the concept, which allows me to reflect on the complexity, connectivity, and tension in the modernising Chinese society through observing and interpreting the social drama staged in a small place.

Yet, so far academic interest in this debate has mainly unfolded along a global-local nexus, overwhelmingly dominated by the phenomena generated by transnational movements. It is easy, but too hasty, to assume that the struggles and contradictions of place-making within a nation state is less tense or less complex, because the conventional modern geographies of the last two centuries of nation-state building are defined not only by boundaries between nations but also by those within. Particularly in a country such as today's China, which is undergoing dramatic transition, the issue of place and place-making geared by internal movements (not separated from the global flows though) is equally urgent. Since

the 1980s, the economic and institutional reforms in the country have broken down the walls between regions and work-units, industries have been restructured, the administrative system has been re-organised and the planning has been laid down for a new round of urban renewal and sprawl. New geographies of homogenisation and differentiation are fundamentally changing the landscape of both city and countryside. But they are only one dimension of place-making in today's China. We should also be aware that under these epochal changes, the lives of 1.3 billion Chinese people are literally 'on the move' (Friedmann, 2007: 260). Either passively cast out into an unfamiliar world or spontaneously in seeking a better world, they are commonly experiencing spatial and social displacement and desperate to reorient themselves. In the process, life routines are readjusted, the sense of place is reconfigured, the belongingness to place is renegotiated, and mechanisms in space ordering and regulation are reinvented. Comparing with place-making at a structural level, which is well-planned and grand-styled, these practices are rather trifling and disorienting. But they interest me more, not only in that they are the constitutive strands in the grand turbulence of the transition, but also, I believe, since place is about both objective location and subject identification, no place-making can literally happen in reform schemes or blue prints, they have to be materialised through people's everyday life permeated with personal feeling, experiences and sentiments. That is why when I entered the two urban villages, my intention was focused mainly on how place is sensed and shaped in people's everyday life through their bodily experiences in establishing, sustaining and adjusting particular life patterns and rhythms.

Given the massive scale and particularities of the rural-urban migration in reform age China, it is not surprising to see a growth in academic interest in this field recently. Many scholars do not particularly base their studies on any spatial form that accommodates rural migrants in the migration, but mainly examine this population flow as an economic, political, and cultural movement that affords China a new engine of social conflict and transformation, such as the citizenship contest under the logic of the market (Solinger, 1999), the emergence of social and economic stratification (Li, 2004), the social reproduction of cultural identity and subjectivity (Jacka, 2006), and the relationship between urbanisation and the peasant labour market (Cai, 2009). Some scholars do focus their studies on particular migrant settlement locations including a number of urban villages in various cities, which shed light on the spatial and geographical dimension in rural migrants' social struggles (Beja and Bonnin, 1995, Piante and Zhu, 1995, Wang, 1995, Ma and Xiang, 1998, Xiang, 1999, Smith, 2000, Zhang, 2001, Fan and Taubmann, 2002, Gu and Liu, 2002, Wu, 2002, Xiang, 2005, Zhang and Hou, 2009). But most of

them tend to exclusively examine the practices of rural migrants, while taking the locality of the urban village and the impacts from other residents in the place only as a background. At the same time, there is another strand of research that specialises in the indigenous communities in the urban village and the transformation they are undergoing with the diminishing of this unique landscape in Chinese urbanisation (Li, 2002, Li, 2004, Li, 2004, Lan, 2005, Xie, 2005, Tian, 2008, Wang et al., 2009). Although studies in this strand acknowledge the influences caused by the influx of rural migrant population in the place, their interest is largely dominated by the tension between indigenous residents and the authorities, especially their confrontations during reconstruction campaigns. In none of the existing strands of research is the interaction between rural migrants' settlement practices and the locality of the urban village directly documented. It is by gearing the quest on this under-documented nexus that the present research is distinguished from the previous ones. For the first time, the concept of place and place-making is used as a dynamic framework to capture the opportunities, struggles, and tensions in Chinese rural migrants' settlement practices in the city. Questions are going to be asked not only about how these 'urban outsiders' create their settlement in the urban village, but also about how this creation engages in the place-making politics around this urban locale, both shaped by and shaping the locality.

Compared with preceding research, the second distinction of my ethnographical work is the central position of people's everyday life in my observation and theorisation. Unlike studies that are more concerned with rural migrants' organised and institutional practices, such as the operation of private enterprises, grass-roots organisations or their collective confrontation with the authorities (Zhang, 2001, Xiang, 2005), my attention is focused on the micro and personal level, looking into daily activities in their domestic and neighbourhood life. This stance is based on my belief that everyday life has potential in accommodating critical alternativeness in modernity and exhibiting how differently a place can be made from below compared with how it is made from top down.

What is more, I intend to contribute to this field by converging two detached narratives in relating rural migrants to their urban settlement locations in the previous studies: one is the enclave narrative which tends to imagine the urban village as a bonded and enclosed community exclusively belonging to rural migrant subjects (Ma and Xiang, 1998, Fan and Taubmann, 2002, Jie and Taubmann, 2002), the other is the dis-embedding narrative which emphasises the significance of networking powers in transcending the boundaries

of the urban village, such as translocal connectivity and electronic communication (Xiang, 1999, 2005, Qiu, 2009). To go beyond this binary, I am going to simultaneously account for the embedding and dis-embedding factors in the spatiality of rural migrants' urban settlement, putting my focus on the intersection between groundedness and connectivity, the dialogue between presence and absence, and the tension between home and away, rather than dealing with them as disjunctive or oppositional. In particular, my ethnographic work for the first time covers rural migrants' media consumption, like telephone and television uses, in the urban village, not as a separate or centred phenomenon but as an integral element of the place-making practices in their daily life. Through situating their media consumption in the particular micro-geography of street, neighbourhood, domesticity and festivity, I hope to capture the interaction between the power of various networking technologies with people's sense of place and home.

To summarise, my research is committed to deepening our understanding of the interplaying relationship between rural migrants' urban settlement practices and the place-making politics of the urban village in contemporary China. Based on ethnographic work in two urban villages, it is aimed to demonstrate how the formation of migratory subjectivity is embedded in the locality of the urban villages and meanwhile reshape the landscape and meanings of the place in their everyday world. Tracing this place-making process, I am going to examine how different objects, signs, institutions, spaces, and relationships are intricately interwoven and strategically employed; how the notion of home and belonging is negotiated; how the meanings of being urban and modern is re-interpreted, reproduced and subverted; and, what kind of social and cultural struggles are on-going.

In searching for the answer to these questions, I conducted 7-months ethnographic work in Gaowang and Wujiawan in 2006 and 2007. To organise the data collected through interviews and participatory observations in the field which were largely unstructured, I choose to compile them into an 'impressionist tale', which comprises a series of focused moments or scenes in the field that mark and make memorable my fieldwork experience. Although information is provided to illuminate certain general features of the place, 'what makes the story worth telling is its presumably out of the ordinary or unique character' (Van Maanen, 1988: 102). To a large extent, the judgement was not made from the perspective of informants, but of myself, as both a researcher and an outsider, who consciously and unconsciously sought what appeared different and 'out of the ordinary' in the field from my own experience and knowledge of modern city life, and then tries to

make sense of them by learning from the informant households. While some points are tightly focused, gaps are unavoidable, therefore ‘culture knowledge is slipped to an audience in fragmented, disjointed ways’ (Van Maanen, 1988: 104). I have done so in order to ‘bring the reader into an immediate and sensual contact with the field’ (Dubisch, 1995: 56) through my participatory view. More importantly, the epistemological aim of this approach is ‘to braid the knower with the known’ (Van Maanen, 1988: 102), so that both the place I want to know and my way of knowing can be jointly examined. Then, exactly what kinds of moments and scenes have been captured in the field and how they are narrated and interpreted in the reference to the theoretical literature and the social background of transitional China are going to be spelled out in the following outline of my thesis.

Chapter 1 attempts to reconfigure the existing literature on the issue of place and place-making from the expanding interdisciplinary field of social science into a theoretical framework to rethink about the relationships between the mobile subjects and the place of their urban settlement. The key focus of the chapter is to re-ground the identity formation and cultural struggles of migratory subjects onto the place-making politics of their urban settlement.

Chapter 2 provides a social backdrop to contextualise my ethnographical exploration in contemporary urban China. It traces the unique tradition of the city in China and sketches the restless transformation of urban space under different versions of social reforms throughout the modern age. The chapter goes on to show that the modern urban in China is far from a fixed identity, but an incomplete enterprise and a place-making arena, wherein the practice and struggle of rural migrants in urban settlement has never been outside the urban space, but functions as a constitutive force in how the city is defined and regulated. Based on this historical review, a characteristic geography of rural migrant settlement is then mapped out, wherein the urban village emerges as the principal inhabitant form for rural migrants and also marks the frontline of the spatial and cultural struggle in contemporary urban China.

Chapter 3 zooms in the lens onto the field where the ethnographical research was conducted. Firstly, it depicts the location of the research, including the city Wuhan, with its shifting city landscape and particular position in China’s contemporary internal migration, and the two urban villages Gaowang and Wujiawan, which are literally located in the centre of the city and possess historical and demographical particularities as a rural



migrant settlement site. Then, it informs a series of elements in the design of the fieldwork, ranging from sampling, timing, to multiple data collecting methods. In line with the interpretive methodology of the research, the role of the researcher in the co-productive field relationships is reflected on towards the end of the chapter.

In the subsequent chapters, the place-making practices of the rural migrants in the two villages are delineated from five facets of their everyday life. Chapter 4 unrolls the chaotic and vibrant street life in the urban villages. Among a whole array of migrant-oriented consumption sites, close-up examinations are focused on two distinct types of consumption sites: the boiled-water rooms and the public telephone services, both embodying the re-appropriation and re-interpretation of certain consumption phenomena in the rural migrants' settlement practices. In addition, the street space in urban villages is also featured from its liminality between the private and the public crystallised in the street-house dwelling form, whereby a localised pattern and rhythm of life is constantly set in motion. In the last part of the chapter, the spirit of street life in the place is captured from people's street wisdom in dealing with strangers. Referring to all these impressions, I argue that the street space in urban villages empowers the rural migratory subjects to manipulate and subvert the hegemonic discourses on the *publicness* of public space, not necessarily by staging bold political rituals and events, but more essentially, through dwelling, walking, gathering, and consuming.

Chapter 5 goes into people's domestic space and explores how everyday life is both structured by and structuring the housing form in the urban villages. It characterises the distinctions of the informal housing rental market oriented to the influx of rural migrants and decodes both the communal and conflicting relationships between the indigenous owners and migrant tenants. Then, alongside the evolutionary trajectory of different housing patterns in the place, it unpacks the shifting and juxtaposed meanings and strategies of dwelling practices, from external bordering to interior ordering, which delivers a cultural contest space where different or contradictory notions of home encounter and negotiate with each other.

Chapter 6 focuses on an important object in the rural migrants' home-making experiences - television. Without denying the significance of programme-oriented consumption, this chapter turns to a relatively un-documented aspect in migrant viewers' TV consumption, the physics of television. In particular, the place of television in rural migrants' home-making experiences is analysed from three angles: their strategic possession of a TV set in

the trajectory of migration, the functional and symbolic emplacement of the TV set in their urban domestic space, and finally, their active engagements in creating an alternative cable TV connection in the neighbourhood which manifests a resistance against the marginalisation of the area in the city's cable system.

The last two chapters are both based on a special anthropological moment in my fieldwork: the calendrical ceremony during the Spring Festival, one of the most important ritual occasions in China. Chapter 7 examines the ways in which the ritual power of the festival in regulating social belonging was challenged by rural migrants through their festival celebrations. It firstly puts the festival return pilgrimage of rural migrants under interrogation and finds out that, far from yielding to a fixed and unitary origin, the rural migrants actually endow their return journey with a trans-local sense of home and identity. Meanwhile, parallel with the question of whether to return or not, the debates about where to return, or whose home to return to, also rise within every migrant household, which opens up a potential transgressing space against the arbitrary gender boundaries of the ritual. Next, it turns to the rural migrants who celebrated their festival in the urban villages and discovers that, co-inhabiting in the same neighbourhood, same ritual performances of the festival, such as the New Year couplet posters and family reunion dinner on *Chuxi* night, were differently operated by the indigenous and rural migrants households, expressing distinguishing identities in the same location.

Chapter 8 captures the moment when the migratory subjects engaged in the media ritual of the festival constructed by the CCTV Spring Festival Gala show on New Year's Eve. In order to display the intersection between the production of a national ritual performance and the consumption of rural migrants in the locality of urban villages, the chapter approaches the moment by combining content analysis of the programme with the reception study with the migrant viewers. It is demonstrated that, the ritualisation of this media rite is a multi-situated and multi-layered social and cultural process co-produced by both media producer and consumer. In the process, the rural migratory subjects are not absolutely excluded from but have long played a prominent role in the construction of the mediated centre of the 'national family'. At the same time, the rural migrants in the urban villages also used Gala Show viewing as the exercise of a form of ritual mastery to enrich their own festival experiences and to know the environment and themselves better.

Finally, my exploration concludes on two subjects: how the two urban villages exemplified a 'progressive sense of place' in transitional China and, how rural migrants' settlement practices in the urban village revealed the power and mechanism of daily activities in place-making. I also reflect on the limitations of my study and suggest some approaches to expand it. In the end, I record some recent changes in and around the two urban villages which have happened since the completion of my fieldwork, which give rise to more questions to be answered by future research.

# Chapter 1

## Re-grounding the Migratory Subjects in Place

There was a tendency to discuss migration in ‘the mechanistic terms of causes and consequences’ (Papastergiadis, 2000: 4). Considerable endeavours have been made to formulate the general laws of the population flow (Ravenstein, 1889, see in: Gregory et al., 2009), to establish theoretical models of migration pattern and intervening factors (Stouffer, 1940), to capture the driving forces behind individual decision making (Lee, 1966), or, to question the inequality behind migration from the perspective of Marxist political economy, wherein migrants play the role of a ‘reserve army’ of cheap and exploitable labour subject to the structures of ‘state capitalism’ (Castles and Kosack, 1973). In this cause-and-effect paradigm, migratory subjects are merely seen as moving between two dichotomous places: the rural and the urban, or the old world and the new world, whereas the trajectory of their movement is rarely seen as an active part in the field of identity formation. However, as Papastergiadis asserts, ‘it is increasingly evident that contemporary migration has no single origin and no simple end.’ (Papastergiadis, *ibid.*) One of the forces to challenge the binary mapping of migration is the distinct existence of various forms of migrant settlements in the city, which cannot be seamlessly categorised into either end of movement. The unsettling and disturbing existence of these enclaves in the city, both as a geographic landmark and as a cultural phenomenon, indisputably demonstrates the significance of a third space beyond the binary, which cannot be ‘reduced to a neutral stage upon which other forces are at play in the narratives of migration’ (Papastergiadis, *ibid.*), but actively constitutes the social implications of the population flows and the cultural identity of the migratory subjects.

However, just as how they are multifariously termed in different social contexts, be it ghettos, slums, shantytowns, or urban villages, there is a wide variety of theorisations of migrant settlement places in the academic sphere, reflecting different perspectives of the relationship between place and migration. Especially in today’s networking and globalising world, where people are easily able to transcend physical territories with the

help of a mechanical net of transportation and communication devices, the traditional person-place bond has been constantly put into question, so is the relation between migrants and their urban settlement places. In this context, the necessity and possibility to re-ground migratory subjects to their settlement places forms an interesting agenda and a huge challenge for migration studies. It is also a question that my study cannot bypass. My answer to the question is developed from the recent renaissance of the concept of place in the inter-disciplinary academic debates. In this chapter, I am going to find out how a theoretical redoing of place can contribute to emplace people who are conceived as ‘out of place’, and how this new notion of place provides us with a framework to describe and understand the dynamical processes of social, spatial and cultural struggle unfolding in the trajectory of migration and settlement.

## **The theoretical approaches relating migratory subjects to their urban settlement locations**

The academic interest in the urban settlements of migrants has spanned the past century, bringing about a proliferation of theoretical and empirical works both in sociology and in urban anthropology. Parallel to the constant alterations in the modern migration map, the theorisation of the relationship between the migratory subjects and the place of their settlements has undergone many paradigmatic turns.

The first can be termed as the *functionalist paradigm*. It highlights the role of the migrant settlements in modernisation and urbanisation, but follows the linear model of migration and places the migrant settlements in the so-called folk-urban continuum (Redfield, 1941, see in: Friedl and Chrisman, 1975: 4), functioning as a transitional zone for immigrants to go through the phrase of adaptation. The origin of this paradigm can be traced back to the work of the Chicago School in the 1920s, led by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess. In responding to the public concerns on the disorganisation caused by the accumulation of the immigrant groups, the members of the Chicago School strove to deviate from the standpoint of social pathology held by the former social reformers in approaching the problem. Instead, they placed the immigrant quarters into an ecological concept of the city. In Park’s description, urban society was a ‘mosaic’ of segregated minor communities, each of them seeking to maintain more or less alien and exotic culture (Park, 1952: 196, see in: Ward, 1989: 160). Although it has been noticed that, as ‘natural areas’ of the city, immigrant quarters resembled the rural communities from which many residents had

emigrated, this resemblance was not seen as a simple transplantation, but as an original foundation of community life and adjustment process that eventually leads into social reorganisation (Ward, 1989: 158-60). This ecological approach was followed by Louis Wirth (1928, see in: Friedl and Chrisman, 1975: 2) in his book, *The Ghetto*, which examined the Jewish communities in many cities. But in two other influential studies, William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943) and Herbert J. Gans' *The Urban Villagers* (1962), the general notion of urban disorganisation associated with slums was questioned. What was stressed instead was the adaptation of the local residents to their low status and economic deprivation. Gans' use of the metaphor of the village implied that the social world in migrant quarters was closer to traditional patterns of life than to those of the modern city, which offers its inhabitants cultural continuity in their transition from a rural or foreign urban setting to the ways of life of the American city. Such idea was further amplified by Abu-Lughod's (1961) research into the rural migrant settlements in Cairo, which also conceived of them as more like Egyptian villages than part of the modern city. With the traditional organisations of rural society largely remaining, the place functioned as a cultural cushion for migrant adaptation to city life.

Parallel to the work done by the sociologists, more and more anthropologists moved away from their once exclusive concentration on 'primitive' tribal or rural societies and chose migrant settlements in the city as their new fields (Friedl and Chrisman, 1975: 8). Not surprisingly, their approaches into migrant communities very much inherited the legacy derived from the experiences in the tribes or villages, which tend to look upon the unit of analysis as a closed system logically consistent within itself. This holistic approach led to the second paradigm of migrant settlement study: *the sub-cultural paradigm*. Oscar Lewis was one of many anthropologists who followed the migrants from village to city, trying to understand the cultural change in their new environment. In his work in Mexico City slums, Lewis (1968, 1968) asserted that the inhabitants in the marginal settlements manifest particular personal or cultural characteristics that are in part responsible for their unsuccessful acculturation in an urban environment. The essence of slum life is formulated by Lewis as 'Anomie + Deprivation = Culture of Poverty'. In this formulation, poverty is both an objective condition and a subjective outlook. He listed a whole range of characteristics that indicated the presence of the culture of poverty, such as 'provincial...locally oriented ... know only their own troubles... are not class conscious...' (Lewis, 1968: 11). Although the concept of 'culture of poverty' itself and the properties of the culture have been widely questioned (see: Hannerz, 1969, Jocano, 1975 for critiques of this position), Lewis' approach was not rare in urban anthropology. For example, the black

districts in American cities have also been widely labelled the so-called 'street corner culture' by a crop of anthropologists, such as Elloit Liebow (1967) and Ulf Hannerz (Hannerz, 1969).

At the same time, as the world increasingly encountered the problems caused by rapid urbanisation in post-war developing societies, another strand of academic inquiry turned to the *structuralist paradigm*, which is largely derived from the political economic approach and concerns the migrant settlement as a field of economic and political struggle between the mainstream and the marginal. The classical accounts of this paradigm are from studies on illegal migrant settlements in Latin American countries. In their review of the relevant literature of the study of this field from the 1960s to 1970s, Peattie and Aldrete-Haas (1981) point out that there was an obvious interest for Latin American scholars in integrating the marginal settlement problem into the study of dependent development as a whole. They add that, 'within this general framework, illegal settlements arise because their inhabitants lack capital and thus cannot afford adequate housing. The lack of capital is in turn the result of the economic structure of society, which marginalises certain sectors of its population, denying them adequate, stable, and reasonably paid jobs.' (1981: 165) Based on his work in Lima, Peru, Turner (1965, 1976) argued for the legitimacy of the 'uncontrolled settlements' as the better solution for the housing shortage in the urbanisation process in developing societies. His defence of self-help housing delivers an ideological flavour that conceptualises the urban marginal settlement as 'the roof of one's own' for the urban marginal and an arena for struggle between individual autonomy and powerful governmental institutions.

Given the obvious distinctions between them, the three paradigms are commonly rooted in the modernist concept of migration and based on a presumed exclusive and enclosed affiliation between the migratory subjects with the geographical territory of their urban settlements. They identify the place of the settlement as a bounded space separated from other areas of the city, solely inhabited by a migrant population who are discriminable from outside and share certain homogeneity inside. While the role of the settlement place in migrants' social adaptation and cultural identification is emphasised, little attention has been paid to question how this role is produced and how it is challenged and altered. Contrasting to this reductionist theorisation, many empirical studies have demonstrated that migrants do not have to segregatively settle down in certain districts of the city but equally possible, to reside in non-slum neighbourhoods as servants, lodgers, or extended relatives (Costello, 1987). At the same time, migrant settlement places as a geographical

territory are ‘inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants,’ but in many cases ‘equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous.’ (Brah, 1996: 181) Stronger criticisms are levelled against the essentialist interpretation of the relationship between place, people and culture, which reify the identity of the place with a single sub-community or sub-culture and assume this connotation as given and fixed. Very often, this interpretation is used to legitimise cultural discrimination towards ethnic groups. One example is the constructed connection between Chinatown as a filthy corner and Chinese migrants as an inferior group that once widely existed in western society, as Anderson (1991) points out in his study.

Over the last two decades, migration study has been gradually incorporated into the globalisation discourse, whereby the concept of transnationalism (translocalism), as one of the properties of the globalising processes, has earned its fashionability in the academic field and pushes forward a new paradigm in the theorisation of the migratory subjectivity and space in the late modern age. There are comprehensive reasons underlying this paradigmatic turn. In the first place, the mobility of people has reached unprecedented levels in the globalising world. The patterns of migration can no longer be covered by any bipolar models of population flows and relationships once in the centre of the modernist concept of migration. The density, velocity and multi-directionality of this mobility has baffled analysts and discredited many of the earlier theories. In the context of a proliferation of new border crossings, the notion of transnationalism and diaspora acquires currency to capture the transcending potential of the identity creation and challenge the unitary social belonging and place-boundedness in the conventional narratives of migration (Hall, 1990, Safran, 1991, Brah, 1996, Clifford, 1997, Vertovec, 1999, Kalra, 2005). In the meantime, the organisation of capitalist production on a transnational basis has presented an increasing reliance on the strategies of flexible accumulation in the late modernity (Sassen, 1988, Harvey, 1989). The pervasive ‘economies of signs and space’ (Lash and Urry, 1994), effectively change the world from a centre/periphery structure into a multicentric domain. Technological innovations have sped up the ‘annihilation of space by time’ (Harvey, 1989), reducing the friction of distance and facilitating almost immediate communication over increasingly large distances. In this context, a shifting world landscape has been remapped by a crop of theorists, wherein the power of ‘networks’ (Castells, 1997), ‘flows’ (Lash and Urry, 1994) or ‘disjunctive scopes’ (Appadurai, 1993) not only breaks the borders of territories but also undoes the meaning structure of places, further, generate a deep doubt or fear of ‘no sense of place’ (Meyrowitz, 1985) or ‘nonplaceness’ (Augé, 1995). Similar juxtapositions are presented in



the methodological transformation of the cultural criticism. Once dominated by the image of 'field', now it is chiefly the metaphor of 'travel' that leads anthropologists in exploring the social implications of their research objects. James Clifford is one of the cultural theorists in promoting this so-called 'travel theory'. In tipping the balance from dwelling towards travelling, ethnographers are encouraged to approach 'a site of travel encounters', such as hotels, ships or buses, rather than a fixed residence like a tent in a village (Clifford, 1992: 101). Accordingly, it is *routes* rather than either the place of roots or the place of settlement that are conceived as the new resource in tapping the social agency of the migratory or diasporic subjects (Gilroy, 1993, Clifford, 1997).

All these theorisations have certainly unlocked the mythic unity between culture, people and place, and deployed a new space in rethinking about the diversity, complexity and unpredictability in the process of migration and settlement. But that does not mean the concept of trans-nationalism/localism has earned universal popularity. Among many worries about it, the most strongly negative tones are concentrated on its danger in undermining the place-specific variations in the cross-border activities and over-exaggerating the sweeping power of networks as a one-dimensional flow solely subject to the global order. Indeed, stressing the significance of the transnational networks can sometimes lead to another pitfall, which 'misleadingly implies a notion of universal and equal mobility' (Wolff, 1997: 189). Along with many others (i.e. Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996, Fabricant, 1998), Caren Kaplan has expressed a warning in relation to the idea of 'a world without boundaries' in transnationalism discourses: 'Just how tempting and powerful is the notion of 'a world without boundaries' at this historical juncture? ...As free-trade zones proliferate and tariffs are dismantled, mobility, flexibility, and speed have become the watchwords of both the traders and the theorists in metropolitan cultures.' (1995: 45)

This is not an unnecessary worry. A notable fact is that the place of migrant settlements has been more or less marginalised in the recent migration studies, sharply contrasting to the mounting interest in the space of flow in various forms. For example, more and more researches focus on the role of mass media in shaping identities, celebrating the 'virtual neighbourhoods' or 'imagined communities' constructed through the moments 'when mobile subjects meet moving images' (Appadurai, 1996). Others are fascinated with the theoretical preconceptions of hypermobility in the postmodernity exemplified by some key sites in world cities, such as hotels, airports, and similar institutions that 'are intensely involved in mobility and in the encounters of various kinds of mobile people...' (Hannerz,

1998: 239). To remind about the bias in this trend, Smith (2005) re-asserts a concern in the emplacement of mobile subjects. He explains 'in forming their own sense of agency people are always already positioned or situated rather unmoored subjects.' Migrants, like everyone else, 'occupy multiple social locations, and are subject to the inner tensions and conflicts derived from their multi-positionality.' (p. 9) Similarly, to picture a new diasporic space in today's migration, Brah is also cautious about the truth that the experience of location can easily dissolve out of focus because of the strong association of notions of diaspora with displacement and dislocation. She therefore registers 'a politics of location' in diasporic identity, which features diasporas as both migrants and settlers (Brah, 1996: 204). Both of them commonly point to the continuing significance of migrant settlement place in the seemingly placeless historical juncture, which delivers a potential to bring geography back into the transnationalism discourse and to ground mobile subjects into social and spatial specifics (Mitchell, 1997). Therefore, the strength of the notion of transnationalism/localism depends on whether it can simultaneously 'signal a broad refiguration of human geographies away from a national/international imaginary' and meanwhile specify and ground such a refiguration 'for correcting overgeneralised accounts of cultural globalisation and displacement.' (Crang et al., 2003: 439,440)

One of the empirical researches to substantialise this strength is Roger Rouse's (1991, 1992, 2002) work in Mexican migrant community. For the first time, he employs Fredric Jameson's notion of 'postmodern hyperspace' to re-map the contemporary migration flow between the rural Mexican *municipio* of Aguililla and the USA. Instead of the conventional idea of 'community' and 'center/periphery', Rouse (2002) renders the term of 'transnational migrant circuits' to feature the social landscapes of migration as not just 'a movement between distinct communities' but a process wherein 'various settlements have become so closely woven together that, in an important sense, they have come to constitute a single community across a variety of sites' through 'continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information.' (p. 162) But in the meantime, the local particularities of each of the settlement locations have not lost their weight in Rouse's research. They function as *sites* 'in which transnationally organised circuits of capital, labour and communications intersect with one another and with local ways of life.' (1991: 16)

Rouse's theorisation is very insightful indeed. For me, it is a decisive step to lead the cartography of postmodernist social space 'equally discoverable in the details of people's daily life.' (Rouse, 2002: 158) I concur with him in contextualising the social practices of

the migratory subjects in the migration circuit as a whole rather than solely in any one locale. But I would suggest that, to grasp the complexities in the interplay between 'circuits' and 'sites' of various forms, our observing points should be diverse, each has its focus and schematic priority, as Rouse (1995) himself suggests elsewhere:

*Given the complexity with which power operates, it is impossible to identify the nature of its workings without holding at least a few things still, quite knowing reducing the fluidities, hybridises and contingencies in certain areas to relative fixity and uniformity so that those in other areas can be brought more easily into view. (p. 398)*

While Rouse benefits from his multi-sited ethnography approach (also see: Marcus, 1995), which enables him to chart a socio-spatial imagery of the social and economic ties across borders of various sites, I would like to particularly examine how these ties intersect in and with one locale. If his focus is on migratory circuits constituted by different settlement sites, mine is more on one settlement site as integral to the whole circuit. However, I do not think Rouse's term 'site' is rich enough to express my understanding of the migrant settlement. Instead, the word *place* seems to be more appropriate. Next, I am going to explain from what theoretical stance I use this concept to make sense of the social practices on-going in the migrant settlement and why it is a dynamic concept to capture the complexity and tension in the process.

## **Redoing place: from *Being* to *Becoming***

In the most straightforward and common way, place can be defined as a meaningful location. To understand how rich the concept is, political geographer John Agnew (2002: 16) outlines three fundamental elements of place: locale, location and the sense of place, which means a place is a combination between a concrete form within which people conduct their lives under different social relationships, 'wider networks and the territorial ambit it is embedded in', and the subjective and emotional attachment people have with the place. Place cannot be fully understood without any one of them and is more than any of them. It is this combination between the material and the social, the object and the subject, that makes place into one of the most paradoxical concepts in social science. This paradoxical feeling was once phrased by Entrikin (1991) as 'the betweenness of place':

*From the decentred vantage point of the theoretical scientist, place becomes either location or a set of generic relations and thereby loses much of its significance for human action.*

*From the centered viewpoint of the subject, place has meaning only in relation to an individual's or a group's goal and concerns. Place is best viewed from points in between.*  
(p. 5)

Given this ambiguity and complexity, place cannot be reduced to space or site. While space is rather abstract and site does not convey the engagement of subjects, place always presents itself as concrete, discernible, meaningful, and unique, deeply related to our memory, sentiment and sense of belonging. Thus, from the person-centred perspective, place is more important than space, and geographical investigation is required to honour the experiences, imagination and attachments of intentional human subjects. In other words, it is not spaces or sites which ground our identifications, but places (Carter et al., 1993: xii).

However, it is quite understandable why Rouse (1991) deliberately avoids using 'place' to define the migrant settlement and argues that 'the place of the putative community...is becoming little more than a site...' (p.16) In my mind, his rejection of the concept has much to do with the connotations that once dominated our imagination of place. In emphasising the significance of place as an essential property of human existence, humanistic geographers (Relph, 1976, Tuan, 1977 among others), after Heidegger, tend to characterise place as a status of *being*. While time is seen as a progressive dimension of motion or flow, place is 'a pause', 'an organised world of meaning', 'a static concept', which cannot be sensed if 'we see the world as process, constantly changing.' (Tuan, 1977:179) More specifically, this conceptual solidification is fulfilled through two dimensions: the structure/agency dualism and the global/local dichotomy.

The first dimension is mostly demonstrated in the oppositional relationship between space and place. What has been widely accepted is to understand place with reference to space and vice versa, treating them as opposite aspects of a unity, wherein space represents openness and freedom constituted of rootless and fluid flows, while place stands for security and stability fixed by structure and value. As Tuan (1977) puts it: 'What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.' (p. 6) Similarly, de Certeau (1984) also endows space with much potential for everyday resistance and considers place as the opposite:

*A place (lieu) is the order in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location*

*(place). The law of the 'proper' rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. ...A space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a "proper".* (p.117)

In this binary construction, the establishment of spatial meanings that is full of complexities and conflicts is reduced into a one-way journey: making spaces into places through subjective investment, whereby place is imagined as the fixed destination of the journey eternally structured by social powers or cultural code, with little space for agency or negotiation.

Another conceptualisation of place relies upon what Smith (2002) called the 'binary dichotomisation of the global versus the local' , wherein place is synonymised to 'the local' in the opposition to the global (p.110) . In this discourse of global-local interplay, the global is depicted as the dynamic economic space of capital and information flows floating above places, while the local is used to signify either 'the cultural space of embedded communities' where 'personal meanings are produced, cohesive cultural values are articulated and traditional ways of life are enunciated and lived', or 'inexorable spaces of collective resistance to disruptive processes of globalisation.' (ibid.) According to Smith, one extreme of this dichotomy is represented by Harvey and Castells' theorisation of the global dynamism of the capitalist (post)modernity. Harvey's (1989) explanation of globalisation is overwhelmingly informed by the capital action characterised as flexible accumulation. With the spatial barriers overcome by the accelerated 'time-space compression', 'the spatial and temporal bases for reproduction of the social order are subject to the severest disruption.' (p.238) For Harvey, the oppositional movements from the regional may flourish in some particular places or win some battles in what he calls 'postmodernist politics', but 'they are all too often subject to the power of capital over the co-ordination of universal fragmented space.' (ibid.) The other theorist Castells (1997) tries to frame the global development not with the logic of capitalist production but under an informational mode, wherein information accumulation and exchange play a central role in the constitution of the global networks of wealth and power. The result of this mode of development, he argues, is to convert places into 'space of flows'. Like Harvey, Castells sees the networking power as boundary-penetrating which not only disrupts the sovereignty of the nation-state, but also results in the detachment of individual and group

identity from local places. Although he puts more stress on the local resistance, the local voices in his ears are still produced by the global domination. As Smith (2002) points out, 'resistance to globalisation is tied not to the agency of specific actors confounding unique historical conjunctures but to the very structural dynamic of the technological revolution which threatens to render the local "tribes" irrelevant to the new informational world that has come into being.' (p.112)

Concerning the other extreme of the global-local dichotomy, Smith (2002) targets the postmodern ethnographic effort in "recording" the pure, authentic voice of the "marginal" and the "different" (p. 117). He warns that the danger in this temptation is to romanticise the local voice as 'the heroic individual or collective challenge to the oppressive forces of global modernity' (ibid.), which again, polarise the local and the global as one from below and one from above and never seem to be compatible with each other. The incompatibility between the local and the global is equally expressed by Relph's (1976) two binary terms: 'place and placelessness', as well as Augé's (1995) 'place and non-place'. Both theorists commonly emphasise an authentic sense of place or organic social life that is only conditioned by the inherent history of the place and impossible under the abstract or uniform manner in the global conditions. What is more, this pursuit of an authentic and original local voice as opposed to 'the global' too often mirrors the problem of idealising the local identity as homogenously united and timelessly pure (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 7).

In both dichotomous nexuses, place has been reduced to a fixed point. In the circumstances when cultural difference is increasingly becoming de-territorialised caused by mass migration and transnational/local cultural flows in the late modern world, this solid notion of place has become a hindrance for us to continually use it as a rich and dynamic concept for understanding the experience of modernity. To re-evolve 'a sense of place' in what might be perceived as increasingly placeless world, a new notion of place needs to be built up by putting both dichotomies under scrutiny.

To unravel the first dichotomy, we need to think if there is any possibility of reconciliation between structure and agency. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Giddens' *locale* provide positive answers to this question. For Bourdieu (1977), social life is best understood as the mutual interaction between structures, dispositions or orientations to action, and actions themselves. As a term, *habitus* is the means by which structure is played out as it consists of a set of 'principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations

which can be objectively regulated and regular without...being the product of obedience to rules...' (p.72) At the same time, it is also the capacity for improvisation in actions that, though they will always be structured, are not reducible to structures. *Habitus*, then, is both durable and malleable (allows some free play). It is not only a set of abstract rules; it also 'highlights codes of spatial performance in the context of social situations.' (Shields, 1991: 37)

Similar to Bourdieu's *habitus*, Anthony Giddens' (1979) notion of *locale* also functions as a constituting element in action, a social structure not simply obeyed by people in their everyday life, but internalised by social actors in their habits in the sustaining of communication through the dynamic 'time-space routinisation'. 'Virtually all collectivities have a locale of operation, spatially distinct from that associated with others.' (p. 206-7) In a sense, each locale functions as a structure for social actors, but in Giddens' structuration theory, structure should not be treated as 'establishing parameters within which social actors are able to exercise their independent discretion'. Rather, structure should be seen as 'implicated in every moment of action' as 'an "absent" order of differences, which only "present" in the constituting moments of interaction through which it was itself reproduced or transformed.' It was 'at once constraining and enabling', being 'both the medium and the outcome of the social practices constituting social systems' (1979, 1984, 1990, see in: Johnston et al., 2000: 798). Directly drawing from Giddens' theory of structuration, Pred (1984) theorises place as a historically contingent process, whereby the reproduction of social and cultural forms, the formation of biographies and the transformation of nature ceaselessly become one another at the same time, and time-space specific activities and power relations continuously become one another. He argues that, as an integral part of the structuration process, place is both constitutive of, and constituted by, social relations and everyday practices. Place is 'what takes place ceaselessly,' they are never 'finished' but always 'becoming'. (ibid. p 279)

In contesting the second dichotomy, the dichotomous interplay of the global and the local, critical urban geographer Doreen Massey (1993) proposes a 'global sense of place' or 'progressive sense of place'. On the one hand, she warns against the tendency to understand the condition of postmodernity as exclusively driven by capital actions or as equally accessible to all. By imagining the globalised flows in more 'socially formed, socially evaluative and differentiated way' and develop a 'politics of mobility and access' or 'power-geometry of time-space compression,' (1993: 60-1) Massey (1984) tries to re-affirm that still 'geography matters' in the global conditions. A focus on place variations

for her (1997) is an excellent basis for understanding diversity and difference and the inequality generated by effects of various types of large-scale restructuring. On the other hand, no place variation or locality is solely derived from the internal history bonded with a singular identity. Every place is different because it is specific in the way of interaction and articulation between social relations, experiences, and understandings. 'A portion of those relations are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself.' (Massey, 1993: 66) Therefore, there is no authentic voice or coherent identity bonded with place in Massey's mind. Rather, places are imagined as meeting points of different routes of people, whether residents or non-residents, whose 'favourite haunts within it, the connections they make (physically, or by phone or post, or in memory and imagination) between here and the rest of the world vary enormously.' (ibid.: 65) This indeed creates a very extroverted sense of place 'which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.' (ibid.: 66)

Another way to understand place as a dynamic rather than a solid concept is provided by Taylor's (1999) 'place-space tension' theory. Characteristically, he points out the fact that 'everywhere, in fact, has the potential for being both place and space,' depending on whose perspective is involved. For him, the geographic politics involves not only making space to place, but also transformations of place into space. The dynamics underlies in the process is what he called 'place-space tension' between 'the producers of space and the makers of place.' (p.12) For example, a city is viewed as a place by its inhabitants (or different places by different inhabitants) but it is also a space to plan for urban planners (although they themselves can be inhabitants of the city too). Therefore, 'the question of who defines an institution in spatial terms and who sees it as a place opens up a politics of place-making. The task for political geographers is to unravel the geographical ambiguity of political institutions as expressed in place-space tensions.' (1999: 7) The political implication of this theory is further explored by Taylor through identifying nation-state and home-household as two exemplary fields of place-space tensions. The establishment of modern nation-states does not only turn space (sovereign territory) into place (national homeland), but also involves turning place of indigenous into space of developers. The same tension also arises between household space and home place. Taylor's 'place-space tension' theory develops our imagination of the dynamics of place-making process from a one-way, one-off mode (making one space into one place) to a multi-dimensional and multi-layered mode (being co-interpreted and co-produced by different subjects through multiple movements).



Massey, Pred and Taylor's insights inspire a redoing of place on a progressive basis: to understand place as a process of *becoming*, or *in making* instead of a status of *being*. This enables us to grasp the fluidity, connectivity, and multiplicity of place, to make sense of the ways in which social relations affecting places are stretched out over space and time. This notion of place does not contradict to the meaning of site, for it is equally practical and operational. It no longer posits place and circuits as external to each other, but sees place-making process at one location as constitutive in the whole circuit, and vice versa. But more than that, place does not simply site or deliver circuit, it also projects itself in the process, for every place is unique in its distinct mixture of local and wider social relations. It problematises the boundaries, textures and meanings of site and its intersection with circuits by questioning whose place it is, how different it is from different subject positions, how these differences affect the dynamics of circuits, and how various circuits change the identity of the place. In the trans-national/regional circumstances, every settlement location still stands for a meaningful place for the migratory subjects for it embodies the ways that 'localised struggle' and 'alternative discourses on the meanings of "global conditions" are played out.' (Smith, 2002: 118) As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) point out:

*The larger point is not simply the claim that cultures are no longer (were they ever?) fixed in place. Rather, the point, ... is that all associations of place, people, and culture are social and historical creations to be explained, not given natural facts. ... We must turn away from the commonsense idea that such things as locality and community are simply given or natural and turn toward a focus on social and political processes of place making, conceived less as a matter of 'ideas' than of embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistances. (p. 4-6)*

## **A bifocal look into the politics of place-making**

According to Gupta (1992), place making is a process of 'how feelings of belonging to an imagined community bind identity to spatial location such that differences between communities and places are created.' (p. 63) To grasp the nature and dynamics of this process, different theoretic approaches provide us with different analytic versions. The first version is from a social constructionist perspective, which sees every place as constructed by various forms of power relations in society and highlights the social and cultural inequality and struggle in the process. Theoretical works in this approach more or less derive their critical strength from three French theorists: Foucault, Levefere and de

Certeau, whose contributions unveil the spatial mechanisms as another profound dimension of power operation in modern society. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault depicts the changing nature of the social control from the pre-modern to the modern age and notes the emergence of seemingly more civilised and humane ways to control those who cannot fit into the social norms. Rather than being punished before the public, criminals and the 'mad' were separated from the public and sent to prisons or mental asylums, which functioned as institutional sites where modern technologies of discipline were exercised. Compared with the power measures in the feudal system, this spatial machinery is more effective and diffuse, because it is implicated with the power of knowledge about what is normal and what is insane, and how the human body should enter and use space and behave in the 'right' manner. In particular, Foucault uses Panopticon, a model prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18 century, as a metaphor to illustrate the spatial arrangement is fundamental to the modern notion of discipline of deviant individuals and behaviours (ibid.: 204). The key of this design is not only to enable the inspector easily observe the actions in every cell, but to create a threat of continual surveillance because the prisoner would not be able to see into the lodge and know if he/she is observed or not at any given moment. Therefore, the ultimate aim of the Panopticon is to establish a power apparatus whereby the moral codes of its designer can be internalised into every individual's self-consciousness and implemented through their self-control. As the result, 'there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and rules at the root of power relations' (Foucault, 1978: 94). Power literally embeds into the social body and comes from everywhere.

Further to Foucault's criticism, Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1991) target is to extend the interrogation of the pervasive and alienating effects of capitalism into the realm of everyday life, the realm that tends to be marginal in classical Marxism. He mapped the trajectory of capitalism not only in terms of class struggle and capital accumulation, but also in the operation of various modern institutions of bureaucratisation and commodification on social life and social space, the process he asserts as the 'colonisation' of the 'absolute space' of everyday life by the 'abstract space' of capitalism (1974). Lefebvre's interest in everyday life is shared by another French philosopher de Certeau. But unlike Lefebvre's stress on the suppressing and alienating powers 'from above', de Certeau (1984) seeks to uncover the resistance power 'from below' permeating everyday life. Ephemeral and slight manifestations and forms, like dwelling, walking, cooking, talking, are all referred as *tactics*. Distinct from the *strategies* of the strong who have

power to classify, survey, and order space, tactics are for the weak to divert, manipulate and subvert the meaning of specific places (p. xix).

These three theorists' ideas are an immensely provocative source for thinking about the politics of place making. Though differing on specific points of emphasis, they commonly argue that every place is constructed by social rules and cultural values and the relationships that people have with place cannot be considered without an analysis of power relations. The process of place-making is in turn featured as an on-going struggle between different social actors and social values. Some scholars reveal this process as a geography of exclusion, segregation and discipline, through which the dominant control is maintained (Mitchell, 1988, Shields, 1989, Markus, 1993, Sibley, 1995). Others celebrate place-making as a resistive agency of the subordinate individuals and groups to subvert the hegemonic appropriation of place by reclaiming their own subjectivity over the fractured landscapes of modernity (Pred and Watts, 1992, Ghannam, 2002, Keyman, 2007), a mechanism for people 'out of place', such as homeless and refugees, to commit 'transgression' by using place in subversive ways (Cresswell, 1996), otherwise, the potential for the relatively powerless to organise themselves into self-supporting cultures of resistance and co-operation (Spivak, 1988, hooks, 1997).

Given the strength of the social constructionist approach, it, however, cannot exhaust the richness of the place making in people's everyday life practice. In fact, it has encountered warnings from some scholars in its possible reductionist imagination of place-making processes, as it attempts to simplify power relations as neatly dividing the cultural field 'into two opposing camps.' (Rose, 1993: 48) Oakes (1997) puts his worry like this: 'the unproblematic focus on disempowered groups resisting dominant representations risks the assumption that marginal groups define their place-identity in a purely oppositional fashion.' (p. 524) This warning leads us to the other version of place-making from phenomenological approach, which tries to balance the power/resistance emphasis in the social constructionist approach.

For Edward Soja (1996), the difficulty in grasping the essence of place comes from our deep dependence on all forms of categorical or binary logic, including the oppositions of objectivity versus subjectivity, material versus mental, real versus imagined, and space versus place. In line with Lefebvre's (1974) concept of 'triple dialectic' of spatiality, he defines Thirdspace as a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness. In his definition, he uses Firstspace to describe empirically measurable and mappable phenomena (perceived

space), and Secondspace as the conceived spatiality in mental or cognitive forms.<sup>3</sup> While, Thirdspace is the lived space. It interrupts the distinction between the two conceptual realms for it is practiced, inhabited and lived rather than simply being material (perceived) or mental (conceived) (1996: 10). It is the opening up of Thirdspace that seems to provide us with a theoretical groundwork for focusing on operative spaces of place-making embedded in daily life. When discussing social construction of place, Tim Cresswell (2004) also expressed the similar conception. He said, 'place is neither like toothpaste (which once did not exist and in the future will be redundant), or gravity (which exists completely free of human will or consciousness). It is a construction of humanity but a necessary one – one that human life is impossible to conceive of without.' (p. 33) This reminds us that we should not over-simplify or over-romanticise people's place-making practices as solely politically oriented. After all, a sizeable portion of our interactions with place is pre-cognitive and involves a pre-reflective knowledge in our lifeworld. They might not be purely power-free, but at least not fully subject to the logic of the dominant power structure.

A rich knowledge about the everyday and mundane ways that people know place and live in place can be drawn from the literature of phenomenological geography. At the heart of this approach lies the philosophical acknowledgement that there is not a supposed 'real' world separated from human consciousness, but that this 'reality' should be studied independently of human experience. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), Edward Relph (1976), and Anne Buttimer (1976, 1980) are the key figures in this approach, who commonly emphasise human immersion (more often unselfconscious) in place as the very essence of existence and in turn, place should be understood as a pre-scientific fact of life based on the way we experience the world, or in Buttimer's words, 'the taken-for-granted context or pattern of daily living.' (1976: 277) This phenomenological enquiry is further substantiated by David Seamon in his book *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (1979). Like Tuan and Relph, Seamon rejects abstract theorisation and categorisation of place, but he further claims the necessity to 'uncover and describe things and experiences ... as they are in their own terms.' (p. 16) To do so, he developed a framework for understanding the relationships between people and place interlinked by three themes: movement, rest and encounter, which commonly form a 'triad of environmental experience'. In the centre of this triad is not our mind but our body, because from Seamon's view, we do not always consciously think about how we interact with the world. Our body too have intimate knowledge of the

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<sup>3</sup> These to some extent coincide with what Entrikin (1991) describes as the "decentred and centred perspectives".

everyday spaces of our lives in its own right. By considering individual people as ‘body-subjects’ and ‘feeling-subjects’, the place-making process in daily life is metaphorically described by Seamon as a ‘body ballet’, a performance without thinking. Accordingly, our sense of place is conceptualised as an experiential construction of ‘at-homeness’, which he defines as ‘the usually unnoticed, taken-for-granted situation of being comfortable in the familiar with the everyday world in which one lives.’ (ibid.: 71)

Seamon’s work is very inspiring for it visualises Soja’s Thirdspace as not merely an abstract or analytic concept, but a substantial and operative space for place-making. It suggests that place can be made and remade by different social agents because our routine interactions in and with place entail immediate agency, a kind of bodily and emotional spatial practices that are not fully manipulated by or exclusively resisting against structural powers.<sup>44</sup> The metaphor of ‘body ballet’ delivers similar political implication with de Certeau’s ‘tactical art’ of everyday practices as opposite to strategies, but appears much more radical. Seamon distinctly argues that ‘the body holds within itself an active, intentional capacity which intimately “knows” in its own special fashion the everyday spaces in which the person lives his typical day’ (1979: 35). By saying this, he sheds light on the truth that place is not only structured by discursive knowledge representing unequal power relations, but also embedded in practical knowledge rising from routine and familiar experiences. If social constructionists insist that it is always the powerful defining who is in place and who is out, phenomenological geographers would retort that it is the movements of bodies that produce an existential insideness – a feeling of belonging within the time-spatial rhythm in place.

Taking both aspects into consideration, a bifocal stance between constructionist and phenomenological approaches will be employed in this study to examine the complexity of place-making practices in migrant settlement, which allows me to examine both ideological structures and lifeworld agencies, as well as to find out the articulation and complicity between them. Such bifocal stance is going to be further clarified through the following discussion about two very profound aspects of place-making practices in daily life: home-making and daily consumption.

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<sup>44</sup> Seamon’s work also needs to be critically appreciated. One thing seems to be missing is the balance between the individual freedom and the constraints on people’s performances from social and cultural norms (Cresswell 2004: 34).

## **Making home in migration**

For many, the most ordinary and inescapable engagement of place-making in their lifetime is to make home. According to Cresswell (2004: 21-2), the centrality of home to human geography owes much to Heidegger's (1971) focus on 'dwelling' as a status of *Being* in the world. Similarly, phenomenological philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1994) considers home as a primal space that acts as a first world or universe that frames our understanding of all the spaces outside. Very often, human quest for a place in the world or a sense of situatedness is crystallised in a yearning for home, which is strongly associated with being at rest in a place which is known intimately, 'a place where individuals can assert their identities and be what they want to be.' (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 90)

Nevertheless, this humanist concept of home has been recently deconstructed as a romantic myth. The strongest attack comes from feminist geographers, like Rose (1993) who assert that, the view of home place as 'conflict-free, caring, nurturing' mystically venerated by the humanists is a discursive strategy to deny the truth that home is actually 'the central site of the oppression of women.' (p. 55,56) Some even contend that we have to 'give up on the dream of a place called home.' (Honig, 1996: 258) Well, the construction of home isolated from struggle and withdrawn from the noise of politics is certainly an impossible desire, but does it mean we have to totally abolish the idea of home? It appears not as simple as one might expect. The danger of doing so, in Kenny Cupers' (2005) mind, lies in the threats to personal memories, emotions, and past affiliation. Thus, he reminds that, 'home can also be considered as a temporary state of being, serving as an invaluable site for the preservation of a multiplicity of histories, for preparation, withdrawal and resistance.' (ibid.:736) The debate is also undertaken within the feminist field. The black feminist author bell hooks (1997) recomposes home as a potential nurturing place of resistance. For subalterns who suffer in the world outside, home may indeed act as a particular kind of safe place where people are relatively free to forge their own identities. It is therefore also an empowering place, which plays a real-and-imagined role in grounding struggles over various forms of oppression. Following this debate, my discussion about home is conditioned on the acknowledgement of the significance of home in both personal lifeworld and collective social movements, but meanwhile reckoning home as not just a matter of feelings and lived experience, nor of any universal essence, but of cognition and intellectual construction differing in social contexts and notions (Somerville, 1992). Thus, modern men and women's daily engagements in home-making are essentially constituted of constant negotiations between

their bodily, emotional spatial practices and the ideological structures in modernity. In the relation to the migratory subjects, negotiations are simultaneously undertaken around two connected themes.

The first theme is the logic of home territories (Morley, 2000) which defines modern home as a distinct locale from others, constructed and sustained through a whole range of boundaries between nature and culture, work and leisure, public and private. Although the idea to create a familiar environment by establishing a high level of control over the interaction between the edifice and its environment, to construct an inside in opposition to an existing outside has existed since antiquity (e.g. Douglas, 1966), never before has the level of the control and division been achieved so efficiently and sophisticated as in modern buildings and ideology of home. According to Loughman's (2006) research in the domestic interior of pre-industrialisation Europe represented in Dutch art, homes were not exclusively represented as place of rest, on the contrary, they also doubled as a place of work, be it a workplace for tailors and shoemakers, offices for a notary or a businessman, or cabinet of curiosities. The priority of the spatial arrangements in those households was put on sociability rather than privacy. But with industrialisation relocating work away from home and the state taking greater responsibility for education and health care, 'households were increasingly seen as a domestic retreat for the nuclear family.' (Hareven, 1991, see in: Mallett, 2004: 71) From the feminist perspective (Massey, 1994, Wardhaugh, 1999), the separation between the private and the public was also gendered – the domestic sphere being associated with women and children, the public sphere with adult males. The concepts of 'privacy' often protect dominant (male) interests and legitimate the oppression of women in the 'private' realm where they are consigned to a life of reproductive and domestic labour including nurturing children, cleaning and other housework, which has been devalued and marginalized in the analogical relation between the public and work, the private and rest (Oakley, 1974, Eisenstein, 1984, see in: Mallett, 2004).

Owing to these binary oppositions, modern home actually presents a bourgeois notion of socio-spatial order permeated with social exclusion and segregation. Sibley (1995) reads home as a potential space of exclusion where a 'fear of difference', of 'non-conforming people, activities or artefacts' can be projected onto the 'objects and spaces comprising the home.' (p. 91) In the same spirit, Mitzi Goldman (1997) argues that: 'there is an inextricable link between the imagining of home and the mechanisms of exclusion (and often hatred) used to define its borders, in so far as unified sense of self and nation depends on the exclusion or 'Othering' of foreign element that disrupts that image of

unity.’ (p. 153, cited in Morley, 2000: 31) In other words, keeping ‘the Other’, the undesired natural and social elements out of modern home legitimates social exclusion as an act of home-making. Among all of the unwelcomed, migrants are prone to be defined as ‘outsiders in urban societies’ (Sibley, 1981) and become one of the targets of exclusion, abolishment or the subjects of optimisation. Just as King (1995) described, ‘the rules of modern migration are clear: desirable migrants with skills, education and capital are let in; undesirables, illiterates, poor people from different cultures, religions and races are filtered out. Globalisation is a process of social exclusion.’ (p. 27) Facing this social exclusion and discrimination, the settlement practices of migrants in the host society are far from simply refugee seeking, but are essentially constituted of complex political and personal struggles over the social division between insider and outsider, which will ultimately determine how ‘feeling at home’ is different from ‘staking a claim to a place as one’s own’ and when a location can become a home (Brah, 1996: 194, Fazal and Tsagarousianou, 2002: 11).

The second theme of home-making in modernity is the opposition between home and migrancy. On the one side of this opposition is the presumption of home as physically and culturally fixed to a singular location or root in a form which Agnes Heller (1995) calls ‘geographical monogamy’. On the other side, mobility and migrancy are featured as a force in detaching identity from place, as the abandon and denial of home. Under such opposition between away and home, migration and settlement, people who engage in migration are often seen as homeless, ‘bearing unwelcome gifts, defying the attempts of governments to regulate the populations situated and moving within their territories.’ (Tsagarousianou, 2007: 1) Mobility itself sometimes comes to be seen as a form of geographical deviance in a place-bound, property-owning society. Historically, as Tim Cresswell (1996: 85) observes, the whole apparatus of state bureaucracy in most countries has long depended on the notion that people should live, work, pay taxes and vote in a fixed location. In China, the apparatus is exemplified by the household registration system enduring from Qing Dynasty till now (Wang, 2005). So, to be of no fixed address or accommodation is already to be of a suspicious character. ‘The “nomads” confront the bourgeois spectators as a spectacle of filth’ because ‘they transgress all settled boundaries of home.’ (Morley, 2000: 34) Alternatively, they are constructed under the ‘ideology of return’ (Brah, 1996), an overrated emphasis on the perceived nostalgic links and memories migrants have of an original home or homelands, which overwhelmingly suppose ‘they or their descendants will return to the homeland should the conditions prove favourable.’ (Safran, 1991: 83) As the outcome of the opposition between home and migrancy, the



place of migrant settlement in the host society tends to be defined as ‘the site of illicit or disdained social activities’, ‘being the other pole to a great cultural centre.’ (Shields, 1991: 3) otherwise, as the ‘fossilized image’ of the cultural landscape in their homeland (Morley, 2000: 49,50), whereby the continuing supports from homeland, as well as ‘the communal consciousness and solidarity are maintained.’ (Safran, 1991: 84)

Recently literature on migrants, refugees and homeless people opens up the dialogue between home and migrancy. Even the experiences of homelessness can serve to define and delineate home in a dynamic and dialectic fashion. Because ‘being at home is an unselfconscious and taken-for-granted state, while to be homeless brings with it an awareness of absence, a consciousness of difference, of deviation from the norm.’ (Wardhaugh, 1999: 93) In this sense, routes taken out of home are not necessary a displacement of home, but constitutional to the notion and feeling of home, crucial to how home is identified and defined (Jones, 1995).

Moving beyond the doctrinal discourse of ‘return’, a rich literature illustrates more complex and contextual relationships between the place of origin and the place of migration. First of all, the powerful meanings of place for the migrant who approaches his or her native village after a period of migration cannot be dismissed easily. A lot of examples demonstrate that people could refer to his/herself as ‘coming from’ their original home villages even after many year of exile or migration. What is more, their home villages indeed bear their practical values no less than the place of new settlement (Rouse, 1992: 45, Olwig, 2002). Whilst the final return might be mythical, it is true that at least some migrants find returning fulfilment through their remittances, savings or new houses (Menjivar et al., 1998, Grant, 2007). However, even under these circumstances, the return or desire of return should not be taken as a doomed destination of the trip. Rather, it is a way either to appreciate or to verify the value of migration, or, a process of reconfiguration of the social relationships in the original home and their personal position in the former system. As Morley (2000) puts it, ‘sometimes absence itself functions as a badge or emblem of a fundamental sense of belonging which transcends mere physical presence ... In order to truly “belong” to a community, it may well be stipulatory to leave it, at least for a time.’ (p. 54)

For other writers, the ambivalence toward physical return is more of their theme. According to Berger and Mohr’s (1975) investigation with migrant workers, most of them portray hopes for the future but also some of the objective difficulties of trying to resettle.

Although the underlying pain and unease from this dilemmas is existed in daily experience of migrants, yet like Clifford (1997), we could understand this unsettling of return or staying in 'strategic ways' rather than just as tragedies. Unlike those who 'are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home', people in migration 'are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions,' (Said, 1984: 172) which creates a creative tension in their self and collective identification.

All these complexities remind us that the nostalgic emotion and links that migrants have with their original home is neither easily to be taken as a doctrine, nor totally denied as a negative sentiment. While the overrated emphasis on 'roots' and discourse of 'return' do impose a 'social regulation of belonging' on migratory subjects (Brah, 1996: 194), it is more interesting to see how this strategy of discovering one's roots could be deployed by marginalized people as a site of resistance. Here, Blunt's (2005) idea is quiet inspiring. Rather than perpetuate an antipathy towards nostalgia, she interprets the homing desire of Anglo-Indians in relation to a *productive nostalgia*. In her view, the desire of home is not apolitical or confining. Rather, she finds out it has libratory potential for Anglo-Indians in political debates about the future and status of the community. In this sense, the home-making processes of migrants are not exclusively oriented to either the original homeland or the new settlement, but literally straddling between 'here and there', which refers to a multi-placed and multi-located notion of home across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries (Brah, 1996: 197, Kalra, 2005: 17).

## **Consuming in place and place-making by consuming**

Another profound aspect in the centre of place-making practices is people's everyday engagements with the consumption of goods and services. Once considered as a secondary subject to production in social thoughts, the increasingly ubiquitous landscapes of consumption and incursion of processes of commodification in everyday life in late modernity have given rise to an accumulating academic interest focusing on consumption instead of production as the principal driving force in contemporary society, which has resulted in a proliferation of literature in multiple disciplines over past decades (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979, Miller, 1987, Corrigan, 1997, Baudrillard, 1998, Featherstone and Lash, 2001, etc.). This theoretical turn opens up a novel field for social and cultural criticism. Very often, consumption is interpreted as a form of resistance *tactics* in everyday life against power network, which *is* 'devious...dispersed...insinuates itself

everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.’ (de Certeau, 1984: xii) It provides a particularly powerful lens through which our understanding of ‘the complex and shifting relations of domination and subordination’ can go beyond the classical models of proletarian resistance and register the localised patterns of ‘cultural struggle’, the struggle against ‘cultural meaning, values, and goals’ that affect people’s everyday attitude and norms (Ong, 1991: 281). Not surprisingly, the deployment of this ‘cultural struggle’ in migrants’ settlement practices engagements emerges as an important theme in migration studies (Rouse, 1992, Mills, 1997, Mack, 2004).

But it is noteworthy that in the academic inquiry into the ‘true’ nature of consumption and the consumer’s world, attentions have long been centred on the relationship between people and things (*who* buy and use *what*), without sufficient and substantial voices of space or place (*where* to buy and use), which means the geographical research on consumption has long been relatively marginal (Jackson, 1993: 209). From the political-economic perspective, people’s consumption is viewed as chiefly driven by Marx’s ‘false consciousness’ or Baudrillard’s (1998) ‘need to need’, which negatively serve the logic of capitalist production. In the diffusionist’s view of consumption, goods and consumption patterns are filtering down from middle-class to working-class, from the central to periphery (Veblen, 1899, McKendrick et al., 1982), whereby multiple points in the social field are reduced to single united hierarchy. This linear diffusion model is more or less broken by Bourdieu (1977, 1986) through unveiling the fierce struggles that take place between social groups in the cultural arena of consumption. Yet he tends to treat social classification as based on the internalisation of norms and values, therefore the negotiation space for the chance of radical social change is essentially limited (Moore, 1993: 123). Another myth of consumption is crystallised around ‘the spirit of commodity’, which is intended to differentiate capital commodity exchange with other forms of exchange, such as barter and gift (Mauss, 1970, Gregory, 1982), whereby an ‘excessive dualism’ between class societies and clan societies, ‘market exchange’ versus ‘reciprocity’ was constructed (Appadurai, 1986: 13). What is commonly embedded in these theorisations is a sense of placelessness associated with the pervasive flow of commodity and mass consumption. While places have been historically thought of as more or less fixed and prone to stabilize and objectify our feelings and ideas, consumption tends to be perceived as a force demolishing the boundaries of places and social division associated with it.

Does place matter in the consumer's world and how? In his editorial volume *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai (1986) intends to challenge the traditional theories of consumption through cultural reflection on commodities. Following Simmel's (1978) definition of commodity as any thing intended for exchange, which puts emphasis on exchange as the source of economic value and not vice versa, the existence of any universal 'commodity-hood', for Appadurai, becomes questionable. What is more worthy to explore turns out to be *how* and *where* things are exchanged and by *whom*. For Appadurai, this means, 'looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things.' Instead of being reified as 'a certain kind of thing', commodity should be approached as things in 'a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives.' (1986: 13) From this point, Appadurai proposes to understand practices of consumption in the framework of *regimes of value*. By this plural term, the idea that 'every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions' has been abandoned, rather, it is implied that 'the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity.' (ibid. p15)

In the recent development of consumption studies, the idea of place has been increasingly highlighted as an important signifier of the *regimes of value* in the theoretical horizon by a crop of scholars (Glennie and Thrift, 1992, Jackson 1995: 229, Miller, 1995, Clarke et al., 2003). Their endeavours not only fill the 'gaps on the map of consumer society' by examining sites and landscapes of consumption (Crewe and Lowe, 1995), but more importantly, provide critical insights into consumption as a complex sphere of relations and discourses that are actively assembled, reproduced and expressed in diverse ways in places, rather than as a singular or monolithic phenomenon floating over places (Mansvelt, 2005: 10). In his book *Place, Modernity and Consumer's world*, Sack (1992) develops a dynamics framework to present mass consumption as the most powerful and accessible place-creating activities of everyday life. The mechanism in the process is described through the image of a loom: 'a structure that enables the weaver to weave threads together to create a fabric.' (p. 108) Given the constraints of the materials and the structure of the loom (which is largely embedded in place), the weaver is free to create whatever fabric with the threads from the realms of nature, meaning, and social relations. The compositions of the places created by the weaver (the consumer) are the fabric that is woven on the loom. Places created by this mechanism are temporary and unstable for they quickly unravel, to be replaced by new ones through another act of consumption (1992:

108). Therefore, place is connected with consumption not simply as sites or settings of consumption, which put its weight in the value, patterns, and effect of the appropriation of goods, but in the more important sense that place, with its physical features and cultural meanings, is created, sustained, altered by consumption. So, the question of the relationship between place and consumption turns out to be how consumption, as both discourse and people's daily practice, is articulated and intersected with the politics of place making in different settings.

One of the locales manifesting such articulation is the modern home, where people quite often make themselves feel at home through purchasing, distributing and disposing of goods. On the one hand, people's daily engagements in domestic consumption, including what kind of commodities are appropriated at home, where, when and by whom they are supposed to be consumed, are subject to the operation of the divisions between work and leisure, public and private in different social contexts (McDowell, 1983, Forty, 1986, England, 1991, Mansvelt, 2005). On the other hand, it is equally evident that, without considering people's consumption practices, the institutions and the power relationships in the modern home will become much less tangible. Given the constitutive role that consumption plays in the modern home, in essence it entails a negotiation space in how home is constructed and defined, which leads the rules of home locale always in uncertainty, conflicts and tension. For example, in the case of diet, a body of studies point to how culturally specific 'food ideologies' are constructed through routine cooking and eating, which define 'what constitutes a so-called "proper meal" and what different dishes are appropriate for men, women and children.' (Jackson and Moores, 1995: 5) (also see: Charles, 1995, Murcott, 1995). Family meals often functions as a ritual of 'common presence', be it daily meals or celebrations like birthdays, Christmas or weddings. 'Being eaten with all co-resident household members present on the table' are cherished as the occasions of high symbolic value, which marked 'home comforts and family unity' (Jackson and Moores, 1995: 5). They also tighten the connection between families and communities of larger scale, such as the role that Thanksgiving meal plays in America. In such way, a discursive trinity between 'home', 'family' and 'community' is also reinforced (Susskind, 1992, see in: Morley, 2000: 19). Using case study examples, Gill Valentine (1999) tries to reveal that spatial and temporal dynamics of cooking and eating within the household can 'shape the micro geographies of domestic interiors to our understanding of home as a social space' and 'locate individuals and household members into shared narratives of identities.' (p. 505) Households, rather than being single units of food consumption, 'can be sites of multiple and sometimes contradictory consumption

practices in terms of the methods of cooking, the contents of the meals consumed and the timing and location of eating.’ (ibid.)

Besides the spatial engagements, the creative involvement of consumption into place-making also lies in its forces in creating time, which is equally associated with our sense of place in terms of the experience of the past and the predictability of the future (Tuan, 1977). Building on Thompson’s (1967) classic account of the time discipline occurred with capital production, Appadurai (1996) develops an account of the time discipline through mass consumption. In his words:

*...the small habits of consumption, typically daily food habits, can perform a percussive role in organizing large-scale consumption patterns, which may be made up of much more complex orders of repetition and improvisation.* (p. 68)

Appadurai further addresses that the illusion that ‘repetition in consumption seems to be determined by natural or universal seasonalities of passage’ needs to be considered in reverse causal chain, that is, ‘consumption seasonalities might determine the style and significance of ‘natural’ passages.’ (ibid.: 70) In other words, ‘natural’ periodisations, including seasonality and rites of passage are better seen as ‘naturalised’ consumption seasonalities. They are marked by, as well as are built from consumption practices. More simply, ‘consumption creates time rather than merely responding to it.’ (ibid.)

Another indicator of consuming power in place-making is the massive proliferation of modern communication technologies in our daily life, which allow face-to-face interaction within a specific local institution to be replaced by interaction at a distance, a phenomenon of ‘time-space distancing’ in Giddens’ (1981, 1984) term. One interpretation of the result of this distancing is coined by Meyrowitz (1985) as ‘no sense of place’, by which he claims that: ‘the electronic media affect us... not primarily through their content, but by changing the ‘situational geography’ of social life.’ (p. 6) Nevertheless, this assumption has been proved too hasty by the recent researches. Some have revealed how the electronic media consumption can simultaneously function as ‘disembedding mechanisms, powerfully enabling individuals to escape... from their geographical locations’ and, meanwhile, come to be embedded within pre-existing domestic routines (Morley, 2000: 149, 86) (also see Williams, 1989: 171, Moores, 1993). Some dwell on what kind of integral role media consumption is playing in constructing domestic spaces (Lull, 1990, Tacchi, 1998), and how the electronic media function as a

‘gathering place’, providing sensory communion and social congregation (Adams, 1992). Recently, John Urry (2004) also suggests us to revalue the consumption of new technologies beyond the dichotomies between real and unreal, face-to-face and life on the screen, presence and absence. He reminds that all social relationships involve diverse ‘connections’, which are more or less intense, and more or less mobile. Very often, face-to-face connections are made through extensive movement. On the other hand, people travel in order to be physically co-presented with one or more others for specific periods, often in very specific places. Therefore, the dynamics of the connections enabled by communication technologies cannot be understood in one dimension as simple ‘replacement of the continuously present by the mobile absent’ rather, they are ‘significantly remaking the notions of presence and absence.’ (ibid. p28)

All of these complexities suggest that the relationships between place and consumption have to be understood in an interplaying and dynamic process. As Sack asserts that, ‘the key to understanding the place-building role of mass consumption lies in its complex, through unstable, integration of forces and perspectives...Consumption undoes contexts to create contexts, undoes social relations to create social relations, and undoes meaning to create meaning.’ (1992: 132) Indeed, the geography of consumption frequently seems to pull in two different directions at once, ‘paradoxically creating *homogeneity* and *heterogeneity* at the same time, promoting both *mobility* and *fixity* without contradiction, and ensuring that space and place sit alongside each other in a way that challenges unreflexive assumption about the way the world works.’ (Clarke et al., 2003: 80) Such powerful and complex dynamics forms an important dimension in our understanding of the migratory social space, which generates a whole array of studies in commodity culture, such as food, fashion, and music, under the transnational/regional discourse (i.e. Dwyer and Crang, 2002, Connell and Gibson, 2003, Cook and Crang, 2003, Dwyer, 2003). In reviewing this research strand, Crang, Dwyer, and Jackson (2003) emphasis commodity culture is ‘a valuable way of bridging the unhelpful separations of transnationality as an abstract cultural discourse and transnationality as a *lived social field*.’ Because, ‘cultural discourses and stylizations of identity are a central part of what is being produced, circulated and consumed, but always through specific material forms and through variable, economically motivated, social practices.’ (p. 451) In this sense, it is insightful for them to argue that commodity culture is another entry point to a *re-grounding* of transnational studies. To some extent, this is also one of the implications of my understanding in the re-grounding of migratory subjects and social space, but my study is different from most of the exited transnational commodity culture studies in its observation point. Given

substantial emphases on place-specificities and cultural differences in those studies, the centrality of goods or commodity unavoidably encourage the researcher to ‘follow the things themselves’ and try to encompass a complete trajectory or circuit of one particular commodity. My interest in the trans-regional consumers’ world is however, not centred on or following any particular commodity or goods. This would allow me to focus on the intersections of different commodity circuits within a particular location and their embedment into the place making practices of the migratory inhabitants in their local life.

To sum up, my exploration into Chinese rural migrants everyday practices in their urban settlement place can be seen from the theoretical perspective as a resonation to the recent calls for a *re-grounding* of migration studies under the transnational/regional situation. The issue for me is to find ways to empirically capture the interactions between the deterritorial forces of networks, flows, circuits and the territorial sense of place in everyday practices of migratory individuals, households and communities in their trajectory of migration and settlement. I understand these interactions as the key element of experiences in the late modern age. It enables the migratory subjects to make sense of the social processes of modernisation in light of the responses, visions and ideas generated by these processes, which transform both themselves and the world.

Although the idea of *re-grounding* sounds generally appealing in the academic field, as Crang, Dwyer, and Jackson point out, there is still an ambivalence in migration studies about where and how to ground or re-ground (2003: 446). I would like to reason this ambivalence as a reflection to the nature of the migratory social spaces featured with multidimensionality and multilocality, which in turn allows multiple entry points to this re-grounding project. In response to this project, I share ideas with Rouse, Crang, Dwyer and many other scholars in grounding migratory subjects and spaces on the interplaying relationship between transnational/regional circuits and every settlement places. But within this interplay, I intend to move attention from circuits to places. Rather than looking at how circuits are formed through the connections between different places, my interest is to examine how one particular settlement place is in making by the conjunction of various circuits or movements and their intersections with the locality.

In making this move, I would like to start my empirical voyage from the following theoretical stances:



1. Like all places, every settlement place should be seen as a historically contingent process both constitutive of and constituted by social relations and social practices, which is subject to ceaseless reconfigurations.
2. Every settlement place is an integral node in the migratory trajectory and intricately connected with other places by various forms of circuits, flows and networks. At the same time, it also presents itself as a specific field of intersection of different social relations and movements, which forms a unique landscape and relatively independent lived world.
3. The identity of the migration settlement place is not given, but derived from the negotiation and struggle of a range of social actors who commonly engage in the production of the place with different interests, investments, and perceptions.
4. The positions of different social actors in the place production are not equal. In the hegemonic discourses of social belonging regulation, the migratory subjects are often seen as 'out of place'. This simultaneously makes the everyday practices of the migratory dwellers a site of meaningful resistance. But parallel to this discursive space exists a non-discursive space, wherein place is made through bodily and emotional experiences in the lifeworld of the migratory subjects. To capture the complexities in such dual structure, a bifocal perspective from both constructionist approach and phenomenological approach is in need.
5. The place making process in the migrant settlement entails the reconfiguration of home, which inevitably problematises the modern notion of home territories and home identification.
6. Despite the relative weakness of migratory subjects in the host society in terms of the production relationship, rich resources of place making can be drawn from their everyday consumption practices, which in turn form a key theme of observation and reflection in the present research.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the bulk of the literature underpinning this theoretical framework refers to the situations of transnational movements, while few directly deal with translocal movements within a nation state, such as the rural-urban population flow the transitional China has been undergoing since the 1980s. To fill this gap, my next chapter is aimed at situating the problem of place and place-making against the backdrop of Chinese urban space transformations, and also to map out China's rural-urban migrant settlement geography in the reform age.

## Chapter 2

# The Politics of Place-making and the Geography of Migrant Settlement in Urban China

Compared with various forms of transnational migrations, which are commonly characterised by jurisdictional border transgressions, remarkable cultural differences, and enduring ethnic and racial conflicts, the internal migration from the rural to the urban within a country seems more likely to be seen as a matter of course. What is underlying this taken-for-grantedness is the conceptualisation of the rural-urban migration as a spatial manifestation of the ‘mono-directional’ and ‘non-reversible’ journey of modernity (Papastergiadis, 2000: 74), which defines the rural as an economically and culturally inferior and situates the urban at the apex of the historical hierarchy. This linear mode of modernity tries to imagine an abstract idea of the city and the urban way of life, while ignoring the cultural and social specifications of the city and their differing interactions with the trajectory of modern migration. Also under this mode, the rural migrants and their practices of settlement are physically and socially fixed to the marginal position in the city, having their agency fully subject to the urban mainstream. Given the wide acknowledgment of the significant role of individual migrants in various aspects of urban construction, never has their position been addressed as a central force in the constitution of the modern and the urban. To examine the complex of rural-urban migration and the social meanings of the migrant settlement in the context of contemporary China, a fresh view of the relationship between migration and the modern city needs to be adopted.

Rather than seeing the urban as a fixed identity and rural-urban migration as an external outcome of the urban-centred modernisation, we see the modern urban in China as an incomplete enterprise, ‘a process as opposed to a fixed and defined’ (Eade and Mele, 2002: 4), whereas the trajectory of migration and migrant settlement is one of the dimensions in gearing this process. The aim of the present chapter is to contextualise the rural-urban migration within China’s characteristic urban place-making politics and delineate the

interplaying relationships between the urban in becoming and the migrant settlement in the making in the modernising China.

## **Chinese urban space in transition<sup>5</sup>**

In his research, John Friedmann (2002, 2005, 2006, 2007) has pictured the dramatic transformation Chinese urban society has undergone throughout its long history. One of the keys to understanding Chinese cities, as he stresses in one article, is its dual aspect – ‘its relative newness parallel to its ancient pedigree.’ (2006: 441) Despite that her modern urbanisation lags behind the growth of cities in Europe and North America by almost two centuries, China is one of a handful of regions of primary urbanisation in the world (Wheatley, 1971). From its ancient origin throughout its changeful history, China maintained a distinctive urban tradition that still impacts deeply on today’s Chinese cities (ibid.). Unlike those of Western Europe, Chinese cities did not originate from trade centres, but political centres. They were normally the seat of the empire or the relay stations of imperial power in different counties. As illustrated by the Chinese character for city, ‘*cheng*’ (城), which literally means walls or a walled place, the foremost emphasis of the function of a city was on defence and security. Cities in imperial China were principally built to protect the empire and the *yamen* (the bureaucracy).<sup>6</sup> Not only was the whole city enclosed by a high wall and controlled by city gates, the residential space inside city was also divided into wards, known as *fang* or *li*, equally ‘surrounded by high walls whose gates, opening to the four cardinal directions, were shut from dusk to dawn’ according to drum beats (Friedmann, 2007: 261). The daily life of the residents was highly regulated inside their wards (Wang, 1999: 116-8, Xiong, 2000). But the walls and gate towers were not simply built for physical protection and separation. In essence, they formed a sacred space that symbolised the mightiness of the ruler and the order of the world. As Paul Wheatley (1971) noted, the early cities were commonly planned as replicas of the universe, not as places of industry and commerce in the first place, not even as places to live for masses of people. Their layout was decided less by practical considerations but principally by ideological and cosmological conceptions closely linked to kinship, genealogical factors and calendrical calculations,<sup>7</sup> whereby the power of the ruling classes was legitimised.

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<sup>5</sup> The periodisation and the skeleton of the historical review in this section are borrowed from John Friedmann’s research on Chinese urban transition (2005, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> This privilege also attracted landed gentry to move to the city, but they were highly dependent on the *yamen*. In some cases, they had to use troops sent by the *yamen* to collect rents of their lands in the villages. (Fei, 1953: 97)

<sup>7</sup> More discussions about the calendrical ceremony will be available in Chapter 7.

Such urban landscape was by no means intact in the millennial imperial China.<sup>8</sup> But a major rupture occurred in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of Western powers in China, who set up the treaty port system of cities and launched the modern industrialisation. After the 1911 capitalist revolution, the fall of the Qing brought the history of the walled city to an end. Over the next few decades, most cities saw their walls and gate towers demolished to give ways to wider roads (Dikotter, 2007). No longer constrained by walls, China's cities, exemplified by the major cities like Shanghai (Lee, 1999), Beijing (Strand, 1989), Guangzhou (Tsin, 1999), Hankou (Rowe, 1989) and Chengdu (Wang, 2003), gradually opened to the modern world. Countless modern goods were imported from the West together with an unprecedented flow of new ideas (Dikotter, 2007). Both the city and urban life underwent dramatic transformations as new public spaces and imposing Western-style buildings appeared, rickshaw pullers gave way to motors, main streets were electrified. With the rise of department stores as the replacement of the street stalls, the bourgeois notion of urban consumption had emerged in the urban landscape (Lee, 1999, Wang, 2003). For the first time, urban planning based on scientific survey was adopted in Guangzhou, which held that the transformation of the city conditions in which people order their everyday lives, from hygiene to the patterns of entertainment, was an approach to force people to become modern (Tsin, 1999: 24, cited in: Friedmann, 2007: 265). In big cities like Beijing and Chengdu, the urban space was increasingly regulated by an all-purpose city government and city police force, who took the place of the local gentry and elites in dealing with public security and social affairs (Strand, 1989, Wang, 2003).

Such pursuit of the bourgeois city was abandoned following the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Mao Zedong's vision of the city was a city of socialist production. The path to the modern, in Maoist ideology, was 'to industrialise the country without incurring the heavy costs of urbanisation.' (Friedmann, 2007: 267) During the decades of the command economy, government investments were overwhelmingly concentrated on the heavy industries, whilst, on the other hand, being very limited on urban infrastructure, housing construction or consumption goods. Despite some ups and downs the state never loosened its grip on the development of the scale and extent of the urban population. In the heart of this vision of city was the work-unit or *danwei*, which spatially and socially organised various social resources as the aim of

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<sup>8</sup> For example, there had been a change from the 'city of wards' or 'city of aristocrats' in the Tang dynasty to the 'city of bureaucracy' in the Northern Song and Ming dynasties, which presented considerable 'openness', with their vivid street life and flourishing commerce. See in: Friedmann (2007), Mote (1999) and Heng (1999).

socialist production. Every work-unit, like a factory, a government unit, or a school, was enclosed in a walled compound in itself. Quite similar but much more complicated than the city wards of ancient China, these *danwei* compounds were separated worlds where one would work and live almost from birth to death, having all one's individual needs for accommodation, food, and leisure activities being met collectively (Friedmann, 2007: 267). From the 1950s to the early 1980s, most of China's urban population was attached to such work-units, which dictated people's social and political status and defined the mainstream way of being urban. Comparatively, their social contacts with the city spaces outside the *danwei* compounds were very limited. In a sense, the *danwei* constituted a principal form of communities through which 'urban residents derived their sense of place and social belonging.' (Bray, 2005: 5) (also see: Lu and Perry, 1997, Frazier, 2002).

The reforms towards the new socialist market economy since the 1980s brought Chinese cities onto a fast-speed track of transformation. After decades of anti-urbanisation, the state's restraints on the scale of urban development were loosened. Sprawling urban developments changed the landscape of the city beyond all recognition, as well as displacing millions of residents from their familiar neighbourhoods and social relations. Although still having influence in some aspects of urban life, the *danwei* is no longer offering cradle-to-grave security to urban residents. Instead, the market is playing the core role in urban spatial production in the post-reform era (Wu, 2000, 2002). From the promotion of private housing to the commodification of land use right to the recent unveiling of the Property Law, a whole array of on-going reforms have made the urban space increasingly monetised (Wu and Ma, 2005, Xu et al., 2009). Like never before, feeling at home in the city is symbolised by private home ownership and the picture of the ideal home is produced by the real estate developers' glossy marketing brochures. On the hyper-mobile city landscape, the new urbanites' eyes are dazzled by the skyscrapers in the financial district, foreign retail outlets and shopping malls, theme parks, and clusters of commercial estates. Contrasting to Mao's age, consumption is replacing production as the core theme of urban daily experiences, and the urban subjects have become chiefly individual consumers rather than collective workers (Davis, 2000, Latham and Thompson, 2002). In this marketing turbulence, city space is no longer homogenised behind the walls of the *danwei* but is on a historical trajectory of polarisation and fragmentation (Yang, 2006). While the high end is the new city elite protected by their luxury fortress communities (Miao, 2003); the low end is the laid-off workers, migrant workers and other low-income groups squatting in the dilapidated communities in the old city centres, the residential zones of closed-down factories, or the underdeveloped areas in the city fringes.

Even living in the same city, people's urban experiences and social identities have never been so diversified and so tightly attached to where they are living. A new round of place reconfiguration is under way.

However, this does not mean the state is giving up its power in urban place-making. To tackle the challenges raised by all these radical changes, the government firstly strengthened the Residents' Committees, the neighbourhood organisations in Mao's era, in the mid-1980s, to substitute work units in providing social welfare and community services and to avert civil disorder (Choate, 1998: 11). Then in 1994, 14 Ministries and the State Council jointly issued a paper '*Accelerating Community Service Development*', which marked the official launch of the so-called *shequ jianshe* (community construction) in nationwide cities (ibid. 12). Theoretically, a community (*shequ*) is defined as a neighbourhood unit (with varied amount of population in different cities) and a grass-roots organization to provide residents with daily life services and social security facilities (Choate, 1998, Ding, 2009). According to Friedmann (2007), these territorially based 'communities' resemble the ancient *baojia* system<sup>9</sup>, an original model for structuring local 'self-governance' in imperial China. 'It is a serious effort to encourage urban neighbours to attend to their own social needs within the broad policy framework of the state.' (p. 271) In practice, however, this 'top-down' version of 'community construction' is far from its nominally grass-roots orientation, but deployed as another form of 'state involution' (Duara, 1988, He, 2007: 136). As recent research revealed, while the new community committees have been generally established in many cities,<sup>10</sup> the autonomy of residents in managing their own activities has not been substantially realised. Due to the fact that no community committee can function independently in the provision of local services without public funding and other resources from the local government, manipulation by the government in community affairs, including the elections for Committee leadership positions, is not surprising (Ding, 2009: 32-36).

On the contrary, the establishment of these communities has further facilitated the official order on the daily life deep into the neighbourhoods. In many communities with functioning committees, the emphasis is mainly put on crime prevention through two

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<sup>9</sup> The history of the *baojia* (mutual responsibility) system can be traced back to the Qin Dynasty. It was an imperial institution to organise families into units collectively responsible for their activities to the state, including taxation. Each *bao* contained some 5 neighbouring households and was headed by a trusted person from these households. For the origins of *baojia* and its relations with *hukou* system, see Wang (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Most were transformed from the old Residents' Committee.

principal measures: the ‘technological guard’ (*ji fang*) and the ‘man guard’ (*ren fang*), that is, to equip streets and other public spaces with electronic gates and CCTV, and, to hire a security guard team to keep an eye on the whole community through daily patrol.<sup>11</sup> All these efforts show that, given the fundamental transformations driven by marketisation, China’s cities still retain their legacy in symbolising the ideological legitimacy of power and embodying a top to bottom model of order.

## **The imagined ‘Other’ of the urban**

The modern place-making of the Chinese city is not only about the reconfiguration of the urban space inside the city territories. Another constitutive element in the process is the construction of the urban identity through inventing and dealing with imagined ‘others’, in other words, making sense of what is urban in modernity by defining what is not.

Conventional definitions of cities that stress that the population of cities has to consist of a majority of non-agriculturalists, or that a city has to have a minimum population to deserve that name, are not applicable in the case of the origin of Chinese cities. Despite having walls and gates marking out its territories, the city in imperial China was typically not a unit by itself, separated from the surrounding countryside and its villages, but a cultic and administrative centre of a large district including villages and farms (Wheatley, 1971). Living inside the city wall did not point to a specific identity of being urban, for ‘urban and rural folk alike shared roughly similar cultural beliefs and practices.’ (Friedmann, 2007: 262) Even the population size within the walls might not necessarily be greater than that of the communities outside (Fei, 1953: 98). The majority of the urban population was comprised of sojourners. Disregarding occupations and statuses, whether officials, handcrafters, or merchants, they equally had very weak identification with the city, but derived their identities from ancestral villages where they hoped to be buried at the end of their life (Weber, 1958: 81, Rowe, 1989: 277, Friedmann, 2007: 264).

As in many other countries, the uneven transformation in the relationship between the urban and the rural in China is one of the essential changes initiated by modernity, but it deployed in a distinct way in China. Because China’s modernisation was largely driven by external forces from the Western colonials since the mid-nineteenth century, whose influences could only reach cities through the establishment of foreign treaty ports, it was

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<sup>11</sup> In reference to the Shequ Construction Scheme in Wuhan in 2002.

only the city that could actively participate in the new world, while the vast areas of countryside were left behind. In China's long-standing history, population movements were not rare, whether for expanding and guaranteeing control over new lands, especially along the borders, or relieving the victims of natural disasters, or shifting people from denser to more open areas (Lee, 1978, Ge et al., 1993). But the destiny of ancient migration did not necessarily point to the city, but more often from rural to rural. Only with the arrival of the early modern industrialisation in some port cities and the dramatic differences of wages between agriculture and industry was an economic pull force delivered, driving the rural labour flowing into the urban factories.<sup>12</sup> Apart from being economically disadvantaged, the countryside was also defined by the intellectual discourses as culturally backward. The crisis of the empire caused by the western intrusion was reflected by the early nationalists as rooted in the 'national character' (*guomin xing*) that had grave defects (Jacka, 2006: 34). The countryside and peasantry were in turn conceptualised as a 'culturally distinct and alien "other"' connoted with the negative side of the 'national character' (Cohen, 1993: 155). As a response towards the perceived crisis, imperial reformists launched a whole array of social reforms. One decisive reform was to withdraw the imperial educational and official recruiting system (*keju*) and introduce a new public school system. While the principal aim of this reform was to re-fuel the machine of imperial China with Western sciences, its by-product was to widen the gap between the city and the countryside. Unlike the old system, which was mainly operated through private and home tuitions and scattered throughout the countryside, schools of the new education system were overwhelmingly located in the major cities under the control of the court and the local governors. This led to an unevenness of educational resources between rural and urban society. The city gradually replaced the countryside as the pool of talents and the desired place for the intellectual elite (Luo, 2007). The division between the scholar-gentry class (*shi*) and the ordinary people (*min*) in the transitional agricultural-bureaucratic state was reconstituted into one between the urban elites and the peasantry (*nongmin*) (Feuerwerker, 1998: 9).

Such rural-urban dichotomy reached its peak when the Stalinist model of socialism was adopted by Mao Zedong after 1949, in which the 'urban-centred power elite' transformed the 'whole peasantry into a legally and factually discriminated class.' (Hind, 1984) In 1958, this ideology was finally solidified on a legal basis: the issue of the Household

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<sup>12</sup> A survey in the 1930s showed that the urban-ward migration started to outweigh the rural-ward migration in the efflux population of the countryside (Chi, 2007: 78).



Registration Stipulations (the *hukou* system).<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, every Chinese citizen was required to register at birth with the local authorities and obtain their *hukou* card fixed to a particular place. Any movement to another place without the new *hukou* granted by the authorities was illegal. Simply depending on where their residential registration was located, the entire Chinese population was divided into two ranks, the ‘agricultural’ and ‘non-agricultural’ *hukou* holders, one for rural residents and one for urban residents (Wang, 2005). Without the urban *hukou*, namely ‘non-agricultural’ *hukou*, one could not legally live in the city permanently, let alone gain access to the food supplements, housing, education, jobs, health care, subsidies and other welfare benefits to which only the urbanites were entitled. This residential status was birth-ascribed and inherited. It fixed the peasantry onto the land both as the supplier of cheap agricultural materials and as the surplus labour army available for recruitment for the urban industry whenever necessary (Solinger, 1999: 39-41). Through the *hukou* regulation, an institutional city wall was erected against the peasantry as a whole, further defining its members, in the eyes of urbanites, as ‘other’, outsider, and subaltern.

However, when the country set off on its march towards the market economy in the 1980s, it had to open up the city to a certain extent. Given that the *hukou* regulation was still in effect, as the whole command economy and *danwei* system withered, the restrictions on access to living goods, services, jobs in the city that once effectively barred the agricultural *hukou* holders out of the city were largely loosened. The entry and presence of outsiders increasingly turned out to be a fact that the city had to accept. In this circumstance, how to redefine and sustain the boundary between the urban and the non-urban, the insider and the outsider, became a new question. That gave rise to another signifier of ‘Otherness’ around which the dominant ideas about urban identity needed to be reconstructed. When large numbers of rural people began entering cities in the mid-1980s, they were not treated as a structurally and culturally distinct group. The contempt towards them was mainly under the general prejudices about the backwardness of peasants (Jacka, 2006: 31). But as more and more rural transients poured into the city, putting greater stress on the urban infrastructure and resources, overwhelming anxiety and revulsion forced urbanites to deal with this group as different from or even more threatening than peasants in the countryside. In turn, new terms emerged to separate them from both urbanites and peasants, such as *mangliu* (blind drifters), *liudong renkou*

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<sup>13</sup> Although formally issued in 1958, some say the policy was enacted as early as 1955 (Solinger, 1999; Friedmann, 2007).

(floating population), *wailai renkou* (outsider population), or more recently *nongmin gong* (peasant labourers).

All these terms firstly express a strong reluctance to acknowledge the rural outsiders as equal citizens in the city as urbanites (Chen, 2005), even for their rights as ‘migrants’. In the official terminology, to ‘migrate’, one needs an authorised alteration of the permanent registration from the sending place to the receiving place; otherwise he/she is just ‘floating’. Thus, these rural outsiders were only perceived as the temporarily displaced subjects who were allowed to enter the city to earn money but still had their identity fixed to their rural origins. The city only welcomes their productivity but need not provide for them. Moreover, this terminology points to a sense of fluidity or liminality (*liu*), which, in the Confucianist idea of governance and Chinese cultural semantics, have strong connotations with unreliability, immorality, disorder and danger (*luan*) (Zhang, 2001: 33, Jacka, 2006: 43). As a result, it is not surprising that the rural migrants are always imagined by the mainstream urbanites as the Other whose personal quality (*sushi*) is lower than that of themselves (Hairong, 2006). What is more, they also became an accountable object to be blamed for a whole array of public problems caused by population flows, such as the population explosion, transportation congestion, infrastructure shortage, or high crime rates (Solinger, 1999: 102-45). As with the peasant in history, such naming and categorizing of the rural migrant constructed a new figure of ‘internal alien’ whereby the sense of being urban can be sustained in the post-reform city.

## **From banishment to advanced marginalisation**

The position of the rural migratory subjects in China’s contemporary urban making is more than a symbolic Other, but a regulatory object whereby a dominant ideology of governance and social order is exercised. When initially confronting the tidal influx of rural migrants, both central and local governments appeared unprepared. As Zhang Li (2001) registered in her study, there was an institutional difficulty for the dichotomous bureaucratic system to give a clear structural position for those border-crossers. Once spatially moved from their home villages, rural migrants could unhook themselves from the direct control of the rural authority of their original places. But they could not be brought under the urban administrative system either (p. 27). Thus, from the authority’s point of view, they became a group detached from the existing grid of social control, which formed a huge threat to the order and stability of society.

From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, most local governments regarded migrants as an extra burden on their duty, thus the emphasis of their regulation was put on blocking and repressing, trying to keep migrants outside their jurisdictions (Zhang, 2001: 27). Apart from the whole array of discriminative barriers against the rural migrants in employment, business permission, housing access, and education, the most ruthless measure was detention and deportation. According to the 'Detention and Repatriation Law towards Urban Nomads and Beggars' issued by the State Council in 1982, all Chinese cities have 'detention stations' (*shourong zhan*) jointly run by the police and the Department of Civil Affairs, where a variety of people unwanted in the city were kept before being sent back to the countryside. The official definition of 'unwanted' was so-called the 'three without' population, (*sanwu renyuan*), people who lacked legal residential certification, stable income resources and sedentary accommodation in the city, among whom rural migrants were one of the major targets.<sup>14</sup> Usually the detention took the forms of sweeping 'clean-up' raids (Mallee, 2000: 151), in particular when a large public event was about to take place, such as the anniversaries of the founding of the People's Republic. Living conditions in the detention station were normally little better than prisons, but the stay in the station was not free. Detainees must work to pay the cost of detention and their relatives had to bail them out at high prices which, in most cases, would go to the pocket of the station staff (*ibid.*).

But all these attempts did not stop millions of peasants from entering cities. In practice, deportees always managed to get back to the city soon after the raid. The progress of the economic reform also forced the local authorities to accept the truth that the city needs migrant labour to fulfil the low-end, dirty, dangerous jobs that most of urbanites felt shameful to take. Therefore, continuously denying and banishing the presence of migrants proved to be impossible and in turn how to reregulate the rural outsiders under the state's control emerged as a problem. From the mid-1990s, the administrative responsibility was assigned to the local level. Within several years, different provincial and municipal governments had successively announced their local laws on the regulation of floating population, together with a special branch office established in the local police to oversee implementation. The new laws generally expressed a relatively permissive stance to the entry of the peasants, but at the same time reaffirmed the authority of the local government and the duty range of different departments in regulating different aspects of their inhabitancy in the city. What had been commonly highlighted was the significance of the Temporary Residential Registration. Every floating adult is required by this legislation

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<sup>14</sup> Other targets were beggars, prostitutes, gamblers, vagrants, etc.

to register with the local authority and to apply for the Temporary Residential Card (*zhanzhu zheng*), which is theoretically pre-requisite for any kind of job application and business engagement, as well as for children's education in the city. The card is only valid for one year and has to be renewed annually by the local police. The alleged purpose of the registration is to obtain a precise demographic record of the floating population, but the procedure essentially works as a mechanism for both regulatory and discursive aims. In the official registration form, each applicant is labelled with a special code, which categorises card holders into certain secure levels to the public, from A, the most harmless, to D, the most dangerous.<sup>15</sup> This code is not shown on the card, or notified to the card holder, but solely assigned by the registry staff and preserved in the police database, whereby the public security management against the floating population can be more 'focused'. To ensure the implementation of the law deep into neighbourhoods, the floating population regulation was integrated into the state-generated 'community construction'. Once administratively out of any urban residential units, the floating population was now put under the control of the community they resided in. Every community committee was requested to organize a security team (*anbao dui*), mainly hired from the low-income or unemployed urban residents. The function of this force was to work as a grass-roots supplement to the police force in the daily security regulation within the community borders. The floating population, not surprisingly, was set as their foremost target. In order to use this force to improve the registration ratio, one of the incentives for the individual team members was the commission deducted from the registration fees they collected from the 'floating population' and the fines they levied on un-registered migrants.<sup>16</sup>

Notwithstanding all these efforts, the registration system never really achieved its alleged goal: to provide the authorities with a real picture of the population flow. In my interviews with the Hubei provincial and Wuhan municipal officials, it was widely recognized that the official database from the registration had only recorded less than half of the migrant

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<sup>15</sup> Seemingly scientific, the coding system is in fact subjectively applied in reality. My investigation in Wuhan suggested that in practice, it was the community security team members instead of local policemen who code every migrant applicant, mainly according to fragmental knowledge about the person's occupation, transgression record or neighbourhood reputation.

<sup>16</sup> The amount of the registration fees for the temporary residential card and related fines varied from city to city and kept changing. In Wuhan, for example, it once cost 120 yuan per person for the initial registration and 10 yuan per month for the renewal. The fines for offences against the rules could vary from 50 to 1000 yuan. After 2003, to regulate the excessive low level official levies imposed on migrants, the state required all local authorities only charge 5 yuan, so-called 'cost fee'. From the beginning of 2009, the 'cost fee' has also been remitted by the state, and the fines against migrants without cards have also been restricted recently. By then, the temporary residential registration had lost its revenue function, but solely functioned as a regulatory mechanism based on the demographic survey.

population in the city. Many security team members also acknowledged that, due to the mobility of the rural migrants and their resistance to registration, it was unrealistic to register all migrants in the community.<sup>17</sup> However, what matters is something far beyond just the numbers. The effects of this mechanism have to be judged from its deeper implications. Following Anderson's interrogation of modern census institutions (Anderson, 1983: 164), Li Zhang pointedly argues that: 'through the production of knowledge based on censuses, surveys, and social analysis, the floating population came to be conceived of as a real social entity that is fundamentally different from the urban population, and as a social problem to be solved.' (Zhang, 2001: 30)

Based on these administrative measures, the state's next step of policy development during recent years became more sophisticated. It was one migrant worker's death in 2003 that ultimately marked this dramatic shift. On March 17, 2003, Sun Zhigang, a migrant worker from Hubei Province, was caught by the Guangzhou Police for not having a temporary residential card and then sent to the detention centre, where, within sixty hours of his arrest, he was beaten to death (Chen, 2003 , Fong, 2003 , Lin, 2003 ).<sup>18</sup> Sun was certainly not the first migrant victim to be held under the detention law, but after a journalist at *The Southern Metropolitan Daily* exposed his misery and unnecessary death, an unprecedented uproar arose in the country. Under public pressure, the Guangzhou Government was forced to admit their mistake in arresting Sun and the guilty were punished according to the law. But the effects of the event did not stop merely with justice for Sun himself, but also put the entire detention system under serious interrogation. Two months after Sun's death, three doctors of law and five prestigious jurists presented a joint motion to the Executive Committee of the State Council, asserting that the detention law breached the Constitution of PRC and violated the personal freedom of Chinese citizens and appealing for its abolition. Eventually, on 20th June 2003, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao signed the order repealing the detention law.

The State's enlightened response towards the Sun Zhigang event was not accidental. Since the Hu-Wen leadership<sup>19</sup> assumed the post in March 2003, they realized that, as the reform had progressed to a decisive stage, conflicting tensions caused by the growing social polarisation and the growth of civil rights movements were accumulating. Thus the

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<sup>17</sup> From my interviews with the security guard team members in the Ji'an and Xinxin communities in Wuhan.

<sup>18</sup> The later investigation verified that Sun had just been in the city for less than a month and his temporary residential card had been applied for but just not yet arrived. So he was actually arrested on the false ground as a 'jobless vagrant' from the very beginning.

<sup>19</sup> The new state and party leader group led by President Hu Jintao and the Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

principal challenge they faced was to hold the stability of the regime in the crisis-ridden situation, trying to put out fires instead of to fuel them. This recognition was crystallised into the concept of the 'harmonious society' formulated in the Fourth Plenary Meeting of the 16th Session of CPC in 2004 and promoted as the guiding principle of the new government. The outcome of Sun Zhigang event was certainly an achievement of China's juridical system and had profound influence on improving rural migrants' civil rights in the city. But from the view of the authorities, it was also interpreted as the manifestation of the state's line of the 'harmonious society'. In the aftermath of this event, the so-called 'problem of peasant workers' was formally put onto the government's agendas. In October 2003, the Prime Minister Wen Jiabao ordered a local government to press the delayed payment for a Hubei peasant worker (Sun and Huang, 2003). This was followed by a nationwide press campaign called 'pressing payment for peasant workers'. One of the implications of this campaign was to turn the public lens on disreputable employers, blaming them as primarily responsible for the problem, while framing the image of the authorities and the righteous journalists from the state-controlled media as the saviour and carer of peasant workers, whereby the structural inequality suffered by rural migrants was concealed. Further, the State Council issued an official document in March 2006, confirming the strategic transformation in dealing with 'the problem of the peasant workers' under the new circumstances<sup>20</sup>. In response to the document, the Xinhua News Agency and the People Daily announced a joint appeal: '*The whole society should be concerned about and protect peasant workers.*'<sup>21</sup> Now, it is not the presence of the individual rural migrants in the city, but the conflicts and uproar that ensued from the exploitation and discriminative regulation towards them that become the major threat to social harmony. It was therefore suggested to resolve the problem through aiding and comforting the migrants, rather than suppressing and banishing them. On the local level, it became obvious that direct confrontation between officials and individual rural migrants in their daily management had been substantially reduced. No longer possessing the measures of detention and repatriation, the local police and community security teams now lacked the administrative weapons to control the rural migrants as tightly as before. Since then, blanket clean-ups have been relatively rare, except for special occasions like the clean-ups in Beijing before the Olympics, Shanghai before Expo or Guangzhou before the Asia Games. Neither can the authorities regularly employ door-to-door inspections to impose the temporary residential registration. Meanwhile, more positive and sympathetic

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<sup>20</sup> No.5 Document, 2006. *The suggestions about how to solve the peasant worker problem*. The State Council of China.

<sup>21</sup> See: [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-03/27/content\\_237653.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2006-03/27/content_237653.htm)

representations of peasant workers started to dominate the official media, which eagerly acknowledged the contributions of peasant workers to the city and appealed to the public to respect their peasant worker fellows.<sup>22</sup> To encourage more peasant workers to devote their labour to the city development, the outstanding were awarded the Excellent Peasant Worker Prize and publicised by imposing media coverage. The noblest prize for the handful of selected prize-winners is, quite understandably, the grant of a city *hukou*.<sup>23</sup>

All these on-going changes imply that the State's social organisation has entered a new stage, wherein the 'Otherness' of the rural migrants is reproduced and re-manipulated to fit to the new trains of thought of modernization in the bureaucratic discourses. Compared with the previous strategies featuring separation and division, it has become an advanced stage of marginalisation, which offers insights into the deep-structure of the urban space in transitional China. Further to Loïc Wacquant's (2008) theorisation on the place-specific regimes of urban marginality in post-Fordist capitalism, Fulong Wu (2009) provides a pointed reflection on Chinese characteristics in urban marginality in the post-reform age. He suggested that, if advanced marginality in the post-Fordist context of Western market economies means isolation and exclusion from the mainstream economy and society, the urban marginality in China under the concept of the 'harmonious society' seems to be more or less inclusive. As a prominent 'world factory' on the global economic stage, China has to depend on the urban poor's engagement in various informal works for the mainstream economy. So China's urban marginality is 'very much the necessary condition for, and engineered outcome of, its structural competitiveness.' 'Rather than abandoning the weak', the new governance approach 'aims to re-establish the institutional link with the new weak... in order to advocate a wider social security net.' (ibid.: 845) Following this line, we can understand the recent policy transformation in floating population regulation as an inclusive marginalisation or a marginalised inclusion. On the one hand, rural migrants are not abandoned or isolated, but included and reorganised as a fresh resource of productivity in urban construction. But on the other hand, this inclusion is a re-affirmation of the marginality of the rural migrants in the city. No matter how positive it appears in the new official representations, the title of 'peasant labour' does not acknowledge the rural migrants' equal rights to the city. Not only the inferiority, liminality, and the sense of out-of-place that was once connoted by 'floating population' have been

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<sup>22</sup> This change will be exemplified in Chapter 7 by my analysis of the rural migrants' representation in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show.

<sup>23</sup> In 2008, for example, Wuhan government allowed 264 excellent peasant workers and their families to become Wuhan *hukou* holders.

See: [http://www.hb.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-01/05/content\\_12131014.htm](http://www.hb.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-01/05/content_12131014.htm)

kept intact, but also, the new term further reduces the rural migratory subjects into the labour resources of the market-oriented modernisation. Since the structured image of the 'peasant labour' only represents the part of rural migrants who have value in the urban labour market, the inclusive policy actually works as a mechanism that enables the local authorities to select the wanted and filter out the unwanted more effectively and more sophisticatedly. This dual-mechanism of inclusion and marginalisation brings a unique notion of rural migrant settlement into being: rural migrants have to simultaneously have their production realm integrated into the formal and informal economies of the city, and, keep their leisure and consumption realm away from the view of urban elite.

One of the spatial mechanisms by which this discriminative structure materialises is the unequal access to urban housing between urbanites and rural migrants. At the time of the command economy, urban housing was rarely privately owned but mainly allocated (at extremely low rent) by individual work units or the municipal Housing Bureau as a form of social welfare exclusively accessible for urban *hukou* holders. The end of 1999 announced the termination of the welfare housing provision in Chinese cities. Theoretically, it meant urban housing became a commodity accessible for everyone through the market disregarding one's *hukou* status. In reality, however, *hukou* still matters. There are a whole series of rights and benefits inclusively associated with urban *hukou* status, such as:

- To buy out the ownership of the previous public housing they were living in as sitting tenants at cost price;
- To obtain subsidies from the Housing Accumulation Fund (*zhufang gongji jin*);
- To apply for the low-interest mortgages to buy commercial housing;
- For low-income families, to purchase the Affordable Housing (*jingji shiyong fang*) sold by municipal authorities as regular commercial housing but with relevant expenses either being reduced or exempted; otherwise, to rent houses at a low price from the government as a form of social insurance provision.

Since none of these benefits of course is accessible for rural *hukou* holders, the opportunity for rural migrants to buy their houses in the city proves to be very slight (Huang and Jiang, 2009, Logan et al., 2009). Also, due to the State's overriding governance over the urban space, as we have discussed earlier in this chapter, the self-built or squatting settlements by land invasion, one of the widespread forms of migrant settlement in many other developing countries, seems not to be a viable option for China's rural migrants (Wu, 2002).



As a result, a considerable proportion of Chinese rural migrants, especially those who work in formal sectors like manufacture and construction, have to depend heavily on their employers for their accommodation, very often being housed in collective dormitories.<sup>24</sup> A survey of 120 enterprises in four cities (Beijing, Wuhan, Suzhou, and Shenzhen) shows that, on average, about 75% of labour migrants employed by those enterprises live in dormitories provided by their employers (Wu, 2002: 102). To minimize the cost, many employers simply house their migrant workers in the workplace like construction sites or shop floors (Solinger, 1999: 128). This is also a dwelling form encouraged by the local authorities, because under this collective living arrangement, matters related to temporary work and residence permits can be handled through employers rather than with individual migrants.<sup>25</sup> But for the migrant workers, to enjoy this offered accommodation demands them to sacrifice their personal space and fully subject to the collective life oriented to productivity. For example, there is little hope for family reunion, for most of the collective dormitories are primarily arranged on a single sex basis.

So, have there been any alternative options for rural migrants to find a relatively convenient way of dwelling in Chinese cities?

### **The urban village: another place-making site in the city**

In other contexts, the phrase *urban village* might be connected with the migrant settlement in a metaphoric way (e.g. Gans, 1962), connoting impoverished slums and ghettos inhabited by migrants whose communities are relatively isolated from the rest of the city but still retain the cultural identification with their original places. However, the urban village (*chengzhongcun*) in China literally means ‘village amid the city’. In administrative language, the term mainly refers to the property within the urban administrative area or urban planning territories where the ownership of the land is retained by village collectives. For many commentators, the puzzle of the urban village lies in its unique position in China’s dual-track land ownership system (Xie, 2005, Tian, 2008). According to the Land Administration Law (revised in 1998), all urban lands belong to the State while land in rural districts and villages belongs to collectives, be they farmers’

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<sup>24</sup> It is also true that living in the urban relatives’ home is available for a handful of migrants, but just for a short period. Some young female migrants who work as housemaids (*baomu*) could live with the host family, having little space for their own personal life.

<sup>25</sup> According to the floating population regulation, it is the employer’s responsibility to cooperate with the local police to regulate the migrant employees, for example, in relation to temporary residential registration.

cooperative societies or village committees.<sup>26</sup> To acquire rural lands, the city government has to compensate the villagers for their land and relocation. Under the rapid expansion during the last decades, many city governments preferred to requisition farmland rather than built-up village land in order to avoid high compensation and costly relocation of the residents (Zhang et al., 2003: 918). After the farmlands had been requisitioned, villagers soon found clusters of their rural houses standing amid the skyscrapers. With or without having their residential status altered to the non-agricultural households, they still lived in the rural communities and retained a rural lifestyle. In the process, ‘considerable stretches of rural areas where used to be adjacent to the city were spatially encompassed and annexed by urban territories, forming a distinct landscape within the city’s boundaries.’(ibid.: 919) Although the nationwide statistic is not available, data from different cities show that the urban village has become a common by-product of the urbanisation in most of the big cities in China (See table 2. 1.). Either scattering in the peri-urban areas or standing right in the middle of urban districts, like the two urban villages in the present study, they represent a third space in the dichotomy between the rural and the urban.

City	Number of urban villages	Indigenous population (approx.)	Year of survey
Guangzhou	277	100,000	2000
Beijing,	345	71,000	2007
Shenzhen	241	30,000	2005
Wuhan	147	35000	2004
Taiyuan	146	23000	2008
Xi’an	286	37000	2008

**Table 2.1.** *The distribution of urban villages in major cities*<sup>27</sup>

*Sources: The urban village reconstruction schemes in Wuhan, Taiyuan, Xi’an and Shenzhen. (also see: Zhang et al., 2003, Zhao, 2007, Tian, 2008, Wang et al., 2009)*

<sup>26</sup> Some scholars argue that the coexistence of collective and state ownership in land has been designed to develop the agricultural economy and alleviate the rural-urban income disparity. The poverty in many rural areas and the long tradition of farmers’ dependence on land justifies allowing farmers the benefit of using collective land free of charge. But it also creates ambiguity in rules, which encourages corruption in the operation. See: Cheung 1982, Ho 2001, Rawski, 2001, and Tian 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Noting that these were statistics from previous surveys. Due to the on-going urban expansions and urban village reconstructions, the data are changing. For example, 2002’s survey showed there were only 139 urban villages in Guangzhou (see: Li, 2002).

There are a number of reasons for the urban village becoming the most favoured residential site for rural migrants. First, as opposed to the public or subsidised housing system for urban residents, rural housing is self-built by individual households on their residential land allocated by the village. The absence of government intervention allows more autonomy in housing construction and alteration. The lack of the local administrative reorganisation after the land requisition also allows a less controlled space for these areas to develop an informal rental market, where the tenancy is usually conducted without any paperwork or fixed contractual terms. Second, concerning floor space, relatively ample lands are allocated to villagers to build their private living quarters. So they have much more per-capita floor space than urban residents, wherein extra space can be created for letting. Third, after their farmland was requisitioned, most of the indigenous residents faced a deterioration in their household finances, especially those who were laid off from the old state-owned enterprises during the recent market-oriented restructuring. So, they have very strong incentives to engage in the household renting business for extra income. Finally, the lower costs of land, construction and management enable the local renting business to survive at a cheap price affordable for rural migrants. In Guangzhou, for instance, the average rent in urban villages was one-fifth to one-tenth the cost of commercial apartment leasing nearby (Li, 2004, see in Qiu, 2009). In short, it is the rural legacies of the urban villages, the strong rent-seeking incentives for the indigenes, and the administrative rupture in the area that commonly nurture the development of an informal housing rental market in urban villages, which provide the rural migrants with a desirable and suitable option of settlement. In the absence of state provision urban villages turn out to be the most prominent mode of spontaneous migrant settlements in Chinese cities (Wu, 2002 ).

At the same time, the arrival of migrants also transforms the locality of the place, both physically and culturally. The most manifest change happens in the architectural layout. In order to maximise the floor space for renting, indigene owners strive to use every inch of land to extend their houses. As the result of waves of housing construction competition stimulated by the steady demand, the urban villages have long shed the pastoral outlook and have become ‘concrete monsters’, a patch of land crowded by various shapes of unplanned buildings with swinging, narrow and dark alleys interweaving inside. Parallel to this construction explosion is the change of the demographic structure. It has been confirmed by the data from a number of studies that many urban villages have had their migrant inhabitants substantially outnumbering the indigenes. In some cases, the ratio reaches thirty to one (Zhang et al., 2003: 922). What is more, the concentration of the

migrant inhabitants creates a niche market, which attracts a whole range of migrant-oriented businesses clustering in urban villages, from primary schools to private clinics, from little restaurants to repair stalls. By catering for millions of migrant residents in every aspect of their daily life, these self-established institutions co-produce a life service net and consuming world which distinguishes the urban village from other areas of the city with its manifest physical and cultural landscape intricately associated with the identity of rural migrants. In this sense, the existence of the urban village does not only provide rural migrants with a refuge against institutional exclusion, but also enables an alternative space in the city wherein the agency of the marginal in place-making can be exercised.

Given the general inevitability of the urban village becoming the rural migrant settlement in Chinese cities, it would be too simplistic to fabricate a homogeneous imagination of urban villages. In the first place, unlike the settlements exclusively inhabited by migrants, especially those formed through land intrusion or other forms of exclusion against the indigenes, the urban village in China is usually featured by different degrees of co-inhabitancy between the migrant tenants and the indigenous owners. Despite the disadvantages in numbers, the power of the later over the place is still dominant in many aspects, whether through manipulating the private housing construction and renting, or through monopolising the neighbourhood businesses. It is more of the case that the arrival of the migrant residents has further strengthened rather than weakened the place identity of the indigenous communities (Qiu, 2009: 162). Moreover, besides the rural migrants, the informal housing market in the urban village equally has attraction for other urban mobile populations. For example, many urban villages adjacent to universities may find a considerable proportion of their tenant residents are college students and new graduates. In this vein, there is an unease to simplify the place identity of the urban village solely as rural migrant enclaves. In other words, it is not merely under the agency of urban migrants, but through their constant interaction with indigenes and unavoidable encounters with other tenant groups that the identity of the place is in the making.

Another point against the homogeneity of the urban village lies in the massive variations associated with the term. The formation dynamics of the rural migrant settlement in different urban villages vary from each other in their distinct traditions from the rural communities, the different approaches of urbanization of the city, and the diverse positions of the region in China's uneven map of development. While in some urban villages like the Shipai Village in Guangzhou (Li, 2002, 2004, Lan, 2005), the indigenous

clan power and the collectively elected village committee still play an important role in community self-organisation and economic management, others like the two urban villages in my research have experienced a laxation of the indigenous self-organisation and are largely in the control of the city community authorities. What equally matters is the location of the urban village in the city. Residing in a peri-urban area, in the inner city, or near a Special Development Zone makes a difference to the indigene-migrant relationships, and the demographic structures of the migrant residents, as well as the integration of the urban villages with the rest of the city. Finally, different urban villages also vary in the inter-relationships between the migrant dwellers in the area. Data from previous research demonstrate two distinct forms of migrant settlements associated with the urban village. One form is the urban village where the migrant population presents considerable homogeneities. We have urban villages that have the majority of the rural migrants coming from the same rural origins, for which reason some of them are even named after those rural origins, such as 'Zhejiang Village', 'Xinjiang Village', 'Anhui Village' and 'Henan Village' in Beijing (Zhang, 2001, Gu and Liu, 2002, Xiang, 2005), or 'Pingjiang Village' in Shenzhen (Liu, 2002, Xie, 2005: 147). We also have urban villages that accommodate rural migrants who engage in the same occupations, like Dawang Village and Minle Village in Shenzhen that accommodates thousands of taxi drivers. More spectacular example of this kind is Dafen Oil Painting village in Shenzhen, which is famous for its replica oil-painting workshops and exports billions of RMB-worth of paintings globally (Qiu, 2009: 166). However, what is more common is the form where the migrant population demonstrates considerable heterogeneities in both their rural origins and occupations, like the two villages in my research. Taking all these variations into consideration, more place-specific and field-based researches are needed to contextualise the rural-urban migrants and their urban settlement practices into particular geographical, social and cultural backgrounds, seeing them as an integrated element rather than a isolated phenomenon in the multi-layered place-identities and place-making practices in the locale.

Like many informal migrant settlements in the world, the spatiality of the urban village is unavoidably permeated with tensions and conflicts. Intertwining with the rural migrants' home-making endeavours in this locale are the intervening forces from the city planners who have a greater power in deciding what the area should look like and be used by whom. From the municipal authorities' view, the urban village is a blot on the landscape of the modern city, always associated with chaotic land use, illegal housing construction, infrastructure deficiencies, social disorder and degradation of the urban environment. It

also irritates the government by offering informal housing to rural sojourners, which adds more difficulties to the regulation of the ‘floating population’. On the other hand, as the last undeveloped land in the city, the urban village is a prime resource that many developers are eager for. One thing can kill three birds with one stone, to beautify the modern city, to banish the outside population from the inner city, and to tap economic benefits from land exploitation. That is the urban village reconstruction co-acted by the government and estate developers. The government employs its administrative powers to disband the old village committee and change the status of the land from collective owned to state owned, while the estate developers use market measures to negotiate with the indigenous house owners, relocate their homes, remove the old buildings and replace them with new commercial estates.

From 2000 onwards, this idea has materialised in imposing campaigns firstly in coastal cities and then followed by inland cities. The vanguard of the campaign is the state-controlled media, which transform the governments’ instruction into a framed public opinion. My previous content analysis on the representation of urban villages by 43 Chinese official media (Yuan, 2007) demonstrates that media representation of urban villages had been very rare before 2000. The sudden rise in 2000 was not generated by the unusual proliferation of the social problems related to urban villages, but the government’s declaration of war against urban villages in some pioneer cities, such as Zhuhai and Guangzhou. Since then, reports on urban villages have surged in the media and gradually a public opinion backlash has formed. Most of the reports focused on high crime rates, fires, illegal housing construction and rental profiteering. As a result, the urban village, as a special urban space, was overwhelmingly blamed by the urban public as one of the major sources of social problems and demonised as a huge threat towards public security and environment.

Parallel with this symbolic violence, more substantial steps have been taken to renovate the urban village. Varied in procedures and paces, many cities adopted the so-called ‘demolition-redevelopment’ model or ‘Guangzhou model’, a two-phase strategy as follows:

*The first phase is characterised as institutional transformation of the rural status of chengzhongcun. All collective-owned land in chengzhongcun will be nationalised. The rural hukou registration of local residents constituted by village committees will be urbanised and this population will be administered under urban residents’ committees. In*

*the second phase, in compliance with metropolitan regulations and city planning, chengzhongcun will be demolished and reconstructed in the form of real estate development....Existing precarious housing will be replaced by purpose-built decent apartments and commercial housing. (Zhang et al., 2003: 930)*

According to the housing floor space they own, the indigenous villager will be compensated with a certain amount of monetary compensation from the developer or an apartment equivalent to the market value of the old housing. The key effect of this ‘demolition-redevelopment’ model is to deprive the indigenous villagers’ rights and capacities as private housing builders by converting their *hukou* status. Once the State take the land, their intention is to eliminate all of the problems associated with the urban village by simply demolishing the self-built housing and replacing it with formally planned real estate. Not surprisingly, the implementation of the project has been met with massive resistance from the indigenous residents, who are going to suffer uprooting displacement from their neighbourhoods and livelihoods. But indigenes also use the removal to bargain with the developer to win as much material compensation as possible. Consequently, it is very common in every city that the commencement of a reconstruction project turns out to be the stimulus for another roaring wave of housing extension in urban villages. Since the extension at this time is solely aimed to add more floor space as quickly as possible to obtain more compensation, little concerns needs to be paid to the quality. The building could be erected so hastily and carelessly that, in some cities, it is called ‘housing planting’ (*zhongfang*). While the tension between the government and the housing owners is accumulating and has elbowed its way to the top table, the rural migrants as the majority of the inhabitants of the urban village, however, have been banished to what Bourdieu describes as the ‘universe of the undiscussed’ (1977: 168). Without any property to their names or even any substantial rights to the city, what the project needs to do with them is no more than a move notice. In the public debates about the gains and losses of the urban village reconstruction, little attention is paid to this question: what will millions of rural migrant residents lose with the disappearance of the urban village in Chinese cities? The following chapters are aimed to answer this question from one specific case.

To summarise this chapter, I would like to re-affirm that the social implications of the massive rural-urban migration that China is undergoing have to be examined in the light

of the twin processes in China's contemporary transition: the urbanisation and modernisation of Chinese cities, and, the settlement process of rural migrants. It is the intricate resonance between these two motions that constitutes the complexity and uncertainty of the rural-urban migration trajectory and China's urbanisation. On the one hand, the modern urban in China, indeed not only in China, is far from a fixed identity, but a place-making arena influenced by different versions of modernity, which constantly shape and reshape the city landscape and the urban way of life. This changeful history gives the city many characteristics, such as the lack of strong urban identities and local autonomies of individual cities, and the intrusive governance into everyday life by the state (Friedmann, 2006: 444). These characteristics not only determine the rules and regulations of the life for urbanites, but also have direct power over the patterns of acceptance and rejection towards the strangers. On the other hand, the rural migrants and their settlement practices have never been outside the urban place-making in modern China. How the urban is defined has always been associated with how the migratory subjectivity was constructed and how their settlements are situated. As strangers, they are outside the self-image of the city but at the centre of its energy.

As a meaningful place for different social actors, the city is made in many ways. While the State and the local authorities make it by planning and regulating, the local residents and rural migrants make it by dwelling and using. The confrontation and negotiation between different urban identities have projected the urban village to the frontline of the spatial and social struggles in contemporary China. As an integral element in the multi-layered place-making processes in the locale, hundreds and thousands of rural migrants, who are institutionally marginalised in the city, are creating a sense of home in the place and meanwhile shifting the landscape and the meanings of the urban village by adding migratory experiences onto them. In the following chapters, I am going to explore how this place-making process unfolds in the specific milieu of two urban villages in the city of Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in central China.



## Chapter 3

# Doing Ethnography in Urban Villages

The unique cultural landscape of migrant settlements in the urban setting has long formed a hot topic in ethnographic inquiry. In turn, there is an immediate resonance between the theorisations of this particular social space and the paradigmatic transformation of ethnography in general. From the methodological perspective, my research in Chinese rural migrants' urban settlement is a situated ethnographic practice in response to two themes of theoretical debates in recent years: the positioning of the field and the role of ethnographer subjectivity in the field.

Ethnographic fieldwork is conventionally considered as being exclusively engaged in a single field. Given the strength of this research mode in small and simple communities, like villages, tribes or bands, it has long been conceived as inappropriate for complex systems, like the cultures of cities, nations and world systems (Hannerz, 1986). To stretch the limits of ethnography, especially in the face of the globalising world, an emergent methodological trend in ethnography has risen since the 1980s, which aims to move ethnography from its conventional single-sited location to multiple sites of observation and participation cross-cutting geographical and social boundaries, in order to adapt ethnographic practices to more complex objects of study (Willis, 1981, Foley, 1990, Rouse, 1991, Marcus, 1995, Hannerz, 2003). This fashion, however, has not been adopted in the present study. On the contrary, it is still sited in a single field within a very limited geographical and demographic scale. I am so doing not for the intention of separating the object I am studying from the complex world system and translocal connections. Actually, it reflects my own entry point into the exploration of the complexity in the translocal spaces. Without denying the macro and external power of translocal movements and networks in dissolving physical and cultural distances and linking different localities together, this study focuses on the micro and internal level of the process. The aim is to look into the internalisation and grounding of trans-local connectivity in a particular location in the way that 'local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (Giddens, 1990: 21). In this sense, my methodology may be as a

‘strategically situated ethnography’ (Marcus, 1995), which tries to bring multi-sited forces into the examination of a single and small field. The first three sections of this chapter are going to address how the field I selected can adopt such a miniature role.

Recent critiques have also disputed the traditional ethnographic confidence in the authenticity of its analytic objects, be they termed as ‘people’, ‘places’, or ‘cultures’. In Clifford and Marcus’ (1986) reflection, ‘cultures are not scientific “objects”’. Culture, and our views of “it”, are produced historically, and are actively contested. There is no whole picture that can be “filled in”, since the perception and filling of a gap lead to the awareness of other gaps.’ (p. 18) Their critique has inspired a methodological shift from the pursuit of the ethnographic ‘truth’ to the politics of ethnographic writing. It has been revealed that ‘the apparent boundedness and coherence of a “culture” or a place as something made rather than found; the “wholeness” of the holistically understood object appears more as a narrative device than as an objectively present empirical truth.’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 2001: 2) In line with these critiques, my methodology stands in an interpretive paradigm, which places the value of neutrality and objectivity independent from the political commitments or the subjectivity of the researcher into question, while accepting the partiality and the subjectivity as commonly embedded in various versions of ‘ethnographic fictions’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 16). How this paradigm is implemented through the flexible, sometimes even pragmatic, operation of various research methods in the field under a negotiated field relationship between the observer and the observed will be the topic of the last two sections of this chapter.

## **Mapping the urban villages in the city**

It is fair to say that, the outcome of ethnographic research is largely shaped by the nature of the setting in which the study is grounded. In spite of the enormous regional diversity of Chinese cities, so far the academic vision has been predominantly led by the spot light being cast on very limited cities, either the capital Beijing, or the coastal cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou or Shenzhen, which were at the forefront of reform and opening in the last decades (Wellin and Fine, 2001, Zhang, 2001, Li, 2004, Xiang, 2005). By comparison, the city I have studied seems not to be as well known. It is the most populous city in central China, Wuhan. The methodological significance of this selection does not merely lie in my personal association with the city, where I have been living and working for more than 20 years, but also in its distinct position in China’s uneven regional development terrain (Fan, 1997) and its own gesture in encountering the tide of the current

rural-urban migration, which therefore has a potential to fill some gaps in the academic picture of the Chinese city and Chinese modernisation.

Wuhan, as a classic example of the product of Chinese modernisation, narrates the spirit of modernity not only through its achievements and solidity, but also through its incompleteness and fluidity. This mega-city, known in history as the ‘thoroughfare of nine provinces’, lies in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River and at the hub of several main national railways, which provide it with an unrivalled geographical location as the capital of Hubei Province and the political, economic, and educational centre of Central China. Unlike many other cities in China, which are more or less formed around a single centre,<sup>28</sup> Wuhan distinguishes itself with a diverse and multi-centred urban landscape. Having two rivers, the Yangtze and Han, running through it and intersecting right in the middle, the city is divided into three parts, Wuchang, Hankou and Hanyang, commonly called the ‘three towns of Wuhan’. Actually, they were historically independent from each other<sup>29</sup> and it was not until 1927, when the republican (KMT) Government decided to move its capital into this area, that the three towns were merged into one city and named Wuhan. Although more than half a century’s development has already melded the geographic gaps between the three parts with a whole chain of bridges, tunnels, and a sound local transportation system, each town still preserves its own characteristic features in terms of the city landscape, urban expansion pattern, industry priority, as well as some aspects of people’s life styles (Li, 2005). In turn the identity of ‘Wuhaner’ has never been really united, but remains somewhat diversified.

Apart from this internal heterogeneity, Wuhan has also undergone constant re-modelling driven by wave after wave of population flows from outside, like many other cities in the world. Hankou has a long-standing reputation as a city of sojourners and immigrants. A classical Chinese poem written in 1850 described the city thus: ‘There has never been the sense of the local or non-local in this place, which has nine transients with one indigenous.’<sup>30</sup> After his historical investigation of nineteenth century Hankou, William Rowe (1989) concluded that the city ‘had no formal franchise or other legalistic means to differentiate citizen from non-citizen as did in cities of medieval and early modern Europe’. Therefore, ‘there is little evidence of the sort of blanket antipathy to all new

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<sup>28</sup> The most outstanding example of this kind is Beijing.

<sup>29</sup> Historically, the three towns had distinct positions from each other. Before the Republic regime, Hankou was one of the country's top four trading towns during Emperor Qianlong’s reign and later one of the biggest international commercial centres under foreign concessions; Wuchang was the capital of the prefecture over provinces of Hubei and Hunan; while Hanyang was the seat of the Hanyang County magistrate.

<sup>30</sup> From ‘Bamboo Poem of Hankou’ (*Hankou Zhuzhi Ci*) by Ye Diaoyuan in 1850

arrivals that seems to have characterized many European cities in the early modern era.’ (p. 50) Flows of people into and out of Wuhan continued throughout the twentieth century, as the city grew from a mere trading and transshipment centre to an industrial metropolis. Even in Mao’s era, given that the city gate was shut against unplanned migrants from the countryside, in an attempt to redress the economic imbalance between industrial coast and agricultural inland, thousands of skilled workers from advanced cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Nanjing were sent to Wuhan to fill in the vast vacuum of labour in the city’s grand industrial construction during the period of the First and the Second Five-year Plans.

When the ice of rural-urban mobility was broken by the introduction of the market economy in the country, Wuhan witnessed a tidal influx of the spontaneous migrants from rural areas, receiving a growing migratory population from under 300,000 before 1990 to 1,120,000 in 2007, almost multiplied four times within 17 years.<sup>31</sup> However, due to the reconfiguration of the country’s uneven regional development in the reform age, the city differs from many coastal cities in its particularities as a receiving place in this round of internal migration. While the coastal cities, such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai took advantage of the privileged policies in opening up and boomed quickly with a whole array of special economic zones opened to foreign and private investments in the 1980s and the early 1990s, Wuhan, as an inland capital city, had missed the boat of the initial reform policies,<sup>32</sup> leading its economic development to lag behind relatively in the country’s economic take-off. Nevertheless, the city grasped the opportunity of the initial reform period from another direction: in 1984 it took the lead in the whole country in opening up its rural-urban farm product markets and inter-city commodity markets, which used to be monopolised by state-owned companies under regional protectionism in the time of the command economy.<sup>33</sup> From this decisive step, Wuhan embarked on a different track from the coastal cities in relation to rural immigration to the city. First of all, with foreign or private manufactories arriving later and developing less robustly, Wuhan’s ability and attraction in absorbing high quality and long distant rural labour could not compete with the coastal cities. On the other hand, its convenience in trading and transportation and flexibility in employment resulted in an unbeatable advantage for relatively short-distant migrants, mainly coming from rural counties within Hubei province or nearby provinces,

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<sup>31</sup> According to the migratory population statistics by the Public Security Bureau of the Hubei Province.

<sup>32</sup> The opening up policy had not been implemented in Wuhan and other inland cities until the mid-1990s.

<sup>33</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> June 1984, in a press conference, the mayor of Wuhan announced the opening up of the city gate to the national markets without the discriminations of districts and ownerships, without privileges of the regional or departmental monopolies (Pi, 2005: p415).

such as Henan, Hunan or Anhui. The physical and social proximity between Wuhan and their home villages provided more opportunities for the rural migrants who were relevantly weaker, less skilled, with heavier family burdens in their home villages, or those who retreated from the coastal cities. In other words, Wuhan, along with other inland metropolises or middle-size cities has a dual function in inner migration: receiving labour from the rural areas on the one hand, and acting as a transfer station between the countryside and the coastal cities on the other.

Differences between Wuhan and coastal cities can be found in rural migrants' inclination towards occupations and accommodation too. While the majority of the rural migrants streaming into the coastal cities were massively employed on production lines in various international or private manufactories, which are usually located in the suburban development zones, with collective dormitories close to the work place as their principal dwelling form, the influx of rural migrants in Wuhan were more deeply interwoven into the heart of its city life. Although international and private manufactories did grow recently in Wuhan's newly opened suburban development zones, they did not take the major proportion of the rural labour in this city. In comparison, the larger part consists of three main groups: migrants who engaged in rural-urban or inter-urban carriage and marketing of farm products and small commodities; migrants who work in the construction industry and various service sectors, such as restaurants, hotels, leisure centres, or city hygiene departments; the last but equally vast, migrants who are informally employed or self-employed, doing odd jobs or running small businesses like food stalls, hairdressing, repairing, recycling, and so on. These three occupations all have a tendency to drive rural migrants to settle in inner city urban villages in order to pursue better livelihoods.

According to official statistics in Wuhan municipal authority's 2004 Urban Village Reconstruction Plan, there were a total of 147 administrative villages and 15 agricultural and forestry units identified as 'urban villages' in the city, 52 of which were located within the city's second inner-city beltway. In Wuchang the most central is Yaojialing Village, which consists of seven natural villages.<sup>34</sup> Among them, Gaowang and Wujiawan are two adjacent villages where my ethnographic work was fielded. Gaowang is bigger in terms of both the area size (46,655 M<sup>2</sup>) and population (716 permanent and around 2000 floating),

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<sup>34</sup> According to the administrative system in China, the lowest level of rural apparatus is village, or 'natural village'. Several natural villages join together to form an administrative village, which is managed by a collective-elected village committee.

while Wujiawan is smaller, with 26,218M<sup>2</sup> of land, 507 permanent and around 1500 floating residents.<sup>35</sup> Similar to all urban villages in Chinese cities, what remained in Gaowang and Wujiawan at the time of my fieldwork was just the remnant after round after round of land exploitation in recent history. Encroaching on the sites of their previous fields, the city gradually squeezed the villages from all directions until it had almost completely swallowed them up.

Looking at *Map 3.1.* and *Map 3.2.*, we can clearly sense the geographical particularity of the two villages in the city and their neighbouring surroundings while my fieldwork was ongoing. Lying to the west of Zhongbei Road, a north-southwards main road that formed part of the first inner ring road of the city, the two villages literally took up a very central position in the urban space and not surprisingly, were surrounded by a whole chain of important city buildings. The east entrance of Gaowang Village was connected to the end of East Lake Road West, where a newly built four-star international hotel was situated. On the north side of East Lake Road West was the preserved residential community of Factory 6803, an old state-owned military enterprise built up in the 1950s and shut down 9 years ago. On the site of the factory, two modern commercial residential estates were established several years ago, another was still under construction by the time I finished my fieldwork. Each of them was separately walled and well guarded by motor-driven gates and uniformed guards. On the opposite site of Zhongbei Road, stood another more famous factory, the Wuhan Heavy-duty Machine Tool Works, built in 1952 as one of the key state projects in the first Five-year Plan. Having passed its peak period in the 1960s and the 1970s, the factory also fell into decline in the reform era like many state-owned firms. As a result, a large part of its work and office space had been sold to outlets and retailers. Southwards along Zhongbei Road, there was a whole array of commercial and office buildings newly developed within ten years, including a Carrefour Supermarket and a B&Q warehouse. Further to the south were Hongshan Stadium, the first stadium in the province built in 1986, and Hongshan Square, one of the novel emblems and scenic spots of the city. Turning east from the square, the sites of the Hubei Provincial Government, the CCP Hubei Committee and various provincial governmental and Party apparatuses were nearby, combined with the residential communities occupied by the officials and staff

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<sup>35</sup> The land areas and permanent population were obtained from the working report of the Yaojialing Village in Wuhan Government's 'Urban Village Reconstruction Plan'. There was no reliable official resource showing the realistic number of the temporary population in the two urban villages. The numbers here were estimated according to my field investigation, but with confirmation from the chief of the Xinxin Community.



members. This area, called Shuiguohu, stood out as a privileged community with illustrious status and some of the best infrastructure and facilities of the city.



*Map 3.1. The location of the two urban villages in Wuhan.*



*Map 3.2. The location of Gaowang and Wujiawan in Wuchang District.*





***Photo 3.1.** Five adjacent urban villages in Yaojialing area, including Gaowang, Wujiawan, Taoci, Xiaohukou and New Yaoling.*

In the midst of such landscape that was planned as the core of the modern city, the two urban villages had undoubtedly gained some benefits, from life amenities to employment opportunities. But that also meant they had become more unbearable to the city government, who do not want their shabby and chaotic appearance to ruin the city's best looking side and remain a blot on the landscape. It is no surprise that in the city's ongoing 'Urban Village Reconstruction Project', all of the urban villages in the Yaojialing area were listed in the first round of targets. (See *Photo 3.1.*) By the time I started my fieldwork, the whole village had been completely reconstituted. As many as 621 agricultural households from 16 natural villages<sup>36</sup> had their *hukou* converted into the non-agricultural. At the same time, the old village committee was abolished and replaced by the newly established organisation called Xinxin Community. A collective corporation, Xinxin Group, was meanwhile established charged with the management of the lands and properties collectively owned by the old village. While other natural villages were allocated to Xinxin Community, Gaowang and Wujiawan were administratively separated

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<sup>36</sup> Apart from the 7 in the Yaojialing area, the other 9 are scattered in other areas. They used to be connected with Yaojialing as a whole, but were set apart during the city expansion. Administratively, they still belong to Yaojialing.



from them and merged into the Ji'an Community.<sup>37</sup> The ownership of a total of 603,333m<sup>2</sup> (905*mu*) of land has been appropriated from collective to state-owned, and is available for the upcoming reconstruction projects planned by the city.

## Who are the villagers?

The concept of 'village' has its special methodological association in ethnography. It has long been imagined as a bounded site inhabited by 'natives', an inhabitable, mappable centre for the community and by extension, the 'culture'. One of the reasons 'villages' become particularly suitable for intensive study by anthropologists is that they represent a 'powerful localising strategy: centring 'the culture' around a particular locus.' (Clifford, 1992: 98) However, this image does not suit to the two urban villages I studied, not only because of their geographical proximity and integration with the urban centre, as presented before, but also by reason of the ambiguity in defining who are the 'natives' or 'villagers' of this locale.

Among all of the residents in the two urban villages, the 716 so-called 'permanent residents'<sup>38</sup> in Gaowang seem to have the most legitimacy to claim they are natives of the place, because most of their families have lived there for generations. But by 2004 when the whole village was officially converted into an urban *hukou* holder community, only 99 of them still held agricultural household books of this village, while the majority of the rest had been altered to urban households belonging to city communities as their lands were gradually appropriated for development projects by the State over the past decades. Most of their lands were progressively converted to the workshops of the Factory 6803 in the 1960s and 1970s. As a form of compensation, the landless peasants were recruited to work in Factory 6803 or other state-owned work units, and their *hukou* status converted from rural to urban. However, unlike other workers who lived in the allocated housing in *danwei* residential communities, these Gaowang residents did not have access to the free housing and had to keep living in the village. Therefore, over the past decades, these residents were actually working in *danwei* but living in the village, holding urban *hukou* but still isolated from urban life. The inequality implied by this ambiguity was obvious, but it has always been tactically employed by these villagers to maximise their interests in different situations. At one time they strove to get rid of the title of 'villagers' and become

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<sup>37</sup> As I detail in my Conclusion, they were returned to the Xinxin Community in 2009.

<sup>38</sup> According to China's household registration system, 'permanent residents' refer to the residents who have the local household books, whether agricultural or non-agricultural.

urbanites, but as their *danwei* were liquidated one by one as state owned enterprises went bankrupt under reforms and they lost their jobs, they realised more profit could be realised from their rural properties, and so they sought to return to their ‘villager’ status. However, with their *hukou* already converted, this proved to be an uneasy return. In the recent reforms of the village, only the 99 villagers who still held agricultural household status could share the profits of the collective corporation and earn an annual bonus (11,000 RMB per person in 2006), or receive one-off compensation of approximately 210,000 RMB per person. After receiving these privileges, those 99 villagers collectively moved from Gaowang to a real estate nearby subsidised by the Xinxin Group, leaving the village to those who could only make a living from their private houses.

A similar story happened to the permanent residents in Wujiawan, wherein, before the reform, only 14 of the 507 residents held agricultural *hukou*. But it seems to be more problematic to term them as ‘natives’ of the place, because the whole village was actually relocated to this place in the mid-1980s when their original lands were appropriated for the construction of Hongshan Stadium. The site of their current residences used to be the vegetable plots of the Gaowang Village. It is because of this background that although the two villages are so close to each other, they retained two separate identities.

Irrespective of what happened to the permanent residents of the two villages, the foremost force in disturbing the identity of the place was the influx of temporary residents, who came from other rural areas without Wuhan *hukou*, but gradually became the major part of the population of the residents. The initial wave of rural settlers arrived at this area in 1984, when Wuhan took the lead in the country in opening up its market for farm products and permitted farmers from the neighbouring countryside to sell their products in urban food markets. In the city where there was still rigid restriction of housing provision towards rural outsiders, the villages in the Yaojialing area became a perfect stamping ground for these pioneers. The accommodation here was not only cheap but could also offer extra space for the farmers to unload, store, pack and process their products. The central location of the area also meant easy commuting to and back from the markets in the centre of the city. Even though, under the strict population regulation,<sup>39</sup> private renting has to be operated secretly at that time, it boomed steadily.

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<sup>39</sup> One of the regulations of the traditional *hukou* system forbade residents offering lodging for other persons who came from different *hukou* regions, even including relatives, longer than 3 days without reporting to the local police stations.

Compared to the first stream of arrivals, the following stream came from much further afield. They were migrants from Henan, an adjacent province of Hubei, the majority were from villages in Xinyang County. If the former comers were principally 'pulled' by the profit promised by the initial opening of the markets, these followers were mainly 'pushed' by the poverty in their home villages caused by a fierce shortage of land under the overload of the rural population. Quite a few of them left their home villages to escape the penalties in respect of breaches of the single child policy. To survive in the city, most of these Henan village fellows chose to live as scavengers. Similar to the proceeding comers, the Henan scavengers did not simply employ the urban villages as a rest place, but also as workshops, which enabled them to undertake multiple journeys back and forth between the dwelling place and collection sites daily. Distinct from other rural migrants, a typical chain migratory trajectory was demonstrated among this group. They usually came as extended families and were followed by more relatives and fellow villagers. What is equally characteristic is that they tended to settle together in clusters, which eventually became roughly one third of the total migratory population in the two villages of today.

While the first two streams were commonly featured as self or informal employed, the third stream of new comers since the mid-1990s had regular employment. They were the migrants who had once been collectively accommodated by their employers when they initially came to the city and sooner or later moved into the urban villages when the collective dorms or sheds could no longer meet their needs after getting married or having family members from home villages join them. The occupational orientations of this group were concentrated on service industries, such as chefs, waitresses, cleaners, repairers or deliverers. Another considerable proportion of them constituted rural labourers who quit their jobs in the factories in coastal cities after getting married or having children. What was commonly valued by this group was not to keep a bond with rural social relationships but to create a relatively independent space centred by nuclear families. Accordingly, colleagueship or friendship built through their working experiences in the city also played a crucial role in their daily life.

With more and more of the migratory population settling down in the urban villages, a niche market was gradually came into being. To cater for this growing demand, a whole array of migrant-oriented life services was set up in the place, which attracted another influx of rural migrants who managed to make their livelihood within the urban villages. Their businesses covered nearly all aspects of the day-to-day needs of migrants, ranging from food stalls, small restaurants, boiler rooms, tailors, hairdressers, corner shops,

groceries, medical care, telephone services, repairing, education, entertainments and so on and so forth. Chiefly targeting the residents within the neighbourhood, some migrants had also successfully extended their businesses into the rest of the city. For the convenience of the business, these migrant households were inclined to settle along the main street of the two urban villages and have their residence combined with business.<sup>40</sup>

Such categorising is by no means intended to cover the whole migratory population in the two villages. But my investigation suggested that the preceding four groups constituted the vast majority and they were the most stable part of the migrant residents in the place. At times, I also found many young single migrants came to the villages and sought to share rooms with two or three friends. But due to the mobility of their jobs, few of them would stay here for more than six months. Some village houses were also rented out wholesale by labour contractors to accommodate a whole team of construction labourers. Equally, their presence was determined by the duration of the construction project. Recently, a new phenomenon was noteworthy. A stream of college or university graduates began to settle in the two urban villages. Despite being a very limited proportion so far, these young and fresh arrivals introduced their ideas and life styles onto the cultural landscape of the place to a certain extent, making the identity of the two villages even more ambiguous.

By and large, the recent development and transition of the city has brought to Gaowang and Wujiawan a heterogeneous and ever-shifting picture in both demography and local landscape, which is in striking contrast to the nostalgic concept of ‘villages’ in anthropological imagination. It indicates that, only by recognising the co-inhabitancy and co-production between different social actors can we grasp the spirit of these two urban villages and ground rural migrants’ everyday practices onto an extensive and interactive background. It also indicates that the intersection between rural migrants and their urban settlement locations cannot be reduced to a singular and linear mode. For the rural migrants from different backgrounds, they choose to settle in the urban villages at different historical periods and different personal life stages, with various motivations and approaches. These remarkable variations consequently diversify the meanings of the urban villages in their migratory trajectory.

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<sup>40</sup> The street businesses in the two urban villages and the special dwelling form attached to them will be the theme of the next chapter.

## Getting access to the field: sampling, timing, and data collecting

As I mentioned in the beginning, my access to the field was very much due to my personal relationship with Xiao Fang, my former babysitter who lived in Gaowang during 2005 and 2006. She was not only my first informant, but also a good ‘middle-woman’, who introduced me to three of her former colleagues who lived in the same neighbourhood. Two of them became my key informants in my formal fieldwork. Based on this start, most of the informants were obtained through my own life experiences after I settled down in the villages a year later. The easiest way for me was by engaging in various life services in the villages as a customer. Through regular presence in selective consumption sites, such as hairdressers, repairing stalls, little restaurants, food stalls, telephone booths, and grocery stores, I not only made friends with some of the business holders, but also found chances to meet other villagers.

My personal accommodation in Number 48 Gaowang village offered me another entrance into people’s household and neighbourhood life. It was a second-floor single room in a U-shaped four-storey compound, which contained some 20 households including the landlord’s family. With a corridor balcony on each floor, all households were connected together and much of their domestic work and neighbourhood interactions actually took place on the balcony.<sup>41</sup> This open and condense dwelling form enabled me to easily make daily contact with my migrant neighbours and almost effortlessly observe what was happening in the neighbourhood.

Despite being refused occasionally, I did not, overall, confront huge barriers in approaching people, or even gaining access to their homes (though it does not necessarily point to an ideally intimate or trust relationship between me and them, as discussed later in this chapter). I understand this relevant accessibility as a reflection of the characteristics of the place. Normally, the ethnographic barriers to the field come from the tightly defended divides between the insiders (villagers) and outsiders (ethnographers). In such a place, ethnographers, from Geertz’s experience for instance, are inevitably discerned as ‘intruders’, or sometimes dealt with by villagers as though they are not there (Geertz, 1973: 412). But as I have mentioned previously, given their names as villages, Gaowang and Wujiawan were far from what a Chinese anthropologist Xiaotong Fei (1985) called ‘a world of acquaintance’ (*shuren shehui*), but a world where people’s daily life was constantly permeated by encounters with strangers. The divide between the insiders and

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<sup>41</sup> I will discuss this dwelling form in Chapter 5.

outsiders, in turn, was quite blurred. To put this into the words of one of my informants, a woman who ran a little public telephone site in Wujiawan: 'We have already got used to having strangers. Here is a place for strangers by nature.' To some extent, I was not conceived as an outsider strikingly different from people who lived inside, but another stranger little different from others. What is more, the fusion between work and life, especially for those who run businesses in the neighbourhood, accounted for the vague boundaries between the private and public, which also allowed me to easily enter their domestic world, sometimes even without invitation. Both these characteristics will be further analysed in the following chapters. From the methodological perspective, they effectively dissolved my perception of myself as an 'intruder' among the studied group and smoothened my access to the field.

As my research unfolded in the two urban villages, my acquaintances and informants started to snowball and I ended up with 37 migrant households in total, including 81 adults (householders and adult household members) and 35 children.<sup>42</sup> According to the frequency of the visits to different households, they were categorised into two groups. 20 households that had been visited for more than 4 times were labelled as focus households (*See Informant List 1 in Appendix 1*), while the rest that had been visited less frequently were non-focus households, 17 in total (*See Informant List 2 in Appendix 1*). The age of the adult members in the households spanned from 18 to 70. Considering the registered domiciles of origin, more than half of the respondents came from different rural counties of Hubei Province or suburban Wuhan, the second most extensive grouping was from Henan Province, while the rest were from Hunan or Anhui Provinces which are all adjacent to Hubei. With regard to the household structure, the model of 2+1 (2 parents plus 1 child) was the most prevalent, which made up nearly one-third. Furthermore, as we can see from the figures, the diversity of the household structure is also obviously demonstrated by the rest, which include single-person households, single-sharing households, relatives-sharing households, family-sharing households, etc. As to occupations, there were 24 informants formally employed as chefs, cleaners, construction workers, security guards; 22 ran small businesses within the neighbourhood; 12 were odd jobbers; 11 were jobless, 9 lived by waste recycling, and 3 ran small businesses outside the urban villages. The time span of their settlement in the villages ranged from six months to 13 years. The overwhelming majority of the households had had all or part of their members continuously inhabiting in the villages for more than three years by the

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<sup>42</sup> Demographically, the sample unit for my research is households, a group of people who occupy a housing unit, rather than individuals, except where there was only one person in a household.

time I left. The longest time span for migrant households continuously settled in the place that I heard was 22 years. He was a 60-year-old man from the Macheng County of Hubei province, who initially settled in Wujiawan for vegetable marketing in 1985, and already had two generations living in the same neighbourhood. I only met him on one occasion when he was introduced by his landlord but was unable to visit his family.

The fieldwork consisted of two phases. After my first visit to Xiao Fang's home in October 2006, I started my one-week preparatory investigation. During that time, I stayed with Xiao Fang and her husband in their rented room in Gaowang during the daytime. Being limited in duration, that one-week pilot experience was crucial to building up an initial personal network and obtaining a generic impression of the setting. The formal fieldwork was carried out from September 2007 to February 2008. By this time, Xiao Fang had moved away to other district. I rented a room in Gaowang, settled myself in the neighbourhood, and gradually followed the daily routine in the place. However, I did not live in the village day in and day out during these 6 months. The physical proximity between my home and the field enabled the fieldwork to be implemented in a more flexible manner. The other element affecting the extent of immersion in the field was determined by the expectation of the respondents. At this point, I shared some experiences with Ghannam (2002) in her study of displaced communities in Cairo. Unlike her initial intention, it was proven that living with her husband and her family rather than always staying overnight in the studied community was more morally and culturally acceptable for her respondents. A very similar situation happened in my research. After informing my informants that I was a married woman living with my family in the same city, I kept being questioned by them as to why I lived here by myself. In the end, I had to choose the same route as Ghannam: working in the field during the daytime and taking leave every night no matter how late. Only when necessary would I stay in the village overnight, for example, during the New Year's Eve of the Chinese Spring Festival.

Whether that six-month period sounds short or long as an ethnographic fieldwork, it was not my intention to claim that selected period can represent the normality of the setting. After all, as Clifford and Marcus (1986) point out, “‘cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus...’ (p. 10) It is essential to contextualise the data from the fieldwork into the contingency of the particular period. For instance, from 11 January to the 1 February of 2008, near the end of my fieldwork, 13 provinces in south China experienced an unexpected snow and ice disaster unprecedented in the last 50 years.

Wuhan was one of the harder-hit areas. The disaster brought about tremendous difficulties to nearly all aspects of public service, including transportation, energy and water supply and provision of essential goods. The consequences of the disaster in people's life and my research in the villages were unavoidable. The extreme natural conditions largely decreased people's outdoor activities. The terrible traffic also compelled some of the migrants to change their original holiday arrangements, either to advance the date of return or regretfully to cancel their plan of family reunion in the festival. It is hence fair to say that what I did and could capture in the field was merely a snapshot in the ceaseless and restless changing process of the place.

The process of data collection through interview and observation was undertaken in a largely unstructured fashion but tightly interwoven with people's daily routine. An appointment for interview was rarely needed. In a sense, it could be more of a hindrance than help, because that would make the interviewee feel it was unnecessarily formal. In many cases, it also turned out to be pointless in practice due to the remarkable ambiguity between work and leisure in people's daily routine. On the other hand, there seemed to be little frustration towards unplanned dropping in and chatting. This in turn created abundant opportunities for interviews but mostly in an un-focused and fragmented way. Very often, the chatting was carried out while the informant was busy with their business or housework, in which case I had to learn how to give them a hand during the interview. There were no clear boundaries between individual and group interview either. Whether it happened in open spaces, such as lunch time in the corridor balcony or a group gathering in front of little shops or repairing stalls, or in the domestic space of a household, the interview with one informant could be very likely joined by other unexpected participants, which enabled me also to pay attention to interactions between neighbours and family members during the interview.

Apart from the interviews with migrant households, the main targeted group of my research, more data were obtained from the interviews conducted with 16 lateral interviewees (*See List 3 in Appendix 1*), including local landowners in the urban villages and local cadres of relevant organisations, such as the Yaojialing Village Committee (the Xinxin Community), the Ji'an community, the Public Security Departments of Wuhan and Hubei Province, Wuhan City Planning Bureau, and so on. A considerable amount of first hand data was collected through these lateral interviews, which helped me map the setting in broader backgrounds.



Observations were carried out both along with interviews and by themselves. Every chance of a home visit was employed as a window into people's domestic life, from their domestic spatial arrangements to their patterns of welcoming me. Eating together is a principal means for most Chinese people to find out more about each other and to boost inter-personal relationships and I was frequently invited to join family meals. Another effective way of observation was through my personal use of various life facilities and institutions that were essential for the local life. In the compound where I lived, I shared a single toilet with eight other households. I had my own water tap with a separate meter, but it had to be used in a shared outdoor sink located at the end of the corridor balcony. I also had my daily meals at food stalls or little restaurants in the street, did shopping in the groceries or markets, fetched hot water from the boiled water room, had my hair washed or cut in the hairdressers, had my bicycle or umbrella repaired in the repairing stalls, and so on and so forth. Through these participative experiences, much was learned about how different life goods and services mattered in people's everyday life and how people's relationships, their sense of time and space, meanings of the place were formed through the simple and routine activities in their everyday life.

Data from interviews and observations were either noted on the spot or recalled afterwards. I also used a digital voice recorder for interviews whenever it was allowed. Field diaries were written almost on a daily basis to manage and reflect on the obtained data at the earliest opportunity. By the time the fieldwork was finished in 2008, I had accumulated 220,000 Chinese words of transcription from voice recordings and 191,000 Chinese words of field notes and dairies.

Given the amount of verbal data I gathered in the field, I was still unsatisfied with the their limitation in displaying the richness of field experiences and, following the long tradition of ethnography (Harper, 2000, Ball and Smith, 2001), I had to exploit visual images as another effective way of data collecting and writing. In particular, the distinctly spatial orientation of my research inevitably lends more methodological significances to the use of visual data, for their non-linear mode of expression proves to be more powerful in conveying synchronic information than the linear mode of verbal data. All images presented in this thesis come from three data resources: first, hundreds of photographs taken by my own camera throughout the fieldwork, covering various aspects of people's daily life under my observation; second, tens of satellite maps I snapshot from Google Earth, mapping out the landscape of the city, the location and terrain of two urban villages

and the surrounding areas; and third, 11 diagrams derived from my field observations and interviews, mainly to illustrate different housing floor plans and interiors.

The operation of visual data of various forms penetrated every stage of my research. During the fieldwork, I took a portable digital camera with me nearly all the time, using it as another tool for data collecting and recording. It enabled me to capture interesting objects, scenes, and moments immediately, producing data particularly rich in details and contextual information. I also found diagram drawing very useful in communicating with informants when I tried to understand their descriptions of something that could not be witnessed by myself, for example, the housing structures and interior layouts in their home villages. Visual images played an integral part in my data analysis and writing too. As shown in this and the following chapters, images are used to support written words. They illustrate landscapes, environments, sites, materials and life scenes in an intuitional way, making the thesis much more readable, especially for the readers who lack first-hand experiences with the Chinese social context. Furthermore, at many points, written words had to depend on the organisation and comparison between different visual images to make forceful arguments, such as the evolutionary process of housing in Chapter 5 and the land shrinkage of the two urban villages demonstrated by the comparison between the 2007 and 2010 Google maps of the same location.

When Malinowski (1922) inaugurated the first systemic usage of photography in ethnographic research, his aim was to exploit this modern technology as an aid to convince readers of his 'objective, scientific view of things', an endeavour 'to let facts speak for themselves' (p6, 20, cited in: O'Reilly, 2005: 17). Recently, many scholars started to question the legitimacy of this positivist idea. With the realisation of the social construction of unequal or sometimes colonial relationships between the photographer and the subject embedded in visual research methodology (Edwards, 1992, Harper, 2000), a clear-headed field-worker should not easily assume that it is his/her right to photograph the people he/she studies. Neither can he/she naively claim the objectivity of the photographs used in ethnographic research. In my fieldwork, people obviously demonstrated more caution towards being photographed than being interviewed. Taking photos without permission, even in the public spaces such as streets and markets, could sometimes trigger quite hostile responses. To gather the visual data for my research interest, I had to be aware of the harassment the photography could cause to the informant household. Its accessibility and boundary were thus subject to the constant negotiations between the informant and me. Very often, I would voluntarily suggest or be asked to take

photos for the household according to their demands or even lend my camera to them, letting them take photos of themselves, and finally print out all photos for them at my own cost. The payback was not only the further access into their everyday life, including photographing, but also, I gained an important resource to unlock the subjectivity of photography, for the perspectives they chose to photograph their own homes and lives, unsurprisingly, turned out to be so different from that of the researcher.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, if I may claim any extent of objectivity of the photographs I used in this research, they are little more than objective and instrument-based records of the impressions of the field through a researcher's eyes. At the same time, I was also concerned about the difficulty for retaining anonymity that the usage of photography can cause (O'Reilly, 2005: 159). As the solution, I deliberately avoided using photos that contained any close-ups of personal figures. Instead, the photos I presented in the thesis are either without any personal figures or, if necessary, only showing people's backs, side faces or distant images.

## Visualising self in the field

Doing ethnography is certainly a bodily exercise in various research methods in understanding others. But for every researcher, the ethnographical instrument more fundamental than any other method is the 'I', who encounters the field with a particular biography, social status and emotions, rather than as a transparent medium. Therefore, field work experience should not be 'trivialised as the data collection by a dehumanised machine.' (Okley, 1992: 3) It involves the negotiation between personal and scientific authority, a contradiction that may be inherent in all field work (Pratt, 1989). Following Dubisch (1995: 6), I believe personal emotion and experiences, both of myself and of my informants, can be a valuable source for ethnographic practices. I actively engaged myself into the experiment to 'exploit the intrusive self as an ethnographic resource rather than suffer it as a methodological hindrance.' (Cohen, 1992: 223) As presented in the following chapters, this idea enables me to use a flexible writing style which allows 'I' 'wandering freely throughout the ethnographic narrative, blurring the boundary between 'personal' and the 'objective'.' (Dubisch, *ibid.*) For the reader to think about what follows, it is necessary 'to turn the anthropological lens back upon the self' (Karp and Kendall, 1982: 250), reflecting on my own position as an observer vis-a-vis those being observed, and how it was affecting my encounters and experiences in the field.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, in the case of migrant households who lived on street businesses within the neighbourhood (see the next chapter for details), while I tended to capture them at work, where they spent most of their day time, most of the photos taken by themselves, in contrast, showed them at home, sitting in their bedrooms and always with their precious household possessions beside, such as a television or a motorcycle.

The ideal field relationship has long been imagined by classical ethnography as mutual trust between the researcher and the researched. As an ethnographer, one is summoned to pursue such a trust relationship at all costs for it is supposed as the one and only way to dig out faithful stories of a culture. To build up such a relationship, huge efforts are required to construct a sense of similarity between the researcher and the researched to ensure that the latter regards the former 'as part and parcel of their life' (Malinowski, 1922: 8, cited in: Clifford, 1992: 98). From my experience in the field, however, that kind of integration and trust between the observer and the observed seemed to be idealistic and romanticised. In terms of language, nationality, and spatial distance, I might be already 'inside' the culture I am studying. But an invisible wall is always there, setting me apart from the place and the people. Despite the sweeping social and political movements against class inequality in the last century, the hierarchical structure has far from been rooted out in today's China and it is sustained through many social institutions, such as wealth disparity, educational level, professional rank, and most fundamentally, the household registration status. Living and working in the same city, same district, and similarly not being born in the city, my Wuhan urban *hukou* entitles me as an 'insider' and assures me with substantial rights to the city, while their rural *hukou* fixes them as 'outsiders' and deprives them of the same rights. To some extent, my privilege as an urbanite is institutionally conditioned on the social exclusion towards those urban village dwellers. Although this boundary is open to be interpreted and negotiated by both sides, it is naive to assume it can be easily dissolved through some methodological techniques, whether through the local dwelling with them in the same neighbourhood, or the active participation into their daily life.

To legitimise our power in putting the disadvantaged Other under our scientific gaze (Said, 1978), it is always the researcher's temptation to create an imagined closeness or intimacy in the field, so did I. But the power of the observed in challenging this one-sided illusion should not be underestimated. It has been realised that when I, as an observer, put others under my gaze, I am also simultaneously putting myself in a fishbowl, under the surveillance of my studied group (Clifford, 1992: 98). Many signs suggested that people's interest in talking about me as a gossip target had never ceased. In the people's gossip, I was suspected as various un-welcomed roles, such as an investigative journalist, a novelist, an undercover police officer, or an secret officer from the authorities investigating the illegal business or illegal construction in the villages, and so on. In fact, the gossip did generate a certain extent of distrust or even fear, which, in an extreme situation, drove two

families next door to my room to suddenly move out of the compound three days after I moved in. The reason was later revealed by the landlord that they suspected me to be an official investigator who was about to crack-down on their fake certificates workshop.

Despite this unusual occurrence, the gossip did not stop most of the people from getting along with me, or even becoming actively attached to me. Yet, our relationship was carefully managed by them. To give an example, it was always a positive sign for me to be invited to have meal with informants. But under their hospitality, they still treated me as a guest and maintained a distance from me. While all family members and relative guests were eating with porcelain bowls and normal chopsticks, interestingly I was always received with disposable bowls and chopsticks. As an explanation, a housewife once told me: ‘We villagers don’t mind using other’s bowls, but I know you urbanites take hygiene very seriously. You can keep your mind in peace when using such one-off stuff.’ Her words clearly demonstrated a re-affirmation of the group differences between them (as non-urbanites) and me (as an urbanite) and conveyed a caution in over-romanticising our relationship as equal as I had hoped to be.

More lessons were learned from another case. One evening in December 2007, I accepted a collective dinner invitation from two of my informants, Lao Chen and Xiao Yue (both were food stall holders in Gaowang). To make the most of this chance, I tried to trigger more conversation about the topic I was interested in. But it turned out to be evident that the conversation was more under the control of the two of them. To show their interest in my research, they kept asking me questions. When they were informed that I was doing a research project for a foreign university, they appeared seriously concerned. ‘Why do you shame our country by telling foreigners the bad side of our country?’ one of them interrogated me. I was certainly unprepared for this striking moment. For the first time, the legitimacy and correctness of my presence in the field and my research were challenged by my study objects. Even though they did not have much discursive power except employing a patriotic stance in that situation, the question still delivered a sense of doubt and caution, a conscious exercise of agency in resisting the power from the professional discourses that imposed on them.

Another aspect of power relationship in the field that needed to be reflected on was my gender. Although this is not a typical feminist study, my status as a female fieldworker equally had a considerable weight in my field experience. Contrary to my expectation, in many cases, I was primarily considered and dealt with as a woman rather than as a

researcher. Like many other female fieldworkers, I had to make more efforts to overcome moral barriers than men need to gain the access to the setting. Given the anomic image of urban villages in common perception, there actually existed a strong moral constraint in public opinion towards women. A single woman who lived alone, moved about in the neighbourhood day and night, approached people of all kinds, as I was doing in the field, was most likely to be suspected as abnormal, commonly connected with negative moral association in villager's eyes. To avoid this negative impression, a normal marital identity proved to be crucial for me. Therefore, I had to deliberately ask my husband and my daughter to accompany me to the urban villages on some occasions.

Apart from the impacts on the access process, my gender also made evident differences on the data collection process. Whatever research activities I was undertaking in the field, I had to firstly learn how to behave in a way of a 'proper' woman as defined by the villagers. Many lessons had been learnt from several embarrassing experiences. For example, I was not supposed to open a conversation with the husband in a household in the first instance before I was acquainted with the wife. Otherwise, it was possible for the wife to suspect me as an indecent (*buzhengjing*) woman who was trying to accost their husbands. This would lead to a cold reception or, in the worst case, doors slammed on me, which did actually happen twice. As a result of this, I had much more freedom and opportunities to talk and getting along with females in private, while the interactions with males had to be more carefully conducted in a relatively public way, ideally in the sight of their wives and within a limited time span. Even with single males or married males whose wives were not living with them, I had to avoid sensitive questions and finish the interview as quickly as possible. Due to these unbalanced contacts, I have to admit that to a certain extent the data collected in the field does reflect unbalanced voices between men and women.

At the same time, thanks to my gender and my own experiences as a wife and a mother, I felt comfortable exploring common interests and topics with women, who were willing to show their friendship and hospitality to me. This relationship was not only valuable for me, but also exploited by those women as an extra social resources. Rather than passively responding to my investigation, they also knew how to make the best use of my visits, whether consulting me about their children's education or using my personal relationship (*guanxi*) in the city to solve some of their personal problems. More importantly, their responses always reminded me of the danger in assuming a household or a family as an ethnographic unit without reflection. Women usually did not mind sharing their family affairs with me. They tended to use me as a good listener to complain about their troubles

with husbands and family. In responding to my questions, women quite often found a good chance to speak out their disagreements with men, such as whether to return during the Spring Festival and where to return, which will be detailed in chapter 7. In this sense, my own gender status in the field led me almost unavoidably to include gender politics as an important dimension of my reflection, although it was not in my plan at all from the outset.

To summarise, what is going to be presented in the following chapters should not be read as the whole truth about the place and Chinese rural migratory subjects. It was not even my intention to approach my subject in this way. My aim, on the contrary, is to tell an impressionist tale composed of several anthropological moments and scenes based on two urban villages in the city of Wuhan. They are by no means outside the tidal transition of the country, but far more than merely an echo of the grand narrative. What fascinated me was to capture the sparkle of uncertainty and unpredictability when the city and a small place in the city confront the sweeping power of modernity with their distinct characteristics and spirits. What is also true for the contents is that they are doomed to be partial and subjective, because there was indeed no way for me to pretend to be a mere onlooker in the field. Rather, I consciously freed myself from the professional discourses centred by objectivity and neutrality, and actively used my personal experience, knowledge and emotion as an ethnographic tool to frame and interpret my field encounters. By revealing the presence of myself and the role I played in the field, the truth of fieldwork is regarded by me as a process of co-production of data and co-construction of meaning by both the researcher and the researched through personal interaction and negotiation, rather than as ‘a data excavation independently enacted by ethnographic miners in the field’ (Kvale, 1996: 3). In this sense, the ethnographic practice itself is suggested to be an active element in the process of culture-making and place-making rather than being outside.

# Chapter 4

## Street Life in the Urban Villages

*Narrow, twisting, crowded, chaotic, and vibrant. Entering the urban villages, the first scene greeting you is the street.*

— From the field notes on 9 October 2006.

*Every time when I return from work, once I step onto this street, I know I am at home.*

— Xiao Yi, a female migrant from Wuhan Suburb, a newspaper deliverer.

The street posits itself as a principal type of public space in the city, not merely through the spatial functions it bears in traffic and public activities, but also through its symbolism to make a place like a city. Very often, the word ‘street’ is used as a metonymy to signify the whole ‘city’ or ‘town’, because it refers to a particular type of place that only cities have. In China, for instance, ‘going to the street’ (*shangjie*) is an activity one can only do in cities or towns. Because only cities and towns have streets (*jie*), rural areas only have ‘roads’ (*lu*) or ‘paths’ (*dao or jing*).<sup>44</sup> By this token, one can always grasp the intangible spirit of different cities by examining the tangible patterns of streets and the ways they are ordered and used in people’s everyday life, which vary from time to time, from culture to culture.

Our memory of the pre-industrial city is strongly associated with a kind of narrow corridor street, commonly featured by the immediate connection and constant exchange between the street facades and the sidewalk. This form of street normally presented itself as a liminal space that delivered unprogrammed public congregations, and simultaneously served a variety of needs (Holston, 1989). But this kind of corridor street became a hindrance to progress in the modernist vision of the city. Following the model set by Haussmann in his magnificent experiment in Napoleon III’s Paris, more and more cities declared war on the traditional corridor streets and replaced them with wide and straight

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<sup>44</sup> Such metonymic use of ‘street’ is by no means exclusively applied in China. For example, similar connotation of ‘going to the street’ can be found in Brazil, according to James Holston (1989: 107).



boulevards. The aim of this new form of street was to impose the complete control of the authorities on the urban space. It attempted to clear all of the dead corners in the city where pollution and rebellion could be bred and gave absolute priority to unobstructed circulation. While all of the meanings of space of the urban street were overwhelmingly subordinated to the right of free movement, the street in turn became only 'an area to move through, not be in.' (Sennett, 1977: 14) From Sennett's (1977) point of view, this reductionism of street space indicated the fall of the public in general, paralleled with the sacredness of the intimate world in modern cities, which encourages urbanites increasingly to retreat to their 'private universe'. 'No longer using streets as spaces of sociability, the elite now want to prevent street life from entering their enclaves....To walk on the public street is becoming a sign of class in many cities, an activity that the elite is abandoning.' (Caldeira, 1996: 313, 318) This interpretation, however, cannot deny the significance of streets in people's everyday life. In contrast to the urban elites, a relatively street-oriented lifestyle is commonly demonstrated in marginalised communities, be they migrants, minorities, the poor or the homeless. Conventionally, this 'street culture' has been strongly associated with the inferior characteristic of subalterns, such as anomie, rootlessness and the danger of violence (Merton, 1964, Liebow, 1967, Schultz, 1969, Rainwater, 1970, Kapsis, 1979). Recent studies have begun to think about streets as a meaningful site whereby the relatively powerless can 'organise themselves into self-supporting cultures of resistance and co-operation' (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001: 225) by using streets in ways very different than bureaucrats and administrators intend (Jackson, 1988, Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1990, Jackson, 1992, Cresswell, 1996, Busted, 2005). But, as Holloway and Hubbard (2001) have warned, it is clearly problematic to over-generalise the meaning of this resistance (p.232). Therefore, we should understand people's engagements in streets in relation to the specifics of cultural politics.

Although the history of the Chinese urban street as a physical form can be traced back as early as the birth of the city itself, the function of the street has been very limited in the city where urban residents' life was highly regulated into separated wards, as we introduced in Chapter 2. The real street life came into view from the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) when the initial form of combination between the residential and commercial zones emerged in many cities, which populated the street space with bustling crowds and passers-by. It was under this transformation that the street provided a living space for a larger population and the city absorbed an unprecedented amount of vagrants and migrants from the countryside (Wang, 1999: 114-35). Throughout the following centuries, urban streets have developed into the most accessible and vibrant public spaces for urban

commoners, who not only enacted various livelihoods, but also cultivated a sense of neighbourliness and autonomy in the urban community (Rowe, 1989, Wang, 2003). Under the dominance of the work-unit system in the communist regime, urban life was largely constrained into different *danwei* compounds. The street did bear some functions in people's daily consumption, but commerce and services were dominantly operated by state-own companies according to the ratios planned by the government (Bray, 2005). Moving to the reform age, one of the most significant changes in Chinese cities was the shifting locus of urban life from the *danwei* compound onto the street, which saw the emergence of a flourishing of new small-scale private enterprise sector (*getihu*) bring life back to the urban street (Shi, 1993, See in Bray, 2005: 167).

Despite the reopening of street markets and commerce, ordinary urbanites' usage of streets is highly constrained by a whole array of measures from different apparatuses of the government. Apart from the police's responsibility in transportation and security, the Environment and Hygiene Bureau's duty in hygiene, the Industrial and Commercial Bureau and Tax Bureau's power in regulating street business, another institution called the Urban Management Bureau (*chengguan ju*) is also active in every city. Its executive teams have the right to clear any illegal street occupation to ensure the smooth flow of traffic and the order of the whole street space. For those whose lives are heavily dependent on the street, such as small stall holders, vendors, odd-labourers and beggars, this means their life is always under the threat of unexpected raids, confiscations, penalties or banishments. Otherwise, they have to give certain benefits to the team members to earn a living on the street. Under this intimidating regulation and surveillance, the alternative space for the weak to exercise their autonomy in the street is vanishingly small, let alone to enact any radically resistive activities. From the perspective of the authorities, the ideal city needs wide and smooth streets, but does not welcome street lives.

While in most big Chinese cities, the dramatic development during recent years has gradually driven street life out of the mainstream urban landscape, another form of street life has been emerging and developing in urban villages like Gaowang and Wujiawan, which conveys an alternative meaning of streets in the modern city.

## **The street in the making**

Unlike the main streets in the city, the streets in the urban villages were not formed by any overall design or planning. Rather, they were historically shaped by various social forces. Some old Gaowang villagers recalled that before the 1980s, the only passage in the area

was a macadam road, connecting Gaowang with the outside. It was as a result of the relocation of the Wujiawan villagers to the present location that the village obtained a fund from the government to build the cement road they were then using. But what changed this rural road into an urban street was a more complicated process directly linked to demographic change in the place. First, the influx of migrants stimulated the renting business and speeded up the housing construction. Round after round of housing reconstructions and alterations not only created abundant inhabitable floor space along the roadside but also established a solid mass of contiguous buildings that commonly formed a spatial sense of enclosure framing the street into its present shape. Second, the settlement of the rural migrants brought about a boom in the whole range of consumption sites in the street. By facilitating life in the neighbourhood, these sites changed the function of the street from a mere open space for circulation into a social space where various aspects of people's daily life unfolded.

Over the years, a systematic web of streets came into being. The widest and longest is a cement street curving through the two villages, about 700 meters long and 4 meters wide. (*See Photo 4.1.*) It not only shouldered the main traffic of the whole area but also contained the majority of life services in the neighbourhood. Along both sides of the main street were numerous intersections leading to many small alleys. The width of the alleys varied from 3 meters to no more than 1 meter, all on both sides directly connected with the thresholds of the adjacent house compounds or apartments. Neither the main street nor the alleys were straight, but literally snaked through a forest of buildings. Some are partly constructed with steep stairs to adapt to the sloping landform. But none of them are blind alleys. After a number of twists and turns, one would lead to another and further, from whatever direction, connect to the main streets of the city. In short, all these streets, shorter or longer, narrower or wider, together weave a web extending in all directions, both integrating separate parts of the two villages as a whole and allowing the whole area to open to the outside.

If Feuchtwang (2004) is right in arguing that making a territory into a place is a process of centring, in whatever forms and complexity, then such centring process in the urban villages shows an evident orientation towards the street. As the result of excessive construction and expansion, housing buildings conquered nearly every corner of the land. The streets and alleys turned out to be the only open space within the neighbourhood, fusing all kinds of public functions into one space. Moreover, the housing condition for the majority of the migrant households was characterised by crowdedness and the lack of

facilities in their interior space. This also forced a considerable part of domestic functions to move onto the streets and alleys. At the same time, all these neighbourhood activities had to negotiate with the heavy traffic in the street. With no lane divisions, pedestrians, non-motor vehicles, and motors had to share a single paving and make their way through the chaos constituted of loading and unloading, peddling, washing, hanging clothes out to dry, gathering, playing, and so on and so forth. Eventually, the street spaces in the two urban villages distinguished themselves from those in the rest of the city in their multiple-layered purposes and less-divided spatial structure.

Despite this *laissez-faire* appearance, the street space was however, not free of controls and conflicts. From inside, the indigenous house owners did not only guard the access to the street business through renting housing, but also extended their power onto the street corners and walkways. Big or small, every stand, stall, vendor site on the street or in the market was charged for by a certain landlord. But since the street was equally the living space for the indigenes, it was also in their interests to maintain a harmonious relationship with the migrant residents. Quite unintentionally, by using the street life services run by the migrants, such as the boiled water room we will discuss later, the indigenes also had their lifestyle influenced by the arrival of the outsiders. From outside, the local government also attempted to execute its jurisdiction over the area down at street level. At the lowest end, the Ji'an Community Committee was responsible for the daily regulation of the two urban villages from 2000 to 2008. On the daily basis, the area was observed by a temporary security guard team hired by the Community Committee. Every evening around 8 o'clock, one team member would turn up in the street. His duty was to repeatedly broadcast a slogan recorded in a loudspeaker while he walked along streets, saying: 'Watch out for fire and thefts; Close doors and windows; Care about your neighbours; Minimise mahjong playing...' He did this job so dutifully and punctually that he and his broadcasting have unintentionally become a symbol indicating the start of the night life of the place. People also became familiar with the man and occasionally chatted with him, but no one seemed to be very attentive to the words of the broadcast. A few hours after the man left, a patrol was undertaken by a group of temporary security staff every night. Several times, I was allowed to follow them patrolling the streets. During the process, my observation suggested that what they did was little more than strolling around the streets and giving a passing glance at things within their sights. Apart from these daily measures, the local police on occasions launched temporary raids on the streets, mainly targeting the illegal gambling houses and fake certificate workshops. Given all these measures that attempted to ascertain the official idea of the street order, to control the

street space in the urban villages as strict as the main streets in the city seemed not realistic. The local organisations of taxation, commercial regulation, or public hygiene usually found the end of their wits here.

However, nothing shaped the street more fundamentally than the formation of a consuming world in the locality. Within the immediate neighbourhood, along the 700-meter main street and some chief alleys, some 120 stalls, shops or restaurants lined side by side, covering nearly all aspects of people's daily consumption. (*See Table 4.1.*). In accordance with the demographic characteristics of urban villages, these street businesses were unsurprisingly stamped with the identity of the rural migrants in the locality, both as the main body of the customers and as the main operators of the street businesses.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the street consumption system here was distinct from the rest of the city with its scale, contents, prices and business modes deeply embedded in the rural migrants' lifestyle. This was further influenced by their particular economic and living conditions, as well as their unsettled status in the city. Some general characteristics of these consumption sites can be generated from my observations, such as small scale, informal management modes, and relatively low prices.<sup>46</sup> But in relation to the diversity of the consumption sites in the streets and their varied functions in the rural migrants' everyday life, such a generalised analysis risks the danger of over-simplification. In the next two sections, I am going to examine the meanings of these street consumption sites through two case studies: the boiled water rooms and the public telephone sites.

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<sup>45</sup> Still, a handful of grocery stores, corner shops, and mahjong rooms were run by the local owners.

<sup>46</sup> For example, in 2007, the prices of hairdressing in the urban villages were only half of those in the neighbouring urban communities. The largest differences were in the prices of medical services. Ordinary cold cure treatment normally cost at least 150-200 yuan in formal hospitals but less than 50 yuan in the private clinics and the drug stores in the urban villages.



*Photo 4.1. The main street connecting Gaowang and Wujiawan.*

*Table 4. 1. Commercial services in the main street.*

Type of service	Number of sites
<b><i>Food</i></b>	
Breakfast stalls	12
Restaurants	11
Bakeries	3
<b><i>Life Facilities</i></b>	
Barbershops	7
Recycling shops	6
Boiled-water rooms	5
Home appliance repairing stalls	2
Dry-cleaners	2
Bottled gas stores	3
Bathhouse	1
<b><i>Medical services</i></b>	
Private clinics	7
Drugstore	1
<b><i>Shopping</i></b>	

Grocery stores	30 (20 with public telephone service; 4 with press sale)
Electric equipment stores	6 (4 with public telephone service)
Mini supermarkets	3 (all with public telephone service)
Fruit stalls	3
Grain and oil shops	2
Hardware stores	2
Shoe shops	2
Tailors	2
Grocery Market	1
<b><i>Information and entertainment</i></b>	
Public telephone sites	13
Mahjong rooms	6
Video-loan shops	3 (2 with public telephone service)
Gambling houses	3
Lottery shop	1
Electronic game room	1

## **The boiled-water rooms: from the *danwei* compounds to the street**

Among the passers-by in the streets of Gaowang and Wujiawan, I always found many carrying kettles, thermos flasks or buckets in their hands. This was what every household in the two urban villages did every day in their life: buying and fetching boiled water from the boiled-water room in the street to meet their basic household needs in drinking, bathing and washing.<sup>47</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, there were 5 sites supplying this service in the place. (*See Photo 4.2*) Each site had a boiler emplaced in a shed or hut on the street corner, with one or two taps set towards the street and a pile of waste wood piled aside as a fuel stock. They normally opened around 18 hours every day offering an uninterrupted supply of boiled water. The customers usually filled up their own containers

<sup>47</sup> In China, there is considerable demand for boiled-water in ordinary households. Chinese people prefer to drink hot water and tap water has to be boiled for drinking. As there is no domestic heating supply in southern China, every household also needs to use a lot of hot water for washing and laundry in winter, as well as bathing.

and then left their money in a box put beside the tap. The charge was calculated roughly according to the size of the container, 5 *jiao* per bucket, 2 *jiao* per thermos or kettle.<sup>48</sup> If there was a plentiful stock of fuel, all the holder needed to do was to add fuel and collect money, therefore one person would be enough to run the business. My field observation confirmed that the major proportion of household boiled-water consumption in the two villages was supplied by the boiled-water rooms, whether for ingenious residents or for migrant residents.<sup>49</sup>

As an observer, my initial response towards this street scene was that it appeared paradoxical. On the one hand, fetching boiled water from the street was certainly out of my own experience of today's urban life. Like most ordinary urbanites who live in modern apartments, I have got used to getting and using boiled or hot water at home as a domestic activity, rather than on the street. At the same time, the phenomenon also triggered my memory of the recent past, when urban life was under *danwei* dominance and the public boiled water service, along with a whole array of other life facilities established in the residential zone, was provided by every work-unit as one of the sources of 'collective warmth'.<sup>50</sup> In that age, access to the *danwei* boiled water service was free or highly subsidised, yet strictly exclusive to the resident members of individual work-units.<sup>51</sup> Even if it was chargeable, it was normally paid for with internal tickets or pre-paid cards issued by the 'rear-service department' (*houqin ke*) or 'general services department' (*zongwu ke*) of the work-unit, in order to ensure the service was exclusive to the resident members of the work unit only. One consequence of this arrangement was that it provided not merely a life service, but helped create a sense of belonging. This warm and homely sense was actually subject to the ideology of the *danwei* institution expressed through the spatial and social orders of its structures. In its most formal form like those established in the big and populated work-units, such as the one shown in Photo 4.3., the boiled-water service was normally sited in a spatial room close to other life facilities, such as the collective canteen, bathhouse, barbershop and dormitory. In the room, a whole line of taps

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<sup>48</sup> One *jiao* equals 0.10 yuan, approximately 1 penny.

<sup>49</sup> According to my own observations in Wuhan, the existence and influence of the boiled-water rooms are definitely not unique to Gaowang and Wujiawan, but quite commonplace in other urban villages. This is further demonstrated by a study of urban villages in Beijing (Zhao, 2007). See: <http://www.xslx.com/htm/szrp/shts/2007-05-16-21719.htm>

<sup>50</sup> It does not mean the boiled-water service solely existed in the *danwei* space. Small-sized private boiled water rooms have long existed in Chinese urban communities, sometimes combined with teahouses (Wang, 2003). But they normally offered a commercial option, rather than dominating people's boiled-water consumption in a constitutive way.

<sup>51</sup> In reality, even within a work-unit, the gaps between the huge demand and limited supply always existed. Some work-units had to restrain the accessibility for some members. For example, many work-units did not open their boiled-water sites to the married households who were supposed to be able to boil water at home.



were evenly and tidily set against walls, allowing a great number of users to fetch water at the same time. Every boiled-water site was manned by a guard who also operated the boiler. The boiler room staff did not necessarily have much direct contact with users, for they perceived themselves as working for the work-unit rather than for users. The real provider of the service was the authority of the work-unit, represented by the 'rear-service department' or 'general services department', who exercised their regulation not in person, but mainly through a list of regulations posted at the front gate, including the opening times, cleaning duties, and conduct codes. All these regulations served as an integral element to the overall order of the whole *danwei* space, which always put productivity and collectivity as the priority. The opening time of every boiled water room, for example, was set to two or three limited periods every day, exactly in accordance to the working or studying time of the work-unit. By providing basic life services in such an institutional way, the boiled water rooms in a *danwei* space, functioned as a spatial form in structuring a production-based lifestyle and a socialist collectivity among the resident members they served in a walled world (Bray, 2005: 147).

With the advent of Reform and Opening Up, the *danwei*-bonded norm of home has given way to the family-centred norm of home in urban China. Now it is the private life and individual freedom rather than collective solidification that is cherished as the prior principle of society. Parallel with the decline of *danwei* space, the individualised space of the private home has become sacred. As a result, the public boiled water rooms are dying out from the mainstream urban landscape, especially in the newly built residential spaces like the commercial estate communities. One of the indicators of the modern life and modern home, what is valued in today's urban households is the availability of and access to water, cold or hot, within the domestic environment, through the gas or electronic boilers installed in the separate bathroom in individual apartments. In turn, the public boiled water services are increasingly only found in some semi-residential communities, such as university student dormitories, factory collective dormitories for unmarried workers, or army camps, which are commonly featured as non-familial and mobile. Therefore, using public boiled water is no longer associated with the sense of home in the mainstream norm, but has become a sign of being away from home.



*Photo 4.2: A boiled-water room in Wujiawan.*



*Photo 4.3: A boiled-water site on a university campus in Wuhan.*

Based on this social backdrop, the emergence of the boiled water rooms in the urban villages conveyed an alternative social implication. To understand their distinctions, we need to examine the incentives of this place-based consumption phenomenon from the

view of both the provider and the user. In the case of the provider, it was striking that all of the boiled water rooms in the street were commonly run by rural migrant households that originated from Henan Province. One of the boiled water sellers, Lao Qiao, told me it was not strange at all, because the first boiled-water room was set up by one of the Henan fellow villagers in Gaowang in 2001. The idea was inspired by his earlier experience in an urban village in Hangzhou<sup>52</sup> where boiler water selling was initially adopted by rural migrants. Two years later, when that Henan fellow left Gaowang, Lao Qiao bought his boiler and continued his business until the present. The success of the first site attracted many followers but largely under the monopoly of the Henan fellowship. Underpinning this monopoly was their creativity in combining this business with an existing aspect of their livelihood. In point of fact, the boiler they used<sup>53</sup> was mainly designed to cater for small-scale collective communities, like dormitories in factories and universities. To make the same product profitable in a non-collective community such as the urban village and to cater for individual relatively low income households, the key was to reduce the cost by changing the fuel source. The designated fuel was coal, which in the case of full-time operation would cost more than 40 yuan per day, making the business hardly profitable. But the Henan fellows found an almost costless solution. Instead of coal, they filled the boiler with waste wood and other burnable waste collected from construction sites or household removals. This cost little more than the labour in collecting and carrying these fuels and this was exactly what the Henan migrants excelled at, for many of them had long survived in the city as scavengers. By re-contextualising the business into their existing livelihood, the Henan migrants proved their advantages in running the boiled-water service over other inhabitants in the urban villages. However, it was also this tactical solution that underlined the informality of the business in the bureaucratic view. Huge concerns had arisen on the part of the local authorities and neighbouring urban communities who viewed the burning of waste materials in the boiled water rooms with a high risk to the public of fire security and environmental pollution. Official interventions like warnings and inspections were undertaken by the security team of the Community Committee, ordering the sellers to change the fuel back to coal. These measures, however, had little effect, as the business model depended on waste burning for its survival in the locality.

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<sup>52</sup> The capital city of Zhejiang Province, which experienced a boom in the private economy earlier than Wuhan.

<sup>53</sup> Actually, this is another indicator of monopoly: all of the boilers in different sites were bought from the same producer, a boiler factory in Jiangsu Province.

Besides the creative but also informal efforts from the sellers' side, the prosperity of the business in the urban villages was also intrinsically linked to the living conditions of the community it served. Not surprisingly, many customers of the boiled water rooms were the un-married migrants or single migrants whose families were still left behind in the home villages. Their dependence on the public boiled-water reflected the incomplete household function of their daily life, which very much resembled that of those who lived in the collective dormitories in factories or universities. But it was also true that a great number of the households with complete or semi-complete family structures equally paid their daily visits to the boiled-water rooms. What, then, drove their boiled water consumption from the domestic environment onto the street? The foremost driving force was the pressure they had in the cost of and access to household fuel. Unlike the rest of the central urban areas in Wuhan, gas pipe lines had not reached the urban villages. They were an enclave in the central city where coal stoves were still in use in every household, whether indigenises or migrants. Although bottled gas was available through several delivery sites nearby, it had to be used economically for the price was much higher than piped gas. In addition to this infrastructure unevenness was the social division marked by the *hukou* status. While every Wuhan *hukou* holder could enjoy a certain amount of gas subsidies from the municipal government, this benefit was not available to migrant workers. Consequently, boiling water at home, which is a matter of course for most urban households, turned out to be more troublesome and more expensive for migrant households than buying from the street, as some informants recounted to me. At the same time, many of my informants complained that, even though they could afford the expenditure, the housing condition in the urban villages, which normally lacked a separate bathroom equipped with a gas or electric boiler, would not allow them to enjoy the domestically boiled water at home as in modern apartments.<sup>54</sup> Buying the boiled water for bathing from the nearby street corner which was always available proved to be obviously more convenient and economic than boiling and fetching the bathing water from the kitchen or the outdoor corridor.<sup>55</sup> In short, whether for the provider or for the consumer, the emergence of the boiled-water rooms in the urban villages was in essence defined by the unique ecology of the place. Then how did this consumption phenomenon in turn change the place?

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<sup>54</sup> More detailed discussions about the housing conditions in the urban villages will be presented in the next chapter.

<sup>55</sup> The alternative option for bathing in winter was to go to the public bathhouse, only one in the street, also run by a migrant household. But not all migrant households were willing to pay the five-yuan fee. As long as the cold can be endured, bathing in most of the migrant households was still undertaken at home, using boiled-water collected from the street.

Since water, both as a natural element and as a commodity, is a requisite for daily life, its spatial transformations in the settlement have always been intrinsically linked with people's way of being and dwelling. The modern (bourgeois) notion, home is ideologically imagined as a distinct and autonomous 'space envelope' (Lefebvre, 1968, see in: Kaika, 2004: 265), which separates the insider from the outside, the nature from human being, the private from the public. In her study, Maria Kaika (2004) provides an interesting discussion of how such norm of home is embodied through the material and discursive construction of water access and consumption. She sees water as simultaneously in need and denied as 'the other' by modern urbanity, in order to create a sense of familiarity, security and isolation inside home. On the one hand, the availability of and the access to the commodified water increases in the domestic sphere; on the other hand, the production of water (reservoirs, pumping stations, purifying stations) and the networks connecting water production to the production of home (pipes, sewages) are expelled outside and kept invisible. This paradoxical representation of the 'other' leads to 'a discursive construction of two distinct "types" of water': '*good water*' (clean, processed, controlled) and '*bad water*' (dirty, non-processed, uncontrolled) (p. 267), corresponding to the binaries between the inside and the outside, the private and the public. This conceptual distinction implies that only by enclosing the access to and uses of *good water* in the domestic space and keeping the *bad water* outside could a sense of home be guaranteed (ibid. 267-75). Nevertheless, such modern notion of home and domestic water consumption was largely unsettled by the ways that the boiled water was consumed in the urban villages, which contributed to a negotiation space of how home can be created and sustained through water consumption.

As we have described before, people's boiled-water consumption in the urban villages was characterised by its outdoor and public access outside the domestic domain, but this did not reduce its ontological significance in the construction of familiarity and security. My observation suggested that the trips to the boiled water rooms had become an important marker of the routinisation of people's daily life. Unlike what happened in the *danwei* space, each household had its own particular timetable to fetch boiled water, which was not defined by the opening times of the service, but corresponded to the life rhythms of individual households defined by their occupations, family structures, and personal habits in water consumption. Equally routinised were the routes of water fetching. Among the five boiled water rooms scattered around the different parts of the street, every household normally fixed to a selected site according to distance and habitude. By deliberately fixing the trip to a single site, a certain extent of familiarity could be created both around the site

and along the route, as well as acquaintanceship with both the seller and other buyers. As a result, the journey outside the domestic space could be conducted in a take-it-for-granted way as a domestic activity. For example, there seemed no need for people to change their indoor wear when they fetched boiled water from the street. A similar sense of comfort and ease could be sensed from the fact they often left kettles or buckets in front of the site for a period until they came back from somewhere else, without worrying whether their kettles or buckets would be stolen. As familiarity and acquaintanceship grew through usage, every boiled water room functioned as a meeting point for different groups of residents within the neighbourhood. This regrouping process more or less cut across the social divisions between the local owners and the migrant tenants, as well as the regional differentiations within the migrant residents. In other words, to some extent, it brought strangers together and re-configured the social space of the neighbourhood.

If one emphasis in the sophisticated network of urban water supply is to keep the connections between the production of water and the production of home invisible, then these connections have been partly re-visualised in the urban villages. By moving part of the water access and process from the domestic space to the public, the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, become porous. Driven by the boiled water consumption, many domestic activities, such as laundry, hair washing, and children's bathing in summer, equally moved beyond the threshold onto corridors, communal balconies, or even street corners. Accordingly, part of the domestic life routines of the individual households was revealed by people's public appearances in the boiled water room. For example, boiled water contained in buckets, which was supposed to be used up immediately, indicated that there was laundry or bathing in preparation.

Nevertheless, being porous between inside and outside does not necessarily lead to the abandonment of the home boundaries. More precisely, it means the boundaries are operated at different levels and through different means. Going back to Kaika's theorisation about how the discursive distinction between the *good water* and the *bad water* functions as a division between the inside from the outside in modern home, one could find the similar dynamics worked in a different way in the boiled water consumption in the urban villages. Although the boiled water from the street was not categorised by the local households as *bad* as dirty or useless, there was still an idea in their mind to differentiate it from the water boiled inside home. During my fieldwork, I was repeatedly reminded by my informants: 'You'd better not drink the boiled water from the street. It is mainly suitable for washing.' Although I still saw many households drank

the boiled water they fetched from the street, I did notice that when the host family tried to show their hospitality to me, they always emphasised that the boiled water they offered to me was home-boiled-water rather than street-collected-water. It was suggested that the boiled water from the street was not good enough for drinking because its quality was not guaranteed and to drink half boiled water could cause many diseases. More interestingly, the uncertainty towards the water quality was further associated with discrimination against the seller. As a Hubei fellow told me: ‘You know those Henan fellows. Their own life is not hygienic. How can you believe in the water they boiled?’

Another means to manipulate the inside/outside distinction was through gender division in dealing with the boiled water. As many scholars (Hill, 1972, Kendie, 1996, Shiva, 1997, see in: Kaika, 2004: 270) have pointed out, using water in the domestic space, from washing to cooking, had traditionally been the task of women, whereas handling and taming water outside the house (from field irrigation to dam construction and the conquest of the sea) were men’s privileges. Historically, women’s domestic uses of water were not restricted within indoor spaces but also extended to outdoor and public spaces, including collecting water from surroundings and gathering around wells, streams or springs to wash and clean. But with the access and uses of water being gradually domesticated in the modern home, women lost their duty as well as an opportunity in dealing with water in public (Laermans and Meulders, 1999: 123). Water consumption in turn became an institution in further constraining and isolating women in the interior space. This interior/external division between genders was also mirrored in the boiled-water consumption in the urban villages. Although collecting boiled water from the street was certainly part of domesticity, due to its outdoor position, this part of the domesticity was often assigned to men rather than women. In most of my informants’ households, while using boiled water, from laundry to bathing children, was the task of women, the duty in collecting boiled water from the street normally belonged to men, whether the husband or the son. If you saw a woman in a boiled water room, it was very likely that she was single or having her husband and son away from home.

After examining the boiled water-rooms in the urban villages from both their formation dynamics and position in people’s daily life, we are able to differentiate them from those in the *danwei* space. Similar in the goods and service they offer, the boiled water rooms in different contexts actually differ in their social symbolisms. While the *danwei* boiled water sites serves as a daily institution in sustaining the wall-compounds, the access to which pertains to an exclusive and privileged status, the boiled-water rooms in the urban



villages, however, belongs to the street and open to the public, the dependence on which mirrors the economic and social marginality and alternativeness. If one is established from the above and is executed as an institutional regulation over the collective subjects on behalf of the authorities, then the other is formed from the bottom up and exercised as a tactic to tackle the shortage and the inequality by the weak and for the weak. In this sense, the reappearance of a declined form of daily institution in a marginal place does not imply the resurrection of the old ideology the institution has once represented; rather it questions the new dominant ideology which re-constructs the institution as an absolute Other to the modern home. What was deployed through the operation and usage of the public boiled water service in the urban villages was an alternative geography of domestic water consumption, which set the home boundaries between inside and outside, private and public, purity and impurity into reconfiguration. In this sense, it delivers a subversive mode of social practice through a mimetic effect.

### **‘Telephone supermarkets’: bringing ‘here’ and ‘there’ together**

The intensified consumption of the long-distance telephone in migrant settlements and its significance in the formation and sustenance of migratory or diasporic communities have already been widely discussed (Margolis, 1994, Morley, 2000, Rouse, 2002). But a bias in the previous studies is that the spatial context of people’s telephone consumption, if identified, is predominantly limited to their domestic sphere. Given the notable truth that districts of cities with substantial immigrant populations now ‘tend to feature a plethora of high-street call-centres’ (Morley, 2000: 126), public telephone use in the migrant settlements, especially those on the street, has not been adequately documented.

This bias is not coincidental as far as the technological and cultural transformation of the personal telecommunication in the modern history is concerned. During the first hundred years since the telephone was invented and initially distributed, except for the wealthy and high-ranking officials, people’s access to this technology was dominated by various public approaches. According to Peter Young’s (1991) documentation, by the end of the century in the USA, pay phones were common in places frequented by the public, especially drugstores. In the UK, the early individual calls were made in call offices or post offices (p. 32, 33). The establishment of street kiosks in the beginning of the 1900s made the instrument available to a wider public (p. 58). But thanks to the spread of the networks and the mass production of the individual telephones, the 20th century witnessed public callings gradually giving way to the residential callings. ‘There were always public booths,



but these were for emergencies and pre-arranged calls, not for when the mood or need arose.’ (ibid. : 125) Once perceived as an intruder into privacy, the calling machine was then invited into the home and became part of the intimate space. Unsurprisingly, with the household-centred landline calling consumption further privatised and personalised into the calls on mobile phones in recent years, the position of the public telephone is perceived as under further threats.

However, the telephone consumption among the rural migrants in the urban villages seemed not to follow this fashion. If having a telephone at home is a desirable goal for the Brazilian immigrants in Margolis’ (1994: 97) ‘little Brazil’ in New York, then the attitude towards the residential telephone among the rural migrants in my investigation was very different. Most of them understood this as a waste of money, even if it was affordable.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, except for a few households who needed a telephone for business purposes, few of my migrant informants in the two villages had a landline at home. On the contrary, their access to the telephone was overwhelmingly dependent on the public telephone sites on the street. Despite the obvious inconvenience of public calling compared with domestic calling from some perspectives, they had their own reasons to prefer public calling:

*I can use the public telephones within a few steps outside. What is the point for me to have a telephone at home? And what’s more, it is cheaper.*

—Xiao Han, 32, female, from Guangshui, Hubei

*Using the public telephone which is literally available on every corner here, I can call whenever I need and wherever I want.*

—Sisi, 22, female, from Puqi, Hubei

*Calling in the street is certainly not as convenient as calling at home, but it makes little difference for me. Because the street is supposed to be the place I have to go many times every day, whether for shopping or for collecting boiled water. I can always make my calls on the way.*

—Xiao Ke, 31, female, from Yangxin, Hubei

*One of our Henan fellows is running the public telephone business just opposite to my home across the street. I often meet many acquaintances when I make calls there.*

—Li Bo, 36, male, from Xinyang, Henan

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<sup>56</sup> Since the initial installation fee was cancelled in 2001, having a residential connection became more affordable for ordinary households in China and it is not beyond the reach for most of migrant households in my investigation.

To understand the proliferation of the public telephone in the urban villages, we have to firstly contextualise this long-existing communication technology in 21st Century urban China, where new technologies are increasingly integrated into many old communication industries and thus a whole series of low-end services are produced to meet the demands of low-income and previously marginal markets on a massive scale (Qiu, 2009: 3). One service of this kind is IP telephone, or VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). As a new technology operating calling through the Internet rather than traditional telephone lines and signal exchanges, the differences in distance have been diminished. This technological evolution dramatically lowers the prices of calls, especially for long-distance calls. As a result of the quick distribution of this technology, a new model of public telephone business has been introduced in Chinese cities over recent years. The new model is distinct in its easy market access for small operators. Apart from the state-run company, China Telecom, the market is now shared by multiple operators as different as China Unicom, China Netcom, and China Railcom, etc. Once the monopoly had been broken, the prices were further controlled at a low level. After several rounds of price wars, by 2007, the price for long-distance calls from IP telephone sites had been reduced to a similar level as local calls. While the domestic long-distance rate is 0.7 Yuan/min by traditional landline and 1.3 yuan/min by mobile, it only costs 0.2 yuan/min from an IP telephone site. Because the residential telephone market is still dominated by China Telecom, it is understandable that the IP telephone service providers target the communities with heavy calling demands, especially for long-distance calls, but less residential telephone coverage, like the migrant settlements in urban villages.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, the relatively low entry barrier of this business creates abundant job opportunities for rural migrants. To establish an IP public telephone business, one only needs to apply for an account from any IP supplier. For only a 200-yuan refundable deposit, an IP telephone will be offered, together with a fare-calculating device. Irrespective of how much customers are charged, the supplier only charges the shop holder 0.09 yuan/min or even less. The surplus is the profit earned by the holder. The daily management of the service is equally simple, little more than keeping one's eye on the store and collecting the fees. Although one cannot expect a big profit, the business does provide a new low risk opportunity for rural migrants to make a living in the city.

As a consequence of the technological and economic stimulation, the IP public telephone services appeared in Gaowang and Wujiawan in 2003 and then quickly mushroomed in the

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<sup>57</sup> Equally targeted are university student residences and factory collective dormitories.

place in the following years. By 2007, they were distributed at some 42 locations in varied forms, providing the whole area with a telephone network deep into every corner of the neighbourhood. The intensity of the business reflects the steadiness of demand. Among my informant households, 95% made at least one public call every day, on average spending 20-30 Yuan every month. On the occasion of some special calendrial moments or personal events, the frequency and the duration of public calls could be doubled. From his observation in the Aguilillan migrant communities, Roger Rouse (2002) noticed that ‘growing access to the telephone has been... allowing people not just to keep in touch periodically but to contribute to decision making and participate in familial events even from a considerable distance.’ (p. 162) Thanks to the popularity of the public telephone in their urban settlements, this benefit has been further realised by today’s rural migrants in China. The low price even permitted the migrant residents to use the telephone in an impulsive way and to enjoy hours of chat (*bao dianhua*) without major cost worries. Especially among the young migrants, calling had in a way gone beyond the basic communicative needs and become a kind of leisure activity.

What further raised the value of the public telephone in the rural migrants’ daily life was its combination with mobile phones. The revolutionary significance of the mobile phone as a good alternative to fixed lines among marginal groups in offsetting their disadvantages in communicative technologies has been celebrated by many scholars (i.e. Castells et al., 2007). But the realisation of the advantages of this new technology is subject to how different social agents embed the instrument into their local contexts. In Gaowang and Wujiawan, the acceptance rate of mobile phone among rural migrants in the urban villages was not low. Nearly every migrant household under my investigation had at least one mobile phone holder. Owning a mobile phone was perceived by most of my informants as one of the key conditions in surviving in today’s urban society. But due to the high call rates,<sup>58</sup> most rural migrants only use their mobile phones only for SMS and a few calls in urgent situations.<sup>59</sup> However, they invented an alternative solution to bring

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<sup>58</sup> The Chinese mobile industry has long been monopolised by only two national operators, China Mobile, the subsidiary company China Telecom, and China Unicom. In 2008, the price for a local call was 0.6 yuan/min; the domestic long-distance call was 0.6 yuan/min+0.07 yuan/6sec. More fees will be charged for calls made in other network areas. Moreover, the pricing system in China had long been dual-party (both caller and receiver) pays. Under public pressure, the pricing started to be changed to CPP mode in some cities from 2009.

<sup>59</sup> One alternative form of mobile service in China attractive for low-income urbanity is the Little Smart (*xiaolingtong*), a low-end mobile phone. It uses wireless local loop (WLL) technology to connect handsets with traditional landline networks. With its own set of base stations, switchers, and handsets, the technology allows its customers to enjoy mobile service at the price of landline, much cheaper than GSM or CDMA and without receiving charge. But because the services are only limited within one city, it seems to be not appealing for rural migrants, whose lifestyle is featured by the constantly shifting between the city and their

their mobile phones into play: to combine mobile phones with the public telephone. While the mobile phone enabled them to be connected wherever they were, easy access to the public telephone in the street allowed them to immediately realise this connection at a low cost. The method was to hang up the mobile as soon as one received a call and then use the nearest public telephone to call back. Under the dual-party pricing system in China, this method could save considerable money for both sides, especially when the other side was calling from a landline.<sup>60</sup> As a result, the increasing distribution of mobile phones among rural migrants had not reduced but further enhanced the role of the public telephone in their life.<sup>61</sup>

As we have said, calling in the street or in other public sites is nothing new in modern society. But when this long-existing phenomenon settled in the urban villages, it showed a different face, which was manifested by the characteristics of its spatial forms. As far as the public telephone in the modern city is concerned, one typical form is kiosks scattered in the city streets all around the world. Since the time they were invented,<sup>62</sup> the core concern of this public instrument has been how to ensure the individual and private use in the midst of the public space. The solution of this anxiety was embodied in a small booth or box, forming an enclosed compartment, usually accommodating only one person, to separate the occupant from others. What is also central to this architectural form is the concept of transparency, which according to Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky (1984), creates an 'equivocal space' allowing the user both in and out of the public sphere. This concept is read by Richard Sennett (1977) as a 'paradox of isolation in the midst of visibility', a sign of the dead public space in the capitalist, secular, urban culture (p. 15). Because, 'people are more sociable, the more they have some tangible barriers between them, just as they need specific places in public whose sole purpose is to bring them together.' (ibid.)<sup>63</sup> What is more, by enclosing a distinct space particularly for calling out of the street chaos, the architectural form of the telephone booth also expresses a temptation in dis-embedding calling from its physical location, which is aimed to link the

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home villages, or sometimes between different cities.

<sup>60</sup> Callings from landline to mobile cost both sides: the landline caller and the mobile receiver. But calls between landlines only cost the caller.

<sup>61</sup> However, it is still uncertain whether the reduction of the mobile rate since 2009 will threaten the prosperity of the public telephone business in urban villages.

<sup>62</sup> 1889, the first coin-operated call box was installed, in the Hartford Bank lobby at Hartford, Connecticut. Street kiosks were introduced from at least 1904. Cast Iron Kiosks were introduced in 1926. For more details of the historical development of the public telephone instruments (see in: Young, 1991).

<sup>63</sup> It is also notable that, to solve the problem of vandalism, there is another tendency in many cities, including those in China, to make the kiosk less like a box, more an open but sheltered spot. It took up less space, was easier to maintain, and altogether cheaper. (See: Young, 1991: 233) However, the core concept of the design is still in succession to the telephone booth.

individual callers with ‘there’, the other end of the line, by diminishing ‘here’ from their sight.

In the urban villages, however, the public telephone was presented in a totally different form.<sup>64</sup> Rather than outstanding on the street as a distinct space, they retreated behind the shop fronts and more or less blended into other street institutions. Varied in different patterns, they could be roughly categorised into two kinds. The first was the public telephone services attached to other business sites, such as grocery shops, corner shops, little supermarkets, video renting rooms, boiled water rooms, press stalls, or electronic and repairing shops, roughly counting up to 29 locations. In this case, only one or two telephones were provided, normally put on the top of the counter desk, where phone calls had to be made standing. These were usually the sites suitable for immediate and short calls.

More formal were the sites called ‘public telephone supermarkets’ (*dianhua chaoshi*), some 13 in Gaowang and Wujiawan. (See *Photo 4.4*.) These were the locations primarily established for public telephone service, though sometimes also attached by other businesses, like video loan, prepaid telephone card sale, or drink sale. Distinct to ‘booth’ or ‘box’, which emphasises enclosure and separation, the term ‘supermarket’ conveyed a sense of openness and fluidity. It also advertised the mass-orientation of the service in its convenience and low prices. Big or tiny, each telephone supermarket was designed like a little hall with a big entrance directly facing the street. In the room, a long narrow shelf was built against walls, where telephones were placed side by side, either with no partition or only having small planks between each other. The number of telephones could vary from 4 to 12 in different locations, allowing many customers to use telephones at the same time. In its simplest form, a ‘supermarket’ simply consisted of a line of telephones put on a table. No matter how basic, however, every telephone supermarket commonly offered a table and benches; electric fans were also available in summer, trying to create a comfortable environment to cater for long-distance calling.

Striking in the spatial arrangement was how little attention had been placed on the individual enclosure and privacy. At the peak time of the business when every telephone was occupied, normally every evening after dinnertime, the whole shop could be very

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<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, in the last week of my fieldwork, a telephone booth appeared in the urban villages. It was established by the holder of the telephone supermarket as an extension to his old site. It was built of planks, with windows on three sides and only accommodated a single person. From its appearance, it resembled a cast iron telephone booth in the city street.

crowded. Without enough distance and partition of each telephone from the other, conversations on the phone were easily over-heard by other callers, or even by passers-by in the street. But this seemed not to matter for callers, some of whom even called through the loudspeaker. If they did feel frustrated, that was not for worries about privacy, but because the voices from others often distracted their hearing on the phone. As a result, rather than trying to lower their own voice to avoid being over-heard, every caller tended to raise their voice in order to overwhelm the surrounding noises.

Just as individual callers could not be cut off from others, it was equally difficult to separate making a phone call from other activities in the shop. The attached services could be one source of distraction, but another important reason was that the calling business was more or less intertwined with the household life of those who ran the business, because the shop floor was at the same time used by the owners as the front room of their residence, and separated by only a door or a curtain, was the inner dwelling space of the household. While the business was running, the holder would not only sit at the corner and collect money according to the meter reading, but more often some light household chores, like knitting, cooking preparing, or baby sitting would also be ongoing. Equally important, people did not come to the shop merely to make a call. They might also come to meet and chat with acquaintances. Food and drinks could be brought in, even card playing was allowed. It was exactly in the midst of all these relevant or irrelevant happenings that phone calls were started, interrupted, sustained, and hung up.

One could certainly see such spatial arrangements as a result of the lack of financial investment in the business. But their influences on people's calling activities were beyond the economic concern. In such spatial arrangements, callings were commonly integrated in, rather than separated from the surroundings. The tension between the private and the public was not resolved by enclosing the private into a distinct box out of the public, but by constant movements across the boundaries between them. To some extent, by making a public call in the shop, one might unconsciously enter others' private space and meanwhile open his/her private space to others. Here, we find a different geographical dynamics underlying calling practices. The telephone line did not merely facilitate connections between two individuals on both ends of the line, but more essentially mediated the dialogue between two distant places. Without uprooting individual callers from the physical and social contexts of the calling activities, the telephone line was not intended to cut off the caller out of 'here' in order to reach 'there', but to stretch 'here' to 'there' and link them together.

In the case of migrants, the ‘here’/‘there’ metaphor usually refers to the relationships between their settlement in the host societies and their original homeland, for rural migrants, the city and the home village. In accordance with the emphasis on the constitutive role of the ‘original place’ in the self-identification of migratory subjects, the observation into telephone use among migratory communities always tends to focus on the long-distance calls made by migrants, which are essential for them to keep contact with the homeland, as well as the original social relationships dispersed around the world (Margolis, 1994, Rouse, 2002). Comparatively, the functions of their telephone consumption in making place and making home in the new settlement are more or less undermined. In my study, long-distance calls certainly played a significant role in the public telephone consumption of the rural migrants in the urban villages, a considerable proportion of which were indeed taken up by calls back to the home villages. But what was further suggested by my observation and interviews in the field was that the facilities of public calling in the urban villages were equally exploited by rural migrants as a tool in their place-making practices in their urban settlement. First, parallel to the calls back to home villages, still a substantial amount of calls were oriented to their daily life in the city. They were calls made in response to job and business opportunities, or to weave a social network in the new environment, or in search of help in difficulties. Second, except for those generated by emergency, calls back to home villages tended to be undertaken in a routinised way, the periodicity of which varied from person to person, household to household. Calling back to home villages nearly every day were the unmarried singles (especially the new arrivals), or parents who left their offspring in the villages. They tended to choose a relatively fixed time each day to make the call. These were not only the moments convenient for the receivers, but also the selected moments in the callers’ daily routine, such as the time arriving home from work, the time after dinner, during the trip to fetch boiled water, or intervals in the street business. For those who had all their immediate family members living together in the urban villages, calls to the elders or relatives left in the home villages were usually arranged weekly or monthly. 51-year-old Fu Shifu had been living in Gaowang village for 8 years. Public calls were the principal way for her to keep in contact with her parents and her sisters who were staying in her home village. She told me: ‘I try to call them at least once a month. When I call them, I do not necessarily have much to say, little more than greeting. But I still remind myself to call them regularly. It has become a kind of habit and it makes me feel comfortable.’ Of course, no calls were more crucial than the calls made on the occasion of the big annual festivals, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival or the Spring Festival, if home return could not be

arranged at that moment.<sup>65</sup> In this case, festival greetings through the phone line became an alternative way for the callers to celebrate the festival in the city. In whatever periodicity, the routinisation of the calling back to the home villages did not only enable the rural migrants to keep in touch with their home villages, but also marked certain rhythms of the life in their urban settlement.

Finally, there was a strong interplaying relationship between the maintaining of distant networks and the construction of proximate social ties through public telephone consumption. One scene in the field demonstrated such co-existence of 'here' and 'there' in a very striking way. 33-year-old Xiao Guo and her husband had been running a bakery in the main street for 6 years. But her 10-year-old daughter was still left in the home village in Hunan, cared for by her aunt and uncle. Xiao Guo's life in the urban villages was fully occupied by business, not only baking to supply restaurants and market food stalls outside the urban villages, but also keeping a stall in the street selling her own products. The way she kept ties with her daughter was to manage to talk to her via phone every day. Their conversations normally started at around seven o'clock, the time after her daughter's dinner. In order to spend every minute on work, Xiao Guo never left her bakery stall to use a public telephone. Instead, she moved a telephone from the corner shop next door to her stall, with whom she had a good neighbour relationship, and put it on her knead board. Also to save her hand from holding the handset, she switched on the loudspeaker button before she dialled. The conversation on the phone was then undertaken while Xiao Guo continued the work in hand. The loudspeaker meanwhile allowed the talk between the mother and the daughter to be heard and occasionally joined by the father, who was also working alongside. In a sense, the telephone on the knead board represented the absent daughter in the presence of the family talk. The contents of the talk could cover a whole range of topics, from study progress to life details, such as teaching the girl to use face wash, or reminding her to wear different clothes as the seasons changed. For years, this had become a particular way of parenting in the case of physical separation for this family. Partly involved in their family talk were the neighbours living around and the customers who visited their stall during that time. While chatting with her daughter, Xiao Guo would keep contact with her customers with her expressions, sometimes ceasing the talk on the phone for a while to serve them. Once the phone was hung up, Xiao Guo was always eager to share some of the information from the call with her neighbours or with the acquaintances who happened visited her stall, one of whom could be me.

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<sup>65</sup> More details about their Spring Festival celebrations are going to be revealed in another chapter.





*Photo 4.4. The interior of a telephone supermarket.*



*Photo 4.5. Tarry awhile: a street scene in Gaowang.*

From Xiao Guo's calling experiences, I vividly witnessed how 'here' and 'there' could be harmoniously integrated together through the phone line. The mother's calls to her distant daughter did not uproot her out of the present place, but further rooted her life in the place she was dwelling and working in. It seemed to me that the better she maintained the ties with her relationships at a distance, the deeper she grounded her life into the neighbourhood, and the stronger she felt at home in the settlement away from her original place.

## **Dwelling in the street**

Given the general significance of the street to all the residents, no one found their life bonded with the street more tightly than the households who lived on street businesses, for the street was both their workplace and their life world. Like many other urban villages, the street landscape in Gaowang and Wujiawan distinguished itself from the main streets in the city in its spatial combination between commerce and residence, which had comprehensive impacts on the dynamics of the street life in the place.

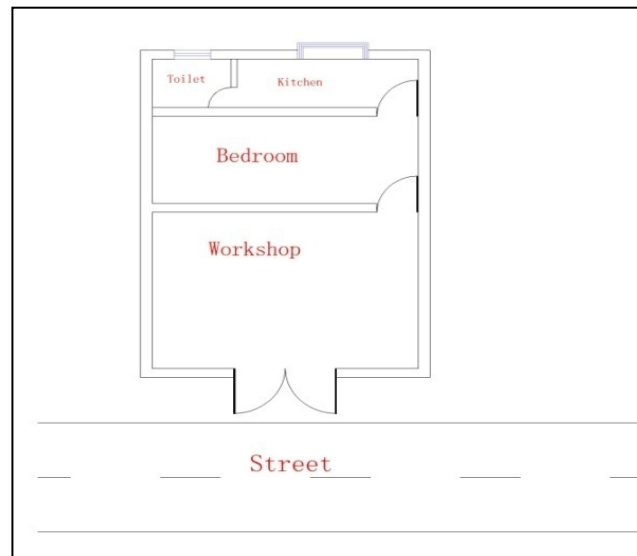
This combination was embodied in a unique housing form along the street sides, called 'street houses' (*pumain*), which was distinct from those off the street.<sup>66</sup> In fact, this had historically been the principal housing form on the main streets in many Chinese cities (Wang, 2003). Under attack on the corridor streets in contemporary urbanisation, it retreated from the main urban streets but survived in the urban village streets, much simpler and cruder in design and construction though. As illustrated in Figure 4.1 and 4.2, the street house was normally located on the ground floor of a two or three-story building oriented towards the street. In its complete form, the house was composed of a front room directly facing the street, an inner room next to it used as a bedroom, and a space for the kitchen and toilet connected with bedroom. Very often, there was not a separate room for the bedroom, in which case, sleep was arranged in a self-built loft, or in a corner of the front room only partitioned by a curtain at sleeping time. Similarly, the kitchen could be set in a shelter at the corner of the door, while the toilet could be located behind the building and shared by many households.

The front room was not only the biggest space in the house but also carried the most important function in the household. On the one hand, it was used as the shop floor to run the business and was open to the public. Therefore, its spatial arrangements were primarily

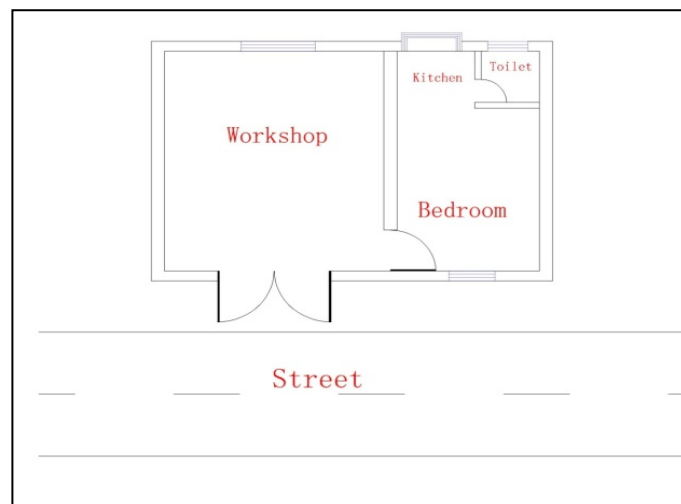
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<sup>66</sup> The latter will be the topic of the next chapter.

subject to the services of different businesses, be it a barbershop, a public telephone supermarket, a small restaurant, a repair shop, a grocery shop, and so on and so forth. At the same time, it functioned as a living room of the household who ran the business too, where family guests were received in the midst of customers, a dining table was set up in the middle during meal times, and a television placed at the corner and watched while the business was running.



**Figure 4.1.** *The floor plan of the street house (1)*



**Figure 4.2.** *The floor plan of the street house (2)*

*Source: The author's observation in the field.*

For the street business holders, the significance of the combined housing form between living and working was a key strategy for surviving in the place. The foremost benefit was

to reduce household rental expenditure. Given that the rent for street houses in the two urban villages was on average 40% higher than that of the off-street houses, it proved to be worthwhile if it actually covered both business and accommodation expenditures. The second benefit was the flexibility in time and labour shifts between different duties. The co-existence of working and living in the same space allowed the business to be undertaken parallel to household chores, one taking the turn during the interval of the other, which maximised the time and energy spent on business while ordinary life could still carry on. Of course, to get the benefits of this dwelling form, one could not expect to lead a life with clear separation between work and leisure, public and private. Rather, it was essential to develop a whole series of techniques to harmonise these two aspects, which would naturally influence the spatial arrangements and the time shifts of both business and family life. The outcomes varied from household to household depending on the businesses they were engaged in, the household structures and their life habits. For example, while it was easy for the public telephone site holder to deal with household chores, including child care, grocery processing, cooking and eating, during business hours, this seemed to be difficult for those who run barbershops, whose business was much more attention demanding. For the latter, they had to find times in the business intervals to finish housework and take turns to have meals. Similarly, while TV viewing was compatible with working in barbershops, grocery, and repairing shops, it had to be restricted in the public telephone sites, either by moving the set into the inner room or muting the volume whenever there were customers in the shop.

Not only had the life of those who lived in the street house been shaped by this dwelling form, what was further reshaped was the landscape of the public life in the street itself. If the boundaries between the public and the private in the street were conventionally defined by the facades along both roadsides, then these boundaries in the urban villages were largely disturbed by its street housing form. In turn, the street life unfolded a kind of liminality which could be observed on two levels: the indoor space of the front room in the street house and the outdoor space of the street.

As one of the elements in the architectural configuration of the street space, the consumption sites along the street always functioned as half public and half private, open to the public to negotiate the boundaries between the two domains. What one could see in the street of the urban villages was that both the tension and the flexibility of this negotiation had been intensified. As described before, the shop floor of every consumption site was at the same time the front room of the household who ran the business, which

carried many domestic functions and immediately led to the further inner quarter of the household. By entering a consumption site, one automatically more or less stepped into another's private domain. You might hear the housewife hairdresser scolding her child when you had your hair cut in a barbershop, come across a family meal when you ask for a repair in an electronic shop, or join the household in viewing a TV show when you did shopping in a grocery store. In whatever case, one was requested to constantly adjust the boundaries of the actions oriented by the situations. Being a consumer accordingly became far more than merely dealing with goods and services, but more crucially, knowing the place and people, because one's actions and roles in those street houses were both defined by and redefining the relationships between the shopper and the seller, the customer and the server, which furthermore, was related to the broader web of social relationships outside the house.

A second level of liminal space unfolded in the outdoor space of the street. Because the interior floor space of every street house had been extended outwards to the furthest extent, the distances between the doorways and the wayside had almost disappeared. The household could use the wayside as their own doorway and in turn, the passer-by could walk on the doorway of the street houses as the sidewalk. Such intimate relationship between street and the street houses inevitably changed the sense of being in the street. James Holston (1989) once evoked the concept of 'solid-void/figure-ground convention' of the street space to clarify different senses of being in the street. According to him, if the city street is analysed as the architectural configuration composed by an open space in the middle and the facades of the buildings on both sides, then our sense of being in the street is oriented with the different recognitions of the solid-void/figure-ground convention between the street and the facades. One of the distinctions between the street systems of the preindustrial city and those of the modernist city is their inverse orders of solids and voids. The former presents streets as figural spaces and buildings as continuous ground; while the latter, streets appear as continuous void and buildings as sculptural figures. When the street is perceived as the ground, it functions as a sheer void in separating buildings apart and allowing passages; when it is perceived as the figural, however, it reveals the character of the street as a semi-inner space walled by facades of the buildings (Holston, 1989: 119-127). In a sense, the street structure in the urban villages could be read as the revival of the preindustrial concept of the street in the heart of the modern city. Here, the street was no longer a void space merely for passage, but a room or an interior corridor clipped by the street houses from both sides. (*See Photo 4.5*) It took time for an observer like me, who had taken the conduct code in the urban main streets for granted, to

be accustomed to the way of being in the street in the urban villages. In the beginning, I felt very anxious about being detained right in the middle of the street and talking with people for a long time. This anxiety gradually subsided after I learned that the street space here was not only for motion but also for staying.

This spatiality was not simply created by the physical structure of the street, but more essentially formed by people's daily practices in the locale, which were characterised by constant movements between interior and exterior. On the one hand, there was a conceivable extent of privatisation of the public space with a range of domestic activities expanding onto the street, including cooking, washing, and entertaining. This externalising inclination was mostly manifested during Wuhan's summer time, when temperatures could often reach 40°C and rarely drop below 25°C. With the general lack of air-conditioning during such hot and humid weather, people were driven from rooms to the street, where an occasional breeze could bring some coolness. To defeat the heat, some households living across the street used a kind of dark plastic net to shade the street space, which literally made some parts of the street into an outdoor living room suitable for sitting, drinking, chatting, or playing cards or chess during the day time. On the other hand, this privatising process did not make the street space exclusive but more open and inclusive to the public. Every street dwelling household not only managed to create an inhabitable space in the street for themselves, but also showed evident responsibility in maintaining the street environment and had an impressive tolerance or even hospitality to outsiders. In order to attract and retain the potential customers, benches and stools were normally offered by street shops, which anybody could use; children were free to play in the street; passers-by were welcome to stand beside the street to watch television with the host families.

How then was the street maintained as a place of staying at night time? The night life of the urban street derives its special atmosphere from the light. Modern urban main streets have their night life co-dominated by two light systems: the street light supplied by the municipal government and the commercialised light from the shops, cafes and restaurants. The juxtaposition and interaction between these two light systems was addressed by Wolfgang Schivelbusch (2002) as one of the dynamics by which the night life of the modern city was constructed. He writes: 'commercial light is to police light what bourgeois society is to the state....public lighting creates the framework of security within which commercial lighting can unfold.' (p. 88) What distinguished the night life in the urban village street from that of the main streets in the city was the unrivalled dominance

of commercial lighting over the entire street space. As one of the manifestations of the marginality of the place in the city's public infrastructure system, there was absolutely no municipal-operated street lighting in Gaowang and Wujiawan.<sup>67</sup> In turn, the commercial light from the street houses became the only source of illumination in the public spaces, which otherwise would leave the night street in total darkness. As a result, when the curtain of night fell in the urban villages, the only outdoor place people tended to gather and felt safe was the parts of the streets lit by the lights from the shops and restaurants, while the narrow lanes without any commercial light were perceived as dangerous areas. What was meaningful here was the dual-duty carried by the commercial light in the urban villages, both as 'the framework of security' or 'the guardians of order', and as the source of 'festive illumination', which doubled the significance of the commercial light in shaping the night life in the place. As Schivelbusch argues, 'unlike police lighting, which is uniform and homogenous, commercial light is fed by heterogeneous sources.' (ibid.) Given the singular lighting structure in the urban village streets, the commercial light inevitably projected its heterogeneity onto the order of the street space as a whole. Considering that the commercial light from the street houses was simultaneously the light to attract potential customers and the light to structure the private night life of the street households, we can further understand this heterogeneity as connected with the diverse outcomes of the constant negotiations between the public and the private, the work and the leisure in different street households. Although it would be misleading to romanticise the dominance of the commercial light over the night life as the triumph of the local residential autonomy over the authorities, it is fair to argue that the absence of the public lighting system reflected the rupture of governmental control in the place, which at moments shifted the local power geometry. From my observation of the night patrols carried out by the community security team, one phenomenon which interested me was that, although it was acknowledged that the back lanes were most likely to be 'dens of iniquity', they turned out to be the least scrutinised places, for the night patrol team seldom went beyond the areas out of reach of the light from the street businesses. Even with torches in their hands, the team members were still reluctant to risk the darkness out of concern for their self-security. We can see from this example that even the route of the police patrol was unintentionally structured by the commercial light from the street houses.

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<sup>67</sup> In the seven urban villages in the Yaojialing area, it was only the main street in the centre of New Yaoling Village that had been covered by public street lighting, which was operated by the XinXin Group, the company converted from the original Village Committee of the Yaojialing Administrative Village, rather than the municipal department.



Besides the spatial structure, what was equally influenced by the street house dwelling form was the temporal rhythm of the street. Similar to the interweaving between the public and the private spaces, the work and leisure time was also largely blended in the street household life. Unlike the commercial sites in the main street, there was no particular opening and closing times in any of the commercial sites. Businesses normally started soon after getting up and remained open until bedtime without any intervals. Except for several days during the Spring Festival, there was no weekend or holiday closing time either. Without any unified and clearly defined timetable in operating the commercial sites, the street life in the urban villages demonstrated a strikingly different rhythm from that in the main urban street, where boundaries between opening and closing, bright and dark, bustle and calm were largely blurred, as if time in the street was somehow prolonged. Every morning, the appearance of the first breakfast stalls on the street corner could be as early as three to four o'clock to cater the earliest groups of local residents, especially those who engaged in the vegetable trade or the breakfast service in the city; around lunch and dinner were the peak times for boiled water service; every night from eight to ten was the busiest time for the barbershops; some little restaurants or food stalls had to keep their businesses open after the turn of the day to serve the last wave of customers coming home from their night duties; after their lights were turned off, the street would soon be lit by the breakfast stalls once again. Day in and day out, an ceaseless and rhythmic symphony was co-played out by different street households, making the street into a timeless space always open to the local public.

## **Street wisdom in the milieu of strangers**

While the city presents itself as a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet, the village is always perceived as a pastoralist land, where people are acquainted with each other and bonded as an intimate unit, or, in Xiaotong Fei's (1985) term, 'the society of acquaintances' (*shuren shehui*), a concept I used in the methodology chapter. From this dichotomous taxonomy, calling Gaowang and Wujiawan 'villages' seems problematic, for the place was characterised less by the ties of acquaintances than by a world of strangers.

To make sense of this world, one needs to differentiate strangers from strangers. According to Richard Sennett (1977), 'the stranger' can be a figure of two very different sorts: the stranger as the 'outsider' and as the 'unknown' (p. 48). Interestingly, the two perceptions of the stranger do not differ in the qualities of the stranger people encounter,



but lie in the ways that people recognise themselves. As he asserts, the stranger as the outsider 'appears in a landscape where people have enough sense of their own identities to form rules of who belongs and who does not'; while 'the stranger as an unknown can dominate, however, the perceptions of people who are unclear about their own identities, losing traditional images of themselves, or belonging to a new social group that as yet has no clear label.' (ibid.) In Sennett's idea, one of the typical milieux of strangers as unknown was 18<sup>th</sup> Century Paris and London, where with the rise of the bourgeoisie many people were increasingly like each other but didn't know each other, and thus lost the language in identifying 'us' and 'them', insider and outsider.

In the matter of rural migrants in China, their image is always associated with the figure of 'the stranger as the outsider' in the city when confronted by urbanity. Only this perception does not come from any ethnic or racial differences between them, but is defined by the social constructed divisions between the rural and the urban and the population control through the *hukou* system. However, in the realm of rural migrant settlements like the urban villages, the figure of 'the stranger as unknown' emerges and becomes the dominant perception of the people in the place. There are numerous reasons underpinning this perception. First, no matter how long they have been living and working in the city, the social identity of the rural migrants has not been equally accepted as urbanity. Neither do they identify themselves with any new labels fabricated by the official discourses, whether 'the floating population' or 'the peasants labour'. Second, unlike some migrant settlements, like Zhejiangcun or Henancun, where the majority of the migrant residents share common rural origins, urban villages like Gaowang and Wujiawan are inhabited by migrants from various rural origins. They share the same ethnic and cultural identity, as well as the rural status, but are distinct from each other in accent, food habit, and some customs. 'Materially alike but not cognizant of their similarity' (Sennett, 1977: 49), such paradox between distance and nearness leads to the unease in placing others into any existing social terms. When both 'self' and 'others' become unclassifiable, one would find him/herself staying in the milieu of many unknown strangers. In the milieu of strangers as outsiders, strangers are those to be excluded by insiders, unless they can cross the barriers and mark him/herself credible on the terms used by those inside. Whereas in the milieu of strangers as unknown, there is no place to put strangers outside, because no one can easily claim him/herself as the insider, thus people are forced to live and play with strangers. It is this place-specific perspective on 'the stranger' that underpins the public geography of the street life in the urban villages.

The street space is crucial for strangers because it is ‘the customary arena of the public display and transactions of crowds’ (Holston, 1989: 107), wherein strangers can encounter, interact, and support each other without any vested relationships, but simply as crowds. (Vidler, 2001, see in Mitchell, 2003: 3). In the traditional norm of social order in China, ‘crowd gathering’ (*juzhong*) is always connected with ‘trouble making’ (*zishi*) and conceived as the resource of disorder (*luan*). This conception has not fundamentally changed in the modern age, when the street crowd still tends to be associated with violence, riot or danger (Bon, 1896). In the milieu of stranger like the urban villages, however, the foremost wisdom of street life is to know and play with crowd gatherings. In terms of formation dynamics, two kinds of crowd gatherings could be seen in the urban village street. The first was crowds generated by affairs. In Chinese, it is called *kan renao* (watching the scene of bustle). One such scene I witnessed in the field was demonstrated during a funeral performance for their dead mother held in their front yard by an indigenous household.<sup>68</sup> Besides the family members and invited guests of the host household, it was striking to find that most of the audience that crowded in the yard and on the street corner were migrant residents who came without any invitation. Their presence was certainly not for the funeral, but for the entertainment provided by the program. In contrast to the atmosphere of mourning in the host household, the audience was in great delight and amusement. Even the memorial services enacted by the mourners, like collective bowings and paying tribute to the altar of the dead, had become another part of the performance watched by the crowd.

Equally attractive for crowd gatherings were some scenes of conflict. During my fieldwork, it was not rare for the armed police to enter the two urban villages, whether to arrest crime suspects or to crack down on illegal gambling sites. Every time, the site of the action was blocked by a crowd of people who gathered together from every corner and eagerly watched what was happening. Even after the police left, the crowd would still stay in the street for a long time, continuing their talk about what had happened. Similarly, when officials from the Community Committee appeared in the neighbourhood to conduct inspections or solve problems with some residents, they were always surrounded by a

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<sup>68</sup> It has long been a tradition for Chinese households to hire a commercial crew and hold a performance at home on the last night, sometimes overnight, before the funeral of their dead family members. As an important element in the death ritual, the performance is intended to celebrate the lives of the dead, as well as to entertain the alive who take part in the funeral. Parallel with mourning as the core theme throughout the performance, amusements are equally presented, such as pop songs and comic sketches. To promote effects, the performance is normally open to the nearby neighbourhood. Nowadays, such customs are mainly preserved in rural areas. Urban villages are the rare areas in the city where customs like this are still preserved.

group of onlookers. If any dispute arose in the process, the onlookers would immediately grow into a crowd.

The other kind of crowd gatherings was defined by locations. There were crowds gatherings regularly displayed at selected points of the street corners, especially in several street intersections. Those locations were not only the busiest thoroughfares, but also with various life amenities around, like boiled water rooms, little restaurants, food stalls or public telephone sites, where multiple activities in people's daily life took place. Bigger or smaller, in the forest of concrete buildings, these locations more or less functioned as a tiny square in the neighbourhood, which allowed passing but were also suitable for loitering and gathering. The unique terrain also made them into a kind of resort where people could enjoy plenty of sunshine in winter and a gentle breeze in summer. The scope of one location could range from the doorways of the nearby shops to the middle of the street pavement, which allowed crowds to grow, stay and disperse easily.

The crowds in different locations varied in scale, rhythm and composition. For example, every morning, a group of people gathered outside Lu Shifu's repair stall (*See Photo 4.6*), mainly constituted of women from nearby households who had an entire morning to kill after their husbands had gone out to work. If the weather was good, there would regularly be one or two dozen of them sitting there for the whole morning, doing knitting, vegetable preparation, baby caring or simply chatting. Sometimes they were also joined by those who had just had their breakfast in the street, or those who came to the stall for repairs. Near noon time, this crowd would disperse, for it was the time for those women to cook lunch for their families. Meanwhile, another crowd formed in the location some 50 meters away in front of landlord Yu Shifu's corner shop. These were the residents who had just returned home from their workplaces for lunch. People came here to fetch boiled water, to buy lunch in the food stalls. Many of them also stayed in the street corner to finish their lunch and to talk in groups. In the evening, the crowd reappeared in front of Lu Shifu's repair stall but its main characters changed. While most women stayed at home at this time, men, after a whole day work outside, gathered here, smoking, talking or playing cards until late at night. Next day, all this would occur again, as long as the weather allowed. By contrast to the conventional image of crowd gathering as a trigger of impulsiveness and danger, this kind of crowd gathering pertains to stability and routinisation.



**Photo 4.6.** *The gathering location before Lu Shifu's repair stall.*

Being actively engaged in crowd living did not necessarily reduce the anxiety in the company of strangers. How deeply should one become involved in an unknown happening in the street? How far can the benches in a shop be taken and used? How close can a passer-by approach the TV set playing in the corner shop? To what extent can one trust his/her neighbours? The challenge in the milieu of 'the stranger of unknown' is that no one is really sure about what are the appropriate standards of behaviour in a given situation, therefore they have to create, borrow, or imitate behaviour which all agree to treat as 'proper' in their encounters. This leads us to another wisdom of street life, the spirit of sociability which transforms the street into a theatre, man into an actor, wherein everyone plays a role in the public, which is not necessarily identical with their personalities (Sennett, 1977). One example from my observation could illustrate such disjunction between the public role and personality in the two urban villages. When I initially approached my informants, I followed what I knew to be basic etiquette: I introduced myself by my family name and asked theirs. But after a period of time, I became puzzled by the fact that people often could not recognise whom I was talking about if I only spoke of someone by his/her family name. Then, by observing the communication between them, I realised that people were rarely addressed by their names. Rather, they were addressed by the title of their public roles, the characters they displayed in the public. For those who ran businesses, they were likely to be addressed by the terms of their products and services, be they 'Mahua' (the fried dough twist), 'Tangyuan' (the dumpling made from glutinous

rice flour), ‘*Shaobing*’ (sesame seed cake), or ‘*Pijiang*’ (cobbler). Parents were likely to be called after the infant names their children were called in the public, such as ‘Wenwen’s Mum’ or ‘Xinxin’s Dad’. Similarly, few tenants knew the names of their landlords or landladies, but generally called them ‘*laoban*’ (boss). While these public titles were widely used in daily communication, people’s real names seemed not matter. This unique way of identifying and of being identified suggested that a sense of distance was deliberately preserved in people’s social interaction, no matter how close and familiar they were getting along with each other. Despite the openness in engaging and dealing with strangers, there seemed not much temptation to grasp other’s personality and figure out who they were. In other words, the strangeness was not anything to diminish, but something to play with.

What really matters in this play was more about how ‘self’ was re-settled than about how the concept of ‘others’ was placed. 61-year-old Lu Shifu could not be considered as an old face in the street. By the time I started my fieldwork, he had only lived in Gaowang for three years, much shorter than many of his neighbours. After his wife found a job and moved to another city, he actually continued to live here on his own, sheltering in a shabby little hut beside the street and depending solely on his simple repairing business. But in his neighbourhood, Lu Shifu was really a classic example of being streetwise. As a result of his reliable personality and easy-going character, his repair stall had become one of the most popular gathering sites in the street, both for adults and for children, men and women. Such good neighbourhood relationships did not only ensure a steady customer flow for Lu Shifu’s repairing business, but also provided him with a warm and harmonious sense of settlement in the neighbourhood, which could have otherwise been very lonely and uneasy for a person in his situation.

Lu Shifu’s success did not come from any privileged status or social resources, but from his wisdom and active efforts in managing relationships with strangers. To capture a locational advantage for his business, Lu Shifu had chosen the busiest part of the street as his dwelling and working site, where people living around were truly strangers for him in terms of regional origin, accent, and life. Without any personal ties with his neighbours, Lu Shifu creatively adopted various measures to develop his social network. For example, he bought himself a second-hand TV set which was the biggest and best in the nearby neighbourhood and invited neighbours to watch together with him.<sup>69</sup> He also subscribed to a local newspaper and allowed it to be passed around in the neighbourhood. Many

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<sup>69</sup> This will be discussed in more details in Chapter 6.

common topics between Lu Shifu and his neighbours actually emerged from their shared reading. When he returned to his rural home for the Spring Festival, he even left the key with one of his Henan neighbours and allowed them to watch his TV when he was absent. In return, the neighbour promised to take care of his hut when it was empty. However, all these were only one aspect of his attitude. On the other side, Lu Shifu was always conscious about his distance from those neighbours. During interview, he confessed: 'All I do is what one has to do if he wants to survive in this place. It doesn't mean I want to have any intimate relationship with them. They are still strangers for me.' My observations did confirm that, however openly and friendly Lu Shifu dealt with his neighbours, he tried to keep his communication with them as public as he could. He accepted food occasionally offered by neighbours, but never entered other's home to share meals with them. He opened his door and allowed others to watch his TV, but never stayed at home with any of his neighbours with the door closed. Again, none of his neighbours knew his family name. He preferred being addressed as 'Pijiang' (cobbler). In other words, his active engagements with strangers were only aimed to define and enact his public role, not necessarily pointed to his own personalities. From this perspective, the core of Lu Shifu's street wisdom in the milieu of strangers was the understanding of how to settle 'self' through the characterisation in public, while showing less obsession in seeking a 'real' self through creating and exposing his intimate and private world, nor in entering that of others.

To dig deeper social implications of Lu Shifu's behaviours, we need to go back to Sennett's theory. Sennett's (1977) true worry about the fall of the public life in the modern city exists in the danger of 'the tyrannies of intimacy'. He argues: 'the belief in direct human relations on an intimate scale has seduced us from converting our understanding of the realities of power into guides for our own political behaviour. The result is that the forces of domination or inequity remain unchallenged.' (p. 339) In urban villages, people's passion in crowd living and their active engagements with strangers were far beyond a hunger for intimacy or a desire for bonded community. More precisely, their behaviours conveyed a caution of the limitations of the private world and the recognition of the negotiating and empowering space hidden in the public life. There were many moments in my engagements with the migrant informants when I was impressed by their agency in developing and employing the public network with strangers as a lever to poise the relationships in the intimate sphere. One tactic was fluently exercised by many female informants. When discords arose between husband and wife, the woman was inclined to go to the street and deliberately engage with the crowd whom she was acquainted with. When her husband approached, she would use the engagements in the collective activities

to ignore and embarrass him. During the process she could clearly sense the support from people around her, even though they did not have a very tight relationship with her. Maybe this could explain why women were playing an equally main role in the street crowds as men in my observations, which formed a contrast to the impression of men's unchallenged dominance in the street life once presented by many previous studies (Liebow, 1967, Hannerz, 1969, Young, 2003).

In this chapter, I attempt to embark on my exploration of the cultural landscape of the two urban villages by entering the street and street life in the locality, which I believe opens up a portal to the outsider to capture the vitality and particularity of the place. Like many marginal groups in modern urban settings, Chinese rural migrants in the urban villages equally demonstrate a conceivable street inclination in their urban settlement practices. But in interpreting this inclination, my observation posts a counter argument towards the concept of 'anomic street culture' presented in the conventional theorisations, which tend to essentialise the street inclination as a fixed property of the subculture for the weak and associate their street life with anomie, rootlessness and the danger of violence. Rather, I understand the rural migrants' street life in the urban villages as a particularly power platform to bring multiple social actors together, whereby a dynamic place-making process is materialised through their everyday encounters in the public space.

First, I reason the formation of the street landscape in the urban villages as the outcome of the interaction between structural power and individual agency. On the one side, the urban village street and people's way of life in the street reflect the marginality of the place in the city, due to the lag in infrastructure construction and public services from municipal investments, the administrative oversight of local government, and the economic poverty and social disadvantages of the community. But on the other side, this marginal position also implies a regulatory rupture wherein a spontaneous process of street making can be deployed.

Second, in opposition to anomie, rootlessness and danger of violence, the snapshots presented in this chapter present a vibrant and resourceful lifeworld in the crowded and seemingly chaotic street space. People's public interactions in the street are not opposed but constitutive to the routinisation and familiarity of their daily life, many even permeate

their domestic sphere, which essentially contribute to a sense of home and a sense of grounding in the place.

Third, the shifting landscape of the street proves the power of everyday consumption of migratory subjects in re-making the locality in their urban settlement. The example of the boiled water room and the public telephone sites has demonstrated that in the heart of the street and place making dynamics is the rural migrants' creativity in re-contextualising and re-appropriating the existing life services or commodities to their routine life in the urban villages.

Fourth, standing in the centre of a modernising city, which ideologically gives absolute priority to speed and control, the street landscape in the urban villages looks like a flashback to the corridor street in the pre-industrial or early modern cities, characterised by its less programmed spatial divisions and arrangements, integration of a wide range of social activities, lack of overriding control by the authority and relatively equal accessibility to all local residents. In short, it restores street space from an area to move through to an area to be in, from a realm of order to a realm of life, which challenges the one-dimensional construction of street space in the modernist version of city.

Finally, the street landscape in the urban villages once again demonstrates the empowering potential of public space for the urban subaltern. But this empowering force does not have to be derived from political rituals and events, such as street riots, demonstrations, protestations, parade, or carnivals, that have been frequently addressed in the existed researches (i.e. Jackson, 1988, Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1990, Jackson, 1992, Busteed, 2005). More sporadically and tenaciously, it enables a space for the rural migratory subjects to negotiate, manipulate and subvert various hegemonic discourses on street life through dwelling, walking, gathering, and consuming, which highlights the essential spirit of public space in the modern city. As Deutsche (1998) writes in her book:

*Public space is the social space where, in the absence of a foundation, the meaning and unity of the social is negotiated – at once constituted and put at risk. What is recognised in public space is the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate.* (p. 273)



## Chapter 5

# Co-inhabitation and Transformation: Knowing the locality through Housing

The most essential component of human settlement is housing, not only because it provides us with a material shelter, but also because it functions as a key site ‘where symbolic relations are encoded in the everyday life and naturalised as physical patterns of behaviour’ (Bray, 1997:57), whereby what Bourdieu (1977, 1990) calls *habitus* is nurtured and inculcated. As an ethnographic field worker, I was able to experience this first hand through my own settlement in the two urban villages.

My formal fieldwork started with house hunting. I spent three days searching the street ads pasted on telegraph poles, meeting local owners, and viewing a great variety of properties. My first room was good in location, but after only two days, I had to move out for the fleas in the room made for sleepless nights. When I was worried about where else I could move to, by chance I met Zhang Shifu, a Songzi migrant whom I had known for years for he ran a bicycle repairing stall in front of my apartment. He introduced me to his landlord Qiang, who owned a house compound in Gaowang. Fortunately, Qiang happened to have a single room available for renting. I rented the room immediately without any hesitation, not only because I was generally satisfied with the condition and price, but also, living with someone that I was familiar with in the same compound made me feel more settled. This proved to be a decisive step for my work. As soon as I moved in, my rented room automatically formed a connection between me and the place. The room did not exist as an external object, but became part of me. No matter who I was before or how long I would stay, the room changed part of my identity into a tenant of my landlord, a resident of Gaowang, and a neighbour for those who lived next door. The room I lived in also defined the way of my life and work in the field. Because the toilet and sink were outdoors and shared among many households, I had to learn how to conduct part of my private life in public. Almost involuntarily, I tended to use the area in the common balcony immediately connected to my doorway as my extended living space, as all my neighbours did in their daily life. My relationship with the landlord was not stipulated in any

commercial contract, but formulated through the constant encounters between us, and was re-enforced by the fact that my landlord's family was actually living in the same compound opposite my room. In my six-month living experience in the field, the rented room embodied a particular dwelling form, a space-time structure, and a conjunction of social relations, which subtly programmed my daily activities. But at the same time, it was through dwelling, using and moving around the room that I came to know the place and the people around me and tried to make myself part of them (even just for a limited period). Of course, my personal experience was by no means identical with that of my rural migrant neighbours. But that experience led me to examine their housing experiences as both a product and a producer of the place and social relationships in the locale, understanding people's housing practices not only as discursively structured but also as practically experienced in everyday life.

Like many ethnographers, my interest in housing also stems from its intricate association with the idea of 'home', which is deeply embedded in many cultures. For example, as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, English case law declared: 'The house of everyman is to him as his castle and fortress' (Rykwert, 1991: 58, cited in: Mallett, 2004: 65). In China, 'home', 'house', and 'family' share the same term *jia* (家), expressing the close relationship between the living space and the social belonging of its occupiers. A conflation between the two terms is further consolidated in modern societies, including contemporary China, through the promotion of 'home' ownership by states (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998, Fraser, 2000, Fleischer, 2007). No one can deny these associations, but a fully conflated understanding of these two terms could be risky. Following recent criticisms (Somerville, 1992, Wardhaugh, 1999), I read housing and home-making as two interplaying but not conflating processes. People's sense of home is not limited to or sufficed by their house tenure or ownership, in turn, housing practices do not necessarily end up with a full identification or definite claim of the living space as home, if home means a certain extent of belonging or a sense of centring. To what extent and how the two processes interact with each other is not an unproblematic or universal matter, but deserves close examination based on the particular social context.

Academic inquiry about the housing problem of rural migrant settlement in developing societies has been dominated by the concept of 'self-help building', which emphasises the agency of migrants themselves in informally solving their housing problem outside the formal housing provision system controlled by the authorities (Turner, 1976, Ward, 1976).

This self-help model is not non-existent in Chinese cities.<sup>70</sup> But considering the social backgrounds I detailed in the former chapter, the principal body of the informal housing available for rural migrants in Chinese cities is constructed by indigenous residents in urban villages who have the access to land and offered through private housing rentals. What is more, in the case of urban villages like Gaowang and Wujiawan, the growth of the informal renting market oriented to rural migrants is parallel to the continuous inhabitancy of most of the indigenous owners in the same neighbourhood. All these specificities implicate that a unique housing landscape would unfold in the two urban villages, which differ from other rural migrant settlement sites, physically and socially. In this chapter, I am going to depict two aspects of this landscape: the tenancy relationship, and the transformation of dwelling forms and neighbourhood life.

### ***Laoban* (boss)**

The dominance of private built and rented houses in Gaowang and Wujiawan underlines the significance of the relationships between owners and renters in the local dwelling experience. Renting a room in the two villages was not the first time for me to deal with landlords, but a very normal term in people's language reminded me that the tenancy relationship in this place might be different from what I had experienced before. In Chinese, the direct translation of the word 'landlord' or 'landlady' in Chinese is *fangdong* (the owner of the house one lives in)<sup>71</sup>, which is now commonly used between urban owners and renters. But in the urban villages like Gaowang and Wujiawan, the indigenous owners are addressed by the migrant tenants in another term: *laoban*, which generally means the boss, manager or patron of a business, such as a shopkeeper or a factory boss. Although *laoban* has a meaning equivalent to '*fangdong*', when one's business is in particular dealing with housing renting or accommodation service, it conveys something more than '*fangdong*'.

In the first place, the distinction of addressing reflected the historical and social context where the private renting market in urban villages was nurtured, which was different from that in the rest of the city. As part of the business vocabulary traditionally existing in Chinese society, both *fangdong* (landlord) and *laoban* (boss) were abandoned under Mao's

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<sup>70</sup> For example, migrants from Wenzhou built their own housing compounds in Beijing Zhejiang village in the 1990s, which were even guarded by hired guards. This form of housing posted a serious threat to the authority of the local government and resulted in official demolition in the mid-1990s. See Xiang, 1993, 2005 and Zhang, 2001.

<sup>71</sup> In Chinese tradition, *dong* (东) (east) is the position for the host and *xi* (西) (west) is for the guest.

regime for their connotations with capitalism and exploitation. Under the revolutionary ideology, every form of private ownership should be eliminated and properties of the whole society should be owned by the state, or to put it more ideologically, by the whole people. Similarly, everyone was supposed to be employed by the state work unit that was managed by the leaders (*lingdao*) or the cadre (*ganbu*) designated by the government. The launch of the economic reform of the late 1970s brought '*laoban*' back to the everyday language with the rise of the private enterprises from the monolithic block of the command system. The new *laobans* were the daring pioneers who departed from the work unit system and had a shot at running their own businesses. The political significance of this term lies in its representation of 'an agent of market and capital who is no longer entirely generated by the genetic codes of the state and the habitus of socialist practices' (Liu, 2002: 44), which lent the term a certain extent of rebellious quality. Among this group of tide riders were the leading group of private renters from the indigenous residents in urban villages, who used their privately owned housing to accommodate the initial influx of rural migrants who were barred outside the state's urban housing provision system. When this marginal business started to boom in the urban villages in the 1980s and early 1990s, the term *fangdong* (landlord) had not yet returned to everyday Chinese language usage, because most urbanites were still living in the public housing owned by the government or work units. Private house renting was not officially legitimised until the announcement of the first regulation, *the Regulation of Public Security Management of Housing Renting*<sup>72</sup> on 6 March 1995. It took another four years for the state to officially terminate the welfare housing provision and replace it with the market housing system, which then gave a rebirth to the formal renting business and a private *fangdong* group in the urban settings (Lu and Shao, 2001: 192, Wu, 2002: 95). Therefore, the two terms recorded two historical contexts in the trajectory of the housing reform in contemporary China. Whilst the epithet *fangdong* represents an entitlement of the owner of a legitimised private renting business, *laoban*, on the other hand is used to address a business leader, such as a private entrepreneur who is trailblazing a new way of making money in a tacitly allowed, yet still officially illegal, or grey area under the dominant power structures.

Actually, this ambiguity between the legal and the illegal is the key to understanding the ecology of the housing rental market in the urban villages. In contrast to the informal housing system in squatter settlements that are obviously built and occupied illegally, housing in Chinese urban villages presents a legal status in terms of the home-ownership possessed by the local residents and the tenancy between the local and the migrants. But

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<sup>72</sup> Order No. 24 of the Ministry of Public Security.

the local rental business equally confronts the risks of illegality defined by bureaucratic measures. Needless to say the most risky period was the early 1980s, when private renting was still suppressed as 'the tail of capitalism'. As some indigenous residents recalled, the problem facing the initial group of owners was not how to develop or expand but how to hide their rental business. Even after the regulation was loosened, the legitimacy of private renting in the urban villages could still fall foul of the authorities in two different ways. First, housing legally owned by the local residents could become illegal due to the process of extension and alteration without official permission, or because of sub-standard construction. In fact, housing construction and extension in the two urban villages were overwhelmingly undertaken by the owner household without the assistance of any professional institutions. To earn a quick return on their limited investment, few owners were willing to meet the professional standards formulated by the authorities or bear the heavy expenses required by the approval procedures.<sup>73</sup> Second, since the target of private renting in the urban villages were rural migrants, who were officially defined as floating outsiders of the city, the legality of this business was accordingly subject to public security regulations relating to the floating population. To comply with the then current rules, the owner should only rent property to the 'temporary population' who had legitimate temporary resident qualifications. In addition, the owner should also register with the local police station and sign a public security guarantee to obtain an official permit to rent. The property owner was, in accordance with the terms of the guarantee, subject to a whole series of regulations designed to implement various policing measures relating to the 'temporary population'. These included ensuring the 'temporary population' apply for any necessary temporary certificates, accurate reporting of the tenant's personal details to the local police station, and prompt reporting of any suspected criminal activities on the part of their tenants. Any failure in these duties was punishable with a heavy fine and confiscation of the relevant rental income.<sup>74</sup> These measures could be implemented in a rather violent way including the demolition of the illegal private housing construction and punishment of the private owners who offered accommodation to the 'rural floaters'

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<sup>73</sup> According to the current management system of individual housing construction in China, two permits are required for any construction project: land use permit and construction project planning permit. To apply for permits, one has to submit a professional design and the legitimate qualification of the construction organisation. Applications are jointly examined and approved by several bureaux in accordance with complex standards, ranging from city land planning, floor plan limitation, fire prevention, environmental protection and other technical standards. The minimum expenses involve survey and drawing fee, municipal infrastructure access fee (80 RMB/M<sup>2</sup>), tenure registration fee, certificate stamp tax, etc.

<sup>74</sup> According to *the Regulation of Public Security Management of Housing Renting*. Order No. 24 of the Ministry of Public Security. 6 March, 1995.

without official registrations. These actions frequently featured in the clearance raids towards the floating population launched by the authorities.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to its distinct political implications, the term of address '*laoban*' (boss) also delivered a unique tenancy relationship in the urban villages that '*fangdong*' (landlord) can not. The two terms differ not simply in their literal difference: a landlord only owned the property and had the right to rent it, a boss took charge over others by virtue of owning or other privileges. More significantly, the everyday usage of *laoban* in China may go beyond the literal meanings of *boss* in the West. The character *lao* in Chinese means not only 'old', but also 'superior'. In accordance with Confucian tradition, very often, *laoban* is regarded not only as an employer or manager but also as a master, whom others should respect and obey as his servants. In a business company, as Xin Liu observed, the *laoban* who takes a higher management position is also respected as a character who possesses more wisdom and stronger abilities, so that 'many employees took their *laoban* as no less than a symbolic father... the appearance of the *laoban* would stir a feeling of nervousness if not fear.' (Liu, 2002: 43) During recent years, this usage has even spread into many non-business spheres, and is equally aimed at strengthening the hierarchical relationship between the superior and the inferior. For example, the head of a governmental organisation might sometimes be addressed by the subordinate staff as *laoban*, as also might a supervisor by research students in academic institutions. Interestingly, this hierarchically constructed interaction does not necessarily lead to estrangement between the superior and the inferior. Quite the opposite, it is likely to bond the two groups more tightly as a kind of quasi-familial relationship. Unlike a manager or a leader, a *laoban* either is or acts as the head of a household, who has right, as well as responsibility, to go beyond the commercial or market codes, dealing with the business as family affairs and treating the employees or subordinates as family members. This position is also indicated by the special significance of the *laoban niang* (boss's wife) to the everyday operation of entrepreneurial firms or other businesses (Hamilton, 2006: 192).

Then, why did such both hierarchical and communal relationships become the feature of the tenancy relationship between indigenous owners and their rural migrant renters in the urban villages? First, the absence of institutional intervention in housing construction and public services in the place forces the indigenous owners to take many responsibilities that

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<sup>75</sup> For example, an internal file of the Public Security Bureau of the Wuchang District recorded that, in the clearance raid in the Shuiguohu area from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1999, 87 'outside floaters' were detained and 36 private owners were punished.

ordinary landlords or landladies do not. In urban communities, these affairs are usually taken care of either by the rear-service department of every work unit, or by the municipal public service departments and utility firms, or, alternatively, in the case of the commercial residential estates, by commercial professional estate management companies retained by the owners. None of these agents has been introduced into the urban villages. Not only do the indigenous owners have to seek funds, design floor plans, and hire labour by themselves during the housing construction process, but also the daily management of all public affairs relevant to the housing renting, including installation and maintaining utility systems, public security and public hygiene, is the sole responsibility of the individual owners. One prominent example is that, until the mid-1990s, the municipal water company's supply to this area had been very limited. During times of peak demand, the water pressure was always not strong enough to carry the water supply upstairs. Therefore, every household owner had to dig a well in their courtyard and one of their daily jobs was to pump water to a tank on the roof every day, so that tap water could be available for tenants living upstairs. Similarly dependent on the owner households is the public security of the neighbourhood. In the interests of both themselves and tenants, the owner households would always keep an eye on the surroundings and readily question any suspicious strangers in their sight. Compared to the nominal actions of the security guard team organised by the Community Committee, such as the night patrol I discussed in the last chapter, the owner households were more dependable in keeping watch over the neighbourhood all day and every day.

Second, the physical and social proximity between the indigenous owners and the migrant tenants determined that the renting business is maintained in everyday integration rather than separation of the two sides, which is not necessarily the case for ordinary landlords with their tenants. My investigation in the field suggested that, notwithstanding the exit of a sizeable body of local owners moving away in recent years, the majority still lived in the two urban villages. Further, as will be presented later in this chapter, the particular housing forms in the area far from placing the owner households and migrant tenants into two separated spaces actually integrated them into a co-inhabited housing space. In every housing unit, the owner households did enjoy better locations and bigger houses, as well as better indoor facilities, but they still shared with the tenants many communal spaces, such as the main entrance, balconies, corridors, courtyards, as well as the utility systems, including water, electricity, and cable TV. In other words, they were both the owners of the property and the close neighbours of their tenants.

Along with the spatial proximity structured by the housing form, the social bond between the owner and the tenant was also reinforced by their social and cultural similarities. Economically, the income gap between the owner households and migrant households was actually less than I expected. Even having housing rental as their chief income resource, most of the local owners have to make their living in other occupations, whether running grocery shops in the neighbourhood or finding jobs elsewhere in the city. For example, my landlord Qiang, co-owned a housing compound of 24 rented rooms with his two siblings. But he still had to work as a street sweeper in the city, actually in the same team as one of his migrant tenants. In addition, his wife worked as a part-time taxi driver. Culturally, despite having their household status converted to urban *hukou*, the owner households still more or less retained their rural lifestyle. Only ten years or so ago, it was very common for the local households to raise pigs or plant vegetables in their back yards. In addition, at the time of my field research, the local ritual activities like weddings, funerals and festivals were still being arranged according to the rural customs.

Third, the household mode of the business made renting housing more like a family affair than a commercial activity. One indicator was the distinct gender bias in the operation. Despite its obvious significance for every owner household, the daily operation of the renting business was overwhelmingly in the charge of the female members. I first got this impression when I rented my own room in the field. Older or younger, all of the local owners to receive me were female. Even if the first person of the household I met were male and he was apparently free at that moment, he would still suggest that I should come later when his wife or mother was at home, because he normally had little idea about vacancies and prices, neither would he have any keys in his hand. After I had settled down, I discovered that it was always my landlord's wife, Xiao Wu, who received new comers, collected rentals and bills, and did daily cleaning and management. Only on one occasion, when Xiao Wu had a quarrel with a tenant, did her husband become involved in the issue. Such division of labour is so sharp that it seemed to be the situation in all owner household, irrespective of their income and occupational status. As I said before, both Xiao Wu and her husband Qiang had their own jobs, so Xiao Wu's responsibility for the rental business could not be explained by the fact that she had more spare time in the family. In some owner households where the men were unemployed, their rental business was still managed by the women. This phenomenon was once explained by Li, the deputy director of the Xinxin community (originally the Yaojialing Village Committee), whose wife also ran rental business at home:



*'It (the rental business) is certainly women's business, if not my Mum's, then my wife's. Because it happens at our home not outside, it is of course part of the domestic job for women, which is supposed to be full of trifling things.'*

However, with reference to my observation, such gender division in the renting business did not necessarily mean the men had totally given up their power in the rental business to the women. No matter how little he was directly engaged in the daily management, the man was still regarded as the *laoban* by the tenants. More precisely, this labour division reveals the owner household's attempt in sustaining their sense of home boundary no matter how much the housing space has been extended and how many strangers lived in it. By categorising the housing rental as a 'domestic job' and 'women's business', the tenants were accordingly perceived of as a kind of extended family members belonging to the individual owner household.

Two implications can be drawn from this categorisation. One is that the daily operations of the rental business cannot or do not have to follow the pure market codes of tenancy. Rather, an informal, flexible or sometimes even personal approach proves to be more beneficial for both sides. For instance, the rent of rooms to let was never advertised but always negotiated during the viewing and settled as an oral agreement. Once a liking is taken to a room, keys can be offered immediately on the payment of the first month's rent only in cash. I never heard of any form of deposit or tenancy agreement. Although long-term tenancies were certainly preferred by owners, there was normally no minimum term agreed. Renting could be terminated at any time, without any form of notice in advance, as long as no rent or bill was owed. Obviously, such informality allows much flexibility in the business that suits the relatively unstable lifestyle of the rural migrants. The other implication is that the rented floor spaces are not acknowledged by the indigenous owners as the private space of their tenants, but still as an extended part of their own domestic space. There was no such thing as exclusive possession. That is why I always saw Xiao Wu, my landlady as part of her routine household chores, taking the responsibility for cleaning the whole house compound, including the public toilets, sinks, corridors, stair well, front door, and courtyard shared by dozens of tenant households. Although the migrant tenants could somehow benefit from the extended duty of the owner household, their own autonomy in controlling and arranging the housing space was largely constrained. Despite having their own rooms, many migrant informants expressed that the sense of home they tried to build up in their own rooms could be at times offset by a strong sense of home-stay with their owner households. As one of my neighbours put it:

*How can you call here my home? We are certainly living under other's roof. Everything here is under the charge of our laoban.*

—Xian Han, female, from Guangshui County, Hubei

Finally, the personal bonds and mutual interests between the owner and the tenant conveyed by the term *laoban* should be understood as a strategic alliance of both sides in confrontation with the power from outside. As a marginalised group in the city, it is not surprising that the rural migrant tenants depended on their *laoban*, who have some extent of advantages in the locality, to deal with various threats. For example, when they were questioned by the local authorities for various permits and fees, it would not be rare for their *laoban* to stand out and give them a hand, or at least verbal support. According to the security team leader of the Ji'an Community, the local owners had always been one of the main resistant forces against their floating population management in the area:

*To be honest, our main headache is not with the rural floaters, but with the local owners. Very often, our work with the floaters was hindered by their laobans. They certainly have their influences in the area. If our team members have any quarrel with one owner, then several more would gather around and prepare to fight. Seriously, some of our team members have even been beaten by them.*

—Liu Shifu, male, 62, the leader of the security team of the Ji'an Community

Apart from pressure from the authorities, troubles could come from local hooligans. As one of my migrant informants recalled:

*I remember when I first came here two years ago I was repeatedly extorted by several local bullies. Once when I was chased by them to my dwelling place, my laoban stepped out and gave them a warning. That really helped. You know those bullies always target outsiders like us, but they do not dare to cause troubles with the locals.*

—Xiao Zhou, male, 31, a recycler, from Dawu, Hubei

In return, there was a prevalent sense of loyalty among the migrant tenants towards their landlords, especially in the case of those who had settled long-term in the place and those whose tenancy was vital for both dwelling and livelihood, such as the street business holders. Unless really necessary, they would not consider moving. If they had to move, it would most likely be between different houses let by same owner rather than between different owners. One example happened to Xiao Liu's family. After having lived in a

first-floor room for 5 years, the owner's planned reconstruction forced Xiao Liu to move, but she was offered a second-floor room in the newly established apartment. Xiao Liu initially felt dissatisfied with this offer in terms of quality and price, and started to think about finding a better house in the area, which seemed not very difficult. But in the end, she still moved into the room offered by her *laoban*. To explain this, she told me:

*I think I had better accept the offer of my laoban, in that more or less she can give my family some care. You know sometimes things seem to be more easily discussed with an acquaintance than with a stranger. It is always better to improve my relationship with my laoban than to spoil it.*

— Xiao Liu, female, 28, housewife, Macheng, Hubei

A similar story was told by Xiao Yue, a sesame seed cake baker. Throughout the 6 years he lived in Gaowang, he had never changed his *laoban*. After the building he lived in had been reconstructed, like Xiao Liu, he still moved into a new apartment built by the same owner. He had stronger concerns in so doing than Xiao Liu, because his housing *laoban* also controlled the rental of the street corner stand where his small baking business was set. He believed that his loyalty in renting would ensure his privilege in using the stand: *'Even during the times when I went back to my home village, there was no need for me to worry if I would lose my business site after I returned, because my laoban promised to keep it for me.'*

In short, through teasing out the meaning of the term *laoban* in the urban villages, we have taken a close look into the place-specific tenancy relationship underlining the private housing rental. The impact of such tenancy relationship on rural migrants' urban settlement is to a certain extent ambiguous. It can offset their disadvantages as outsiders in the city on the one hand, but further deprive them of independence and autonomy in the settlement place on the other. Very often, we have to understand the meaning of *laoban* as swaying between two ends of the spectrum when it is used in different situations. Similarly, it would be misleading to conceive this place specification of the tenancy relationship as static. Next, I am going to depict one of the driving forces underlining the shifting tenancy relationship, as well as the shifting meaning of dwelling for the migrant dwellers.

## The evolution of floor plans

It is difficult to generalise about house patterns in the urban villages. Since the individual owner households were the main agents of housing construction and, as mentioned previously, did not have much professional assistance, it is not surprising to find that there was a lack of standardisation in design, planning and construction. Houses varied from each other in size, orientation, structure and style, depending on the land occupation and the financial situation of each owner household, as well as the quality of the small construction team they hired. However, one can still perceive an overall evolving trajectory unfolding in the local housing development during recent decades with the transition of the place from a rural village to a migrant urban settlement. Roughly speaking, the private house construction in Gaowang and Wujiawan underwent a three-stage process. At first, with the initial arrivals of rural migrants in the early 1980s, the local residents only rented out some rooms in their own houses. Then, to meet the increasing demand caused by the following influxes of migrants in the 1990s, they started to extend their houses either by adding one or two stories to the top of the existing houses, or by putting up additional wings in their back yards or on the adjoining land. Finally, when all the adjoining land had been built upon with extensions, and the original foundations of the old wings had also reached their load-bearing limit, another round of construction occurred in more recent years. The original houses were completely demolished and replaced by multi-story apartments built on new foundations. No doubt the foremost aim underpinning the escalating housing construction was to create as many rented rooms and floor spaces as possible to wring every penny out of the limited land space. But the outcome of these three stages of housing development in the urban villages was by no means limited to the quantitative proliferation of floor space. In essence, there was an unrolling of different dwelling forms in the place, which constantly reconfigured the social space of everyday life. Before I set about to map the trajectory of this decades-spanning development, it is worth noting that the evolution of the housing patterns in the place is not simply a replacement of the old by the new. Because of the varied paces of housing reconstruction for different owner households, what we see in the two villages nowadays is actually a co-existence of multiple forms of housing completed in different stages.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Irrespective of the type of housing there were three rental patterns: shared room, single room, and two rooms. There was a body of two-room suites for renting in the housing market. But my discussion will be mainly focused on the principal pattern in the area: single room renting. Another thing to bear in mind is that the housing patterns in the following discussion will focus mainly on the off-street housing, which also forms the major part of the local housing. The street housing that combines dwelling with business has already been described in the last chapter.

## *The reconfigured rural house space*

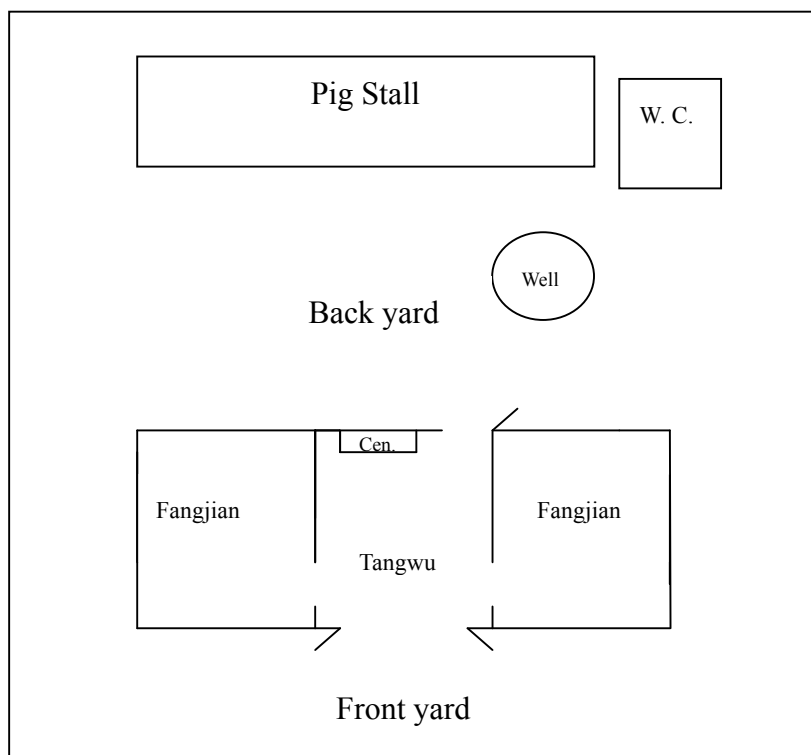
When the first wave of rural migrants arrived in the 1980s, all of the local residents in Gaowang and Wujiawan were living in the type of rural house which widely existed in the rural areas of Hubei and other provinces of Central China. After so many years of reconstruction, none of them has been preserved in the two urban villages in the original form. We can only picture them by collecting memories from the old villagers or by piecing together their fragmentary remains in the later housing forms.

Generally, they were built in the model of a traditional Chinese courtyard house, in its simplest version though. As shown in Figure 5.1., the smallest residence consisted of a single wing divided into three spaces: a central room (*tangwu*) opening to the outside and two internal rooms (*fangjian*) opening off the *tangwu*, the left usually occupied by parents, the right by children. Wealthier families might have two storeys with the same floor plan, in which case the central room of the first floor was used as another internal room. Apart from the indoor spaces, each house had a certain area of outdoor space called courtyard (*yuanzi*), wherein the outdoor facilities were located, such as a well, toilet, and pig stall. Although not necessarily enclosed by a wall or a fence, those houses presented themselves as closed and self-contained spaces, at a distance apart from each other. In terms of the interior arrangement, the spatial structure of the traditional rural house was largely characterised by the centrality of the ground-floor central room, the *tangwu*, in the household, not only in its central position, but also in its prominent functions for the household. In daily life, it was a communal space for all collective activities in the household, such as dining and gathering. It was also the principal space for outward functions, like receiving guests. But the most important significance of the *tangwu* lay in its ceremonial and ritual functions, as an ancestor shrine composed of an ancestor tablet, a central scroll and sometimes genealogical scrolls which were placed here in the most conspicuous position. Its symbolism in the household space was to express ‘the continuity from past to present and the ancestral authority invested in the living occupier of its space’ (Bray, 2005: 30). Taking up such spatial and spiritual position, the *tangwu* also organised the whole household space into an internally united and hierarchical domain. It did not only dominate the main door,<sup>77</sup> but also led to every corner of the household in all directions, including all ground-floor *fangjians* and the courtyard. According to their spatial relations with the *tangwu*, the priority of different rooms varied in the household.

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<sup>77</sup> In the wealthier households, however, the emphasis was to set a wall in front of the *tangwu* in order to both block the evil spirits from outside and prevent the good fortune inside from leaking away.

The room to the left of the *tangwu* usually ranked in priority to the right one, while the ground-floor rooms ranked in priority to those of the first-floor. Such spatial dominance of the *tangwu* has been theorised by some scholars as a spatial embodiment of the Confucian moral code and the patriarchal authority in the traditional rural house (Bray, 2005: 25, Faure, 2005: 293), which emphasised the singularity of family power and the unification of the household as a whole. While this household space was not devoid of inner quarters to preserve a certain amount of individual rights and privacy within the household (Bray, 2005), they were in the end subordinate to the patriarchal authority over all the household members.



**Figure 5.1.** *The floor plan of a typical single story rural house in Gaowang and Wujiawan. 'Cen.' represents the position of the central scroll in the tangwu.*  
*Source: Generic type based on the description of the local residents.*

It was under such a house pattern that the initial wave of the rural migrants was accommodated along with the local owners. Physically, their arrival did not bring any change to the house at all. The owner household just let out one or two of their internal rooms and continued their own family life as usual in the rest of the house space. The apparently intact floor plan of the old houses not only reflected the under-development of private renting at that stage, but also functioned as a protective strategy against the

inspection by the authorities when both the rural-to-urban population flow and private renting business were strictly prohibited. In order to have a foothold in the city, the rural migrant tenants had to adapt to this dwelling form, especially its spatiality centred on the family life of the owner household, sometimes even ready to change their identities. As an old migrant told me:

*At that time, I had an agreement with my laoban that, whenever I was asked about who I am, I was supposed to answer them that I was a distant relative of the laoban. Otherwise, both of us would have trouble.*

— Lao Qiao, male, 70, from Xinyang, Henan

With only one or two tenants, the old spatial structure in the rural house remained unchanged. For example, the family activities in the owner household like daily dining and festival ceremonies could be undertaken in the *tangwu* as usual, despite the unavoidable coming and going of the tenants. But things started to change with the arrival of more tenants. First of all, when family activities in the *tangwu* became increasingly distracted by more passing in and out, the owner household had to retreat into their internal rooms and left the *tangwu* more unblocked for passage. Gradually, the *tangwu* largely lost its centrality in the everyday life of the household. Only the ancestor shrine was kept there and it was continuously used for family gatherings in festivals or other ceremonial situations. Further, no longer having an unparalleled centre once marked by the *tangwu*, the original hierarchy of the different rooms gradually melted away. The ground-floor rooms were let out first to cater for the special dwelling needs of the rural migrants, allowing them to park carts and store goods, which was especially important for those who engaged in marketing farm products and scavenging. Meanwhile, the upper-floor rooms were preferred by the owner household to retain a relatively private space for their own family life in the context of co-inhabitancy with tenants. In short, under the surface of the intact floor plan at this stage, the entry of the new dwelling members had tacitly reconfigured the spatial structure of people's daily practices in the rural house.

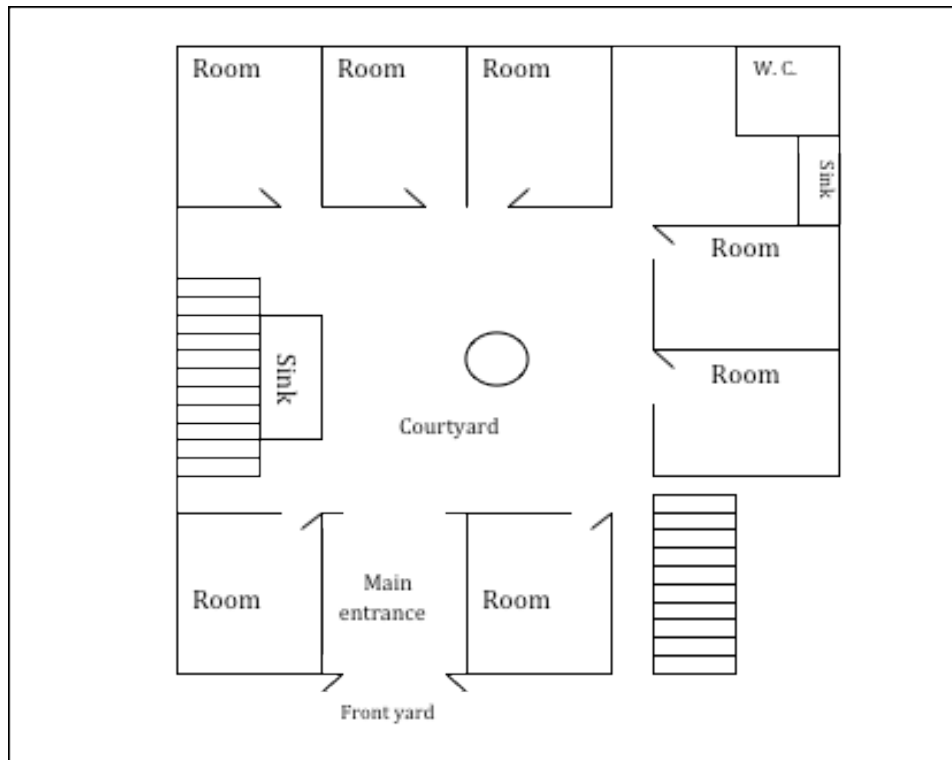
### ***The fluid compound space***

The traditional rural house pattern underwent continuous transformation in the two urban villages during the house construction boom in the 1990s. The theme of this round of housing construction was to develop more rented floor spaces without fully abandoning

the original houses. Depending on different conditions, the original houses were extended along two dimensions: vertically by putting up one or two storeys on the top of the existing house; and horizontally by extending the existing rooms or adding new wings in the courtyard. This resulted in two structural changes: the prevalence of the multi-storey buildings and the emergence of housing compounds.

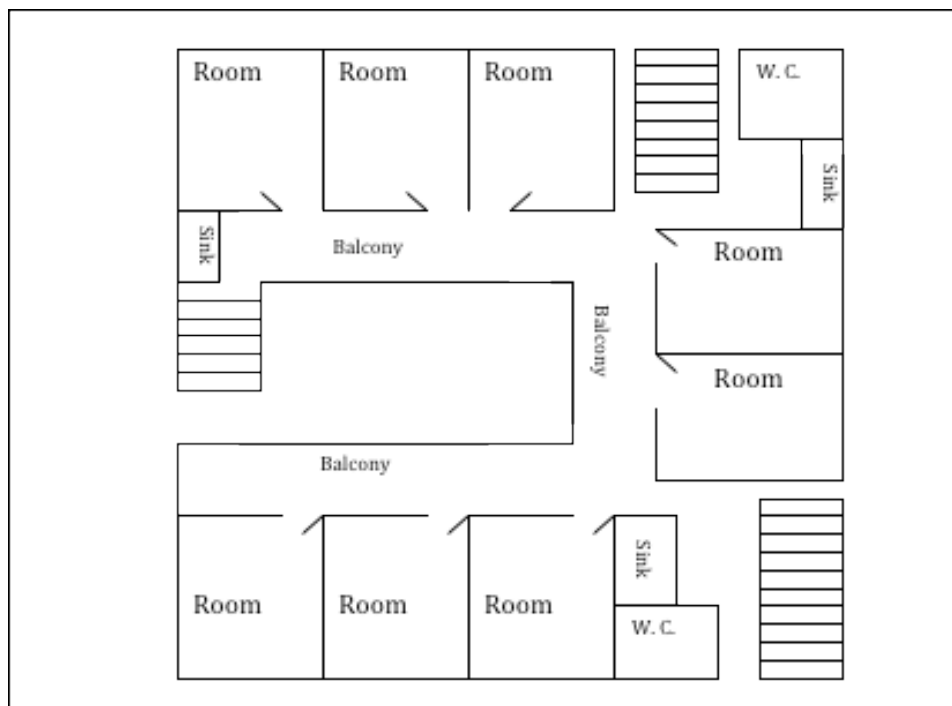
By the end of the 1990s, nearly all buildings in Gaowang and Wujiawan had grown to three or four storeys, each floor with no more than four rooms. These multi-storey buildings were not laid down separately in parallel rows. Rather, different wings belonged to one owner were connected to each other and constituted a U-shape or rectangle, called a compound (*dayuan*). All wings within a compound often shared a main entrance and commonly faced a courtyard surrounded by them. The compound where I lived in the field was a typical U-shaped compound (*See Figure 5.2., 5.3., and Photo 5.1.*). Among the three wings, the south was a four-storey built on the top of the original rural house successively completed in 1999 and 2002; vertical to it was the east wing, a two-storey built in 1996; the north wing was another three-storey built in 2000 on the site of the old pig stall. In this compound, the structure of the original house was still detectable. The courtyard surrounded by the three wings was part of the backyard of the old house. The well remained in the middle, but was no longer in use when I was there. Two common stairs led to the first floor balcony of the three wings, which were connected together. From this common balcony, another two stairs led to the upper floors of the north and south wings. Every room of the three wings opened onto the common balcony and faced the courtyard. Although much more complex, this building structure still resembled the old rural house in its manifest introversion.





**Figure 5.2.** The ground floor plan of a U-shaped house compound extended from the rural house

*Source: Sketch based on the observations of the author*



**Figure 5.3.** The first floor plan of a U-shaped house compound extended from the rural house

*Source: Sketch based on the observations of the author*



**Photo 5.1.** *The courtyard and balcony of a compound in Gaowang.*

One interesting change happened to the *tangwu*. With the owner household moving their living space to the first-floor rooms, the position of the *tangwu* in their family life had been largely marginalised. But unlike other rooms, it stood as the portal of the house and opened to all directions. Therefore, it could not now be used as a separate room for letting, as it had been altered into the main entrance lobby for the entire compound, commonly used by all dwellers not only for passage but also for bicycle or cart parking (See Figure 5.2.). However, the alteration did not mean that the symbolism once represented by the *tangwu* had been thoroughly discarded. Although it had lost most of the practical functions that the *tangwu* once performed in the rural house, the main entrance continuously took the place of the *tangwu* in organising the space in the compound. Distinct from the plain wooden doors of individual rooms inside the compound, every main entrance of the compound was guarded by a big iron gate, called *fangdao men* (anti-theft gate). Due to the almost ceaseless passage, the gate was in fact rarely closed. Thus its practical effect in guarding against thefts or burglaries was very doubtful.<sup>78</sup> But the gate marked the boundary of the whole compound and attempted to structure the individual housing units

<sup>78</sup> In the compound where I lived, two neighbours and myself lost our bicycles despite the existence of the main gate.

inside, no matter how many, as a united and autonomous space from outside, in other words, organising them into an extended household space. This arrangement made the main entrance lobby a polysemous space in the compound. From the tenants' perspective, it was regarded as a public space outside their domestic spaces and commonly used by all dwellers. While in the minds of the owner household, it was conceived as their own main door. Behind this door, the whole compound space, both indoor and outdoor, whether rented or not, was their private realm not only owned but also guarded and controlled by them. In some extreme cases, some owners even retained some ornaments of the old *tangwu*, such as ancestor tablets and the central scrolls in the lobby. This perception would be further manifested through their manipulation of the main entrance in the ceremonial moments, such as couplet posting in the Chinese New Year, which example I will discuss in another chapter.

Inside the compound, there was a structural balance in the spatial distribution between outdoor and indoor space. A substantial portion of space remained as outdoors, including the courtyard, stairways and balconies. They were not only the communal spaces for passage but also the sites where various life facilities were located. In the compound I lived in, for instance, there were three toilets, each shared by five to ten households, and four sinks, each having several taps allocated to different households. These facilities were only for the tenants who lived in single rooms, who usually took up the major part in the entire compound. The owner household had their toilet and sink built inside their rooms. There were also a few two-room suites for renting having their own indoor facilities, of course also at much higher rentals. Having all these life facilities located in the outdoor spaces, the internal space appeared quite simple. Single rooms were the most common form for renting in the compound, varying from 10 to 15 square meters. Each room could contain one double bed and other basic furniture. A single door opened onto the backyard or balcony. Two windows were opened one onto the balcony next to the door, the other on the inner wall opposite the door. Without any internal subdivision, the room had to function for all indoor activities and be fused together, from sleeping to eating. Neither did it permit the separation of adults and children, men and women, in the spatial usage.

Living in this kind of compound space, one's perception of the public/private boundary was far from defined by the indoor/outdoor distinction as normally assumed. The outdoor locations of the life facilities unavoidably oriented a considerable part of domestic activities beyond thresholds. Due to the constant movements in and out, doors of individual rooms were usually kept open except sleeping time or when they were empty.

Not only washing and toileting had to be done outside, as there were no facilities and not enough ventilation inside, cooking also became an outdoor activity. Many tenant households set their stoves on the balcony or the courtyard next to their doorway. For those who lived on the narrow intersections, the stove was moved out of doors for cooking every day. To get better use of the outdoor spaces, some household objects like sweepers, bins and bath basins were put at the corner outside the door; lines were strung between balcony railings for hanging clothes; children were also required to play or do their homework in courtyards or on balconies. More precisely, the courtyard and balcony spaces connected to different doorways were perceived by individual households not as fully outside but as an extension of their domestic space. At the same time, all these domestic activities had to be negotiated with other communal use, like passing, staying, and talking, in the same space.

Such heavy exposure to the communal spaces made the compound living in a sense to resemble the spatial structure in collective units in the *danwei* compounds or private firms. But it by no means implied a sense of collective belonging. After all, residence in the compound was neither a token of public welfare, nor a compulsory regulation tied to employment. Despite the communal appearance, every expense of the compound living was charged to the individual households. For instance, despite the shared toilets and sinks, water bills were paid individually. Each household had their allocated tap, attached to a separate water meter. Misuse of others' taps was perceived to be cheating. To give an example, I had my allotted tap at the end of the second floor balcony, but the nearest toilet was on the first floor. Every time I finished using the toilet, I tended to wash my hands at the tap in the first floor which was set next to the toilet. This behaviour proved to be unacceptable. I remember one day, a teenage girl came out and scolded me angrily: 'Don't you know this is our tap. Here, you can only use your own tap?' Similarly, the electricity expenses were accurately calculated for each household according to the subsidiary meters installed in each room. That was why there was neither flush tap for the shared toilets<sup>79</sup> nor communal lights in the main entrance or other public spaces.

In these circumstances, to settle in the compound space was far more than renting a room, but essentially involved an endless negotiation of a whole series of home boundaries: to what extent could the domestic life be extended beyond the threshold, where a stove or

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<sup>79</sup> In the compound where I lived, the landlady always put a bucket of wastewater from her home in the shared toilets for flushing. But without any proper flush device, the sanitary condition in the shared toilets was generally very poor.

washing line could be set, what was the boundary for children to play outside, and so on. None of these was given. Commonly accepted scale, pattern, and frequency in the outdoor space usage were gradually achieved through cautious exploration, flexible adaptation, and the occasional conflict. While some boundaries were undone, others were maintained or reinvented to adapt the compound living. The threshold of every household was no longer exactly identical to the home boundary. Instead, it usually presented a division between different domestic functions. It separated the wet (washing, cooking, clothes hanging) from the dry (sleeping, dining), as well as the public from the private. Family collective activities were kept indoors, while individual activities tended to happen in the outdoor spaces. For example, suppers never happened outdoors, since they were usually eaten together when all family members returned home after work. But lunches were usually taken to balconies or courtyards, for family members seldom met together for lunch. In addition, different social distances were also expressed through opening or closing the door. When receiving strangers or distant guests, the host usually left the door open, even at night time (this is how I was treated by my neighbours). Only when all of people inside were family members, relatives or close friends would the door be closed.

Dwellers in the compound were not nuclear households severed from their previous social bonds. Thus the neighbourhood relationship was far from homogenous but heterogeneised into different configurations influenced by the relationships between relatives, fellow villagers, or colleagues. When I initially moved into the compound, I lived on the same floor as two related households from Hunan province, sharing a common balcony with them. In that period, I had to consciously or unconsciously minimise my access to the balcony, for the intimate relationship between those two households partly changed the communal space into an exclusive space for them. This feeling suddenly disappeared when another two households moved in, who did not know each other. I soon got to know the wife of one household and once we were familiar, she tended to stay with me on the balcony while eating or doing some household chores. In the same compound lived another two related households from Songzi County: Zhang Shifu, his wife and their son on the first floor of the south wing, Zhang Shifu's sister's family on the ground floor of the same wing. In addition, Zhang Shifu introduced two of his fellow villagers to the same compound: Qin, next door to him, and Wen, on the same floor of the opposite wing. These four families frequently dropped in on each other and gathered together for dining or for playing mah-jong. Very often, they also played a kind of card game only popular in the Songzi area. After Wen moved out in December 2007, his next door neighbour immediately introduced one of his Henan fellow villagers to move in, so that two Henan

migrant households could live together and share the same balcony. In this ever-shifting neighbourhood landscape, migrant tenants from different origins commonly demonstrated an agency to exploit their existing social bonds in the active construction of the neighbourhood space in the urban settlement. However, I did not see any housing compound solely conquered by migrant tenants from a single rural origin. Even with many fellowship or relative sub-groups in the same compound, inter-group interactions could equally develop after a certain period of dwelling as neighbours. In this sense, what actually presented in the compound space was the co-existence of multi-layered social relationships in the same territory.

The last point to grasp about the fluidity of the compound space was the reversed gender positioning between the indoor and outdoor spaces. In the Confucian notion of domestic order, women have long been secluded in the inner quarter, just as a man usually refers his wife as ‘the person inside’ (*neiren*) (Bray, 1997: 54). Western industrialisation equally constructed a spatial distinction between public and private, indoor and outdoor as a gender division between man and woman (Rose, 1993, Massey, 1994). In the compound house, however, women were without doubt the main characters in the public and outdoor spaces. In the first place, that was of course due to the outdoor positioning of various life facilities, which automatically drove women out of their interior world. Whenever they cooked, washed, or looked after children, they unavoidably extended their domestic space onto backyards or balconies. But women’s position in the outdoor spaces was far from passive. Rather, they actively exploited all kinds of outdoor household work as chances for public and social engagements with other women in the neighbourhood, such as greeting, gathering and chatting. For the same reason, some housework which was usually conducted indoors, such as cooking preparation and knitting, was also moved outside. Very often, chatting would continue even after the work had finished. During lunch times, a group of women would hold their bowls, sit in the backyard or lean on the balcony rails, and chat with each other while eating. Doing knitting together was also a favourite way for them to pass their leisure time. In a sense, they did not merely use the outdoor spaces as their housework sites, but also transferred them into common parlours. These kind of interactions did not necessarily lead to a friendship deep enough to enter each others’ home, but they certainly provided the migrant women with a platform where an alternative social bond could be nurtured.

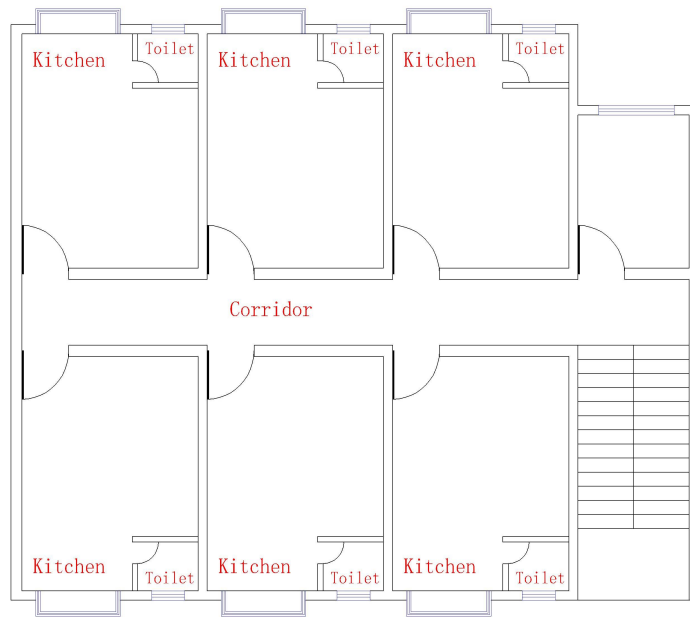
In sharp contrast with women, men’s appearances in the outdoor space were very limited. Although their social activities in the street were not rare, within the compound, they

manifested an obvious indoor orientation. They tended to head into their own rooms as soon as they returned from outside and tried to minimise their outdoor activities. Neither were they often seen chatting with others on the balcony or in the courtyard. Compared with women, men generally showed less inclination to communicate with neighbours except those who they were already familiar with, like relatives or fellow villagers. Such different attitudes towards neighbourhood interactions resulted in an interesting reversal in the gender positioning: men retreated to the indoor space as the head of the household, while women became the main characters outdoors. Although this reversal did not necessarily point to an overall subversion in the gender politics of the migrant settlement process, it did formulate a unique micro-geography within the compound space, whereby women's voice in the settlement would not be fully absorbed into the patriarchal order. Very often, I could see women deliberately used their neighbourhood engagements as an autonomous space to balance their disadvantages in the social circle centred on their husbands' contacts. For example, living in the same compound with his sister's family and two fellow villagers, the neighbourhood communication for Zhang Shifu was largely limited within these three households. His wife, Fu Shifu, however, had a much wider scale of interaction in the compound. Among the women she made contact with, she seemed not particularly attached to her husband's sister and the wife of her husband's fellow villager. When answering my inquiry, she said: *'Why should I only talk with relatives? They are my relatives, but they are more of my husband's relatives. As for Wen, he is a good friend of my husband. I am glad to get along with his wife, but I also have other neighbours to talk with.'* Sometimes, I could hear Zhang Shifu complaining in his room, remonstrating with Fu Shifu, when she had been chatting with other female neighbours on the balcony for a long time. In turn, Fu Shifu occasionally expressed discontent towards her husband for he often played cards with his sister's family overnight or drank with his fellow men for hours. In my mind, the dispute between them reflected their divergent ways of feeling and making home in the new dwelling environment, which were simultaneously allowed in the compound space.

### ***The newness of the new housing***

From 2002 onwards, the old model of extension based on the original rural house floor plan had reached its limit, so a new model of housing reconstruction emerged in the urban village housing landscape. To boost the efficiency of the limited land space to another level, the new reconstruction had to fully abandon the floor plan of the old rural house and

erect a new building on a sounder foundation. Years of accumulating wealth by many of the local owners from the rental business facilitated such radical projects. (*See Photo 5.2.*) One by one, many multi-story buildings rose above the rubble of the old house wings. Instead of being composed of several small and low wings, they were now single blocks occupying the entire curtilage of the former household and up to seven stories high, which could contain as many as 40 to 60 households.



**Figure 5.4.** *Floor plan of an apartment in Gaowang after the reconstruction*

*Source: Sketch based on the author's observations*

This alteration led to the termination of the old rural housing structure, which was shaped as an enclosed space around a spatial and symbolic centre. Architectural elements like the *tangwu* and the courtyard all disappeared. Each building had its entrance, but unlike the main entrance of the compound, it was not an independent gate lobby in the middle of the building front, but an entrance immediately connected to the ground-floor corridor and the stair well, sometimes even not gated. As the floor spaces further expanded to the limit of the curtilages of the former household residences, the space between the different buildings became dark, narrow corridors. Instead of a sense of enclosure and centrality commonly shared by all housing units in the building, the priorities of the new housing was placed on two points: the privatisation of space and the internalisation of household functions. Except for the necessary passing spaces, all floor spaces in the new buildings were allotted to the internal spaces, whereas the outdoor spaces had been literally reduced



to zero. Unlike the building wing in the compounds with single rows of rooms commonly open to an outdoor backyard or balcony, the new building only had an indoor corridor on each floor, flanked by rooms on both sides. (See *Figure 5.4. and Photo 5.3*) Each room had a single door connected to the corridor, which was closed all the time. All life facilities had accordingly been moved from outdoors into the internal spaces. Each room had one of its internal corners partitioned off as a tiny toilet, equipped with flush water, concurrently used as a bathroom. The window next to the toilet (normally the biggest window in the room, if not the only) was extended outwards to form a small platform, which was designed for the installation of a gas stove. An extractor fan was installed in the window as the solution of the ventilation during cooking inside the room. Nearby the window were a small cement table and a tiny sink with a water tap. The combination of all these facilities formed a tiny open-plan kitchen inside the room. Without any partitions, furniture was arranged in the rest of the room, which was simultaneously used for dining, sleeping, living, and other household functions. No matter how narrow the floor space was, the primary aim of the design was to contain all household functions within the internal space.

The idea of such design was partly adopted by the local owners as a profit-taking strategy in the upcoming renewal of the urban villages by the municipal authorities. What had happened in the renewal projects in other urban villages suggested that the government would calculate housing compensation to the local owners mainly by reference to the interior spaces, while all outdoor spaces like balconies or courtyards would be either disregarded or discounted. Constructing more interior space would mean gaining more compensation. Yet, from the perspective of the current stage, the design was aimed at a quicker return of investments at higher renting prices. The price gap between the new and the old housing was evident in the market. Given no substantial increase of the internal floor space, the monthly rental of a single room in the new buildings nearly doubled compared with that of a single room in the compounds<sup>80</sup>. The advantages of the new housing pattern in the market was clearly demonstrated and boosted by the small housing advertisement postings widely spread in the two urban villages. The most eye-catching words commonly appeared on those ads were ‘New houses available!’ Here, the newness of the house did not merely refer to the fact that the house was newly completed or that it had not been occupied by anybody. Its real connotation was marked by the following

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<sup>80</sup> In 2007, the average price of a single room in the compounds was 100-120 RMB per month (about 9-11 GBP), while in the new buildings it was 180-200 RMB per month (about 17-19 GBP), not including bills, which was equivalent to the price of a two-room suite in the old buildings.

words: 'Independent toilet and kitchen'. Thus, the unique selling point of those advertisements was a new fashion of dwelling and style of living.



*Photo 5.2. A cluster of new apartment buildings in Wujiawan.*



*Photo 5.3. The second-floor corridor of an apartment building in Gaowang.*

The concept of 'new' has special significance in modernity, for it pertains to a 'linear consciousness of time and history' (Lee, 1999: 43), which posits present and past as contrasting values and prioritises the present moment 'as the pivotal point marking a rupture with the past and forming a progressive continuum towards a glorious future' (ibid.). In this vein, to advertise the recently completed housing as 'new' was to value it as a 'pivotal point' in a 'progressive continuum'. Unlike the housing construction of the past, the new housing not only displayed a gesture of total repudiation towards the existing housing form, but also manifestly demonstrated an emulation of the mainstream lifestyle in the modern city. In today's Chinese city, the main body of the formal urban housing has been standardised into a pattern called apartment units (*dan yuan fang*). Initially introduced in China in the mid-1980s,<sup>81</sup> this housing concept emphasises 'a complete complement of functions suitable for one household' as the key to improve the quality of family living in urban residences (Lu and Shao, 2001: 228). Big or small, 'a unit of housing should have an independent kitchen and a toilet with corresponding facilities.' (ibid.) During recent years, this idea has been implemented through a set of construction standards by the urban authorities and become the dominant form in today's urban housing landscape. As an emblem of the modernisation of the urban dwelling, not exclusive in contemporary China but also in many other contemporary urban societies, the modern apartment houses function as a structured space, which objectifies the mainstream understanding of modernity. It is usually promoted by states as a way 'to create healthy families and remove social conflicts and "immoral" behaviour' (Ghannam, 2002: 48, also see: Theocharopoulou, 2005). In urban China, this housing form also signifies the formal and standardised housing construction of the urban professional authorities, in contrast to the informal and ill-standardised housing construction in the rural and marginal urban settings. However, when this formal housing form was transplanted and reproduced in an informal housing domain like Gaowang and Wujiawan, it exhibited a mimicry discourse in the reproduction of the Otherness: a desire to become formal and mainstream on the one hand, and a failure or a reluctance to be the same on the other (Bhabha, 1994). From the bureaucratic perspective, the result of this mimicry is nothing but another level of Othering of the urban villages in the city.

The result of this mimicry manifested itself in the floor plans of the new housing. It was immediately apparent that it did create an independent and autonomous space for the individual households. With all life facilities installed inside, tenants no longer needed to

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<sup>81</sup> It first appeared in 1985 when the 'Blue Paper on Technological Policies of China' was published.

go out and expose their private life to the public gaze, especially the daily surveillance and intervention from the owner. Even still living in the same building, the encounters between the owner and tenants had largely decreased. But that did not mean the owner has entirely given up his or her control over the entire building. Needless to say the economic inequality in the tenancy relationship had not been shaken, even the spatial structure of the new buildings, which was seemingly ruptured from the old, was still imprinted with the unparalleled dominance of the owner. Unlike the standard urban apartment buildings, which normally have multiple entrances, each leading to two columns of units sharing one stair, the apartment buildings in the urban villages were uniformly characterised by the structure of a single entrance and single stair well for the whole building, regardless of the amount of house units it contained. As in the compound, most main entrances in the new building were guarded by an iron anti-theft gate. Inside the building, all rooms on each floor were connected by a single corridor, usually very long and dark. Such singular and simple arrangements could help reduce building costs, but in essence, it was determined by the singular ownership of the building. The attempt was to organise all spaces in the building as a whole under a single power, similar to what once existed in the old rural houses and later in the compound houses.

In the standard apartment construction, the internal complement of the household functions is accompanied by a necessary subdivision of the interior space. Even in its simplest form, each unit is at least partitioned into one bedroom, one living room, a separate kitchen, and an independent bathroom including toilet, whereby different housing functions are met by different spaces without interference from each other. In the limited floor space of the apartment unit in the urban villages, however, such interior subdivision was absent and not allowed. Despite their fresh appearances, the total floor space of a single room in the new building was still no more than 20-30 square meters, not necessarily bigger than the single room in the old house. Having nearly one third of the internal space allotted to the toilet and kitchen, which used to be placed outdoors, the internal space for the rest of the family activities had actually diminished. Thus in fact the interior space in the new houses could not meet the spatial demand caused by the internalisation of more household functions.

What is more, tenants were also deprived of the benefits they once enjoyed in the old compound housing. As previously presented, despite all the inconveniences of the housing compound, where various outdoor spaces functioned as both integral and separated components of the residence, the constraints of the limited floor space could be more or

less transcended, while different household matters could be separated by the indoor/outdoor divisions. However in the apartment, every household had no extra space beyond their front door. As all of the facilities moved indoors, all household matters had to be squeezed side by side into a single space: cooking smells permeated the whole room, dining was immediately next to the bed; clothes could only be hung in the toilet. It became almost impossible to maintain the domestic order by dividing the dry from the wet or separating the dirty from the clean. If the difficulty in the compound housing was for each household to keep a private space from other households, the present difficulty was for different household members to keep a distance from each other. Being constrained in a single space, no one could escape from others' sight even for a single moment. After moving into her new house for a month, Xiao Liu expressed her frustrations like this:

*We now live in a single room as big as before, but I feel my own space has somehow shrunk. Before, when I felt crowded inside, I could go onto the balcony. Now, everyone has to stay together and there is only one space to stay.*

Contrasting to the inescapable pushing and shoving inside, the outside now became an absolute void. The usually closed doors left the corridor dark, empty and silent, solely useful for passage. There was now no need to exchange and negotiate in the public space usage, the daily encounters and interactions between neighbours dropped to almost zero. Even though some were retained, they were oriented into the separated indoor spaces, no longer open to uninvited participants. The most affected were women, especially those who were not employed. With the disappearance of the public spaces like courtyards or balconies where they used to meet and chat while doing various household works together, all household works were now carried on behind doors and conducted alone. Without any outdoor spaces nearby, children had to be caged indoors, unless they were old enough to play in the streets. That equally made parenting much more boring and tiring than before. As an unemployed mum, Xiao Liu told me about the changes that happened to her life after moving to the new house:

*In the old place, even if I did not talk with neighbours, I could easily feel their existence, whether when I washed clothes, or when I prepared cooking. I knew I was not on my own and easily found someone to chat with. Now, I felt I was caged in this single room. Everyone is having his or her door closed. It becomes much more difficult to encounter and visit each other. My friends used to simply call me from downstairs, now they have to*

*come upstairs and knock on my door. Very often, people would not bother. That is why we have many fewer visitors than before.*

Additionally, women's burden of household work seemed to be heavier in the new house. For many migrant tenants, the newness of the new buildings has much to do with the effect of their strikingly clean appearance. This effect was largely created by the heavy usage of white ceramic tiles as decoration, both for the floor and for some parts of walls. In this way, they sharply distinguish themselves from the appearance of the old housing buildings, which usually left the brick or cement floors and walls undecorated. White and ceramic are not only associated with brightness and light, but also connote hygiene, because it helps reveal all stains and dust. To express this unique impression of the new house, one migrant tenant told me: *'Here everywhere looks like and is supposed to be much cleaner than in the old buildings.'* But to maintain such visual appearance was very labour intensive, especially concerning the lack of divisions between different household matters in the interior space. Of course, the burden was usually born by women. As Xiao Liu complained:

*The floor mopping seems endless. You have both mud from outside and the dirty stuff from the cooking place and toilet. If it were cement floor as in the old place, nobody would care that much. But on this white ceramic floor, they are so harsh on the eyes. What is more, it is also our sleeping place. You cannot bear it to be too dirty.*

Considering all these experiences in reality, moving to the new house could not promise any dramatic improvements of life conditions for migrant tenants, despite its emulation of the mainstream housing code and its higher price in the market. That was why an evident indifference towards the new housing was demonstrated by my migrant informant households. I often heard comments like this: *'It just looks better, but not necessary suitable for us.'* Or *'I do not think it is worth that much at all.'* So far, the migrant tenants living in the new apartment building were mainly composed of two groups: those who lost their previous housing in the reconstruction and followed the same *laoban* in moving into the reconstructed buildings, like Xiao Liu and Xiao Yue; and, the newly arrived young singles, who usually shared one single room with other fellow villagers or colleagues. Besides these two groups, there was little sign that the migrant tenants showed a prominent preference for the new apartment housing over the old.<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, what

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<sup>82</sup> Admittedly, such conclusion was drawn from my limited encounters in the field. The partiality could be caused by two factors: first, only three of my informant households were living in the new apartment houses,

was still steadily demonstrated was the juxtaposition of a whole continuum of different housing forms in the two urban villages.

Notably, the new housing forms formed an unexpected attraction for another consumer group: the young college or university graduates who strove to find a job and survive in the city with very low income in the early period of their career. To cater for the particular lifestyle of this new tenant group, many market-sensitive owners started installing broadband Internet access in each apartment unit. As far as I am concerned, this recent development was meaningful indeed, for it added another layer on the place making practices in the locality. But to examine this new trend is beyond the limitation of the present study.

In concluding, the emergence of a particular housing form in the two urban villages is an aggregated process combining geographical conditions, historical memories and social relationships. It provides a tangible platform of conjunction wherein nature and culture, actor and structure articulate with each other. Dwelling in a given housing form not only grounds the migrant subjects onto their settlement site, but also enables them to colour the locality with their identity and reconfigure the living space into a meaningful place in their migratory trajectory.

My exploration into the housing practices in the two urban villages particularly illuminates two aspects of the place-making dynamics in Chinese rural migrant settlement. First, Chinese rural migrants are not the sole actor in the construction of their settlements in the urban villages. As exemplified by housing, where and how they are dwelling is deeply dependent on the indigenous residents who control the housing construction and the rental market. At the same time, the housing system in the urban village also binds the local owner and the migrant tenants together in a highly integrated space. Such housing and dwelling model highlights the co-inhabitancy and co-production between multiple social identities as a key for the place to take its shape. It determines that a highly interdependent and mutual tenancy bond plays a crucial role in the settlement process of rural migrants. This tenancy bond constitutes a place-based power relationship that could

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one household moved to the new house during my fieldwork; second, this round of housing reconstruction was still ongoing by the time I finished fieldwork. Many new phenomena could have appeared later.



both form another layer of social deprivation towards the rural migrants and be employed by them as a strategic resource in offsetting their disadvantages in the city.

In the second section of this chapter, the housing evolution throughout the recent decades provides a vivid picture, showing the physical and cultural landscape of the two urban villages as far from static but fluid and subject to continual reconfigurations. Every stage in the evolution was a historical conjunction of the dialectic interactions between multiple social forces: the structural force of the booming growth of the city, the authorities' governance power in floating population regulation and informal housing discipline, the profit hunger of the local owners and their endeavour to continually hold their privileges in the place, and last but not least, the agency of the rural migrant tenants in interpreting, manipulating, and appropriating the housing space in their local dwelling. Certain forms of housing marked the temporary balance between these forces. Once the balance was disturbed, another form would emerge. This continual reconfiguration manifested itself most distinctively in the housing landscape. But what housing underwent in recent decades was only an epitome of the dynamical transformation of the whole locale.

Of course, the mechanism of housing in place-making never plays out on its own, but through intertwining with other daily materials and practices. I am going to look at one of them in the next chapter.



## Chapter 6

### Possession, Location, Connection:

### The place of television in home-making

To understand media, particularly television consumption as a dynamic factor in the migratory subjects' settlement practices, is not new in academic inquiry. The recent decades have seen a host of literature engaging in the intersection between electronic mediation and mass migration, which broadened and deepened our knowledge about the complex relationships between identity, place, and culture in the process of social and cultural transformation driven by modern migration (e.g. Gillespie, 1995, Morley and Robins, 1995, King and Wood, 2001, Ross and Playdon, 2001, Karima, 2003). However, it is striking to note that the studies in this field are almost overwhelmingly centred on the consumption of the contents mediated through television. What always evokes the enthusiasm of researchers are the moments when 'moving images meet de-territorialised viewers', which lead to 'the new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities' (Appadurai, 1996: 4), whereas the material dimension of the intersection between television and migration tends to be overlooked. This theoretical bias reflects an unproblematic perception of the migratory subjects as always displaced and rootless on their migratory trajectory, having their identity formation overwhelmingly attached to the 'virtual neighbourhoods, 'imagined community' or 'displaced public spheres' (Appadurai, 1996: 192). The bias also roots in the orthodoxy that characterises television merely as a medium of content, which has been only recently questioned.

The ubiquitous presence of the shining box in the rural migrant households and its integral permeation into the fabric of their life equally puts forward television as an unavoidable theme in my observation in the two urban villages. In the light of my previous experience as a media researcher, it was natural for me to focus considerable attention on finding out what kind of channels and programs the people liked to watch and how important programme viewing was in their daily life. This agenda, however, proved to be not very productive in my investigation. That was partly because, given the media reforms in the

recent years, television programme production in China is still largely dominated by the professional and ideological control of the state and the party, which leads to an evident closeness and homogeneity in the nation's viewing landscape. The contents particularly catering for niche audiences and the marginal groups produced by the mainstream media are very rare. The platforms for the non-government organisations or the marginal groups themselves to deliver certain forms of alternative production, such as the community or independent media, are equally under-developed in today's China. By reason of this, one cannot expect many radical divides (definitely not non-existing though) between different social groups in terms of the channels and programmes available for them. Thus, compared with *what* to watch, what seems to be more informative about Chinese rural migrants and their urban settlements is *how* to watch. Moreover, once the lens is turned from what is playing inside the box to what happens between the box and the viewers, the action of 'watching' became very difficult to define, because it is always intertwined with many other activities, which are related but not necessarily determined by the programmes. To adapt to this new horizon, I need to strategically decentralise programmes in my observation of the rural migrants' television consumption and understand the place of television in their urban settlement from a material culture perspective, which re-interprets television from merely a media of programmes to a meaningful object, accordingly seeing the viewer/audience as a user. This theoretical stance is not meant to undermine the significance of programme viewing and interpretation in the rural migrants' urban settlement and identity transformation, but to refocus on a relatively overlooked aspect in order to stress the multi-dimensions and multi-facets of their media space.

Although not yet being directly related to the migratory subjects, the material culture of television has already been an important theoretical paradigm in media studies. David Morley (1995) is one of the theorists who first shed light on this paradigm. To balance the bias in the orthodoxy of media study, he points out:

*For some years now it has been a commonplace of work in media studies to recognise that our growing understanding of the active nature of television consumption has led to the destabilisation of previously fixed ideas of the nature of the television as 'text' or programme. (p. 187)*

He draws attention to the 'physics of television', 'focusing on the largely unexamined significance of the television set itself (rather than the programmes it shows), both as a material and as a symbolic, if not totemic, object' (Morley, 1995: 170). Apart from

Morley's (1986, 1990) pioneering work, a body of academics (e.g. Lull, O'Sullivan, Moores, Silverstone) have made huge efforts to reveal the complexity of people's everyday consumption of television from the material culture and ethnographic perspective, whereby the most 'familiar' of this domestic object has been destabilised and de-familiarised. What is commonly demonstrated by studies in this strand is the prominent role that place and space play in the meaning system of television, especially the mutual interdeterminations that television and home have exercised on one another during the modern age. From this point of view, the mediation function of television has gone beyond the text/audience nexus and engaged in the interaction between people and place. The aim of this chapter is to apply this paradigm to the context of Chinese urban villagers and to map a local geography of TV living from their engagement in the material culture of television. I will try to approach this map from three directions: the household possession of TV sets, the emplacement of the TV set and viewing activities in their dwelling space, and the particular meanings and strategies in their cable TV connections.

## **Possession**

As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue, the consumer buys goods not always/only for their personal or functional uses, but more generally to 'make and maintain social relationships' and 'construct an intelligible universe with the goods he chooses' (p. 60, 65). It is exactly these symbolic values that make television so desirable, or maybe indispensable for modern homes, as commonly suggested by studies based on different social contexts. For example, O'Sullivan's (1991) research indicates that the acquisition of a TV set and aerial in the 1950s' UK often symbolised status and modernity for the families that owned them. It 'seems to be remembered above all as a sign of progress, a visible sign of joining, or at least not being left out of, "the new".' (p. 166) In post-war Japan, television was also conceived as one of the 'sacred things', which functioned 'as a symbol for authentication of the identity of the individual household as being a "modern family".' (Yoshimi, 1998: 6-8, see in: Morley, 2000: 88) But apart from signifying social status and identities, television possession has another dimension of symbolism, which has not yet been discussed deeply. That is, people always purchase television in/for a place. The television you possess not only symbolises who you are, but also reveals what the relationship between you and the place is. This symbolism is not exclusive to television, but there are two properties distinguishing television from other domestic objects in the geographic constraints. One is its limitation in portability like a piece of furniture, which prevents it from being mobilised easily; the other is its considerable expense as a staple

and durable commodity, which prevents many households from purchasing whenever or wherever they wish. That is to say, buying a television is not only about spending (how much to pay), but also about locating (where the set is bought for and positioned).

How possession of a TV relates people with a place is in essence a social construction. In modern society, most people buy a television set for the place they call home. As a result of the rapid diffusion of television in China over the last three decades, this relationship has also become familiar to the majority of Chinese residents. Although television broadcasting started in China in the late 1950s, its entry into the ordinary households was quite late.<sup>83</sup> For a long time, the possession of a TV set had been far beyond the reach of individual families. Instead, people normally watched TV in the recreation centres of their work units which could afford the set collectively. Under this circumstance, possessing and watching TV was more of an institutional activity, a means for the work units to organise the collective social and leisure activities for the socialist workers. Since the early 1980s, television started appearing in a number of wealthier families. At this stage, the key focus of TV consumption was less on programmes<sup>84</sup> but more on the ownership of a television set as a domestic luxury, a marker of prestige, and an object of aspiration. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the launch of economic reform brought accumulating wealth to ordinary households. Similar to the situation in post-war Japan mentioned in Yoshimi's (1998: 6-8, cited in: Morley, 2000: 88) study, a television set was yearned for by more and more ordinary households as one of the 'three must-have domestic luxuries' (along with a washing machine and refrigerator). It increasingly became an item appearing in a woman's dowry and was exhibited in wedding parades.<sup>85</sup> The relative scarcity of the television set at that moment, especially in the countryside, prevented the domestic consumption of television from being entirely locked behind closed doors. Rather, watching TV tended to be a kind of activity among the whole community or neighbourhood. People often flocked to neighbours' homes or crowded into an open space to watch television. For the host family, the realisation of the symbolic value of the possession of TV was external-oriented, through showing and sharing. In this sense, the domestic possession of television at this stage had not fully installed a TV set as a private object enclosed in the domestic space. It was more suitable to be defined, in Veblen's

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<sup>83</sup> Less than 2 percent of Chinese households had a television set in the late 1970s. By 1988, the percentage was still under half. (Kevin Latham, 2007: 47)

<sup>84</sup> Normally, no more than three channels were available and also for limited periods of broadcasting every day.

<sup>85</sup> One of the marriage customs in China is the groom calling on the bride's family and introducing her to his family. The bride would bring a certain amount of valuable items as her dowry (depending on the wealth of her family) from her natal home and show them off in a parade all the way to her husband's home.

(1899) term, as an item of conspicuous consumption, mainly for wealthier households to consume to indicate the qualities of their social honour and social status. Later in the following years, two factors contributed to the increasing ubiquity of TV sets in the ordinary households: the manifest improvements of household incomes in the economic boom and the considerable reduction of the price of television sets as the result of intense price wars between many domestic TV manufacturers. By 2007, official figures showed that television sets were owned by 98.1% households nationwide, with every 100 households possessing 134.9 sets,<sup>86</sup> which meant some households had more than one set. From scarce to ubiquitous, television left the seat of conspicuousness and came down to ordinary life.<sup>87</sup> Accordingly, TV viewing gradually retreated from communities or neighbourhoods to the inner space of the individual households. In this sense, the proliferating possession of television in the reform age not only signified the nationwide improvement of living standards, but also contributed to the social construction of a family-centred and individualised sense of home. Given such symbolic association between the acquisition of television and the sense of home, having a TV set for rural migrants cannot be reduced to a matter of affordability. In essence, it both reflects and affects where they felt at home and how to make home in their migratory trajectory.

### *The obligated and the operated*

For most of my migrant informants, the first TV set they bought was for their homes in the rural villages. Especially for the early wave of migrants in the 1990s, one of the aspirations that drove them to leave the land was to be able to afford a TV set and the set they finally carried back to the home village from the city was really a symbol of success, a trophy. 61-year-old Lu Shifu told me the first fortune he earned in the city was used to buy a 12-inch colour TV in 1991. As one of the few leading TV owners in the village, he really earned admiration from his fellowmen. ‘Literally, I became the second person who had a TV set at home next to the village head. When a crowd of relatives and neighbours flocked to my home to see the TV set, I felt all my labour in the city had paid off.’ He said proudly.

Later, when the television became a domestic necessity for ordinary rural families, it entered the rural household chiefly through weddings, which almost without exception

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<sup>86</sup> According to 2008 China TV Rating Yearbook.

<sup>87</sup> If there is any sense of consumer prestige left, it is no longer simply signified by the possession of the set itself, but by brands (foreign brands are more expensive than domestic brands) and the novel styles (such as wide-screen, flat-screen, digital, and LCD televisions).

were held in the rural home of the groom, disregarding how far or how long the young couple had been away from their rural home and working in the city. In symbolising the birth of the new family, television, together with other electrical appliances, was supposed to be shown in the wedding parade and displayed in the prominent position in the room allotted to the young couple in the house of the parents. Very often, one or both of the young couple would leave the village soon after the wedding and go to work in the city. But the TV set would be kept in their room and available for their occasional homecoming. Many migrant informants admitted that the TV set they bought for the wedding turned out to be little more than an adornment, which was barely watched by them. But even so, it seemed a must for the wedding. As a migrant woman told me: 'Others would laugh at us if we did not have a proper TV set when married.' Such seemingly uneconomic consumption highlights the symbolic values of the TV set as beyond its functional uses. The presence of the TV set was crystallised into a cultural obligation, which anchored and regulated the home of the rural migrants to their rural origins.

Comparatively, the pressure of owning a TV set in their urban settlements seemed much less. Not having one in the rented room could be justified either by the lack of living space or by the fact that one has not settled down. Still, my observation indicated that, except the three short-term-stay families and two unmarried singles, all informant households had their own televisions at home. For most migrant households, the television was usually the first domestic luxury commodity they purchased for their accommodation in the city, if not the only one. Among the 38 households, only 5 had air conditioners, 4 had refrigerators and 4 had washing machines. The outstanding possession rate of televisions proved that, even without the pressure of marriage, the significance of television in the urban village was no less than that in the rural village. Due to the shortage of other social resources in the migration process, the potential provided by television proved even more vital for making a dwelling place into a home. Sometimes it might make an immediate difference, as happened to one of my downstairs neighbours, Xiao Yin's family. Xiao Yin had no TV set at home when I met her. At that time, persuading her two children (one 12-year-old daughter and one 10-year-old son) to stay at home, even for family meals, was a problem for her, because they could not resist going to neighbours' homes to watch TV. Things suddenly changed in their home when an old television set was bought from a fellow villager. Since then, the two children spent most of their after-school time at home and the family started having meals together in front of their own TV. Xiao Yin appeared satisfied: 'It is worthwhile. Now our home is more like a home.'

Unlike the television in their rural villages that normally arrives with weddings and symbolises the birth of the family, television was not such a pre-condition for migrants' urban settlements. Rather, it comes when it was really needed and the need was geared by the varying statuses of settlement. Xiao Hu and Xiao Liu were the only couple who established their family in Wuhan and had no home of their own in their rural origins. They had a different story of TV possession from those who married in the rural villages: *We did not buy a TV set when we married, for we were not certain about how long we could stay in Wuhan. In the beginning, life went well without a TV since both of us worked late and came home only for rest. But when I got pregnant, no one would hire me and I had to stay at home everyday. That was the time when we decided to buy a television, otherwise how could I kill the time when I was alone? When we had our daughter, the television became more important, for it was the easiest way to keep the little girl quiet and happy at home.*

—Xiao Liu, female, 28, from Macheng, Hubei

In Xiao Liu's story, there was no obligation of possessing a television for their marriage. The requirement and the significance of the television unfolded with the development of their family and the consequent changes of their life style. In other words, the television connected their family with the place they lived as a dynamic process, rather than as a fixed bond. Unsurprisingly, this process was interplaying with a whole array of other factors of settlement in the migratory trajectories, including the continuity of dwelling in the same place, the occupational status, the distribution of family members, and of course the income of the household. In the earlier example, Xiao Yin delayed their TV purchase not merely for thrift. The deeper reason was that her husband's departure to another city six months previously largely unsettled the settlement of her family in Wuhan. The arrival of the television in this family had an obvious synchrony with the return of the husband, which resettled the family in the place, at least for another period of time. The interplay between the TV acquisition and the family unity worked in the opposite way for Lu Shifu. His television was bought when his wife found a job and left for Hangzhou, because 'it can make the room more bustling and make me less lonely', said Lu Shifu. In these three households, the television was bought at different moments, but it was commonly employed as an effective means to express the sense of settlement in the urban villages and diminish the anxiety caused by the uncertainty between home and away.

### ***'Secondhandedness'***

The possession of a television in migrants' urban settlement differed from that in their rural villages not only in the moments of purchase, but also in the property of the set. Given the variation of style and quality, the TV set bought for the rural home has to be brand new. Buying an old one would welcome no fewer sneers than having none. On the contrary, in the two urban villages, there was a prevalence among the rural migrants of second-hand TV sets, which were found in two-third of my informant households.

One obvious attraction of the second-hand television was the relatively low price. Depending on the size and condition, a second-hand television cost between 100 RMB and 380 RMB, less than half the price of a new television of the same size in the shops. But this cannot fully explain their wide acceptance in the urban villages. Compared with buying a new set in the supermarket or department stores, buying a second-hand set was not only cheaper but also more convenient in the urban villages. One approach was through various personal networks. Occasionally, one could buy a second-hand television from fellow villagers or friends who planned to leave.

However, the major proportion of the trade was operated through an established market of second-hand sets in the area, which offered an abundant stock readily available within the neighbourhood. This market was chiefly operated through a whole chain of second-hand electric appliance shops in the street run by migrants who possessed some basic skills in electrical appliance installation and repairing. Like other street shops, they had to survive with a comprehensive business range, covering different electronic appliances from electric fans, refrigerators, DVD players, to mobile phones. But televisions obviously took the principal position in their business. The functions of these shops went far beyond simply selling. More precisely, they held a whole circulation of the second-hand televisions, from collection, process, selling to re-collection, re-process and re-selling. The services were firmly located in the two urban villages and mainly targeted the migrant customers, but the operation of the business entailed a circuit stretching far beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood. The resources of the second-hand television were from every corner of the city either collected by shopkeepers or purchased from other migrant recyclers. Once they flowed into those shops, the used televisions were sorted out. Nothing was wasted in the process. Those in good conditioned were directly labelled with prices and put on sale. The broken sets were dismantled. All useful parts from different



sets were put together, or with some new parts if necessary, to make a kind of self-assembly set. The useless parts were sold in material recycling markets. These electronic appliance shops also provided various television-related services in the neighbourhood, from TV set repairing to cable connection. What is more, whenever customers wanted to leave the urban village or exchange their old television for a new one, they would hand over at a negotiable price their old TV set, which, with no doubt, would soon be put on sale and bought by other migrants.

Our commonsense about consumption is that it starts from purchase and ends with disposal. Only recently have consumption studies shown their interest in what happens after disposal, which proves to be far from the end but the start of another life stage of commodities (Hansen, 2000, Hetherington, 2004, Gregson et al., 2007). In the process, the same commodity could connote different social meanings in its different life stages, even if the functional value does not change much (Kopytoff, 1986). Similarly, the popularity of second-hand televisions in the two urban villages should not be simply characterised as the thrift of those second-hand buyers. As far as I am concerned, the purchase of second-hand television sets enables a flexible emplacement, which fits the situation of the rural migrant buyers. If the brand new television set is usually purchased as a durable domestic commodity and its solidness marks an inclination towards being sedentary rather than mobile, then in its second-hand stage, the solidness of the television is in a way fluidised by the lower prices and shorter life spans, which allow more space for mobility. Owing to the existence of a big second-hand television market in their urban settlement, the possession of a TV set no longer particularly fixed the possessor to the place. Rather, it created a liminal space opening to both emplacement and displacement. A second-hand set can equally provide a sense of settlement as a normal set but at the same time does not reduce the possibility of movement, for one can more easily dispose of it or resell it to get some money refunded. On the other hand, the secondhandedness of the rural migrants' television consumption further highlights the groundedness of their everyday life in the urban villages. The formation of the second-hand television market in the place delivered a unique television consumption mode suitable for the rural migratory subjects, who would otherwise have been marginalised in the mainstream retail sites in the city. This remarkably localised market was not solely ruled by a general economic rationale, but also sustained through personal networks and deeply intertwined with the micro-economic structure which already existed in the place, such as the existence of a substantial group of

rural migrants who engaged in the recycling business as their livelihood.<sup>88</sup> In this sense, buying a television was not only a domestic consumption activity for individual migrants or migrant households, but also essentially an active engagement to embed their everyday life into the locality of the urban villages.

### *The two-set living*

However the rural migrants achieved their TV possession in their urban settlement, this possession was not opposite or irrelevant to the television they left behind in the rural home. Another distinction of the domestic TV possession in most rural migrant households was the enduring juxtaposition and linkage between how to possess a new set in the city and how to preserve and dispose of the set left behind.

For a number of migrants, the set left behind was still highly valued and cherished. No matter how rarely it was watched, the television was preserved in the house as a guard of a home always ready for the return of its hosts. A Hunan migrant woman told me:

*Although I only go back to my home village in Hunan less than once a year, I must make sure, whenever I return, my own television is available to watch. Otherwise, I would feel very uncomfortable. In fact, the first thing when I arrive home is always to switch on my television.*

—Xiao Guo, 33, Female, from Yiyang, Hunan

Very often, the left set was allowed to be shared by other household members or relatives when the owner was absent. This was especially the case for the young couples who had their rural home settled with their parents or other siblings in the same house. Sometimes, others were allowed to enter the couple's room to watch the television. Otherwise, it was moved to other rooms or even other houses. This did not necessarily mean handing over ownership. The intention was rather to maximise the value of the television through a certain extent of communal usage in the absence of the owner. Underlying the process was a kind of moral economy commonly existing in the television usage. But here, the operation of the moral economy was far beyond the boundary of a singular domestic realm, as usually focused on by media studies (e.g. Silverstone, 1994: 48). In the case of these rural migrants, one TV set entailed a moral economy between different locations, whereby

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<sup>88</sup> The impact of the recycling business on the rural migrants' daily life in the urban villages is not limited to their TV consumption. Another example is the boiled water consumption detailed in Chapter 4. Besides these two, the second-hand or waste consumption widely permeated nearly every aspect of their daily life.

the absent possessor can maintain his/her position in the community through the presence and the manipulation of the object.

Under certain circumstances, the left set might be handed over to others. Reselling seemed rare. More often the set was given as a gift either to relatives or to fellow villagers. In this way it could still function as an emotional tie in sustaining a continuous connection with the home village. Otherwise, it could be traded for some current necessity. One such situation happened in Yin Sao's family, another Henan migrant household who lived in the same compound as me. When I met them, they had just moved to Gaowang four months previously. But to my surprise, they already had a 21-inch colour TV at home. Yin Sao told me, this television was actually not bought but obtained by exchange. They took this TV from one of their fellow villager families who were about to go back to the rural village. In return, they gave their own TV left in the rural village to the fellow villager family when they arrived back in the home village. This trans-local exchange of the object obviously facilitated the two families to move between the rural and urban villages and to settle down in their present places.

No matter how the left set was disposed of by the absent owner, it retained considerable weight in the domestic TV consumption in the rural migrant households and had more or less influence on their TV possession in the city. This trans-local juxtaposition and interaction between two distant sets in migrants' television consumption practices was in accordance with the multi-location of their home identification. It demonstrates that the potential of the television in transcending the social and physical territories is not limited at the content level, but also at the physical level.

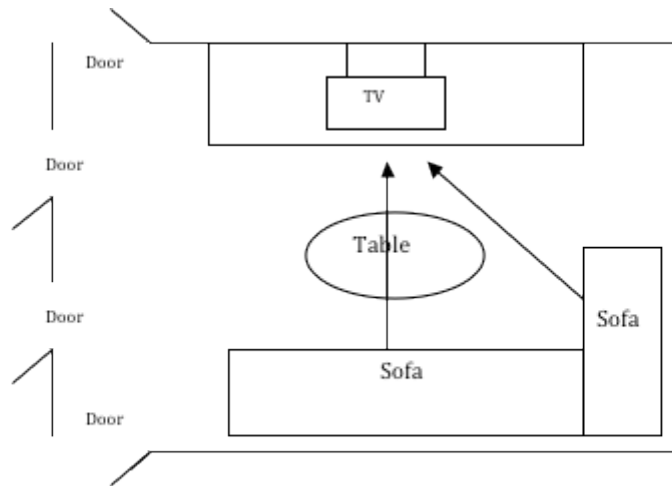
## **Location**

### ***From the living room to the inner quarter***

The domestic consumption of television is not only about possession. The TV set is also consumed to modernise the home by introducing and promoting a particular spatial syntax of domesticity where the object is embedded. In the modern idea of home, the significance of television is very much embodied in the focal position it takes in the domestic space. A stable site in the sitting room or main living room has been reified into a deserved place for television in ordinary households, whereby the collective attention of the whole family

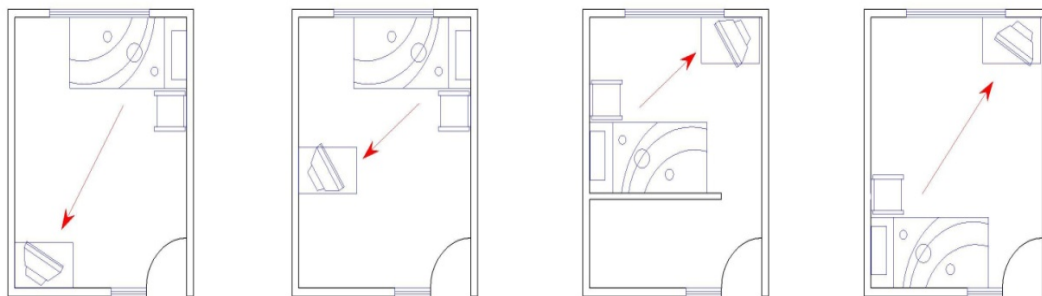
can be bonded around this ‘electrical hearth’ or ‘shining centre’ at home (Silverstone, 1994: 41, Gauntlet and Hill, 1999: 35). This image has been so much naturalised in the common awareness that one might overlook the social construction of this position and the hegemonic dynamics underlying the construction. According to Silverstone, such a location of the television in the Western home reflects the bourgeois notion of the modern interior, in which ‘personal pleasures and social preoccupations could be sustained and protected, shielded from the attentions of the public.’ (Silverstone, 1994: 24) To achieve such a ‘different world’, a main living room or drawing room is separated from the rest of the household space, functioning as ‘a box in the world theatre’ (Benjamin, 1976: 176). It used to be the space to hold salons or stage plays with friends and family members, but with the promotion of television as a home theatre, the screen replaced other amusements in maintaining the living room as separated from outside and meanwhile unifying the collective attention of the family (Spigel, 1992: 12-35).

Such idea of TV location is by no means universal. Even in the West, it has undergone dramatic changes in recent years, such as multiple sets viewed in different rooms by different members of the family or viewing through computer screens situated in other rooms. However, the impact of this living-room-centred location of the television on the domestic spatial syntax of today’s Chinese urban apartment dwelling is remarkable. Like their counterparts in the West, the standard apartment units in Chinese cities highlight the rational spatial arrangement of each functional activity and preserves considerable floor space and the central position to the living room (Lu and Shao, 2001: 279). Such residence usually assigns a clear position to television in the living room, not only manifested in the housing design but also consolidated through the interior decoration and furnishing. As charted in Figure 6.1., the living room is supposed to be situated in the centre of an urban apartment unit and it is principally structured by three pieces of furniture: a set of sofa, a side table, and a television cabinet where the principal TV set of the household is placed (or a combination cabinet for television and other electronic appliances like video player or stereo). These three parts are normally arranged as an enclosed unit, with the TV cabinet opposite to the sofa at a proper watching distance and the side table in the middle. Such interior lay out certainly entitles the television with a fixed position and demonstratively draws the attention of the whole living room to it.



**Figure 6.1.** The living room and the location of the TV set in a typical Chinese urban apartment.

Source: Sketched according to author's observation.



**Figure 6.2.** The locations of the TV set in the bedroom in different housing forms in urban villages.

Source: Sketched according to the author's observation.

In the urban villages, however, I could not find this kind of lay out in any of my migrant informant's home. Instead, their TV sets were overwhelmingly accompanied by beds in varied locations, as shown in Figure 6.2. In the light of the housing condition in the urban villages we discussed previously, this seems not surprising. For the majority of the migrant households, a separate living room did not exist in their accommodation. A single room, big or small, contained all their possessions and all indoor activities took place in one space without any partition. For the households who lived in the two-room suites, six among my informant households, did not have a separate living room either. As shown in the third case in Figure 6.2., the inner room was the principal room for the parents' bed

and the main indoor activities, while the outer room was only used as an extensive space to put extra beds for children or for visiting relatives. Without clear division between different functional spaces, the usage of every piece of furniture was accordingly multiple. In coincidence with the overlap between bedroom and living room, the bed was not only for sleeping, but also for sitting. Depending on different situations, it could be used as a chair for dining, as well as a sofa for TV viewing. Thus, the housing condition in the urban villages gave us the first explanation of the distinct emplacement of television in the rural migrant households.

A further question is how the rural migrants perceived this arrangement of television. If solely referring to the spatial arrangement of television in the typical urban apartment we charted earlier, one might assume it would trigger a sense of displacement. But this assumption proved to be problematic in the context of the rural migrants, because it did not take the *habitus* of their previous rural residence into the frame of reference. Linking to our discussion in the last chapter, the interior space in Chinese rural housing that mostly resembles the living room in the urban apartment in terms of both location and function is the *tangwu*. But according to my informants' descriptions, the television in their rural home was rarely put in the *tangwu* but normally in the *fangjian*, the inner room for sleeping and more private family activities. The first reason for this emplacement was that, as a portal space of the household directly facing the main door, the *tangwu* seemed less secure than the *fangjian* for keeping precious property like a television. Second, no matter how important a television was for the family life, it was generally perceived as improper to be placed in the *tangwu*, the sacred space in a household for the ancestor altar. 'To put a shining and noisy object like television alongside the altar is a huge disrespect to ancestors,' explained by Xiao Han, a female migrant from Guangshui county in Hubei province.

The last reason lay in the different symbolisms of the *tangwu* and the *fangjian* in the rural extended households. Appearing united under a singular patriarchal centre from outside, the traditional Chinese extended households are internally composed of several independent conjugal units, each with their own budget and economic interests (Faure, 2005: 281). Although different spatial units in the household are not strictly separated, relatively, the individual *fangjian* allocated to each conjugal family marks their private territories, while the *tangwu* is mainly for the collective possessions and activities. Also, the *fangjian* is distinct from the *tangwu* in its gender accent. While the *tangwu* is *yang*, symbolising the patriarchal power, the *fangjian* is *yin*, usually conceived of as women's

space, a guard of the inner world (Bray, 2005). Then, how does this spatial distinction decide the location of television? As mentioned in the last section, the principal means by which a television enters the rural household is through marriage as a dowry item brought from the bride's family. Conventionally, although women are supposed to convert their identity from her natal family to her husband's family, they are allowed to keep the trousseau as their private property when they live under the patriarchal order in the extended household (Bray, 2005: 271). So it is with the television brought in by the bride. It is implicitly or explicitly conceived of as her property rather than of the whole household and thus placed in the *fangjian* of the conjugal family rather than the *tangwu*. Although other household members are normally allowed to watch if they do not have one of their own, the emplacement of the TV set in the *fangjian* ensures the married woman and her conjugal family possess priority in using the set. Consequently, the domestic consumption of television in contemporary Chinese rural settings manifests a spatial attachment to the inner quarter where a certain extent of female dominance can be exercised. This forms a contradiction towards the general perceived emplacement of television in the Westernised urban domesticity, which demonstrates a spatial attachment in the common living space where men own more dominance over the technology and the reception (Morley, 1986).<sup>89</sup>

The resemblance between the emplacement of television in the rural migrants' urban residences and that in their rural residences was remarkable. In spite of the fact that the housing structure had totally changed and the TV set no longer entered their home as a dowry item of the wife, the object still tended to be emplaced in the inner quarter of the household and demonstrated a closer relation with women. This gender accent was further manifested through the accoutrements of the set. Quite often, my attention was attracted by the top of the set, where a whole array of female appliances was tidily displayed: face cream, comb, hair clips, shampoo bottles (men usually use soap for washing hair), etc. (see Figure, 6.3.) My woman informants normally justified such arrangement as 'handier' for them, but my observation suggested that the TV top was actually not or at least not the only handiest place for them to put and use those things. I also found in two families that, once the family bought a television, those female appliances which used to be put somewhere else immediately appeared on the top of the TV set, which proved this

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<sup>89</sup> Having said so, there is no intention here to essentialise these distinctions as fixed to two cultures. The micro-geography of television consumption in Chinese rural residences narrated by my informants can only be understood as a particular phenomenon in the context of a given household structure and television possession form in some rural settings. Similarly, the male dominance over television in Western domesticity is also questioned by recent debate, which proves to be only suitable for some situations. (See Gauntlett and Hill, 1999 and Morley, 2000)

phenomenon not accidental. More interestingly, women's use of the TV top like this had never been questioned by men. They also implicitly accepted this arrangement as a matter of course. To understand this phenomenon, we could refer to Lull's (1988) ethnographic work in China and Leal (1990)'s investigation among Brazilian working-class households (both cited in: Morley, 2000), which commonly address the television entourages as visualising the individual investments of the meanings attached to the TV set. But the entourages in their observation are sacred family possessions, such as the photo of the whole family, which 'constitute a matrix of significations' (Leal, 1990: 21) and turn the television into a sacred or fetish object. By comparison, what accompanied the TV set in the rural migrants' households were not sacred, but typically trifling and female things. The display shown in Photo 6.1. was very common in my migrant informant households. The meaning invested through these kind of entourages was not to deify the object, but to restore the gender accent of the object it once had in the rural residence. This gender accent, together with the inner room emplacement of the TV set, did not necessarily point to the overall privilege of women in the television consumption at home, but more precisely, its function as retention of a familiar micro-geography of TV consumption and a familiar spatial syntax of domesticity in the unfamiliar situation. From this perspective, although the inner quarter location of television in the rural migrants' urban dwelling largely stemmed from the constraints of their housing condition, it did not necessarily lead to a sense of displacement or disorder for the migrant user, as it might for some urban apartment dwellers who value the living-room location and viewing. On the contrary, the symbolism of such a location for the rural migrant households could be used to foster a feeling of familiarity and stability in the struggle of settlement.





*Photo 6.1. The accoutrements on the top of the TV set in a migrant household.*

### *The nomadic set, the nomadic viewing*

Unlike the television sited in the living room in the modern apartment, as charted earlier, which usually has a fixed position anchored by certain combination of furniture and a relatively structured spatial pattern for viewing, the television in the rural migrant households did not have such an authorised site, making both the set and viewing activities considerably nomadic.

The television was often seen as squeezed in a place just big enough for its size, sometimes side by side along with other household objects, and ready to be turned or moved whenever necessary. Similarly, viewing was not particularly seated in a stable sofa or armchair, but in whatever place was available for sitting or even standing or lying. Without a separated space centred on television, viewing was inevitably interwoven with other domestic activities. From washing, cooking, to dining, all could be undertaken while the TV set was playing. Given the normally dominant occupancy of a bed in the room, it replaced the sofa as the most likely site for viewing, which made watching to some extent overlap with sleeping. A number of informants had the habit of going to sleep with the

television on. *'Because that makes me fall asleep more quickly.'* a middle-age housewife told me. For others who had to get up very early for morning businesses, like Xiao Yue, a sesame cake baker, television was used as an alternative alarm. *'Actually, it works better than a clock.'* Xiao Yue said.

Relating to the particular housing forms we discussed in earlier chapters, it was not surprising for viewing activities to go beyond the threshold and cross the border between the indoor and the outdoor, the public and private. In the space of the housing compounds, the outdoor orientation of a substantial part of household work and daily activities also led the TV 'viewing' or 'listening' onto the balcony or the courtyard, while some household work was ongoing. With the main doors usually open in the daytime as long as the host were at home, the television playing in one household could easily be watched or heard by neighbours, who sometimes could be invited to join in.

If the outward exposure of TV viewing in some migrant households was something unintentional, for the households who lived in the street houses, it was unavoidable or sometimes deliberate. As I described earlier, the engagements in the street business drove these households into a unique dwelling form, wherein spatial and temporal division between living and working, public and private, was quite blurred. The location and usage of television in those households were both structured by this dwelling form and exploited to manage the daily life in such a dwelling form. In the first place, television was used to create and enlarge the border zone between leisure and work wherein they could be harmonised with each other more easily. As a border crosser, television was freed from the inner quarter and emerged in the working site, be it on a wall rack in a restaurant or at a corner of the counter in a grocery store, which allowed viewing simultaneously with working. 33-year-old Xiao Guo and her husband ran a bakery stall in the street just opposite their residence. From morning to the late night, day in and day out, the couple made and sold their products from the stall. To live through every long day, especially the night time, it was vital for them to have a television set for company. Therefore, every evening, people would see the couple moving the TV set – along with the cable – across the street, from their home to the stall, and then after the stall was shut up, moving it back home. (See Photo 6.2.) By indefatigably doing this, they used the television to reconcile the conflicts between life and work, which would otherwise be overwhelming. More essentially, the motion of the set swinging between their residence and working site resembled that of a pendulum, bringing about a sense of rhythm in their monotonous daily routine which had neither work schedule nor spatial distance between home and

workplace to mark the shifts between work and leisure. As Xiao Guo said, ‘every evening is my time for relaxation. Although I am still busy with the business, I can relax by watching TV.’ In this sense, the routine movement of the TV set was not merely a manipulation of an object, but essentially a making of time and space.

Since the working site of every street household was at the same time the consumption site of the public, the nomadic location of the television in the householder’s life inevitably exposed this domestic object to the public. Although passers-by could seldom control the reception, they had few barriers to join in the viewing. More precisely, the television was consciously exploited as a kind of bait to tout for and retain more customers. Most shopkeepers deliberately placed the set outwards facing the street. They not only allowed passers-by to watch, but also in many cases provided them with small stools to sit on. In some business sites like little restaurants or barbershops where customers were supposed to stay for a long period, the placement of the television was mainly to serve customers as one of the requisites of the service. In this case, the customers had the first call on reception, while the shopkeepers also managed to enjoy their own watching during the intervals of business, since most of them did not have any extra set at home. No matter who had more control of reception, whether the insider or the outsider, what was commonly demonstrated in these street houses was the co-existence between the domestic viewing and public viewing in one space and bonded to one set, whereby the borders between different social terrains were in a sense transcended.

Finally, the nomadic set and viewing enabled an operating space whereby an extensive neighbourhood relationship could be established and maintained. In Chapter four, we introduced 61-year-old cobbler Lu Shifu as a streetwise resident in Gaowang who gained popularity among the inhabitants of the nearby neighbourhood. Along with many other tactics, Lu Shifu’s success was very much owed to the second-hand colour TV in his little hut. The object was not just there to entertain Lu Shifu and cure his loneliness in the absence of his family. It actually provided Lu Shifu with an effective approach to draw his neighbours together and maintain a social bond between him and the others who could otherwise be strangers for him. Using the information he obtained from the local newspaper, he spontaneously acted as a TV program broadcaster who went around the nearby neighbourhood and notified his neighbours of whatever he found interesting in the program schedule on that day. Every evening after closing his repairing business, Lu Shifu would put his TV set towards the doorway and switch it on. As long as the weather conditions allowed, a small group of viewers, with or without their own television at home,

would gather in front of Lu Shifu's little hut and watch his television together from the doorway. (*See Photo 6.3.*) In the process of watching, people also chatted with each other, or sometimes turned to play card games if the program was not very interesting. In this example, the emplacement of the television did not lock the user into a private space or uproot him from the real neighbourhood into an imagined space. Rather, it substantially helped the user to integrate his personal world into the present neighbourhood life.

In whatever contexts, the location and usage of television are supposed to present a certain extent of nomadism in any social setting. Any fixed or singular perception of the object and the viewing activities is doomed to be a reductionist myth. Due to the particular dwelling forms and life trajectory in the rural migrants' urban settlement, this nomadism has been highlighted to a special level. It entails an intricate articulation between TV consumption and people's everyday life and allowed it to unfold and exert an influence in diverse ways. Comparing Lu Shifu's manipulation of television with Xiao Guo's, we can find that the same object was operated by different subjects to serve different ends. While Xiao Guo tried to immerse herself in the sounds and images in order to at least spiritually extricate herself from the heaviness of her work, Lu Shifu used the object to organise and gather people together, which reflected a desire of grounding and attachment to the place. In other word, the dis-embedding power of the electric medium could go in parallel with its potential in embedding the media user into the local life. Such fluidity in TV consumption enabled the rural migrants to create a strategic and flexible groundedness in their urban settlement places.



*Photo 6.2. Watching television in Xiao Guo's bakery stall.*



*Photo 6.3. Watching television in front of Lu Shifu's hut.*

## Connection

My last agenda in the material culture of rural migrants' TV consumption is the cable connection system in the two urban villages. The spatial significance of this agenda lies in its capacity to visualise the linkage between the TV consumption in every individual household and the external institutional power, which points to one of the key characteristics of domestic consumption in modernity. For Giddens (1990), what differentiates the modern home from its past is its unprecedented dependence on the operations of the 'expert systems'. From power and water supply to sewage, our domestic life is now heavily dependent on various systems based on special expertise that is opaque to the layman. This leads to people's experiences of being at home being very much disembedded from their dwelling places and depending on vested trust towards these expertises and institutions (Giddens, 1990: 26). This dependence has been further enforced by the entry of television into domestic life. Not only are the programmes produced by distant organisations and broadcast to the masses but also in order to make the set operate, one has to keep it connected to certain forms of distribution systems, which are subject to a whole array of regulations from the technological, economical, political, and geographical dimensions. Different connection systems not only vary in technology, but also entail varied mediascape and geographic dynamics. While the terrestrial TV is characterised as territorially bounded and strictly regulated by authorities to cater for the mainstream audiences, the recent boom of cable TV and satellite TV provides a technological approach to overcome the restrictions of the terrestrial system and to reach audiences who were once separated and marginalised by territorial borders. The rise of these new systems has generated a wave of academic interest in migration studies, as they open up 'new viewing horizons' for minority ethnic and migrant audiences, who can now access abundant channels, including those from their original countries, whereby a new sense of home and belonging can be formulated (Mohammadi and Ross, 1995, Morley, 2000: 123, Hargreaves, 2001: 140, Aksoy and Robins, 2003, Tsagarousianou, 2007). However, when people are too excited about the opportunities promised by the new technologies, what is easy to be overlooked is the unevenness or deficiency in the transmission and provision of these new systems in a particular social context, both economically and socially.<sup>90</sup> Even more missing is the social struggle of the marginalised

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<sup>90</sup> In examining the social differentiation and unevenness in access to the media technologies, for example, Brunsdon's (1991) study unveils the public symbolism of the satellite dish in contemporary British culture. She argues the erection of a satellite dish functions as a concrete and visible sign in differentiating council houses from middle class areas and further fixed them into a disadvantaged position. Later, Moore (1996) emphasises the variations among different communities and different social statuses in having satellite television articulated in their daily life. But both studies are based on the formal distribution systems.



group in accessing the technologies and their tactics in formulating an informal media connection network in their daily life. My examination of the rural migrants' engagement in the cable TV connection system in Gaowang and Wujiawan is intended to shed some light on this relatively unexamined agenda.

### ***The poverty of the formal system in an informal neighbourhood***

To understand the cable system in the two urban villages, I should above all provide the reader with a social backdrop. In today's China, cable and satellite TV is not unreachable at all for most ordinary households. According to 2008 China TV Rating Yearbook<sup>91</sup>, cable TV has become the principal reception pattern for Chinese audiences, covering 83.4% of household reception (83.8% in cities and 74.9% in countryside). The total number of cable receivers amounts to 140 million households (1.224 billion heads). In the meantime, 88% of urban households and 79.2% of rural households can receive satellite television at home. In contrast, only 12% of urban households and 20.8% of rural households remain watching terrestrial TV. In relation to the population scale of China, achieving such a dominant coverage of cable and satellite TV in the nationwide scope is very impressive indeed. From the quantitative perspective, it even takes the lead on some developed countries.<sup>92</sup>

However, the social implication of such immense coverage of cable and satellite TV should be interrogated with reference to the particular regulatory environment of the media industry in mainland China. Above all, any technological innovation and market strategy of the Chinese media development is still subject to the totalitarian political line of the state and the party, which emphasises the state's regulation in both content and production. Along this line, the development of satellite television in mainland China is characterised by the legal ban of the direct-to-home (DTH) device in ordinary households.

<sup>93</sup> Instead, the principal approach for satellite TV reception is through cable networks run at local levels but equally controlled by the government. This policy is designed to use

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<sup>91</sup> China Communication University Press, 2008. Page 3

<sup>92</sup> In the UK, for example, 77% of households have satellite, digital or cable receiver, cable only serves 13.2% of television homes. For Americans, the household percentages with satellite and cable receiver are 30.3% and 65.7% respectively. According to: Family Expenditure Survey in 2007 National Statistics. (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=868>), 2006 statistics by Ofcom. ([http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2006/03/nr\\_20060317](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2006/03/nr_20060317)), and 2007 statistics from SEC findings, NCTA. (<http://tvbythenumbers.com/2007/11/12/cable-tv-vs-satellite-tv-us-subscribers-2002-2007q3>)

<sup>93</sup> Exceptions are some remote rural areas beyond the reach of terrestrial signals, international hotels and residences, and organisations authorised to get access for special needs.

cable networks to censor the contents from the satellite and only deliver to audiences a particular pack of channels wanted by the regulator. Without their own DTH devices, the satellite channels available for the ordinary households are principally the some 50 channels produced by China Central Television (CCTV) and the provincial television stations, while those produced outside the state's jurisdiction are barely accessible.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, cable and satellite television cannot be categorised as the alternative media in China as they are termed in many other countries. Novel in technology, they are actually conventional in content and institutions, little more than adding an advanced wing onto the old broadcasting machine. Their potential in transcending the authoritative boundaries, developing diversified programming, or catering for small niche audiences have far from been exploited.

However, the nationwide transmission of cable reception does bring dramatic changes to people's reception experiences and formulates a new geography in TV consumption. First, the materiality of the cable network tightens the spatial bond between TV viewing with one's dwelling site. Unlike the territorial signals, which are largely mobile and open within certain territory, every cable terminal points to an identifiable residential site in which both the set and viewing are situated. The homeless and nomads are in turn more easily banished from this environment. Second, the expansion of cable means the reconfiguration of the TV viewing geography within a city. Unlike the territorial broadcasting systems, which are directly run by the governmental administration and normally singular in one administrative jurisdiction, the authority to operate the cable networks has been delegated to the lower levels. When cable TV initially boomed in Chinese cities in the 1980s, it was chiefly established, managed and highly subsidised by some privileged work units to serve their own residential areas (Liu, 2007). As the economic reform proceeded deeper in the 1990s, the cable TV service was detached from most work units and put onto the market. Huge efforts have been made by different levels of government to consolidate the previously separated networks and bring them under the direct control and supervision of the local offices of the Ministry of Television and Radio (MTR).<sup>95</sup> As a result, the market slice of one area was normally shared by several operators affiliated to different levels of administrators, who rivalled each other to expand their own turf. It is true that all operators are state owned and have to follow legal boundary in channel selection, yet within the boundary, each operator still has operative

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<sup>94</sup> Only recently, some coastal areas like Guangdong have opened to limited foreign or Hong Kong channels, such as Sky Satellite and Phoenix TV.

<sup>95</sup> With '*The Interim Procedures of Management of Cable TV*' ratified in that year. MTR was the predecessor of the current administration SARFT.



space to compose their own channel package to compete each other and to serve the particular interests it represents. This market strategy in turn changes the TV reception in one city into a heterogeneous landscape. What is more, in most cases, the space for individual households to choose the operator is very limited. This is rather a decision between the operator and certain public institutions that present and manage the community, be they the general affair office of the work unit, the estate developer or manager, or the community committee. Apart from installation, these institutions also more or less cooperate with the operator in daily management, such as collecting subscriptions. One consequence of this is that the areas weak in community or neighbourhood organisations tend to be marginalised in the cable map of the city. Considering all these influences, the rapid distribution of cable TV in Chinese cities is a unique approach of urban space reconfiguration, both implemented through the expert and market systems and regulated by the power of the State. As a spatial mechanism for the particular power structure, it could be employed by the authorities to add another layer of social exclusion on the marginalised.

Then what is the position of the urban villages like Gaowang and Wujiawan in this social constructed cable geography? When cable TV was an exclusive benefit behind the *danwei* wall, there was no doubt that Gaowang and Wujiawan was absolutely outside the city's cable map. Their first contact with cable TV was as late as 1996, when Hubei Cable tried to expand their market into this area. Initially 113 households subscribed. Apart from the 120 RMB annual subscriptions, each of them had to pay 400 RMB for initial installation, which was not payable for the residents who lived in the residential areas of their work units or estate communities. But it wasn't very long before disputes arose between the operator and the local subscribers. The operator found it difficult to continue their service in the area because collection of the subscriptions proved to be a headache. No viewing fee subscriptions had been paid during the past years, as the subscribers refused to pay because the signal quality was poor and nobody was responsible for troubleshooting. In an attempt to force the subscribers to pay the outstanding fees, Hubei Cable had twice tried to disconnect the area from their network in 2003 and 2004. But this did not work and it took no time for the local residents to reconnect. After several protracted disputes, Hubei Cable finally abandoned the whole area completely. As Mr. Geng, a branch manager of the company told me: 'It has been too much. Now, we regard that area as non-existing. Everybody knows that the villagers are using the cable network without paying, but it is wiser to let them be rather than to play with them anymore.'

Why did it become like this? From the perspective of the operator, the urban villages posed two challenges towards their ordinary management. First, for the ordinary cable customers, one subscriber household usually had no more than two TV sets. But in the urban villages, one account could be used to connect dozens of TV sets. In the operator's registration list, there were only 113 local owner households who subscribed to the service. But behind every owner household, a clutch of migrant tenant households would share the cable with their landlords. The uncertainty of their life in the city tended to hinder the rural migrants from subscribing to the cable service in their own name. Neither was any local owner willing to pay for a separate account for each tenant household, but wouldn't mind sharing their own account with the tenants. As a result, the registered subscribers were vastly outnumbered by the subsidiary users, which unavoidably overloaded the network and caused frequent signal discontinuity or network breakdown in the area. The difficulty for the current cable TV system in handling this kind of community is that the service is priced according to the number of the registered accounts, while not being able to measure the actual usage under each account, let alone to trace changes instantly. The other challenge came from the lack of formal public organisation in the area which the operator could cooperate with in the daily management. The initial establishment of the cable network in Gaowang and Wujiawan was facilitated by several indigenous elites. Their previous positions in the old village committee entitled them to represent the local residents to negotiate with the cable company and undertake the door-to-door fee collection in the first few years. However, the influence of the indigenous elites had been undermined by the administrative reorganisations in the following years, as outlined in chapter three. Meanwhile the authority of the urban neighbourhood organisation had been far from embedded in the community. The lack of a local public organisation in the area made it very difficult for the cable operator to implement their daily management on a door-to-door basis, from fee collection to dispute resolution. Using Mr. Geng's words: 'How can we deal with a host of dragons without a head?' In short, both challenges reflected the poverty of the formal expert system of cable TV in catering for areas like the two urban villages, which featured an ever changing housing occupancy and a self-organised (or unorganised from the bureaucratic view) neighbourhood life. This poverty in turn marginalised the urban villages in the mainstream cable geography of the city and gave rise to the birth of an alternative cable network in the area.

### ***A Do-It-Yourself cable network***

Despite being institutionally abandoned by the formal cable system, cable viewing far from perished in the two urban villages. When I did my fieldwork in Gaowang and Wujiawan, the entanglements between the local subscribers and Hubei Cable had passed many years previously. A group of local owners recently switched to another cable operator, Wuhan Cable, who promised a better service than Hubei Cable. But it seemed not very appealing in the whole area, for they charged 800RMB for installation, as well as higher viewing fee. The majority of the local residents still depended on the network left by Hubei Cable. As no fees were paid, the services from the operator had been absent over the last years, including maintaining or repairing the network. Instead, the cable network operation in these two urban villages had partly detached from the expert system of the formal operator and localised into the place through two levels of self-help.

The first level was home DIY in individual households. To gain the access, one only needed to find a nearby junction box and add an extra cable leading to his/her own room. The cable could be connected either directly from any of the outdoor distributing cabinets or branch boxes scattered around the area, or from the terminal box belonging to the local owner, who once registered with the operator, agreed to share the device with the tenant households in the interest of the house rental business. Very often, the extra cable could be split in the middle and loaded with more branches. The endeavours of every individual household added up to an intricate and chaotic cable web stretching throughout the whole area. (*See Photo 6.4.*) To obtain effective reception under such a heavy load, signal amplifiers were widely used in many households. Apart from installation and connection, every householder needed to learn how to cope with breakdowns for whatever reason, including wire disconnections or breakages from a passing vehicle or other working electronic appliances (rarely a problem in a well-maintained network), otherwise to seek aid from each other. In my observation, this kind of DIY operation had become a commonplace event in the local cable viewing in every household.

The other level of self-help operation was through a semi-professional market, again chiefly played out by a chain of electronic appliance shops in the streets run by the rural migrants who possessed basic knowledge and skills in cable TV technologies. (*See Photo 6.5.*) The first thing those shops offered was to sell a whole range of cable components, from all sizes of wires to a variety of signal amplifiers. Equally available from those shops

were direct cable network services, including connecting, troubleshooting, repairing, and installing signal amplifiers. When a new apartment building was about to be finished, the cable connection of the entire building would be taken up by one or two shops. Although none of these shops had authorised professional qualification, their services were promisingly cheap and prompt. More importantly, being embedded in the place and catering for the neighbourhood for years, they specialised in solving the problems particularly common in the local terrain more than any other experts. They knew every junction box and every section of cable web in the area as well as the back of their own hands. With such a cable map in their minds, they could detect the fault and solve it immediately. Because a good service in cable troubleshooting and repairing would promote the purchase demand for second-hand TV sets in the neighbourhood, another principal business of these shops, this gave them a strong incentive to improve and sustain the quality of their services in the long run.

Based on both individual and market levels, a self-help system was effectively functioning in the two urban villages and produced a distinct cable living in the locality. To say 'self-help' does not mean the whole system was fully endogenetic or self-contained. Its continuous connection and dependence on the city's cable network and the institutions outside the local community were manifest in terms of both hardware and contents. Yet, the consequence of this connection was far from a cable viewing uprooted from their neighbourhood life but a deeper embedment into the local community. The network operation not only presented a physical proximity with people's dwelling space, but also intertwined with the life fabric of their urban settlement, such as neighbourhood interaction, tenancy relationships and migrant livelihood. In turn, through such a self-help network operation, a unique cable landscape was created in the urban villages, making the area distinct in the cable geography of the city. In short, cable connection was both made by the place and making the place. It was exercised by the urban villagers as an important tactic in their daily spatial struggle.



*Photo 6.4 The self-connected cable web in a house compound.*



*Photo 6.5. An electronic appliance shop run by a rural migrant household.*

At the end of this chapter, I would like to conclude the ethnographic moment when the migratory users embrace the material culture of television as another dynamical approach

of place making in the Chinese rural migrants' urban settlement. Arguably, the binary division of television consumption into text and object, imagined and real, fluid and solid is very much simplistic. In reality, they have to depend on and interweave into each other to function. What was critically demonstrated in my observation pointed to the fact that the fluidity of television, or its potential in transcending social boundaries and reconfiguring time and space did not exclusively rely on the moving images and floating sounds it mediates, it was also delivered through people's daily manipulations of the physics of television. Whether through the domestic possession of TV set, the meaningful emplacement of the object in their daily spatial and temporal structure, or the self-help operation in the access to the cable connection, the rural migrants were consciously or unconsciously employing the object to transcend and permeate various social and geographic borders, which empowered them to develop a multi-sited and trans-local sense of home, place, and belonging in their urban settlement practices.

Similarly demonstrated through their TV consumption was the paradoxical mechanism of television between disembedding and embedding, which was employed by the rural migratory subjects as a crucial tactic in interpreting and coping with the tension between home and away, displacement and emplacement in their urban settlement process. Thanks to this paradox, their usage of television to connect them with home *there* and *past* did not contradict with their usage of television to make or feel at home *here* and *now*. Just as the everyday and the familiar provided by the TV programming is not exclusive to sedentary viewers but also in the search of migrant viewers (Aksoy and Robins, 2003: 97), the 'compulsion to proximity' (Urry, 2004) engendered by the television as a domestic object equally matters for the migrant users, for it provided a platform where particular forms of domestic and public life are organised and routinised. In the meantime, the unique TV living led by the migratory subjects gave rise to an informal television market in their urban settlement, which both localised the cultural landscape of the urban villages and linked it with the outside world.

Therefore, by manipulating the possession, location and connection of television, the rural migrants developed multiple and flexible articulations of this modern commodity with their everyday practices of urban settlement. They created a unique mediascape not disjunctive but deeply embedded, integral, and well as dynamical in their domestic and neighbourhood life in the urban villages. They enjoyed a material cultural space enabling both travelling and settling.

## Chapter 7

### The Politics of Place in the Spring Festival

*The human being, by his mere presence, imposes a schema on space. Most of the time, he is not aware of it. ... He marks its presence on those ritual occasions that lift life above the ordinary and so force him to an awareness of life's values, including those manifests in space.*

— Tuan, Y.-F. (1977) *Space and place: The perspective of experience* p36

*(Man) Roaming outside with ambitions*

*No one knows my struggles...*

*They say the world outside is splendid*

*But do I have any other choices*

*Year after year within a glimpse*

*Have I made it or not*

*Wealthy or not, turning the year by homecoming*

*(Woman) Always waiting for you at home is the family reunion dinner...*

— Wang Baoqiang (2008), '*Wealthy or Not, Turning the Year by Homecoming*'<sup>96</sup>

As my fieldwork in Gaowang and Wujiawan drew towards a close, an upcoming big event brought an exciting ferment to the community: the 2008 Chinese New Year (or the Spring Festival). In greeting what is probably the most prominent ceremonial moment for Chinese people, every household started to prepare foods and other festival goods, every public telephone site was crowded with an unprecedented number of long-distance callers, the village street appeared more bustling than ever with intensified comings and goings. What seemed settled in the ordinary time was about to experience new uncertainty and all the matters to be decided once again put the issue of place forward. Where was the place to celebrate the festival? How to change an everyday life locale into a ceremonial site?

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<sup>96</sup> A Chinese pop song popular at the beginning of 2008. The singer Wang Baoqiang himself used to be a peasant worker but grasped a chance to become an entertainment star. This experience gave him to a remarkable popularity, especially among the rural migrants. Wang Baoqiang: *you qian mei qian, hui jia guo nian*. Words: Zhao Xiaoyuan. Music: Xi Mi

Although these are the questions commonly faced by all Chinese households at this time, for the rural migratory subjects, the unsolved tension between settlement and migration in their life would make these questions more difficult and accordingly more vital to decide, and the answer would not merely determine their festival experience, but more crucially, both reflect and affect how they perceive who they are, how they locate themselves and relate different locations in the migratory circuit, and finally how their festivity contributes to the place-making process in the urban villages.

All these questions are far beyond being just individual or household issues for the rural migrants themselves, but equally stir public nerves every year at this time. Since the late 1980s, the character of the rural migrant during the festival has been associated with a public issue called *chunyun* (transportation during the Spring Festival). The annual movement of peasant labour before and after the Spring Festival imposes the world's largest acute population movement on the country's transportation systems. In 2008, for example, the volume of passenger traffic during the festival was estimated at 2.37 billion people and at least half of them was constituted by the rural migrants who were paying their return visits to the rural home.<sup>97</sup> Given the huge efforts by the transportation sectors, including some unusual measures such as the 'peasant labour only' coaches or trains and the temporary outdoor waiting camps, the chaos caused by this tidal movement is still overwhelming. The annual pressure on the transportation system changes the homecoming journey of individual migrants into a public anxiety, whereby an 'ideology of return' (Brah, 1996: 182) is further naturalised in the public perception of the rural migratory subjects. According to its logic, the Spring Festival for the rural migrants is nothing but a sacred and obligating moment to remind them of who they should be and where they should belong. Despite their work and life experiences in the city, once a year, they commit to the festival homecoming as a pilgrimage to their sole and permanent root fixed to the rural land from where they originate. While public concerns are hypnotised in solving the problem caused by this annual tidal movement, eyes are closed to some deeper questions: Why do they have to return? What does return exactly mean to them? Why can't they celebrate the festival in the city? What if they do not return?<sup>98</sup> In this chapter, I

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<sup>97</sup> See: [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2008-01/23/content\\_866781.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2008-01/23/content_866781.htm)

<sup>98</sup> The disastrous weather before the 2008 Spring Festival might have been exceptional in bringing these questions into public awareness for the first time. Due to the unprecedented snowy and icy weather that swept across southern China before the advent of the New Year, the transportation system became paralysed. The freezing weather brought chaos to the road and rail transport networks. Tens of thousands of travellers were trapped en route or at railway stations. To ease the pressure on the transportation system, for the first time, the governments and official media sent a message to the peasant workers: in the interests of both the State and yourself, you are welcome to stay in the city for this year's festival. See: [http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2008-01/29/content\\_2050366.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2008-01/29/content_2050366.htm)



would like to raise all these questions and scrutinise them. The aim is to examine how the rural migrants in the urban villages confronted the 'ideology of return' and actively engaged into the 'politics of location' through their festival practices.

In contrast with the previous contents, the discussion in this chapter will turn our lens from the ordinary life to a ritual occasion, which entails a unique social conjunction in the place-making process of the rural migrants' urban settlement. To understand the social implications of various ritual activities, academic enquiries have never ceased and the successive theorisations still remain a topic of seemingly inexhaustible potential in the social sciences. An early intuition was seen in Durkheim's classic text *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915). His functionlist model of interpretation concentrates on the integrative function of rituals. In the heart of this model is to theorise ritual activities as a social unifier, through which individuals are bonded together, diverse local communities and social strata are welded together into more extensive collectivities, different identities and places are integrated into 'a shared society' and 'one place'. In criticising the Durkheimian paradigm, Lukes (1975) re-defines ritual as 'rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought or feeling which they hold to be of special significance' (p. 291, cited in: Elliott, 1998: 143). He sees rituals as 'expressions of power rather than expressions of consensus', which are aimed to promote 'a class-structured, conflictive and pluralistic model of society rather than a unitary, integrated consensual one' (Elliott, 1998: 142). A more dialectical formulation is provoked by Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982), who believes the together moments provided by rituals do not solely serve the existing social order, but also create a liminal space or a transitional status that is outside the social structure in a subjunctive mode. This model of society based on common humanity (*communitas*) is viewed as a form of 'anti-structure', 'for its very existence puts all social structural rules in question and suggests new possibilities' (Turner 1974: 202). Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* have also been subject to a number of critiques, because they still focus on elucidating commonalities and togetherness, while more or less undermining differences and conflicts. Many anthropologists of religion (Werbner, 1977, Sallnow, 1981, Morinis, 1984, Eade and Sallnow, 1991, Morinis, 1992, Dubisch, 1995) have argued that, far from a unified set of values being affirmed, there are considerable conflicts, including different interpretations over religious values and the meaning of the sacred centres. From this perspective, many sacred sites and performances turn out to be 'almost a religious void', they are nothing but 'a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices' (Eade and Sallnow, 1991: 15), which does not necessarily lead to

*communitas*, but sometimes deliver an ‘arena of competition’ in which ‘new social alignments may arise’ (Sallnow, 1981: 43). It is precisely under a theoretical line such as this that I presume the rural migrants’ engagements in the Chinese Spring Festival entail a practice of space wherein a new sense of place and home is in the making.

This chapter starts by sketching a backdrop about the ideological transformation of the Spring Festival in China. The main body will focus on two aspects of the rural migrants’ festival experiences: their festival return to the rural home and their festivity in the urban villages. The data for the first aspect were collected from my interviews with informants before they set off on their return journey and after they came back from their rural home, while the second aspect is based on my participatory observations and interviews in Gaowang and Wujiawan during the festival, including home visits to four migrant households and one indigenous household on the New Year’s Eve.

## **The ‘position ordering’ through the festival reunion**

The Spring Festival in China is a season of festivity to celebrate the turn of a year in the lunar calendar (the traditional and official calendar in China before 1928). From the 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> of the twelfth month of the lunar year (*Xiaonian*) to the 15<sup>th</sup> of the first month of the new lunar (the Lantern Festival or *Yuanxiao*), there are a whole series of ceremonial performances to ring out the old year and welcome the new. But what is deeply embedded in these performances is their prevailing appeal for familial reunion and completion, which is especially manifested in the family reunion dinner on the New Year’s Eve (*Chuxi*). As Feuchtwang (1992) describes:

*The eve is a return home and a completion of the family households. At the very least a member of a Chinese family would feel absence from it. Many would regret their absence poignantly. Most would be home, celebrating the continuing narrative of a complete household, renewed by their homecoming.* (p. 25)

Although this reunion/return cult is worshipped and operated at household and familial level, its key code is imbued with a delicate web of social order, which is meant to reaffirm a harmonious and permanent cosmic hierarchy centred on an ‘official imperial cult honouring Heaven and Confucius’ (Feuchtwang, 1992: vii). According to Feuchtwang’s (1992) historical review, from the very origin of the official calendar in China compiled in about the third century BC, the Chinese lunar year had been literally

standardised into the imperial year. The sciences of mathematics and astronomy, the issuing of calendars, were closely guarded by the imperial state and directly manipulated as part of imperial power in ruling the massive territory. Through the circulation of almanacs, a unique cosmology was built up, wherein the emperor, as Son of Heaven, was in the centre of the man's world, regulating and keeping the basic universal harmony; while people were the subjects of the feudal ruler, bonded with the land and following the monthly schedule of farming activities as instructed by the almanacs. The turn of each year was thus one of the authoritatively approved ritual occasions to rectify and reinforce such cosmological order (p. 26-8). At the macro-level, the reunion cult pointed to the legitimacy of the sovereignty of the emperor; while at the micro-level, the centre of the reunion was defined as the patriarchal family, symbolised by a series of ritual performances around ancestral shrines or domestic altars led by the patriarch of each household. The festival was exploited as a ritual space in synchronising these two levels into to a highly integrated and unitary model of society (Watson, 1985, Donald, 2007), in which the imperial state represented the extensive form of the familial home and the emperor was the father of the people. Through worshipping this reunion cult, one was simultaneously enclosed in the domestic sphere and connected with the central power. The household shrine or ancestral altar fixed its members onto a unitary origin and meanwhile tied them into a historical and geographical web. Such festival geography has largely remained until today. Although the ancestral altar might be absent in some households nowadays, the climax of the festival for most Chinese households is still to stay at home, unite with family members around the dining table, while watching the national Spring Festival Gala Show broadcasted by the state TV station on *Chuxi* night.<sup>99</sup>

However, the modern history of China added another layer of politics of location to the Spring Festival. As part of the modern nation-state project, the Republican government launched a cultural movement called *feili* (abolished calendar) from 1912, which aimed at promoting the solar calendar as the 'national calendar' and abolished the Chinese traditional lunar calendar (Wah, 2004: 203). Since then, the official holiday of the New Year's Day (*yuan dan*) was moved from the lunar to the solar date and the 'old' New Year was renamed as 'the Spring Festival'. Many ritual activities of the festival, such as ancestral and gods worship, were accordingly discouraged as 'superstition' (*mixin*). Nevertheless, this reform was mainly introduced in big cities, leaving massive rural areas out of its reach. Even after experiencing the 'Cultural Revolution' in the 1960s and 1970s, the religious rites of the festival were still widely practiced in the rural areas and tolerated

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<sup>99</sup> A detailed examination of the programme and the festival viewing will be presented in the next chapter.

by the government, as long as they were limited to domestic and small communal scales. Although the position of the Spring Festival has been re-acknowledged by the authority and a three-day public holiday was issued for it since 1980, the uneven transformation in history has resulted in the distinct urban/rural division in the festival landscape. Commonly at the heart of the Spring Festival is the family reunion, but the forms of celebration vary. In typical urban households, the festival is precisely timed by a 7-day public holiday<sup>100</sup>. The ancestral worship activities have almost disappeared. The well-off urbanites are free to leave their home and go to some commercial sites like restaurants or holiday resorts to celebrate their holiday. While in the countryside, the period of the festival is much more than seven days, still following the old almanac spanning the turn of the year, normally lasting three weeks from the *Xiaonian* to the Lantern Festival. A series of domestic ancestral worship and religious rites are retained. People in different regions also follow various festival taboos, such as the prohibition of rubbish clearance and needle or scissors usage during the first three days of the New Year. In other words, in today's China, people's experiences of the Chinese New Year varied dramatically with their urban/rural categories. That is not to say their festivities are always fixed, nor are their urban/rural categories. It means, however, under the regulation of social belonging along the urban/rural division, every year turning becomes a fundamental moment for social actors to express, reflect, negotiate, and rectify their identifications with different locations. For rural migrants who are in-between these two categories, the significance of this moment in their identification is even greater. While the official discourses that refuse to accept them as equal citizens of the city would unquestioningly presume the turn of the year to be the sacred moment for these outsiders to return to their rural origins, how the rural migrants in the urban villages practically engaged themselves into the festival would put this presumption to the test.

## **Position politics in the festival return**

### ***The multi-sited reunion***

In contrast with what is represented by the mainstream discourses, the question of where to celebrate the festival was far from pre-determined but a huge dilemma to be solved in

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<sup>100</sup> The 7-day public holiday is normally composed of three weekday festival holidays, and two weekends. It used to commence from the New Year's Day of the lunar month. According to the new regulations 2008, it was moved one day forward to cater for the popular demand for family reunion on the New Year's Eve.

every rural migrant household. The process of decision-making was changeful and could continue one or two months until it was very close to the *Chuxi*. Return was certainly an option open to every household but not obligatory. Especially for the households who had been settled in the city for a long time, the location of the festival was decided through constant re-weighing between return and stay, which was destined to vary from one household to another and from one year to another. In the 2008 Spring Festival, for example, 13 households among my 37 informant households decided to return to their home village, whereas 22 chose to stay in the urban villages, another 2 had part of the household members returning and part staying. The difficulties in transportation posed by the snow disaster at the time of that year's festival certainly affected the decision-making in many households, but my interviews about their festival experiences in the previous years also suggested a considerable proportion of households would stay in the city for the festival.

The return journey had its appeal, but also triggered some worries. My interviews suggested that the *desire* for return was usually parallel with a *fear* of return when the decision was made in every migrant household. The fear firstly came from the economic cost. For most migrant households, the return journey was the biggest family expenditure in the whole year, probably costing several months' wages. The expenses were partly for the train or coach tickets, but the larger part was spent on gift offers and family feasts during the festival. All these burdens could be avoided if one stayed in the city during the festival. Apart from the economic costs, more pressure would arise from the encounters with relatives and old village fellows. 38-year-old Xiao Wen honestly admitted that, if it were not for his parents, he preferred not going back to the home village for the festival. 'The meeting with acquaintances back in the home village has come to be a time to show off,' he said, 'when others showed off how much money they earned during the year and I had nothing to say, it was embarrassing. If I stay in the city during the festival, I could avoid that pressure.'

Even if there was no obstacle to returning, life in the city was not that easy to put aside. Although the festival is generally considered as a holiday, or a respite from working, for many rural migrants, it could be even busier. Some justified their stay with the overtime wages available during the festival. For those who lived on the street businesses, like barbershops, bakeries, and 'telephone supermarkets', the time before the festival is the busiest time of their business in the whole year, which made it really worthwhile to sacrifice the opportunity of returning for the festival. The other concern that made those

business households remain in the urban villages was the relatively higher rate of burglary during the holiday, which forced them to stay in order to secure their properties.

Staying in the city did not have to be associated with a separated or lonely festival. Rather, it changed the urban villages into another site of family reunion and homecoming: children or the elders who were left behind in the rural villages were invited to the city; those who worked in other cities came home and reunited with their family members. Wherever the family reunion was sited, their reunion was far from fixed to one point, but spanned between two or even more points. With *Chuxi* approaching, every telephone supermarket greeted more customers than ever. The long-distance calls, which took place on a weekly or monthly basis in the ordinary time suddenly became a daily business. Via the telephone line, various festival issues were discussed and decided, from the reunion site, the gift purchase, to the feast preparation. It was also the moment when the exchange of consumer goods between places intensified. Along with the comings and goings of people, commodities like new clothes, alcohol, and sweets were purchased in the city and brought back to the rural villages, while farm products like cured meat or preserved vegetables were prepared in the rural villages and carried to the city. Under such intense communication and exchanges, the festival reunion in any site would be constituted of and contributed to by the ingredients from other sites. Thus what was celebrated through the festival was not solely the return to a fixed or exclusive origin, but the formation of a trans-local sense of belonging and identity, which was commonly constituted by both their rural connections and the urban settlement experiences.

### ***The returning site: from the roots to the nodes***

After breaking down the myth that reifies the rural village as the sole and natural site of the family reunion for the rural migrants, the next question we need to ask is, for those who did return to their home villages for the Spring Festival, what did the journey exactly mean to them? Did it solely point to a return to one's roots or past? Similar to the multiplicity of the reunion sites, the motivations and meanings of the return journey and the return site were equally multiple rather than singular.

The return to the rural home certainly had its ritual significance for the rural migrants, because that was the place many traditional ritual performances like the ancestral worship could be undertaken. In every case, one of the major issues for the return was to organise

the sacrificial ceremony before the ancestral altar in the *tangwu* and the family visit to the ancestral grave. But the journey was equally driven by many secular concerns. One prominent force was to maintain the social bonds with the rural homes, which still tied a substantial part of their social belonging defined by the territorial oriented population regulations in China. Despite the efforts of the rural migrants to settle in the city, the city only accepted them as a source of cheap labour, while pushing the responsibility for their social welfare on the rural areas they came from. By the time I finished my fieldwork, the rural migrants' access to the social welfare resources, such as medical services, compulsory education, and pensions were still fixed to their birth villages. In other words, no matter how much they contributed to the city, it was still the rural villages that bore the burden of caring for the weak, the ill, the under-age and the elderly. For many migrants, the festival return was their only chance in the whole year to fulfil their moral and social duties to those they left behind. If the festival return was in a sense obligatory for them, it was not necessarily because they spiritually identified themselves as solely and permanently rooted in the village, but more practically because the current system in the city was not yet ready to include them as equal citizens.

We could also be misled in our understanding of the return journey by the image of 'roots' for it constructs a site where the mobile subjects could always be embraced by their unchanged past. But very often, what the returning rural migrants expected to meet in their rural home was not somebody unchanged, but equally mobile as themselves. For example, although Lu Shifu had already made up his mind to return to his Tianmen home village long before the advent of the festival, he could not set up the departure date in advance because he was aware that he would meet no one if he arrived home too early. His wife and daughter were also away from the village and worked in Hangzhou and Shenzhen. The genuine return required the three of them to plan their journey in concert. 'I tried to arrive home on the same date as them,' he told me, 'otherwise, what is the point for me to return to an empty house?' Compared to Lu Shifu, Xiao Wen's decision to return was made up very late. His initial plan was not to return. He changed his mind when he heard one of his cousins whom he had not met for many years decided to return to the home village this year and this would be a rare chance for the two relatives to meet. For both Lu Shifu and Xiao Wen, the return journey was not for anyone left behind, but for someone equally on move. In these cases, the rural home as the return site was no longer approached by the migratory subjects solely as a static root, but an ideal location to accommodate meeting and gathering with other travellers.

There is no doubt that the simultaneous return of a large group of migrants had made the Spring Festival the annual climax of common presence in their rural homes and communities, but to characterise this phenomenon solely as the ritual power associated with the turn of the year or the ancestral worship is too simple. The narratives of my migrant informants about their experiences back to the home villages made me realise that the motivations and meanings of this festival's common presence in today's rural villages had become multi-layered. To make the most of this annual holiday leave, many migrants deliberately arranged other ceremonial events during the Spring Festival, in order to ensure the largest scale of attendance. In the 2008 Spring Festival, two of my informant households went back to their home villages to attend relatives' weddings, one to participate in the elder's sixtieth birthday ceremony (even though the real date of the birthday was not in the holiday). In these cases, more celebrations are added to the moment of year turning and more meanings are delivered by the return journey.

By travelling over distance, the return journey to one's rural roots usually leads to an imagined world different and distant from the modern world, a pastoral heaven where one could retreat from the struggles, disputes, and worries in the city. But what struck me during the interviews was the integration rather than the disjunction between the return journey of the rural migrants and their life in the city. What they looked forward to and what really happened back in the rural homes was an integral part of their work and life in the city. Under the current circumstance, the urban employment of the peasant labour, most typically in the construction industry, is actually based on the rural society and heavily dependent on the rural contractors who use their personal network to recruit labour from their own villages. The recruitment is normally arranged during the Spring Festival when most villagers are expected to be at home. During the whole year of employment in the city, the peasant labourers would only receive a certain amount of living expenses, allowances just enough for their basic living requirements. As for the full wages, they would have to wait until the next Spring Festival when everyone returned to the rural village when the contractor would be expected to account and make the payment. At the same time, recruitment for the new year would soon be launched again. Therefore, for many rural migrants, their return and presence in the rural village during the festival were crucial in that it would determine whether they would be fairly compensated for their whole year of toil in the city and decide their employment prospects for the year to come. The seasonal operation of this employment system inevitably dragged the rural home onto the track of the rural-urban circuit and made it into an integral node in the entire migratory trajectory rather than a distant world off the track. The return journey thereby was



conducted by the migrants not as the mythical conformation to an exclusive and static origin, but as a movement integrating different sites into a circuit.

### ***The sacredness of homecoming***

To reveal the multi-layered purposes of the rural migrants' festival return and acknowledge the material motivations underlying it does not mean we can neglect the spiritual sacredness of this journey. After all, their homecoming for the festival was different from any return journey in ordinary times, because the turning of the year marks a special calendrical moment and lends a ceremonial significance to every event happening during this time. But even in the spiritual dimension, the meaning of the festival return proves to be multi-vocal. Parallel to the orthodox of the festival that drives people to return and stay at home at the turn of the year as the reaffirmation of a command hierarchy or position, there has always been a heterodox long existing in Chinese New Year culture. This is the belief that the year switch indicates a catastrophic moment when demonic powers come down to the world and bring disaster and plague to people and their communities.<sup>101</sup> To survive this catastrophe, big parades or dances were organised to drive away the plagues, everyone had a bath and cleansed the house to get rid of dirt, and deafening fire crackers were set off to scare demons away. As the most critical moment to survive this annual catastrophe, the *Chuxi* night was the climax of the festival. People were encouraged to protect themselves at home and stay overnight with their families until the dawn of the New Year's Day, called *shousui* (guard the year) (Xiao, 2007). After the eve, people came out of the house and greeted each other in this annual event of revival and renewal. From the perspective of this popular heterodoxy, what was celebrated at New Year is not the 'ordered, civil harmony', but rather 'the remarkable survival by families and communities from an "annual apocalypse" in which everyone might just as well have been killed' (Feuchtwang, 1992: 25-60, see in: Stafford, 2000: 31). As Stephan Feuchtwang (1992) noted:

*Under the sweet talk of a benign imperial cosmos is another demonic cosmos of great destructive power and the capacity to withhold or command them. (p. 55)*

In today's China, the sacredness of the turn of the year is not necessarily associated with any fear of demonic powers, but people's belief in the power of renewal of the new year remains. The New Year Festival is celebrated not only as a chance to consolidate social

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<sup>101</sup> In some legends the demon was literally named as *nian* (年) (year).

bonds, but also as a means of changing fortune and renewing life, leaving the misfortune of the old year and bringing prosperity and wealth for the year to come. I am going to discuss the ideological implications of this belief in the next chapter. Here, my purpose is to examine how this belief confers sacredness on the return journey of the rural migrants and what kind of spatiality emerges in the process.

In explaining the mechanism of the sacredness in the ritual, van Gennep (1960) contributes a theory formulating ritual as a process involving three phrases: separation (the physical detachment from the normal life), liminality (a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state) and re-aggregation (the 'sober return' to society). As a calendrical ritual, the Spring Festival normally marks a sacred moment and entails these three phrases in a temporal dimension. The rural migrants' return journey at this moment, however, enables the ritual process to unfold in a spatial dimension. Parallel to the calendrical turning from the old year to the new, the body movements over physical distance separates the migratory subjects from their normal life in the city, brings them to a place called as home or home village, and finally takes them back to the city. Just as the turn of the year is worshipped as a magic power of changing fortune, this belief also sanctifies the return journey at this calendrical moment as a kind of secular pilgrimage in the pursuit of fortune blessing.

The pop song I quoted at the beginning of this chapter provides a vivid expression of this sacred sentiment attached to the journey. Although it is a commercial song, its popularity in the beginning of 2008 both in the mass media and among the rural migrants I investigated reflected that it to some extent articulates what the rural migrants anticipate from their festival return. The song starts with a male voice depicting the hardship and distress the peasant labourers usually experience in the city. Then, a sweet female voice representing the rural home welcomes the traveller to a warm home and hearty meals, which are powerful enough to heal the tired body and the weary soul. After this return journey, the traveller is refuelled with hope and courage. By the end of the song, he rallies from nostalgia and gets ready for 'another toss in the coming year!' Such theme also resonated in my interviews. Talking about their hopes for the coming year, many migrant informants impressed me with their extreme optimism. A very common expression in their talks was: *'Let's see what is going to happen after the opening of the next year.'* No matter how hard they struggled in the old year, the opening of the new year was always something to look forward to, when new opportunities and good luck would magically arrive. The return journey usually makes this belief stronger and more real. The spatial

separation from the hardship of normal life, the sheer joy of family reunion, the intense information exchanges when dispersed people gather together, all these happenings during the journey make the good wishes to the new year far from pure fantasy.

To all appearances, this ritual understanding of festival returning seemingly demonstrates a submission to the social position regulation in the dominant structure, for it worships the rural origin as a sacred place for the migratory subjects where they can gain a magic power and realise a change of fortune in the new year. But from the deeper perspective, it contrarily conveys an alternative self-positioning. As one can observe in all kinds of pilgrimages, the sacredness of the journey never fixes on one location, but involves many disparate sites. It is not simply heading to one site, but to re/locate every pilgrim in the relationship between different sites. Although it is the goal that is normally worshipped as the sacred place with a source of power and salvation, 'it is at home once again that the effects of power are incorporated into life and what salvation is gained is confirmed' (Morinis, 1992: 27). Similarly, the essence of the rural migrants' festival return is not a one-way journey that fixes them to one root, but a circuit, which both differentiates and connects the rural village and the city in the meaning system of their migratory experiences. While the rural home was worshiped as a source of salvation, the renewing power gained from the journey was tested in the city in the coming year. In this sense, the home yearning and ritual worship of the rural villages do not contradict their settlement struggle in the city at all. Furthermore, under van Gennep's three-phrase formulation, the stay in the rural home represents a state of liminality and displacement, while the life in the city was understood as the ordinary life and emplacement. This forms an opposition to the conventional positioning of the rural migrants, which tends to define their working and living in the city as liminal and displaced, and asserts that only by returning to the rural village they are from could they be re-emplaced into their own home and real identity.

### ***The gender boundaries***

Beyond the dilemma between staying and returning, another layer of unease for every migrant household in deciding their festival location was about where to return to. This is a question often overlooked, for the return site is easily taken for granted as a sole destination commonly and equally identified by the whole household as home and origin. But this assumption proves to be an illusion, which conceals more questions like 'whose home to return to?' 'Reunion with whom?' Asking these questions would shed some light

on the gender relationships in the rural migrants' festival experiences, which adds more complexities on their festival space.

In their various forms, rituals always draw attention to the passage over the line of social division, i.e. from the child to the adult, or from the old year to the new. But what is deeply underlying the passage and usually overlooked, as Pierre Bourdieu (1991) argues in his book *Language and Symbolic Power*, is another line of ritual, which naturalises the boundaries between different social categories. Further to van Gennep and Victor Turner's theories, Bourdieu rephrases 'rites of passage' as 'rites of institution'. He puts emphasis on the fact that, 'all rites tend to consecrate or legitimate an *arbitrary boundary*, by fostering a mis-recognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate.' (ibid. P117-8 originally emphasized) In the operation of such 'rites of institution', gender division is commonly institutionalised in different ritual occasions. In the passage to manhood, for instance, what matters is not only the individual's passage from one state to another, but the division between all boys and men, who are subject to ritual operations, and girls and women, who are not subject to them.

Gender divisions in Chinese culture have been discussed by many anthropologists from various perspectives (Martin, 1988, Judd, 1994, Bray, 1997). These divisions are also condensed in the ritual performances of the Spring Festival. As Stafford (2000) figures out, what is commonly signified by a series of ceremonial activities is men's position as household heads and the public agents of reunion, while women's position is largely confined to back spaces, fulfilling household chores, such as food and clothes preparation, house cleaning and decoration (p. 111). Although a woman is entitled to the filial piety from her children, her position in the household is secondary to the man's. On the sacred occasions, such as the ancestral worship, women's presence is either strictly forbidden or inferior to that of their husbands or fathers. As far as the return constraint concerned in particular, the gender boundary is equally powerful. As phrased by a proverb: 'A married daughter is like poured water', a traditional Chinese wedding symbolises the separation of a woman from her natal home. Accordingly, while a man, married or not, is obligated to return and stay in his family home for the *Chuxi* celebration, there is a converse obligation forbidding a married woman to return to her natal home. Especially for the ancestral worship and the family reunion dinner on the *Chuxi* night, a married woman is obligated to join the meal in her husband's home or in her own nuclear home. Her return to natal home on that night is not only unacceptable for her husband's family, but also unwelcomed by her natal home. Although after *Chuxi*, she is allowed to visit her natal

home during the festival, this visit is rather treated like the visit of a relative (Stafford, 2000: 48). I was convinced of the strength of this return constraint by my interviews with many female informants:

*Once you are married, your presence in your natal home on Chuxi night is literally an unlucky omen for the natal home. People believe that it would bring bad fortune to your parents and your brothers' families.*

— Xiao Liu, 28, from the Macheng County, Hubei

*In my home town, it was said that a married woman should not be illuminated by the light of her natal home on Chuxi night. Even if I visit my parents on that day, I have to leave before sunset. If I really have some very special reasons to stay, I was required to wear a straw hat or hold up an umbrella all night to prevent the bad luck from coming to my natal home.*

— Xiao Wan, 27, from the Anlu County, Hubei

Hence, for the women migrants, the return journey to the rural village did not mean the homecoming to their own birthplaces, but to the home place defined by their marriages, where they did not necessarily feel at home as much as the men. If this obligation could barely have been questioned when a married woman only had her husband's home as her second home, then her settlement in the city's urban villages opened up a negotiation space, which provoked a consciousness in the gender boundary of the festival imposed on them and resulted in a doubt about its legitimacy. Overtly or covertly, they would bring forward the question of 'where to return' in the family decision-making of 'whether to return or not', which made the issue of the festival return into an operative space for gender politics.

Many women exercised their agency by refusing to return at all and insisting on staying in the urban village for the festival, especially for the *Chuxi* night. Aizhi had passed her sixth Spring Festival in Wujiawan. Her husband had never been able to pursue her to go back to his Henan home village during the festival. She told me: 'If he wants to go, he can go by himself. I don't like to live with his parents. Neither do I want to trouble my parents and brothers. Therefore, staying here is the best choice. Everything is under our own control.' Nevertheless, this did not mean the return to the rural village did not matter at all for those women. They just deliberately avoided the most sensitive time and chose other times when there was less constraint about where to return. Aizhi went back to Henan several

days after the *Chuxi* and paid visits to both her husband's family and her natal family. Some women also chose to return before the *Chuxi*.

After the constant negotiations, over years, the outcomes of the festival locations in one household gradually came to a balance. For example, during Xiao Liu's six-year marriage life with her husband Xiao Hu in Wuhan, three times they went back to Xiao Hu's hometown Goung'an for Spring Festival, and twice to Xiao Liu's hometown Macheng. Noting that, unlike the trips to her husband's family, which needed no subsidiary reason, those to her natal family were contrived by Xiao Liu using certain excuses. The first time was because she was due to give birth near the advent of the festival and needed to stay at home during the festival to get her mother's care, while the second time was because her father's 60th birthday ceremony was deliberately arranged during the Spring Festival. Since no agreement was achieved in 2007, they did not return to any side but stayed in their own home in Gaowang for the festival.

What impressed me during my investigation was that most migrant women expressed an unwillingness to accept their husbands' rural origin as the given position of their own identity and given site of return. In the process of their family negotiations, they consciously used their settlement in the urban villages as a buffer zone to solve the household conflicts. In terms of the gender politics, the urban villages played the role of a 'third space' in transcending the gender boundary in the ritual space of the Spring Festival, whereby the return taboo imposed on women could be loosened to some extent. It was obvious that the barrier for migrant women to reunite with their natal families was much lower in their urban settlements than in the rural villages. During the 2008 Spring Festival, two of my informant households had their *Chuxi* reunion dinner with parents or relatives from the wife's natal families, while three male migrant informants told me their family's *Chuxi* night was celebrated in their sister's or their daughter's places based in other urban villages in Wuhan. In the case of these households, staying in the city enabled them to experience a different sense of return, to cherish a once suppressed memory.

## **The festivity in the urban villages: the spatial disjunction and reconfiguration**

After questioning the inevitability of the festival return in the rural migrants' festival experiences and interrogating the complexity of this spatial ritual, the latter half of this chapter will focus on the festival engagements of the rural migrants who chose to greet the turn of the year by staying in the urban villages. Since my interest is still on the dynamics of the festivity in relating the rural migrants with the place of their urban settlement, I intentionally display their festivity as an integral element in the overall festival landscape in the locality co-presented by multiple social actors, particularly with reference to the festival engagements of the indigenous residents. The question I intend to ponder on in this part is whether the common participations in the Spring Festival in the same territory would promote the purported solidarity between these two social groups in the locality. As I mentioned in my introduction, this is a hypothesis drawn from the emphasis on the integrative function of ritual at the heart of both the Durkheimian and the Turnerian models. Not exceptionally, what permeates the orthodox of the Spring Festival from imperial China to the contemporary is an ideological triumph of a harmonious and unified cosmology, wherein all dissent and conflicts are suspended.

As previously shown, because of the widening social and economic divides between the city and the country in recent years, the customs of the Spring Festival evolved along divergent paths, unsurprisingly resulting in urbanites and villagers celebrating the same festivity in different ways. But the differences between the two groups I am comparing cannot be easily drawn only along the line of rural-urban division. Just as these two groups occupy an ambiguous spatial position of the place where they dwell, they also share an ambiguous cultural identity between the urban and the rural. Therefore, the discrepancies in the way they celebrate New Year are not defined by those who are from the urban or from the rural, but result from their differences in interpreting, appropriating, and operating the same set of festival codes in responding to the crises they encounter. In the wrenching changes of place, the struggle of settlement is not only for the rural migrant dwellers, but also for the indigenous owners, whose sense of place and home has been threatened by the souring influx of migrant occupants and the upcoming redevelopment of the community in the government's city planning. It is thus not surprising to see the endeavour in the indigenous households to retain the old rural customs in their New Year celebration. It is also noticeable that, due to the withering of the local self-organisations in the urban villages, the public ritual activities such as the lion dance, which were once organised annually by the villagers, disappeared in the two urban villages many years

ago.<sup>102</sup> The domestic sphere in the individual households, in turn, becomes the almost exclusive platform for the ritual performances of the New Year celebration for both indigenous and migrant households in the area. Among the remaining ritual practices, my investigation was focused on two superb examples: the New Year posters and the family reunion dinner on *Chuxi* night.

### ***Posting the contesting place identities***

One effective way that festivals manifest their specificity from the ordinary time is through spatial decoration, which makes the same place look different from its normal appearance. So it is with house decoration for the Chinese Lunar New Year. The most common and fundamental decoration is posting matching couplets (*duilian* or *chunlian*) on doors or gates. One set of matching couplets is usually composed of three strips of red paper, two vertically posted on both sides of the door or door frame, one horizontally on the top, each with a line of words written in calligraphy. The messages are unexceptionally auspicious and extravagantly optimistic, celebrating fertility, wealth, and renewal. Seemingly simple in appearance, the operation of the couplet is actually highly regulated and structured, not only in its orderly layout on the door, but also in the symmetrical relationship between the characters on the two opposite lines, which derives from classical Chinese verse.<sup>103</sup>

These matching couplets are a nation-wide manifestation of the New Year celebrations in China, posted by virtually every Chinese household before the Lunar New Year arrives and left on the door as long as possible until the end of the year. Very often, they are accompanied or substituted by other forms of posters, such as *nianhua* (New Year picture), *Fuzi* (an upside-down character of *Fu* (福) written on a square red paper meaning the arrival of the fortune). In whatever form, they commonly function in framing and highlighting each gate and door as the embodiment of the spatial order of the household and the festival. As Bray (1997) notes, ‘the Chinese house was designed as a magical shelter from wind or evil influences, a site that could channel cosmic energies (*qi*) for the benefit of its occupants.’ (p. 60) This idea endows doors and gates with exceptional significance in Chinese architecture, as they are the thresholds through which these cosmic energies, along with the flow of good and bad spirits, and of welcomed and unwelcomed

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<sup>102</sup> Recalled by some old villagers, there was a self-organised dragon dance in the 1990 Spring Festival. After that, no public festival performance had been carried out.

<sup>103</sup> For instance, if a couplet’s descending line begins with a noun such as ‘heaven’ (*tian*, 天), the opposite descending line would begin with an opposed noun such as ‘earth’ (*di*, 地).



guests, may enter homes. Their significance has even transcended the architecture scale and permeates into various aspects of daily life. In Chinese, the term *men* (door) literally means ‘a family’ or a subdivision of it. The reciprocal visits between families that take place during the lunar New Year festival is also expressed as ‘stringing together doors’ (*chuanmen*). It is reasonable for Stafford (2000) to render doors and gates as an architectural metaphor standing for a social grouping, a symbolism of families and of their internal and external relations (p. 88). During the festival, this symbolism is further ritualised and materialised by the posters. People anticipate drawing a magic power from the words, which on the one hand greet the arrival of blessings, good fortune, wealth, and fertility brought by ancestors, gods, and humans, as well as prevent them from draining away; on the other hand, help to block the unwanted visitors or forces, helping those inside to ‘avoid evil’ from outside (*bixie*) (ibid.: 93). Through this dual function, the spaces guarded by doors or gates are changed into places meaningful for their occupants, residences are transformed into homes.<sup>104</sup> Put in another way, although doors and gates are physically requisite to any form of dwelling, in the context of Chinese Spring Festival, it is the New Year posters that highlight their symbolic significance in a public way. The messages of the posters are far beyond the texts, but equally delivered by the ritual performances around the posters in each household, including timing, positioning, and displaying. In the context of the festival practices in urban villages, the New Year posters can be seen as a means by which different senses of home and locality are unrolled.

The most conspicuous couplets in Gaowang and Wujiawan belonged to the local house owners. They were the group who obviously paid considerable attention to the couplets, so much so that their couplets could be distinguished at first sight, not only in the extraordinary size, but also in the heavy decoration, usually with shining characters, golden edges, and colourful images. (See Photo 7.1.) Even compared with the normal urbanite households in the city, their conspicuous consumption of couplets proved to be outstanding. In contrast, the posters on the migrant households were much more moderate in both size and display. In some cases, the whole set of couplets were reduced to a *Fuzi* posted on the centre of the door. (See Photo 7.2.)

Sharp differences were not only found in the appearances of the posters, but also in their positions. Conventionally, the principal position of posters is on the main door facing

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<sup>104</sup> Not solely for domestic homes though. Note that it is also quite common for work or public places, like the governmental or commercial institutions, to post giant couplets on their gates during the festival. But the symbolism of the social and spatial belonging is similar.

outwards, functioning more as an outer posting and boundary marker than as an inner decoration. When applied in the urban villages, however, this ritual code was operated with quite diverse consequences. Given the particular housing form in the locality, which featured an intimate co-inhabitancy between owners and tenants, the different definitions of the home boundaries determined the different positions of the poster in the same housing building. While the migrant tenant households chiefly presented their New Year posters on the main door of the room they rented, most of the local owner households did not decorate the main door of their own rooms. Instead, they deliberately posted the couplets on the gate of the entire housing compound or the stairway entrance of the apartment they owned. Such outward/inward distinction in the poster positioning in essence reflected two conflicting senses of inside/outside divisions in the same space. Being posted on the gate of the compound or apartment, the couplets of the local owners expressed an endeavour to enclose the space behind the gate as a united space and reclaimed the overriding control of the local owners over the autonomy of each tenant household. Meanwhile, the posters on the migrant tenants' main doors marked another borderline between the inside and the outside, which in turn divided one ownership-defined space unit into separate space units defined by occupancy.

It was equally important to understand the meanings of the New Year posters in the migrant households by looking at their resources. Traditionally, couplets were written by the householders themselves on red paper. It was also common for the illiterate to request local intellectuals to write their couplets, using their own preference of words and styles. This interpersonal and local model of couplet consumption was gradually broken with the advent of mass-production and market circulation of all kinds of the festival goods (*nianhuo*), including New Year posters (Flath, 2004). As a result of this trend, the sacred texts and images have become a seasonal commodity easily available in markets, the personal wishes for the new year were standardised into seemingly plentiful but still limited versions of words, sold in different sizes, qualities, and prices tailored to different customer groups. Therefore, the dominant access to this festival performance is now through shopping, normally conducted in the nearest markets as one item in the festival goods purchase list. Presumably, this is also a quite accessible approach for the migrant households to gain their New Year posters, considering the abundant shopping amenities within walking distance inside and outside the urban villages and the affordable prices in the market.<sup>105</sup> In reality, however, a great number of the New Year posters in the rural

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<sup>105</sup> No more than 10 yuan for the ordinary couplets and New Year pictures. But could be as expensive as 50 yuan for the big-sized and elaborately decorated ones.

migrant households were obtained through an alternative approach, which distinguished their poster consumption in the area.



**Photo 7.1.** A gate couplet of a housing compound posted by a local owner. In front of the gate, the owner also hung a line of cured pork and chickens, ready to serve in the festival banquet.



**Photo 7.2.** The New Year door posters in a migrant household. At the top and bottom, are the advertisements of a commercial estate.

If you take a closer look at the New Year posters in the rural migrant' households, very often you may detect some bizarre signs: at the bottom or edge of the poster appear some commercial logos and ad messages. These indicate that the poster is not purchased as a proper festival commodity, but obtained as an ad poster, a popular means of commercial promotion during the season of the Spring Festival. Posters like this are either attached to product packages or distributed as commercial gifts to promote sales and strengthen client networks, but the posters themselves are absolutely free. This kind of free poster is not rare in the festival market, but they seldom appear in the urbanite's home, including the local owners in the two urban villages, because to post them at home is in a way to do free advertising for some products or businesses, and the ad messages inevitably profane the sacredness and auspiciousness supposed to be delivered by the New Year posters. But this kind of 'fake' poster was used prevalently in the rural migrant households as their festival decoration.

To understand why an improper thing in others' mind could earn such a wide acceptance in the rural migrants' festivity, one has to look into the ways those posters articulated with their life. First, the free posters widely entered the rural migrants' festivity more or less as a by-product of their livelihoods in the locality. For those who lived on the retail businesses, the free posters were always available with the wholesale packages. More precious ones like picture calendars could also be gained from producers or wholesalers as commercial gifts. For those who worked in service sectors, like chefs, waiters/waitresses, deliverers, cleaners, the free posters were also available when they dealt with product packages. Alternatively, they could be collected from waste packaging by an army of migrant recyclers in the area. Above all these approaches through livelihoods, the personal exchange between relatives, fellow villagers and neighbours further promoted the distribution of the free posters among more rural migrant households.

Apart from the convenience in access, the wide acceptance of the free posters among the rural migrants also lay in their alternative interpretation of this unique approach of the festival consumption. During my interviews, few migrant informants understood their usage of the free posters in the New Year decoration as improper. On the contrary, some signs suggested that the free posters meant even more to them than the ones bought from the shop. When explaining why there was no posters at her home this year, Xiao Wan acknowledged that was because her husband was no longer working in a restaurant, which meant they could not get the free posters as easily as before. She added: 'if my husband had got one like before, I would have definitely posted it. But since he has not, it seems

not a problem for us to greet the new year without a poster. Anyway, there is no point to buy one.’ In her message, the ways the posters were obtained were much more important than the posters themselves and, compared with getting a poster for free through whatever approaches, buying one in the shop turned out to be ‘pointless’.

To appreciate the free posters through certain non-commercial approaches means one has to accept and appreciate the New Year connotations from the contents and styles of the posters. This aesthetic change shifted the gratifying point of the posters from contents to actions. Sometimes, the relevance of the content to the festival could be completely ignored. One illustrative example was witnessed in Xiao Han’s home. (*See Photo 7.3.*) On the *Chuxi* morning when I visited her, Xiao Han and her husband had just finished their festival cleaning and decorating. Their single-room home was brightened by some 20 sheets of red posters spread on walls (the normal New Year posters are never used so heavily). A closer inspection revealed that the images on those posters actually had nothing to do with the Spring Festival. They were nothing but ad posters of a computer game featuring several robot game characters. The only resemblance between them and the normal New Year posters was the sheer bright red colour of the background. Xiao Han told me these posters had been left on the rear seat of a bus and picked up by her the other night when she washed the bus in the bus station (one of the little surprises which occasionally emerged during her work). *‘They are not bad, are they? A bright and joyful vision for the festival.’* she said, with a satisfied smile on her face. Her 8-year-old son was even more excited, because the game characters were very much like his favourite cartoon characters

Xiao Han’s story was not unexceptional. Indeed, every free poster had its story before being pasted on a wall or a door, be it a little surprise discovered from the waste collection, a gift from a business partner, a grace from the boss, a tiny premium from one’s occupation, or a personal exchange between relatives or neighbours. What they all had in common was they all deeply interwove with the particular way of life of each household, related to the degree of settlement into the city and the neighbourhood, and signified the build-up in social resources and networks. In other words, although the New Year posters are generally used in every Chinese household, the exploitation of an alternative approach enabled the rural migratory subjects to invest their personal meanings in this general festival performance, which in a way posted their distinct identity in the festival ritual space.



**Photo 7.3.** *The wall posters in Xiao Han's home.*

### ***Feasting the wandering souls***

Food always seems to be an essential ingredient of festivals. The centrality of food in Chinese culture makes it especially difficult to discuss any ritual activities and social relationships without the performance of 'eating together' coming into play (Chang, 1977, Anderson, 1988). As in many cultures, eating together in China is more than food being shared, but literally the construction of kinship and other social bonds, thus to be a family is to 'share food in one pot', whereas to 'divide the family' (*fenjia*) is 'to divide the family's stove' (Stafford, 2000: 99). If reunion is the major theme of the Spring Festival, the key symbol of this reunion is to eat together on the *Chuxi* night, called the family reunion dinner (*tuan nian fan*). In a sense, to be 'united' or 'reunited' can be presented by eating together at that particular moment (even if most of the members will soon separate after the dinner), whereas the failure to eat together is taken as an expression of real separation. That is why the family reunion dinner is not only the climax of the festival celebration, but also a showcase of social distances and the internal/external relationship of a family. No matter how far apart in the ordinary time, as long as people can sit together around the dinner table in the festival, especially on the *Chuxi* night, they are conceived to be 'members of one family' (*yijia ren*) by each other. Apart from sustaining the memberships among the living, the festival dinner earns its special sacredness by catering



for the reunion between ancestors and their living offspring, wherein the dead receive food offering and worship from the living and in return, to avoid doing harm to their offspring, bless them with peace and fortune in the year to come. Then, how was this ritual commensality differently operated by the indigenous owners and the rural migrants to reconfigure their own social boundaries and social networks in the urban villages?

First, the operations of these two groups differed in timing. The family reunion dinner in my experience, also for many ordinary urbanite households, is usually timed at dinner time on the *Chuxi* evening. This timing is not naturally given. Despite the significance of the last day of the twelfth lunar month in the Chinese New Year, the public holiday of the Spring Festival had long been legally set as commencing from the first day of the first lunar month. So, the ordinary urban households had to manage their family reunion dinner on the *Chuxi* evening after a normal working day.<sup>106</sup> This schedule is further reinforced as a convention by the recent invasion of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show into the New Year festivity, which starts punctually at 7 pm Beijing time on every year's *Chuxi* evening and claims a synchrony with the family reunion dinner in every ordinary household. As a result, there is an imagined synchronism of the family reunion dinnertime in individual households in the urban festival landscape, which contributes to the imagined unity and solidarity of the national family. My experience of the *Chuxi* in Gaowang and Wujiawan, however, for the first time broke such perceived synchronism, for there was a striking time variation between the indigenous households and the migrant households. While the former inclined to launch their family feasts earlier in the daytime, the latter took the turn in the evening and night time. The earliest one in my observation was in a local owner household. In fact, it should not be termed as 'dinner', for it opened at around 11 o'clock in the morning. From then on, the sound of firecrackers was heard one after another, announcing the successive commencements of the banquets in different local households.<sup>107</sup> After six o'clock in the evening, the normal time for the family dinner, on the other hand the noises became sparse. Most indigenous households had finished their reunion dinners and sent off their guests. Even if dinner was served at their home, it would just be an ordinary meal, quiet and simple. However, it was now the time for the migrant households to open their family union dinners, which unlike what happened in the indigenous households, rarely involved setting off firecrackers for the commencement.

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<sup>106</sup> However, since 2008, the commencement of the public holiday has been modified to the *Chuxi*, the last day of the old year.

<sup>107</sup> Distinct to the ordinary dinner, the family reunion dinner on *Chuxi* conventionally commences with setting off a long line of firecrackers. Since the mid-1990s, municipal governments issued regulations to ban firecrackers in urban settings. But the regulation was never been fully observed in many marginal areas like urban villages. In 2006, the ban was withdrawn in most cities, including Wuhan.

It was confirmed by both the indigenous and migrant informants that, unlike the urban conventions, the family reunion banquet in the rural setting had never been locked to evening time. It could be timed at any moment during the *Chuxi* and conventionally varied from region to region. The banquet timing in the indigenous households was obviously a deliberate preservation of their rural customs. A middle-age landlord, Lao Yu, told me that the convention in the village was to start the *Chuxi* reunion banquet as early as possible. In his memory, the older generation could get up as early as mid-night to start preparation, striving to open the banquet in the early morning. The purpose was to gain a good omen: ‘getting the day brighter while eating.’ (*yue chi yue liang*). There was also an implicit intention to pursue a pre-emption in this ritual performance in the community, since an early start of the festival banquet reflected the diligence, strength, and unity of the host household and foreshadowed their prosperity in the coming year. During my interviews with many indigenous householders, I could clearly sense a pressure of being in the lead in opening the banquet, which in a sense made the banquet performance into a sort of race in the neighbourhood. The daytime arrangement of the family banquet was equally common for the migrants when they celebrated their festival in the rural villages (not necessarily with the same emphasis on the pre-emption though). However, when they stayed in the city for the festival, the arrangements of their ceremonial activities became subject to their work schedule, which hardly allowed them a whole day of rest on *Chuxi*, in fact it was likely to be busier than normal time. Therefore, given the similar influence of the rural customs, they had to delay their family reunion dinners until after coming back from work in the evening. As a result, a heterogeneous timing was presented in the ritual performance of the family reunion banquet in the locality, which not only questioned the imagined synchronism fabricated by the official regulations and representations, but also separated festival space in the urban villages into two disjunctive time ranges.

Apart from the temporal difference, I was also impressed by the distinctions in the spatial settings of the family reunion banquets in the two household groups. Thanks to Lao Xiao, a 71-year-old local owner in the Gaowang village, I had a chance to participate in the whole process of his family reunion banquet on the *Chuxi afternoon*. Following the rural customs of the New Year ritual, their dinner took place in the *tangwu*. As shown in Photo 7.4., although the original *tangwu* in the rural house had been demolished during recent reconstruction, a mini version of the domestic altar remained in the front room, composed of a high, narrow table pushed against the wall and a big square-shaped table in front of it. Taking up considerable space in the room, the whole set of display did not have major



practical functions in the normal time. *Chuxi* was one of the rare moments for them to be really brought into service. The big square table, which was never used for daily meals, was moved into the centre of the room and laid with cups and dishes. Some 30 people gathered in Liao Xiao's home for this annual feast. Apart from Liao Xiao, his wife, and his eldest son's family who lived together with them, others attendants were Lao Xiao's relatives who came from all directions in the city. Even with an additional table set in the inner room, the indoor space appeared too crowded to cater for so many guests. The doorway and the nearby street were then used as a temporary living room to receive guests. Before guests were invited to take seats, food was reverently displayed on the high narrow table and offered to ancestors. Lao Xiao's eldest son lit three sticks of incense and led everyone gathering around a basin in the doorway and burnt 'earth paper'<sup>108</sup> for their ancestors. Next, everyone assembled in front of the table and bowed, three times in unison, while a long string of fire crackers was stunningly set off outside. The dinner started at around 12: 30 am and lasted for about three hours, during which the main door was kept open, allowing the adults and children to move freely around between the room and the street connected to the doorway.

The whole process impressed me from three perspectives: the inclusiveness in the membership, the formality in the procedure, and the extensiveness in the space occupation. To some extent, the family reunion dinner was intentionally employed by Lao Xiao's family as a public performance, rather than a mere domestic activity. First, extensive numbers of people were involved, including immediate family members and distant relatives, the living and the dead, making the scene hustle and bustle rather with an overwhelming numerical strength. Second, serious attention was paid to follow the rules of the performance, including procedure, position and hierarchy. This formality not only differentiated the dinner from the ordinary meals, but also united the members under a stylised drama, which gave a symbolic privilege to the worship of their shared ancestors. As Ebrey (1991) pointed out in her study of Chinese rituals, ancestor worship was not, contrary to what many foreign observers assume, an immemorial characteristic of Chinese culture. For the lower social orders the official endorsement of their ancestral cult was actually a relatively recent privilege, mainly as the result of the standardisation of the ancestral cult since the Song dynasty (p. 56, see in: Bray, 1997: 153). Similarly in the context of today's urban villages, the emphasis on ancestral worship in the indigenous households' family reunion banquets was a result of an operation to serve their own

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<sup>108</sup> A representation of money, which can be used by spirits to buy necessities and bribe officials in the other world, also called *zhiqian*.

interests. It did not solely point to the kinship solidarity, but had its particular significance in the place politics, whereby ancestral worship was used as a discursive resource to reclaim and re-affirm a pre-emptive and privileged affiliation to the land. Just as the indigenous informants expressed in a common claim: 'We are the people who have belonged to this land for generations.' Finally, this sense of privilege was further expressed and enhanced by the occupancy of the banquet beyond the threshold, such as happened in Lao Xiao's home. In some cases, some local households even set their banquet tables or cooking stoves in the street, or took over the main entrance of the housing compound, forcing passers-by to make their ways through the banquet tables.

Compared with the bustling scene during the daytime, the *Chuxi* night in the indigenous households appeared much more cheerless, with the banquet finished and the guests gone. But the ritual performance had not yet finished. After enjoying the family reunion dinner with their descendants, *Chuxi* night was the time for the ancestors to go back to their own world. As a rite to 'send them off', the food once offered and displayed on the high narrow table was poured outside and to let them 'take away'. What interested me was the location of this farewell performance with the dead. Around 11 o'clock at night, I came across Lao Xiao's eldest son in front of his door. He was holding two bowls of food once displayed on the high narrow table during the family banquet in the afternoon. He walked across the street and after passing a wing of single-story huts occupied by four migrant households, he stopped at the foot of the wall at least 30 meters away from his own residence and emptied the bowl. It is true that the ideal way in China to send off the honourable guests is to escort them beyond the threshold, but never close to other's residences. In the rural setting, the sacrificial food is usually poured away at the corner of the gateway of one's housing compound. Lao Xiao's son chose that particular site because the whole swing of huts was reconstructed from the pig stall, the extensive part of their old rural house compound, and still owned by his family.<sup>109</sup> Although it was far beyond their own residence, it still marked the border of their territory and therefore a worthy site to bid farewell to the spirits of their ancestors. In this episode of the festival performance, the disposal of the sacrificial food certainly extended the ritual space of the family reunion banquet beyond the dining room and manifested an endeavour in territory remaking and rectification.

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<sup>109</sup> I later heard that the site was not merely used on *Chuxi* night as the farewell point with the spirits of the ancestors, but was also the site for Lao Xiao's family to burn 'earth paper' on the seventh evening of July every year, the memorial date particularly to worship ancestors or dead kinship in China.

Parallel to what happened in the indigenous households, another version of festival commensality unfolded in the rural migrant households in the same locality. After attending Lao Xiao's family banquet in the afternoon, I was invited by a Henan migrant, Xiao Yin, to join their family reunion dinner which started at around seven o'clock in the evening. Although the attendants were only five, Xiao Yin and her husband, their two children and I, it was a genuine moment of celebration for the family. After being separated for a whole year, Xiao Yin finally had her husband coming back from Hangzhou and reuniting with her and the two children. Before the homecoming to the urban village, the husband paid a short trip back to the rural home village, from where he brought two cured chickens and a sack of other farm products. With these far-travelling ingredients, plus some fresh vegetables bought in the street market, a warm and flavoursome table of dishes was presented. (*See Photo 7.5.*) For the first time in my observation, I saw the family sitting together around a dining table in the middle of their single room, rather than simply eating with bowls in hands and sitting separately, as they usually did. I also noticed that the ceiling bulb had been changed into a bigger one. Once the dinner was ready and the table was set, all family members sat together and started eating and drinking, with no ritual performance of the ancestral worship or setting off firecrackers at the start. Given that Xiao Yin and her husband had three related families in the same neighbourhood, it was surprising none of them were invited. Like Xiao Yin's family, they all held their family reunion dinner on their own. The dinner in Xiao Yin's home only lasted about one hour. After that, I visited another four migrant households in the villages during or after their family reunion dinners and found quite similar situations. Despite the efforts spent on food and beverages, which certainly made the festival feast different from their daily meals, none of them committed any forms of ancestral worship before the dinner. Neither did any household organise their family dinner among the extended kinship, only one household had a single relative invited.

In the first place, the absence of the ancestral worship rites in the rural migrants' festivity reflected a sense of displacement in migrancy. A ceremonial moment is not sufficient for a ceremonial rite. To consume the sacred power from a rite, one has to place him/herself in certain space. Transplanting a rite over places is not always as easy as supposed. For Chinese New Year ancestral worship in particular, the meanings of the performance are constituted of the sacred sites like the domestic altar or the ancestral grave, both pointing to a sedentary dwelling pattern and an enduring bond to the land. The process of migration did physically displace those sacred sites from the rural migrants' festivity and made this ritual performance out of place in their urban settlement.



*Photo 7.4. The display of the family reunion banquet in Lao Xiao's home.*



*Photo 7.5. The family reunion dinner in Xiao Yin's home.*

But the absence of one rite performance did not necessarily lead to the meaninglessness of the festival itself. On the contrary, it allowed people to ponder and explore the meanings of the festivity beyond the rite, no matter how vital it used to appear. The following quotations expressed the responses towards this absence from some migrant informants:

*Being away from home, no one is particular about those old rules.*

—Xiao Yin, 35, female, the Xinyang County, Henan

*Here (in the urban villages), we don't have to deal with the festival as complicatedly as in our home village. After all, we are celebrating the festival away from home.*

—Yin Sao, 51, female, the Xinyang County, Henan

*In my home village, others will tease you if you don't follow those old manners. Once you are out, the pressure simply disappears. You can manage your family reunion dinner as you please.*

—Xiao Wen, 38, male, the Songzi County, Hubei

According to their responses, having ancestral worship or not was not interpreted as good or bad, complete or incomplete for the festival, but as two different patterns of family reunion associated with different places. Given the acknowledgments of a sense of 'being away from home' or being 'out', this displacement did not banish migrants from the festival space or reduce the enjoyment of their festivity. In their interpretations, the absence of the ancestral spirits in the reunion dinner (at least behaviourally) in the urban settlement was understood as natural and proper as their presence in the rural home. Being 'away' or 'out' entailed an ability to appreciate two notions of festivity with different yet related ritual codes and allowed an alternative interpretative and operative space in the ritual engagements.

As we saw before, another distinction of the family reunion dinner in the migrant households was its limited membership centred on the nuclear family, contrasting to the reunion banquet in the indigenous households oriented to the extensive kinship. Even for the relative families who lived in the same neighbourhood or same city, the desire or constraint for them to gather on the *Chuxi* night was much looser than I expected, as happened in Xiao Yin's family. Given that the reciprocal visits and meal sharing were not rare among those relatives in the ordinary time and during the following days of the festival holiday, they seemed to be conversely something avoided rather than pursued on

the *Chuxi* night. Many migrants mentioned that even if they celebrated the festival in the rural home where most of the extensive relatives were living close by, it was not always the case for all extensive relatives to dine together on the *Chuxi*. Very often, the *Chuxi* dinner was deliberately employed as a boundary marker of the intensive membership.<sup>110</sup> As Stafford (2000) pointedly argues, too often, the overwhelming emphasis on the family unity and reunion has become an obstacle for us to understand the complexity of Chinese culture and the Spring Festival, which, like many other cultures, is actually featured by an ambivalence and a tension between separation and reunion. No matter how much the family unity is purportedly cherished by the Chinese, at some points, the extended household has to proceed into the conjugal family life. In China, family division (*fen jia*) usually comes with stove division (*fen zao*) and incense division (*fen xiang*), which means the divided conjugal families are supposed to cook and eat separately and conduct their ancestral worship at the separate ancestral altars as well (Cohen, 2005: 237). In practices, the *Chuxi* family reunion dinner can be employed both to reunite the separate and to separate the united (to celebrate the division and independence of a conjugal family from the joint household). In the latter situation, having dinner in other's home on the *Chuxi* night becomes a sign of weakness, which usually involves elders, singles, or the families whose circumstances are sharply worse than others.<sup>111</sup>

Such polysemy associated with the *Chuxi* dinner allows multiple strategic operations for social actors. While the indigenous households, as we saw before, intended to pursue an bustling and imposing effect by maximising the implication of the family reunion dinner in sustaining the extended kinship and strengthening the lineage unity, this membership was far from evenly inclusive. Actually, Lao Xiao's younger brother's family, who lived just the next door, had not been invited. I was later told that the relationship between the two families had broken down many years ago due to disputes about property inheritance. A similar strategy was equally exercised by the rural migrants, just with a different emphasis. What they emphasised was the function of the reunion dinner in defining the independence of each conjugal family, which gave prominence to the reunion of immediate kinship.

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<sup>110</sup> This was also evidenced by the interviews with the migrants who returned to the rural home during the 2008 Spring Festival.

<sup>111</sup> Following Chinese filial piety, it is immoral to leave the elders alone on *Chuxi*. Even when the family reunion dinner is organised in the separate conjugal families, they would take turns to invite the elders to their family dinners.

More interestingly, with the emphasis moved from extended kinship to immediate kinship, the non-kinship relationships earned more acceptance in the *Chuxi* reunion dinner among the rural migrant households. In contrast with what happened in the indigenous households, which was extensive in scale but strictly limited to the kinship circles, out of the five migrant households I visited on that night, three invited non-kin guests to their dinners.<sup>112</sup> For example, 53-year-old Lao Lu invited one of his son's work colleagues, who was single and had no family in Wuhan to accompany him during the festival. Aizhi and Xiao Yan came from different provinces but became friends since they worked together in a restaurant two years previously. On the *Chuxi* evening, Aizhi and her children were invited by Xiao Yan to join their family dinner. Later, she also invited Xiao Yan and her son to eat *jiao-zi*<sup>113</sup> at her home. During the interview several days later, Xiao Yan told me her mother was not very happy about her leaving, because she insisted that everyone was supposed to stay at one's own home on the *Chuxi* night. That told me that this kind of inter-family invitation beyond the kinship circle was not encouraged by the festival conventions, but relatively more appreciated by the rural migrants households as an ingredient of their festivity in the urban villages. This action in a way transgressed the conventional insider/outsider boundary of the family reunion dinner and entailed a reconfiguration of social relationships and networks through a strategic operation of the ritual performance.

Finally, the operations of the family reunion dinner of the migrant households were distinguished from those in the indigenous households in spatial occupancy. The extensive occupancy of the festival banquet we previously saw in the indigenous households seemed neither necessary nor realistic in the migrant households. For their sober and intensive festival dinners, the indoor space was enough to contain all attendees. However, this did not mean that their festivity was fully constrained behind the doors. In fact, their *Chuxi* experiences were more outward than the indigenes'. The first outward moment was during the preparation of the dinner. Although cooking outdoor was commonplace in their ordinary life, as described in Chapter 5, it went further during the festival. Many festival cooking activities were even moved outside of the housing compound, such as deep-frying, meat curing or smoking, drying cured meat in the trees beside the street,<sup>114</sup> and so on. The

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<sup>112</sup> For the same reason, I found it much easier to enter and participate in the dinner in migrant households than in the indigenous households.

<sup>113</sup> A substantial stuffed dumpling, a typical food for the Spring Festival in China, but more popular in the northern areas than in the southern. Therefore, for the migrant women from Henan like Aizhi, cooking *jiao-zi* at home is their specialty, compared with the women from Hubei like Xiao Yan.

<sup>114</sup> A food custom of the Spring Festival in China, normally conducted in each household in the last month of the lunar calendar (*layue*).

second outward moment was after the family reunion dinner. Unlike most of the indigenous households following the taboo of the festival orthodox and trying to avoid leaving home on the *Chuxi* night, very few migrant households obeyed this taboo. On the contrary, most of them left home soon after dinner. Some enjoyed entertainment and relaxation in the village street. Some gathered together with friends to play cards or mah-jong. Some stepped into barbershops to treat themselves with a year-end hairdressing, while chatting with other acquaintances or watched television together. Furthermore, many migrant families chose to take a stroll together around Hongshan Square. As a popular aggregative and recreation site in Wuchang at normal times, this big public square became one of the least likely places to visit for urbanites on the *Chuxi* night when everyone was supposed to stay at home. For many rural migrants, however, the *Chuxi* night turned out to be a precious moment to pursue their desire to visit this landmark place in the city where they had long yearned to go but had not been able to find free time to do during the busy working days, especially as a family activity. After coming back from the square with his family, Li Bo, a Henan migrant who experienced his first Spring Festival in Wuhan, told me he passed the square nearly every day on his journey to work, but more than ever, he found the square so broad and so splendid. Watching the musical fountain there gave him and his family an unprecedented experience of the *Chuxi* night.

In this chapter, the Spring Festival is employed as a ritual occasion that further unmasks the complexity and tensions of place-making in rural migrants' spatial practices. Closely involved with the objectification and legitimating of a hierarchical cosmology, the Spring Festival functions as an institution in regulating social belongings and locations, wherein an ideology of return is operated towards the rural migrants, imposing a fixed and unitary origin onto their subjectivity, whereas more potentialities of their place identifications are suppressed. This ideology was, however, severely challenged by the festival practices of the rural migrants in the two urban villages. Far from a one-goal journey from the city to their rural origin, the festival movements of the rural migrants demonstrated a complex turbulence constituted by multidirectional flows, wherein both the rural home and the urban settlement played indispensable roles. No matter return or stay, their family reunion did not point to a fixed and exclusive origin but simultaneously involved multiple places, whereby a trans-local sense of home and identity was constructed and negotiated. This



dynamical process also unveiled the gender boundary of the ritual space and enabled a reconfiguration of the social relationships within every migrant household.

Staying in the city did not reduce the festivity of the rural migrants, but gave them different festival experiences. In comparison with those in the indigenous households, the festival performances in the migrant households were distinct in patterns, contents, and meanings. The variations between these two groups in engaging in the same ritual codes reflected the multiplicity and disjunction of different operating spaces in the ritual performances driven by the exercises of different social agencies. This discovery suggested an unsettling tension underneath the purported solidarity in the structuralist notion of festival. Unlike the privileged place identity of the indigenous households manifested through their festival performances, a strong sense of ‘being outside’ was undoubtedly embedded in the rural migrants’ festival experiences in the urban villages. But it was also this sense that empowered them to go beyond many ritual boundaries and explore alternative possibilities and interpretations of the festivity. In short, the Spring Festival in the urban villages entailed a strategic arena, wherein multiple interpretations and operations of the ritual performances confronted and negotiated with each other. By actively engaging into this multi-layered ritual space, the rural migrants effectively exploited the festival performances as a dynamic institution of place-making and home-making in the process of their urban settlement. Their festival engagements in turn contributed an alternative voice in the meanings of the reunion and returning cult, which challenged the politics of position imposed by the orthodox of the Spring Festival.

## Chapter 8

# A Televised Spring Festival and Its Consumption in the Urban Villages

In different social and historical contexts, the meanings of the turning of the year and people's ways of celebrating the meanings have not always been the same. One recent thrust in this transformation was the participation of modern media technologies in the festival spaces. China is not exempt from this change. Since 1983, a televised form of New Year's Eve started to enter millions of Chinese households. Watching the live broadcast of the Central China Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala Show was aligned with the family reunion dinner, door couplets, and fireworks in constituting the contemporary festivity of Chinese year turning. Compared with the festival activities discussed in the last chapter, the festival practices through broadcasting and viewing posit an unprecedented power in relating the present to the very distant absent and therefore foster the place-making function of the ritual into another realm. The existence of this televised ingredient in the rural migrants' *Chuxi* night allows us to understand the social production of their identity and place their urban village settlement practices in the festival context in a further extensive framework. What are the relationships between this televised and centralised form of festival and the Chinese rural migratory subjects? How does this nationwide media event embed in the rural migrants' festival space? These are the questions I am going to explore in the last chapter of this research.

The marriage between ritual and television has long been hotly debated in cultural study. It started with a whole series of studies on the BBC's role in mediating and representing British royal ceremonies (Shils and Young, 1956, Chaney, 1983, 1986, Cardiff and Scannell, 1987, see in: Couldry, 2003: 56-8). The common emphasis in these studies was how the engagement of television changed the already established rituals from the exclusive royal activities into national ceremonies, which were simultaneously enacted for audiences stretched across multiple locations. The phenomenon was interpreted under a functionalist framework and celebrated as a great platform for the construction of collectivity and solidarity in the modern world, which provided a 'fragmented audience with a common culture, an image of the nation as a knowable community.' (Cardiff and

Scannell, 1987: 169). The first systematic research on this topic was contributed in Dayan and Katz's influential book *Media Events* (1992). The television of public rituals in their minds is beyond the transmission of the existing ritual practices to the larger scales, but possesses 'a power to declare a holiday' on its own and thus playing a part of 'civil religion' in the modern condition (1992: 16). Like religious holidays, the major broadcast events can generate and organise a festive mode of viewing, which not only attracts the largest audiences of all, but also delivers an overall action-frame facilitating 'an interruption of routine...norms of participation in ceremony and ritual, concentration on some central value, ...and integration with a cultural centre.' (ibid.) Similar to the previous scholars, Katz and Dayan apply a Durkheimian line and understand the ritual function of media, especially in the situation of major events, as a mechanism in holding society together and affirming a common set values, but without questioning 'whether, to what extent, and in what ways society does hold together.' (Lukes, 1975: 297, cited in: Couldry, 2003: 65)

Following Lukes' critical approach of ritual, Philip Elliott (1998: 173) draws attention to the uneven power relationship in the ritual performances of the media, which he describes as 'political rites carried out on behalf of the powerful, in which the powerless are invited to take part' and it is hard for them to refuse. David Morley (2000: 110-11) also warns against the risk in putting power and politics aside in the definition of sociability. As he argues, what is usually neglected in the idea of sociability or 'national family' is 'which forms of sociability feel foreign to whom', since any particular collective production of 'the sociable' will have its 'constitutive outside' (ibid. p112). More recently, Nick Couldry (2003) re-conceptualises media rituals as a highly centralised system of symbolic production of 'a myth of the mediated centre', which claims society has a 'natural' centre and media has a privileged role to represent or frame that 'centre' (p. 45). Like Morley, Couldry also strives to deconstruct the togetherness or openness this myth making process usually purports by revealing the division and boundary underneath. In the heart of the media ritual, he contends, are the 'condensed forms of action' whereby things, people, and places are categorised according to their relationships with the mediated centre. What is 'in' the media is divided from what is not. What is being shown has a higher status than what is not. This, according to Couldry, is the central principle of the ordering in the media ritual space (ibid.: 46-48).

As a principle, this is probably right. But in practice, is there really a clear-cut and static boundary between what is 'in' and what is not? Moreover, is there always a coincidence

between the inside/outside or central/marginal category in the media rituals and the status quo in the social, economic or political orders? Can the social subalterns sometimes have their position in the mediated centre? Conversely, can the mediated centre be part of the ritualisation in some marginal places? To answer these questions, we have strategically concentrated our examination of a media ritual on its interactions with a particular social group that is socially marginalised in the society, rather than talking about its overall influences towards the society in general. In the meantime, it reminds us to dwell on the consumption practices of a media ritual in the local context as much as on its production realm, which has been relatively under developed in media ritual study so far.

My fieldwork during the 2008 Spring Festival in Gaowang and Wujiawan offered me a perfect opportunity to engage in this topic from the above two perspectives. My exploration is supported by the data from two sources. First, I will use a content analysis of 25 years of CCTV Spring Festival Gala Shows from 1983 to 2008 to address the outstanding and shifting position that the rural migratory subjects played in this media ritual. Second, the embedment and interweaving of the Gala Show in the rural migrants' festivity will be depicted through my participative observation in the two urban villages, including four home visits on the *Chuxi* night, and interviews with another 8 rural migrant households afterwards. Apart from the personal interviews, two sessions of focus group discussion (two households for each) were organised around a selected recording of the 2008 Gala Show three days after the live broadcast.

## **The rural migratory subjects in the theatrical space of the gala show**

### ***An invented tradition of Chuxi***

Among many televised calendrical ceremonies in the world, the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show is not pioneering,<sup>115</sup> but certainly outstanding. Ever since its first airing in 1983 till today, this live variety show programme produced by Chinese Central TV Station has never failed to keep its appointment with audiences at 8pm on every Chinese New Year's Eve and always accompanies them until as late as 1am of the New Year's Day.

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<sup>115</sup> One famous example is the annual televised Royal Christmas message in the UK since 1932.

Through the live broadcast, the nationwide audiences are invited into the nation's biggest festival entertainment feast held in the CCTV 800M<sup>2</sup> studio,<sup>116</sup> together with the hundreds of the live studio audience, to celebrate the nation's most significant calendrical rite moment. As the outcome of almost half a year's elaborate planning and painstaking preparation, five hours of high standard performances are commonly presented by a crop of top artists and popular stars. Despite the new content every year, the overall style of the Gala Show has not undergone many changes throughout the last 25 years. The performances that excel in creating a cheerful and comic atmosphere, such as singing and dancing (*gewu*), cross-talks (*xiangsheng*)<sup>117</sup> and comic skits (*xiaopin*), are always the staple courses in the show.

Like many media events, the Gala Show distinguishes itself from the ordinary TV programs in the festive broadcasting and viewing mode it generates. Firstly, the broadcasting landscape on *Chuxi* night is distinct from any other time. The five-hour live performance is not only synchronically aired on three channels of CCTV (CCTV-1, 4, and 9) and recently on the CCTV official website, but also relayed by many provincial TV stations on their major channels, as many as 40 channels in 2008 for example (Chai, 2008). Although the attempts of the local stations in challenging CCTV's dominance and sharing the market cake of the festival viewing have never ceased and become increasingly robust in recent years,<sup>118</sup> most local stations still choose to arrange their local festival galas at other times around the New Year's Eve and give the *Chuxi* night to the CCTV Gala Show. As a result, it is not just several channels but a large part of the nation's entire broadcasting network that is dedicated to a single program on every *Chuxi* night. This accordingly leads to a phenomenal spectatorship of the gala show, which has never been rivalled by any other program in China so far. The highest reception rating appeared in 1998 (62.1%) (Xiao, 2003); the 2004 rating was 40.8%, reaching a population of 455 million (Yin, 2005). In 2008, although the overall reception rating dropped to 29.2% (largely because the ordinary households had much more choices of festival entertainments other than merely watching TV at home), still 3 out of every 5 television viewers who switched on television on *Chuxi* night watched the CCTV gala show (CMS Rating, cited in: Chai, 2008).<sup>119</sup> Given the extraordinary collective attention paid to the

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<sup>116</sup> One exception was in 1985, when the Gala Show was held in Beijing Workers' Stadium.

<sup>117</sup> A kind of comic two-person dialogue performed in the Beijing dialect.

<sup>118</sup> In 2008, for instance, the Oriental Satellite Channel (Shanghai) and the Liaoning Provincial Channel broadcasted their local gala shows on the *Chuxi* night. According to *Rating China* Issue No. 4, April, 2008 by CSM.

<sup>119</sup> Although the unrivalled position of the Gala Show in the national reception market seems undoubted, there has never been a consensus about the exact reception ratings of the program. Different media research

Gala Show across the vast territory of China, it exerts a huge influence over the organisation of the annual national family gathering on *Chuxi* night. That so many people over such a huge area can participate in the gathering at home has no parallel in previous ritual practices. Over the years, it has become naturalised as an indispensable part of the tradition in the Chinese Spring Festival culture itself (Zhou, 1997, Geng, 2003).

However, the continuity between the Gala Show and the historical past of the *Chuxi* ritual is largely factitious. It is true that public celebrations have never been rare in the whole festival season of the lunar year turning (normally between the 23rd of the last month in the old year and the 15<sup>th</sup> of the first month in the new year), but the *Chuxi* night in particular has always been a private time for family reunion and ancestor worship, when all public activities cease and people are encouraged to stay only with their family members. Given the varying boundaries of this family reunion, from conjugal family to extended household, the position of non-kinship relationships or official authority powers was largely marginal or absent in the festival activities on *Chuxi* night. A glance at the historical transformation that the Spring Festival experienced throughout the establishment of the modern nation state can further reveal the bond between the Lunar New Year's Eve and the Chinese national identity that underlies the Gala Show is nothing natural but a recent construct. As I mentioned in the last chapter, when the republican government launched the modern nation-state project, the Lunar New Year's Eve, along with all festivals in the lunar calendar, were not promoted as a grand heritage of the Chinese nation but condemned as a backward superstition. It was therefore banned from 1912 in order to give way to the Gregorian calendar introduced from the West, a reform known as *feili* in Chinese (Wah, 2004, Gao, 2010). This ban continued until the republican government failed with their calendar reform in 1934. Chairman Mao's communist regime abolished the festival holiday once again in 1967 as an official demand to promote a 'revolutionary and productive festival' (Gao, 2010). It took another 13 years before the festival finally earned its legitimacy as a national public holiday from the reformist government. With the unveiling of the first *Chuxi* Gala Show on CCTV in 1983, the state completely changed its role from a suppressor to a promoter of the festival and appointed

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groups usually offer varied statistics. The rating statistics in this article are from either CSM Media Research or Nielsen Media Research, the two leading media research groups in mainland China. Another noteworthy point is that the high national average rating of the program is parallel with remarkable disparity between different regions. The statistics from different resources commonly point to the fact that the popularity of the Gala Show is mainly concentrated in north and central China, but much weaker in the south, especially the advanced cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou. As the biggest city in central China, its ratings in Wuhan have generally been close to the national average level.

its official medium CCTV as the solely authorised organiser for this national ceremony. For the first time, the happy family gathering within the separated kinship circles was turned into a grand national reunion centred on one host, one programme. In this vein, the televised *Chuxi* celebration on CCTV is far beyond an electronic version of the old festival, but precisely an invented tradition, which is aimed to respond ‘to novel situations’ by taking ‘the form of reference to old situations’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 2). It is essentially the continuity of the place-making project of the nation state, wherein an annual event on television was invented and mystified as a mediated centre to hold the imagined community of Chineseness in the reform and opening era.

In interrogating this invented tradition, many scholars opt to see the Gala Show solely as a propaganda vehicle in which the central government legitimises its dominance and imposes its ideological message on the whole nation (Zhao, 1998, Pan, 2007, 2010a). More recently, criticism is also mounting on how this highly centralised media ritual fosters a dominant position for CCTV which brings this media giant enormous monopolistic benefits (Lü, 2003, 2006). Given the certain critical insights they provide, these criticisms do not appear satisfactory for me, for they explicitly or implicitly assume the Gala Show as little more than a channel through which certain existing ideological messages are imposed from top to bottom. They commonly lack the strength in explaining how those ideological messages are formed through and empowered by this particular calendrical rite. It seems also very difficult for this kind of straightforward ideological criticism to register the place of the social subaltern like the rural migrants in this media ritual, let alone to leave enough space to examine the localised actions of audiences in consuming and interpreting the programme.

### ***Understanding the ideological scheme in ritual***

Various approaches have been adopted to pondering the question of how ideology is built up through ritual. The functionalist theorisation of ritual is an expression of social cohesion, which maintains the unity of the group as a whole. The dominant structure of social relationships in turn is achieved through ritual by eliminating divisions and conflicts. This theorisation has been questioned and modified by many theorists. Max Gluckman (1963, see in: Bell, 1992), for example, posits that ritual is actually the occasions when the tensions that exist in society are exaggerated rather than minimised. It provides such occasions ‘to channel the expression of conflict in therapeutic ways so as to restore a

functioning social equilibrium.’ (Bell, 1992: 38) Victor Turner (1969) uses his three-stage graph – structure, anti-structure and structure again – to further illustrate how ritual is a mechanism for constantly re-creating, not just reaffirming, social structure. In his words, it is ‘a process rather than a thing’ (p. 203). Through these three stages, the social order assumed in the first structure stage is overturned by the rule-free, chaotic and anarchic anti-structure stage, and then replaced by an assertion of a new structure that ends the chaos. The social structure is only possible after anti-structure. What is more, his notion of social dramas leads him to envision ritual as a dramatisation institution, which not simply depicts but gives form to social conflicts (or ‘public breach’) by dramatising the real situation (Turner, 1982).

Maurice Bloch (1989) links Turner’s theory more directly to how ritual goes about constructing authority, ideology, and power. He differentiates ideology from the cognitive knowledge rooted in day-to-day life. ‘The pre-requirement for the establishment of ideology’, he argues, is ‘a systematic and furious assault on non-ideological cognition’ (p. 129), and this assault is marked by the second stage of the ritual. In this stage, the chaos and the breach are exaggerated to a certain extent so that a new order seems to be required in the third stage. But because the second stage has largely destroyed everyday cognition, the new order can therefore be expressed in an alogical manner. It is not recognising the world as it is in everyday life but making a purified and more ordered representation of it, ‘where everybody is in his place and where those in power are in authority’ (ibid.: 128). In this way, ritual realises the transformation from ‘non-ideological cognition’ to ideology without setting them apart and builds up ideology as subjective phenomenon no matter how ‘unnatural’ or alogical it actually is.

Both Turner and Bloch emphasise the indispensable position of the structural inferior in the ritual process. In their observations, ritual has never been a solo game for the structural superior, but always has a significant role played by the marginal and the structural inferior. Very often, the chaotic nature of the second stage is created or exaggerated by the status reversal between different social statuses, whereby the inferior is permitted to act as if superior, while the power of the structural superior is muted and constrained. The status reversal in the limited period of time works perfectly as a dramatisation of the social breach, for it deliberately puts the social order in normality upside down, which is waiting to be overthrown and rectified. For Turner, this cultural form ‘provides men with a set of templates, models, or paradigms which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man’s relationship to society, nature and culture’ (1969: 128). It is often located



at the annual cycle for ‘structural regularity is here reflected in temporal order’ (ibid. 177). For Bloch, it also functions as an organized assault on everyday cognition that gives way to the construction of ideology (1989: 129).

What we can learn from these theories is clear:

1. Ritual is not simply a static organization reflecting the structure of social relationships, rather, it should be recognized as a dynamic process, ‘a major means of working and reworking those social relationships’ (Bell, 1992: 56).
2. It has to deliver this working dynamics by identifying, visualising, dramatising, and providing solution to certain conflicts and crises commonly faced by the community.
3. The structural inferior has never been outside but indispensable in the ritual scheme of ideology construction.

This ritualised ideological scheme has long been embedded in the Chinese New Year Festival. Like many seasonal rites, the festival is rooted in the cultural attempt and anxiety in harmonizing the activities and attitudes of human being with the seasonal rhythm of the environment and the larger cosmos (Bell, 1992: 120). Under such a festive and auspicious surface, a sense of crisis and uncertainty has always been at its heart. When the power of nature was largely unknown and uncontrollable for people, that anxiety could inflate into a catastrophism. As we have discussed in the last chapter, the ancient Chinese commonly believed that the year turning would bring plague or demons devastating their life and community (Feuchtwang, 1992, Xiao, 2007). Many ritual performances in the festival, such as exorcism dances, setting off firecrackers, and keeping a vigil (*shousui*), reflected people’s intensive anxiety towards the possible crisis and their endeavour in surviving this catastrophe. Because of this dramatised anxiety and fear of an uncontrollable disastrous power, people’s behaviours were subject to a code quite different from the logic of their everyday life. Everything should obey an alogical and purified order. One of the vital taboos, in turn, was never talking about anything that was not auspicious or not respectful, irrespective of whether it was true or not (Xiao, 2007). It seemed that an impending crisis for the whole community demanded people to give up the cognition they gained from their daily interaction and submit to an ideological knowledge to survive the catastrophe, as if all household members had to seek protection from the patriarchal authority of the lineage and all individuals become empire subjects under the umbrella provided by the feudal ruler.

Like other ritual, the festival certainly excluded some inferior subjects, such as women, out of its boundaries. We have talked about this in the last chapter. But at the same time it also gave some inferior subjects unusual priority. One remarkable example was that, parallel to the official exorcism parade organised by the royal or local authorities, the exorcism dance in folk society was often played by the untouchable and the poor, who wore monstrous masks representing the demonic powers. Sometimes it was even transformed into a justifiable public begging and almsgiving activity. People believed those inferior subjects possessed magical power in mediating the human and the demon and therefore deserved particular reverence in this rite moment (Xiao, 2007).

Interestingly, despite the purported disenfranchisement of demonic powers in today's China, a similar sense of uncertainty and anxiety about the turn of the year is also demonstrated (or deliberately constructed) in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show. (*See Photo 8.1.*) With the coming of the midnight hour Beijing time, the Gala Show proceeds to its climax. When there is only ten seconds left all music and performances pause. Everybody turns to the round-face of a clock and starts counting down together second by second. In this magnified ten seconds, nothing seems to matter except the passage of time, as if an apocalypse was approaching, an impending doom. Finally, with the clock striking midnight turning time into the new year, the anxious tension burst out into another round of revelling, singing and dancing. Within a few moments, the studio seems to have experienced a magic revival from a deadly shock. Such dramatic performance endows the Gala Show with a magic power, which seemingly provides the national family with a means of salvation.

However, this dramatisation begs a uneasy question: in the modern world when few people really believe in the need of salvation from any natural or demonic catastrophe embodied in the year turning, where is the fear or anxiety from? That means, if the Gala Show intends to continuously draw ideological power from the rite, new forms of 'public breach' and social crisis need to be imagined or invented. Accordingly, the entrance and the position of the social subaltern in the ritual process are also subject to transformation. It is this mission of re-ritualisation and re-enchantment that invites the new inferior subjects like the rural migrants to the symbolic altar constructed by the Gala Show and assigns to them a distinguishing role in the ritual performance.



*Photo 8.1. The count-down moment in the 2010 CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show.*

### ***From the ‘rural outsider’ to the ‘peasant labourer’: the creation of a ritual catharsis***

For many years, the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show has been brightened by a unique performance genre: comic skits with the figures of the rural migrants as the main characters. Ever since 1990 onwards, this kind of performance popped up in almost every year’s *Chuxi* night broadcasting <sup>120</sup> and turned out to be one of the most promising highlights of amusement in the five-hour performance. A close examination of these performances would contribute an insight into the ideological scheme of the Gala Show and the indispensable role the rural migratory subjects played in the scheme.

Contrary to expectation, the character of the ‘rural outsider’ did not enter the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show exactly in accordance with the movement of the rural-urban migration in the reform age. Given the fact that the initial influx of the peasant labour in many cities started from the mid-1980s and quickly formed a tidal wave (Mu, 1990, Xie

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<sup>120</sup> My research shows that, between 1990 and 2008, only 2001 had no such performance. Clips of most of the comic skits I am going to discuss are available on YouTube or Youku.

and Cheng, 1990), the image of this newly emerging group had been absolutely absent in the Gala Show over the first seven years of broadcasting. This was not only because the population flow had not accumulated to an alarming scale, but also because its influences were mainly limited to the southern and coastal cities, the frontline of the opening and reform experiment, which were geographically and socially distant from the central power that CCTV represents. The indifference was broken in the late 1980s when most of the big cities in the country started to open their labour market and witnessed a tidal influx of the rural outsiders. Unprecedented and unprepared chaos happened in 1988 and 1989, as the nation's railway mainlines were overloaded by the returning and out-bound peasant labour passengers during the Spring Festival. The force of '*mingong chao*' (tide of peasant workers) began to play on the central and local government's nerves. As a consequence, the appearance of '*mangliu*' (blind drifters) in the city became a fresh but alerting motif in the 1990 CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show. In this vein, the emergence of the rural outsiders on the televised *Chuxi* night was more directly driven by public anxiety towards an unprepared population movement than by the movement itself.

A panicky response to strangers was manifested in the first characterisation of the 'rural outsiders', which demonised them as social rule violators, an enemy force besieging the city. At the beginning of 1990, CCTV presented a comic skit named '*Excessive Birth Guerrillas*' in its New Year Gala Show.<sup>121</sup> One month later, another comic skit called '*Fellow Sufferers*' appeared in the Spring Festival Gala Show. The two skits had very similar story plots: villagers who exceeded the stipulated limit of the birth-control policy drifted to the city with their illegal babies in the hope of escaping inspection and penalty from the authorities. In the first one, a village fellow led his pregnant wife fleeing around in different cities, with three baby girls carried on their backs. The babies' names followed three place names, showing how far they had been travelling around the country. To ensure the quickest responses in hostile situations, they adapted themselves to a highly mobile and restless life, like two guerrillas in a battle. The second skit looked like a continuing episode of the same battle. That village fellow came across another excessive birth escaper in the city. The two men firstly fought for a cement pipe to shelter their illegal babies, then allied together to bear up their exilic and struggling life. With the state's regulation towards the excessive birth getting tighter and tighter, they used their guerrilla tactics to drift between different cities and kept fathering. Both skits wielded the

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<sup>121</sup> Another gala show is broadcast by CCTV on the solar New Year's Eve, which resembles Spring Festival Gala Show in many ways but is not as influential.

state's birth-control policy as a mandate to illegitimise the urban squatting of the rural outsiders. In the meantime, by exaggerating the shabbiness and homelessness of their life, the skits also satirised these strangers as awkward and clownish, which aroused a great deal of facetiousity as a good amusement for audiences. The producer was so obsessed with such narrative at that time that '*Excessive Birth Guerrillas*' was later adopted into a homonymy skit performed by circus animals and re-staged in the 1992 Gala Show, which was aimed to trigger more mockery.

Such hostile characterisation worked successfully in alerting nationwide audiences and establishing a symbolism of the image of 'the rural outsiders' as a new subject who are both dangerous and untouchable for the public. But the ultimate aim for the Gala Show is to produce a ritual catharsis in easing public anxiety towards those strangers that the city was simultaneously in fear of and in need of. Therefore, more sophisticated strategies have to be adopted to characterise and re-characterise the rural outsiders as a ritual subject to enact this function.

In his study of ritual process, Turner (1969) delineates two types of liminality in structuring ritual subjects: *rituals of status reversal* and *rituals of status elevation*. In the first, as he describes, the 'persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors', normally accompanied by robust behaviour, in which inferiors revile and even physically maltreat superiors.' While, in the second, 'the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalised system of such positions' (p.167). Turner firstly differentiated these two types of liminality as belonging to different rites, the first for the calendrical rites, and the second for the life crisis rites, like birth, puberty, marriage and installation. But he then used an installation ritual in an African tribe to exemplify the co-existence of two types of liminality in one ritual (1969: 171). Similarly in the case of CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show, it is interesting to discern both types of liminality were manoeuvred to adapt different discursive production of the rural outsiders under different circumstances.

From 1991 to 2003, what was acted out in every year's Gala Show through different comic skits were the rituals of status reversal, wherein the characters of the rural outsiders were bestowed with a momentarily superior position over their real superior, without having their perpetual social status elevated. Such status reversal was performed through

two kinds of narratives. In the first narrative, the rural outsiders and urbanites were co-present in the same skit and positioned in an up-side-down hierarchy. The rural outsiders were masked in strength and demand of urbanites and exercised a ritual authority in the story, very often using robust verbal or non-verbal behaviours to humble urbanities. In the comic skit '*Strangers*' (1991), for example, a rural girl distrusted an urbanite man, who intended to show her the way to her city relatives late at night. To ease her suspicion, the man let the girl tie up his hands and lead him on a leash, like a restrained animal or a captured criminal. Sometime, the two subjects were put in rather paradoxical positions, like the master and the male servant in the comic skit '*Shoe Polishing*' (1993). As the plot unfolded, the two men's positions reversed. The master's real identity was a street shoe polisher (a typical livelihood led by unskilled rural migrants in the city) and the male servant was actually a technician from a shoe factory. The skit achieved its satiric climax when the master begged his male servant, not to have his own shoes polished, but to polish the servant's shoes, because he was prevented by rain from going to work on that day and he could not bear not to exercise his crafts even for one day. The second narrative was constituted by the sole performances of the rural outsiders. In this case, their status was reversed through their mimicry towards urbanities. In the skit '*Searching for Focuses*' (1995), for instance, a peasant couple who came to the city for the first time mimicked investigative journalists, trying to capture the astonishing sights around them with their mini camera. Another skit, '*Returning Home*' (1998), presented a migrant man who spent his earnings from a car washing business in the city on a second-hand mobile phone, a degraded emulation of a status symbol of the social prestige at a time when mobile was largely counted a conspicuous commodity.

In both narratives, not only the statuses between the weak and the strong were turned upside down, but also, the effects were grossly dramatised for heightened comic effect. The reverse fantasy created by the skits initially triggered a lot of laughter from audiences and, in laughter, made them realise just how ridiculous and odd these scenes were, in turn called for a overthrowing and rectification back to normality. Therefore, in the end, these ritual performances of status reversal pointed to a confirmation of the social categories and statuses as axiomatic and unchangeable.

On the other hand, however, as frequently happens in many other rites of status reversal, those comic skits did acknowledge the power of the structural inferior in ritual. In different settings and story plots, the characters of the rural outsiders were commonly

endowed with some forms of tactics that the urban mainstream lacked or disdained, such as pursuing fashion by possessing a second-hand mobile in the skit. They always appear extremely resourceful and optimistic in whatever difficulties. More importantly, they seemed privileged in satirising the powerful, speaking out the discontent from the bottom towards the current social ethos, and hitting social problems rather acutely, which was contrarily more restricted for the mainstream. Paradoxically, their outspoken strength was not vested by any high rank in social hierarchy, but largely from their marginality and inferiority. Different skits commonly featured the rural outsiders as a group of nondescripts, in-betweeners and strangers, who could not easily be coded into or judged by any categories in the existing social order. They were portrayed as unorganised drifters between the city and the countryside, squatting in the city fringe and constantly on the move. Most of them were self-employed, earning a livelihood in whatever occupations were available, such as maids (1993), cobblers (1997), car washers (1998), hourly workers (2000), or water deliverers (2004). Accordingly, their images varied in genders and ages, associated with the old and weak as much as with the young and strong. They were not necessarily rebellious, but largely indeterminate, flowing, and untamed, which always delivered an unsettling force towards the social mainstream. In short, given the ritual re-affirmation of the legitimacy of the dominant social order and structure, the status reversal mechanism presented the rural migratory subjects as an uncategorised identity, not yet fully illegible and disciplinable for the authorities, the liminality of which fuelled the dynamic of this ritual performance year after year.

From 2004 there was a dramatic change in the portrayal of the rural migrants in the Gala Show. In this, the rite of status elevation now purported to elevate the character of the rural migrants from outsider to insider. This mechanism obviously coincided with the discursive transformation of the state's floating population regulation I have addressed in Chapter 2. Following a whole array of events in 2003: the 'Sun Zhigang Event', the withdrawal of the Detention and Repatriation Law, the journalistic campaign against the default payments for the peasant workers, and so on, the new Communist leadership turned to promote the principle of the 'harmonious society' as the remedy for the emerging social crises and change the regulatory mechanism towards the floating population from unselective banishment to selective inclusion or advanced marginalisation (see the detailed discussion in Chapter 2). This alteration was promptly mirrored on the CCTV 2004 Spring Festival Gala Show. Unlike ever before, an inclusive gesture was presented in the comic skit '*Urban Non-natives*', which tried to turn

audiences' attention to the commonalities rather than the differences between the rural outsiders and urbanites. Under a fabricated consensus of 'we are all non-natives in the city', the divides between the rural jobbers and their urban bosses were seemingly dissolved. A year later, a more straightforward expression was heard in the skit '*Decoration*'. The ending was a migrant decoration worker shouting out: 'No arrears for peasant workers' payments!' an apparent duplication of the fashionable slogan in the official media. Further, in the 2006 gala show, the characters of the rural migrants appeared in the city setting as a semi-organised group, who had the kindergarten run by themselves and for themselves ('*Odd Jobbers' Kindergarten*'). In turn, the urbanite they confronted was no longer an ordinary individual, but a cadre from an urban residential committee, whose duty was to assess the quality of their kindergarten and decide whether to shut it down or to fund it.

A more radical lift was seen in 2007, when the character of rural outsiders was, for the first time, detached from the ghetto of comic skit and re-modelled in two higher art forms. The first was a poetry elocution performed by a group of children as the representatives of the offspring of the peasant labourers who work in the city without the urban *hukou*. The poem was entitled '*Innermost Thoughts*', purported to be the most truthful voice of those children themselves. If the comic skits in the past years were aimed to trigger laughter, this time it was sympathetic tears:

*Once I was ashamed to tell you who I am  
Afraid of being laughed at by urban kids ...  
Dim are our classrooms, lit by only several watts  
Shabby are our desks, uttering under our arms  
What neat is our homework; no worse than any others'  
Tell you what is in my heart  
I love my Mum, who sweeps the city street wider and wider  
I love my Dad, who builds high-rises for the new era ...  
Equal are we, as kids of China, flowers in motherland.*

While audiences were still soaking up the affected sentiment, the second scene, modern dance '*Entering the City*' began. In the light-hearted music, a group of countryside-dressed dancers left their home villages and entered the modern urban setting. After experiencing shocks and struggles, they gradually settled down in the city. The replacement of their rustic clothes with various occupational uniforms symbolised the elevation of their identity from rural villagers to members of the urban labour army.



Finally, this rite of status elevation reached completion in 2008. A three-part segment constituted of different performing forms, which took 25 minutes prime time (21:40-22:05) at the reception peak of the Gala Show, conveyed the rural outsiders to an unprecedented position.<sup>122</sup> In the comic skit called '*Bus Concerto*', a stingy native Beijinger met a migrant construction worker on a bus. When he realised the worker was rushing to hospital to donate blood to one of his fellowmen's wife who was suffering dystocia, the Beijinger generously, though not without pain, donated his salary card. The righteous act of this 'urbanite big brother' seemingly built up a quasi blood tie with his 'peasant worker fellowman', as if the difference between them was glossed by a constructed brotherhood. After the ending of the skit, the actor of the construction work Wang Baoqiang, who had once been a peasant worker himself before becoming famous in the entertainment industry was retained on the stage and interviewed by one of the show's hosts. He was praised as a model of the 'peasant worker brothers and sisters', who fulfilled their dreams by devoting themselves in the modern urban construction. In the end, Wang Baoqiang joined in a chorus consisting of dozens of peasant worker representatives selected from different vocations. In a marching rhythm, '*The Song of Peasant Workers*' resonated around the studio.<sup>123</sup>

*Mud on body, sweat on face*  
*All for a dream, we explore in the city*  
*Peasants yesterday, workers today*  
*The new hosts of the city daring and energetic*  
*Stick out your chest, brothers and sisters*  
*No fear of wind and rain after hardship*  
*Believe in yourself and in the future*  
*Similar glory will visit our lives...*

As the chorus proceeded, the huge wall screen in the background played out the images of the booming and growing city. Superimposed on those images was the title page of the State Council document '*The Practical Suggestions on the Problem of the Peasant*

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<sup>122</sup> The clips of these programmes are available on:  
<http://spring.cctv.com/08chunwan/20080206/101832.shtml> and  
<http://spring.cctv.com/08chunwan/20080206/101828.shtml>

<sup>123</sup> The official reports asserted that the song was initially composed by some peasant workers in a factory in Xiamen. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao heard the song when he inspected the factory and demanded CCTV to put this song on the Spring Festival Gala Show. [http://ent.cctv.com/20080129/107625\\_1.shtml](http://ent.cctv.com/20080129/107625_1.shtml)

*Workers*' (No.5 Document, 2006), which promoted 'caring and protecting' as the State's new line towards the peasant workers, one of the key policies at the core of the 'harmonious society' project.

Step by step, five years' Gala Shows elevated the character of the rural outsiders to a new title: 'the peasant workers', 'a new form of labour force born in the process of reform, industrialisation, and urbanisation'.<sup>124</sup> In the official interpretation, the title was aimed to promote the social status of the rural outsiders as no longer outside but equally integral and significant to the grand project of building a socialist harmonious society and modern city construction, which deserves more social equality and civil rights. This interpretation very likely led to a naïve understanding of the elevation as for the collective status of all rural migratory subjects, but it proved not to be true. As Turner (1969) observes, opposite to the collective connotation of the rites of status reversal, there is a tendency for the rites of status elevation to be performed more frequently for individuals, in which case 'an individual's status has been irreversibly changed, but the collective status of his subjects remained unchanged' (p.171). This kind of rite usually puts individuals to test on purpose, forcing them to pass through physical ordeals or oral insults, which is aimed to teach the novice obedience and manliness. The status elevation in turn works as a selective institution, only passing the qualified but abandoning the non-qualified. By elevating some selected individuals to higher rank, the ultimate ritual implication is by no means to eliminate the hierarchical boundaries between the high and the low, the insider and the outsider, but to reinforce them or sometimes to re-draw a new boundary between them.

Such ritual mechanism commonly witnessed in traditional status elevating moments like puberty, marriage or inauguration was evidently reproduced on CCTV's *Chuxi* stage. The rural outsiders were facing certain forms of test or evaluation in the Gala Show. The most straightforward example was the comic skit '*Odd Jobbers' Kindergarten*' in 2006, wherein the urban community committee cadre inspected the kindergarten of the peasant workers. A similar theme also permeates other programmes. Commonly emphasised in this round of characterisations were the passages or crises some peasant workers had endured in the city, which proved they were qualified in 'bitter-eating', endurance, and productivity, eligible to join the labour army that the developing city currently hungers for. As the result of such selective assessment, the rural migratory characters who now earned the title of 'the peasant workers' differed from the previous characters in many ways.

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<sup>124</sup> The definition given in the 2006 No.5 Document of the State Council.

They were overwhelmingly figured as young, strong and predominately male labourers. Their stage images were always associated with certain recognisable occupational uniforms, showing their employment statuses were rather formal and institutional. Accordingly, the elderly, weak, unskilled and informally employed figures, like the cobbler, the car washer, or the street boots, who had once been quite active on the previous Gala Show stage, were suddenly cleared out. Along this re-drawn boundary between including and excluding, a new imagination of the 'others' was figured out, who were still different from 'us', but seemingly not unknown or untamed any more. The title of 'peasant workers' allowed the city to define, select, organise and harness the flow of the outsiders according to its own needs. Compared with the former characters, these included outsiders were more the exemplars of the mainstream value than the representatives of the voice from bottom. They were detached from the liminal position that once enabled them to dare to satirise the powerful and the orthodox. Neither did they have as much resourcefulness to amuse their audience as they used to have. Even the performance forms had become much more serious. All these transformations delivered another level of ritual catharsis to the public anxiety: harnessing the fear towards strangers by eliminating the ambiguity and liminality of their identity. From this perspective, what seemed ultimately elevated through the rites was not the position of the rural outsiders but the position of authority as both the definer and controller of the social order, which was endowed with a magic power in restoring the social equilibrium by re-positioning the stranger in place.

The CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show over the past 25 years can be interrogated from diverse angles. The above review is particularly aimed to go beyond the myth of national unity the media ritual claims and reveal the conflicting reality it has been entangled with in constructing this myth. Given many fundamental differences, at least at two points, television has not led the Chinese New Year Festival very far from its traditional forms: the myth making through the dynamical mechanisms in dramatising and releasing the conflicting tension; and the constitutive role the marginal plays in the construction of the central. As we can perceive from the previous analyses, the wrenching social changes which happened during China's reform and opening up pushed the rural migratory subjects to the heart of the official annual ceremony. Their marginality and liminality as civil subjects parallel their centrality as ritual subjects.<sup>125</sup> Their border-crossing

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<sup>125</sup> At this point, the rural migrants are not alone. Other inferior subjects like the disabled, the elderly and ethnic minorities have also been staged on the Gala Show quite often. See Pan (2007). But none of them have played the same distinct and enduring role as the rural migratory subjects did in the last 18 years.

movements were represented by the Gala Show as a social breach that fuelled the public anxiety. The different characterisations of the rural migrants in different periods expressed the shifting mechanisms the Gala Show exercised to provide a certain ritual catharsis of the public anxiety. Whether by reversing the social status of the rural outsiders or elevating some of them to 'peasant workers', the ritual implication of the performances was to legitimise the domination of those in power and impose a simplifying and hierarchical positioning on the complex and variable conditions of existence in the everyday life.

So far we have looked at the position of the rural migratory subjects in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show's ritual performance. Then, how is this ritual performance located in the rural migrants' Chuxi night in the two urban villages?

## **The gala show in the festival space of the rural migrants**

As a complementary perspective to the conventional ritual studies that are overwhelmingly centred on rite performances and institutions, the practical approach to ritual calls attention to what and how particular social actors do with those rites to construct particular types of meanings and values in different situations. In this paradigm, 'the real principles of ritual practice are nothing other than the flexible sets of schemes and strategies acquired and deployed by an agent who has embodied them.' (Bell, 1992: 82) Following this line, what matters for a media ritual is not only the ongoing performance shown on the screen, but also the viewer's activities towards both the medium and the content. This theoretical strand also has its geographical implication, for it looks beyond the perceived singular centre of ritual institution and sheds light on the multiplicity of the ritual contexts. As Catherin Bell (1992) emphasises, 'ritual should be analysed and understood in its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting within any given culture, not as some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action.' (p. 98) In the case of mass media, the practices of ritualisation are not limited to the place where the rite performance is produced, but stretch over space and act out in every place the performance is consumed. Therefore, the cultural meanings of the rite

performance go far beyond its core stage, but equally depend on who are watching and where they are watching.<sup>126</sup>

### ***Compulsory or voluntary?***

An extensive participation in a rite performance is the very essence of every ceremony. But the audience's participation in a media ceremony seems to posit more puzzles to theorists. Many emphases have been placed on differentiating the television viewer from the actor in traditional rituals. Turner (1985), for example, contends that the true liminality in the traditional ritual processes no longer exists in modern society, because, unlike ritual participation in less complex societies, which was compulsory, the participation as a viewer in the modern society, whether in a television program or a sport game, is voluntary. For participation like this, Turner gives another word *liminoid*. Similarly, Paddy Scannell (1995), in his criticism of Dayan and Katz's conceptualisation of media events, defines television as a prime mediating agent of societal disenchantment. He suggested the gap between the place where performances are produced and observed renders audiences absolute autonomy, allowing them to behave in whatever ways they like in responding to a solemn and sacred ceremony (p. 155). These arguments are definitely insightful in the historical transformations that modern media have brought to our ritual experiences. But the distinction between the ritual participation and media spectatorship might not be that sharp. Here, I agree with Nick Couldry (2003), who reminds us not to ignore media's possible contribution to new forms of ritual experience or re-enchantment in the modern society (p. 34). His caution is particularly pertinent in examining the media events like the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show, which embeds itself in a long existing ceremonial rite.

The relatively personal and dispersed reception pattern of television indeed makes it somehow difficult to accept there is a compulsory sense in the audience's participation, especially in the days of mass audience dominated by channel and medium multiplication. But as Nick Couldry (2003) points out, even if media distribution channels multiply, it is

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<sup>126</sup> As far as I am concerned, this angle has not been substantially explored in the academic study of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show. Chinese scholar Zhongdang Pan has tried to organise his students to do such research but without any result published yet. A brief introduction can be seen in one of his articles (2010b), which concludes his findings on two points: the feeling that it is compulsory for most of the viewers; and a kind of peripheral position of the Gala Show in ordinary households' *Chuxi* night. As my following words in this chapter will demonstrate, things seem much more complicated than this. Another distinction between his project and mine is that his research seems not to be undertaken among any particular social group or based on any particular locality.

still possible for audiences to submit to a compulsory viewing pattern in the situation of some media events, for the shared interest in a common event would drive those multiple outputs easily connecting up intertextually ‘to recreate a sense of a compulsory centre, albeit with countless tributaries reaching out from that centre’ (p. 66). In the broadcasting landscape on Chinese New Year’s Eve, this sense of compulsory centre is not merely created by the market alliance between the multiple outlets, but also underpinned by the hierarchical relationship between CCTV and the local TV organisations in the state’s media administrative system. As the sole comprehensive TV station run by the central government, CCTV possesses the exclusive authority in organising the national media event, while other organisations, in principle, can only operate within the scale of the provinces or cities they operate in. This is one of the decisive factors underlying the unitary broadcasting landscape and massive reception market on the *Chuxi* night we charted earlier. When a programme is simultaneously aired on 40 channels or more, it seems difficult for the ordinary audiences to enjoy it merely as an optional entertainment, but something nearly compulsory. Besides the structural force of broadcasting regulation, another source of the sense of ‘compulsory viewing’ is from the decline of other ritual activities on the *Chuxi* night for today’s Chinese households, especially in urban settings. As we have addressed in other places, rounds of cultural revolutions against the feudal superstitions in modern and contemporary China have largely cleared most of the old New Year Eve customs, such as ancestral worship, out of Chinese urbanites’ *Chuxi* night. In most of the big cities even the New Year’s Eve fireworks had been banned for many years by fire prevention legislation,. Family reunion feasts and entertainment like playing cards or mah-jong are undoubtedly the main event for most urban households to celebrate the turning of the year. But if they want to have something more interesting to make the night carnivalesque, watching the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show usually turns out to be the most likely choice.

What I observed in the two urban villages on 2008 *Chuxi* night was not exceptional. My visits on that night and interviews in the following days suggested the vast majority of the rural migrant households who stayed in Wuhan during the festival watched the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show on *Chuxi* night.<sup>127</sup> Many informants expressed the view that this seemed a must-do thing at that moment; otherwise they would feel they had missed

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<sup>127</sup> The exceptional were equally observable. Quite a few men spent the whole night playing mahjong together. A more interesting example was that a group of Henan migrant women who gathered at one home watched the live broadcast of ‘The Final of the Children Competition of Henan Opera’ (a local opera performed in Henan dialect.) on the Henan Provincial Satellite Channel. In those people’s *Chuxi* night, the influence of the CCTV Gala Show was very limited.

out on something. Some also admitted that watching the Gala Show seemed more important when they passed *Chuxi* in the city than when they stayed in their rural homes, for there seemed not many other things they could do. Indeed, my interviews with the rural migrant households who returned to the rural villages during 2008 Spring Festival proved that the reception rate of the Gala Show among those households was much lower. Unlike in the city, their *Chuxi* nights in the rural home were normally centred around ancestral worship either at home or in front of the tombs, before or after the family reunion feasts. Consequently, watching television became relatively marginal in their *Chuxi* activities. If they wanted, they could watch the replay of the Gala Show in the following days.

Of course, it would over-exaggerating to perceive watching the CCTV Gala Show was something as compulsory as the traditional *Chuxi* rite activities, such as incense burning and food sacrifice before the ancestral altar. Yet, it is difficult to see people's reception activity as absolutely voluntary or solely for entertainment. 25 years' constant, repetitive and monopolistic broadcasting has not only legitimated CCTV as the exclusive authority in holding a national *Chuxi* rite, but also formalised the Spring Festival Gala Show into an electronic icon strongly indicative of this annual ceremonial moment. Similar to the relationship between the divine icons and the religious believers to some extent, becoming a viewer of the Gala Show turns out to be a ready-made way to be part of the festival or to make one night in a year special. This, in fact, is the very means that every ritual does what it does. As Bell (1992) put it, they 'exercise considerable social control by creating situations that compel acceptance of traditional forms of authority.' (p. 70) At this point, the Gala Show is not very distinct from many traditional rites. It not only delivers an ideology to change people's mind, but also imposes a set of codes to alter their action, though the agent of its compelling force is absent in the immediate situation.

### ***Positioning the icon in the festival-making***

Having said so, the iconic existence of the Gala Show on *Chuxi* night does not mean the action space of the festival is fully programmed by it. Like all ritual icons, its referents are rather ambiguous and the complement of its cultural meaning is subject to how different viewers position, interpret, and act on it. Even talking about religious icons, one of the assumptions shared by many theorists is that those icons have to be multivocal and

capable of fusing multi-dimensional or even conflicting interpretations and actions (Turner, 1967, Eriksen, 2001). So it is with the Gala Show.

If we want to capture the position of the Gala Show in the rural migrant households' *Chuxi* night, our observation should be grounded on the recognition that this is one of the social groups in today's China whose home and festival in the city is not settled but still in the making (in the transitional era, this might be generally true for every Chinese citizen though). Therefore, their actions on the Gala Show were geared by what kinds of festival they wanted to create and how they could create in their urban settlement. This varied with different household structures, housing conditions, occupations, the social networks in the city, and so on. This is the key agency in making their consumption of the Gala Show impressively active and diverse.

By virtue of this agency, what we witnessed on *Chuxi* night in the two urban villages was one programme being used as an ingredient to make different recipes:

**Scene 1:** *Soon after their family reunion dinner, Xiao Yin saw her husband was about to leave home and go and play cards with some of his Henan fellow villagers. She switched on the television, a second-hand set they just bought a few days before the festival, trying to keep her husband at home so that the whole family could watch the Gala Show together. Although she did not use the television to keep him very long, at least watching the Gala Show, Xiao Yin and her two children spent that night together.*

**Scene 2:** *Xiao Wei was an unmarried migrant. As a letter carrier in the post office, he could not return to his home village for the festival. On Chuxi night, he had to look after his sister's corner shop, when her whole family was absent. Therefore, his Gala Show viewing was in the shop on his own while the business was still running.*

**Scene 3:** *Every year's Chuxi night was the busiest time for Xiao Ke couple's barbershop. To serve the endless flow of customers who commonly wanted to greet the New Year with a new look, the couple even had to take turns to have dinner, let alone to sit down to watch television. Instead, like what they always did in their everyday business, they kept the television playing in the corner of the shop. What made this night special was the Gala Show played on the screen, which filled the crowded barbershop with music and laughter,*



*creating a sense of festival both for Xiao Ke couple who were working without any stop and the customers they served. Some of the customers even did not leave immediately after finishing their hair dressing but stayed in the shop and continued their viewing for a while.*

**Scene 4:** *Xiao Han's work place offered her double overtime wage for bus washing on the Chuxi night. To grasp this opportunity to earn extra money, she persuaded her husband and 10-year-old son to go to her work place immediately after dinner and wash buses together with her. When the whole family came back home at 11:30, the first thing they did was to switch on television. Despite the whole night's hard working, the two adults stayed up until the very end of the gala show. In Xiao Han's mind, that was a wonderful Chuxi night, for they both earned extra money and enjoyed the festival simply by watching the Gala Show.*

As such scenes show, the sense of festivity the viewers obtained from the Gala Show did not necessarily derive from the contents of the programme. Given a high rate of reception, the number of viewers who had been genuinely following the programme from beginning to the end was very low. Neither did I find many viewers could clearly remember the details of performances. Some even mixed up performances of previous years to those of this year. When talking about the Gala Show later on, few of them gave very positive or satisfactory comments on the programme as a whole. All these signs showed that their engagements in the festival viewing did not necessarily lead to serious appreciation of the contents. It seems that the action of viewing an iconic program on this particular moment was more promising to generate a festival mood than what the programme exactly tells.

In fact, this ambiguity between the icon as a material object and what it is meant to represent is nothing special. For example, in her study of a Greek pilgrimage ritual, Jill Dubisch (1995) notices that very often 'it is not simply through an icon, but to an icon that many supplicants appear to speak.' Therefore, 'icons are not only part of the devotee's relationship to the divine, but are themselves active participants in this relationship.' (p. 69) Related to an electronic icon like the Gala Show which is shown live on television, the focus of people's action on the icon is allowed to be even more shifting. On some occasions, the viewers could make the Gala Show function very well even without watching it properly.

When I called on Aizhi's single-room home on Chuxi night at around 9 o'clock, her husband, her son and other two relatives were playing cards on the bed; Aizhi and her daughter were busy making dumplings by the side. In the corner of the room, the Gala Show was playing on the screen. The sound was loud enough to be competing with people's talking. In this family, only Aizhi's daughter at moments paid attention to the television while she was making dumplings. Others were absorbed in card playing, talking or cooking, only with occasional glances at the screen. Nevertheless, nobody suggested switching off the TV. To explain the function of the Gala Show on their *Chuxi* night, Aizhi firstly quoted a proverb: '*Fire on the thirtieth, light on the fifteenth.*'<sup>128</sup> This proverb points to traditional New Year customs in China, wherein fire burning and lantern lighting were used as important tools to drive away plague and evil spirits and protect the family against demonic powers at the turn of the year. She then added: 'Turning the television on and playing such a bustling and joyful programme are like having a fire burning at home.' In this interpretation, the festival broadcasting and viewing was principally appropriated by Aizhi's family as a material and symbolic substitution of fire and lantern, which provided another form of warmth, security, and settlement in this moment of crisis. The live broadcast might have potential in connecting the family to a distant and transcendent togetherness, but in my observation, it more directly delivered and marked an immediately common presence within this family, which was not necessarily subject to the messages conveyed by its contents.

Getting out of Aizhi's home, I followed the main street and came to Lao Lu's home. As an old electronic appliance repairer and storekeeper, Lao Lu's shop floor displayed a whole line of second-hand TV sets for sale. One of them that was near the front door was turned on and playing the Gala Show. In the inner part of the shop floor, Lao Lu's whole family was having their reunion dinner around a big dining table. Similar to what happened in Aizhi's home, nobody paid attention to the programme. The TV set was not even oriented towards the dining table but sidelong to the opened front door. (See *Photo 8.2.*) Yet, it cannot be said the broadcasting did not exist at all. When the show presenters were about to lead the audience to countdown the last ten seconds to midnight Beijing Time, I saw Lao Lu leave the dining table and take out a long strip of firecrackers to the front doorway. As the clock in the Gala Show struck midnight, he set off the firecrackers. At the same

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<sup>128</sup> Here, 'the thirtieth' means the thirtieth of December in Lunar month, the Chinese New Year's Eve; 'the fifteenth' means the Lantern Festival, the fifteenth of the first Lunar month.

moment, the whole street was deafened by firecrackers from many households. Lao Lu's action suggested that what mattered the most about the Gala Show to him was not the performances, but its function in time structuring. Setting off firecrackers has long been an important component for Chinese New Year's Eve, but it used to be timed differently in every household either when the ancestral spirit was greeted, the family reunion feast commenced, or at the first moment the family woke up in the New Year's Day morning. With the embedment of the Gala Show in Chinese *Chuxi* night, its performance climax at midnight Beijing Time gradually became a kind of standard time for setting off firecrackers in ordinary Chinese households and this has been particularly typical especially in the urban setting. Except for the years and the regions when the fireworks were banned, the time when the Gala Show started to count down the last ten seconds to midnight is usually the time most households prepare to set off their firecrackers. Lao Lu's action was based on his ritual mastery of this cultural scheme and his agent in adapting the year turning of his family to the particular locality of their settlement. The synchronisation between Lao Lu's setting off firecrackers and the climax of the Gala Show did not only reflect his participation in the broadcasting as a viewer, but also delivered his interaction with the festive code of the city and the neighbourhood he lived in, because he knew that was the moment many others would be doing the same thing together with him.

### ***Self-reflection via viewing***

No matter how it was positioned, seeing and using the Gala Show as a festival icon more or less invoked an enchantment of a broadcasting programme as possessing a charisma in leading its viewers to transcend the immediate situation and reach the sacredness of the festival. This competence, however, did not necessarily change the programme viewers into blind-minded devotees. Equally demonstrated in the rural migrants' practices was their consciousness in reducing the Gala Show back to a drama, half true and half false, and seeing themselves as spectators, in between believing and suspecting. This consciousness is essential to the ritual agent, in that it enlightens the social actors to use ritual as a mirror of reflexivity, helping them to see the world more clearly than usual and to reflect on their own position in it.

First of all, we shouldn't understand the reflexive stance as something external to ritual performances. In the previous discussion, we have addressed how the ideological power of

ritual is fundamentally derived from its dramatisation of social reality and conflicts. It tries to render ‘a construction on what we must hold to be true to remain sane’ on the one hand, but through the dramatic representation, it ‘seems also to deny this truth’ on the other. Therefore, ‘it both affirms and denies at the same time’ (Bloch, 1989: 130). A cultural competent viewer, in turn, is the one who is capable to master such ‘half affirming, half denying’ scheme and engage in the performance at both levels. That means people’s agency in taking part in the ritual sacredness goes parallel with their ability in reflecting the meanings of the performance in the reference of the logic in one’s own everyday life. More paradoxically, it is usually not the audiences near to the centre of the ritual organisation that have the higher ability of reflection. Rather, as Bruce Kapferer (1984) observes in demon exorcism among the Sinhales in Sri Lanka, audiences who sit back and see the event at a distance were more conscious in and capable of participating the event as a means of self-reflection. That was because their relatively marginal position allowed them to be able to ‘move to and fro between the ritual, spiritual context and the everyday contexts’, shifting between participation and spectatorship, so that the two realms are connected to each other (see in: Eriksen, 2001: 219).

This notion of ritual practice sheds light on the reflexive agency of the rural migrant viewers in their festival viewing. Compared to those who have power to reside in the production centre and engage in what Geertz (1973) calls the ‘deep play’ of the Gala Show, the rural migrants in the urban villages were only ‘shallow players’, who knew little about the symbolic nuances of the performances on the stage and only linger at the edge of the arena. But their social distance from the performance centre actually rendered them a better position of reflection. This position was further reinforced by the flexible combination between the mediated and non-mediated activities in their festival spaces, as we discussed earlier, which made their location between the media ritual and everyday contexts extremely slippery. As the result, they demonstrated a good ability to read the Gala Show from a distance and relate it to their own life, as the following segments from their interviews can show:

*Don’t misunderstand the Gala Show as merely something to amuse the audience. You always have to look deeper to get its real messages. They are the messages the top wants us commoners to hear.*

—Xiao Wei, 23, male, postman, from Enshi, Hubei

*No matter what is played out in the programme, all it wants is nothing more than a happy atmosphere, making us feel everybody in this country lives in unity and harmony without any quarrel.*

—Xiao Wan, 27, female, housewife, from Anlu, Hubei

Among their various opinions about the Gala Show, what interested me most was how they reflected on the image of the ‘peasant workers’ featured in the 25-minute three part unit in 2008, the mediated rite of status elevation I analysed previously. The official statistics suggested that this unit earned great popularity among the national audience. Especially, the comic skit ‘*Bus Concerto*’ performed by Gong Feng and Baoqiang Wang hit the peak of reception in the five-hour *Chuxi* broadcasting (Chai, 2008). The response of my rural migrant informants, however, proved to be at variance with the general statistics. When they were asked about which program they favoured mostly, only 3 out of 22 informants mentioned the comic skit ‘*Bus Concerto*’. None of them noted Baoqiang Wang’s interview or the chorus ‘*The Song of the Peasant Workers*’. While the three programmes were broadcast, I happened to be in Aizhi’s home. In my observation, no one in the room appeared particularly interested. Of course, such negative or indifferent attitude in reception could not be easily defined as a force of resistance, because there could be a whole number of reasons that prevented them from being interested in this clip of programme, not necessarily due to their dissent against the content or subject of the programmes. The real dissent, however, lied in their reflections on the image of the peasant workers and their own relationship with this image. I learned this by deliberately emphasising the unit in the following days’ interviews, including group interviews after showing the recording of this clip to some informants. These are my conversations with some of them:

Xiao Hu (29, male, chef, from Gong’an, Hubei):

*‘What do you think the programs want to tell you?’*

*‘It seems to be saying something about me, but I don’t think I am one of them.’*

*‘You mean you don’t feel you belong to the peasant workers, like Baoqiang Wang?’*

*‘It’s hard to say. In terms of Hukou status, I am like him. But the honour he got is out of my reach. He works for the formal work-unit, but I am only a chef hired by a private boss. For me, what matters more is the boss’s word rather than the state’s policy.’*

Xiao Liu (28, Xiao Hu's wife, unemployed, from Macheng, Hubei):

*'I don't think I belong to the peasant workers either. The peasant workers in the show only refer to those who make big contributions to the government. I just stay at home and take care of my family. What contribution do I make to the government?'*

Lu Shifu (61, male, cobbler, from Tianmen, Hubei):

*'Do you feel somehow excited when you see the status of the peasant workers was promoted by the government in the gala show?'*

*'To be honest, I feel rather indifferent. Can't you see that the peasant workers in the gala show do not represent all peasant workers? They only include those who work in big work-units, such as factories or construction sites, not including people like me who live on little businesses without a formal job. Otherwise, why haven't I received any benefits from the government so far?'*

Aizhi (35, female, waitress, from Xinyang, Henan):

*'I really doubt if I am in them or not. Those peasant workers seem always lucky to meet good bosses and get help from strangers around them. Not everybody can be that lucky. At least, the bosses I meet are all very mean.'*

23-year-old Xiao Wei had formal work contract with a local post office. Given this relative stable employment, neither did he identify himself as a 'peasant worker':

*'Although I don't have the city hukou, I do not want to be counted as a peasant worker. In my mind, the peasant workers are those who are extremely poor and do very humble jobs, mostly typically the labourers in the construction sites or those who work as scavengers. No matter how their identity is promoted, I don't want to be one of them.'*

Between these lines, an agency of reflexivity was actively exercised. It was aware that, as a replacement of the labels like 'rural drifters' or 'rural outsiders', the identity of 'the peasant workers' was recently promoted by the government to name people like them, those who work in the city without city *hukou*. But they commonly expressed objection to this identification, despite the patronising prize added on it. The power of this objection came from their mobility between the ritual context and the reality. On the one hand, they

used their everyday life experiences to reflect the authenticity of the drama, showing their distrust in the inclusive and harmonious image performed on the stage. On the other hand, they also used the idealised image in the Gala Show as a mirror, to reflect on the real experiences on the city and express their discontentment towards the existing exclusion and deprivation they are struggling with. Despite the lack of power to claim who they are, they tried to excise their self-reflection by denying who they are not. This denial demonstrated an unease to determine the strangers under an invented name or organise them at a fixed position. Under such anti-determination stance, the aura of the ‘peasant worker’ identity, which is painfully elevated by the authority, is doomed to decay. In turn, whether the rite of status elevation performed in the gala show can really impose a hegemonic order onto everyday life become rather uncertain.



*Photo 8.2. Chuxi night in Lao Lu's home. The TV set on the right was playing the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show.*

In the end, if we put content analysis and field investigation together, a dynamic picture is unrolled in the media ritual space constructed around the CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show. Before the complexities revealed in the process, our previous conceptualisation of media ritual solely as a myth-making process of a mediated centre seems to be limited. The idea that this myth of mediated centre is principally constructed and sustained by categorising what is ‘in’ media and what is not appears less convincing. My study of the

CCTV Spring Festival Gala Show and its correlations with Chinese rural migratory subjects suggests that the ritualisation of this media rite is a multi-situated and multi-layered social and cultural process co-produced by both media producer and consumer. At least, from the intersection between the Gala Show broadcast and the urban settlement trajectory of the Chinese rural migrants, two levels of ritualisation are deployed in parallel: the imagined unity and ordering of the 'national family' centred on the modern state authority through a top-down media manoeuvre; and, the creation of a placed festivity in the process of migration through active positioning and appropriating the iconic symbolism of the Gala Show in the locality of the urban villages. Each level of ritualisation points to a different place making process centred by different social value and identification. But they also proceed in resonance with each other.

In both processes, the distinctions between the centre and the margin, the internal and the external, do exist. But the ritual making of the centre is more complicated than the absolute exclusion of the marginal. Its key technique is to selectively include the marginal or external forces and strategically frame them into the creation of a centred place, which unavoidably intensifies rather than reduces the confrontations and crashes between the central and the marginal. As I spelled out earlier, the social liminality of the rural migratory subjects does not drive this inferior group out of the mediated 'national family', but on the contrary confers them with an outstanding position in the construction of this mediated 'national family'. Similarly, the social distance between the institutional centre of the Gala Show and the rural migrants' settlement in the urban villages has not reduced the significance of this iconic broadcast in their festival space.

As an integral element of their home-making project in the urban villages, the active engagement of the rural migrants in the festival viewing is not necessarily a submission to the symbolism of the Gala Show programmed by the external powers, but the exercise of a form of ritual mastery, which invokes flexible sets of cultural schemes in using a cultural icon to organise their own festival experiences and more or less orchestrating their localised and immediate experiences with the transcendent sacredness of ritual value. At the same time, the festival viewing and interpretative practices also enable the rural migrants to confront a mediated image of themselves, which affords them a reflexive space in knowing the world and themselves better.



# Conclusions

Most of time, we live and work in a place without noticing it. It is only when we find out it may not be quite as we think does 'place' become an issue. Similarly, when researchers do fieldwork in a place, they tend to treat place merely as the context rather than the object of the study. My academic interest in place was initially generated by my personal encounter with an unknown place in the centre of my own hometown, which revealed the existence of a hidden force in making the city different from what we imagined it to be. That is why when I made my way into the two urban villages and tried to explore the neighbourhood that accommodated thousands of migrants from the countryside who were largely unwelcome in the rest of the city, the question of place and place-making unarguably stood in the heart of my enquiry. By asking how 'place' is in the making by the rural migrants' urban settlement practices and how the migratory identity is negotiated through this place-making process, I obtained a theoretical anchor to weave the fragmentary snapshots from the local life into a meaningful picture. I hope this picture can enrich our knowledge of the transitional urban society in China and provide us with a tangible approach to understanding the complexity of modernity under the tension between migration and settlement. In the preceding chapters, I focused on different aspects of everyday life that contribute to the formation of the place and people's sense of the place, from street life to housing space, from television consumption to festival celebrations. After those close-up examinations, it is time for me to pay an overall visit to the place-making process that the urban villages underwent and see what we can learn from their experiences.

## **The emplacement of the mobile subjects in a progressive sense of place**

As a caution against an overwhelming emphasis on the disjunction between the migratory subjects and the locality of their settlement places in recent migration studies, my exploration in Chinese rural migrants' settlement practices in urban villages evokes a re-evaluation of the role the urban settlement place plays in the trans-local movement in certain social contexts. It points to an affirmation that, even in our increasingly networked

society, the examination into the embedment of the migratory subjects in their settlement places and their place-making engagements in the locality still provides a key to unlocking the complexity of migrancy in the context of the tension between displacement and emplacement, migration and settlement in modernity. As the principal form of urban inhabitation for Chinese rural migrants, the existence of the urban village offers a geographical expression of the interplay between the individual actions of the migratory subjects and the historical transformation of Chinese urban society. Emerging from the rupture of the institutionalised urban space, the urban village enlarges the border zone between the rural and the urban, blurs the social categorisation boundary between insider and outsider. More importantly, it delivers a potential nurturing space where rural migrants, who suffer discrimination and exclusion in the urban society, can exercise their agency in place-making through creating and maintaining a routinised life and organising a supportive neighbourhood environment for themselves. As we have witnessed in the two urban villages, with a localised life pattern and rhythm gradually established and embedded in the two urban villages, the rural migrant residents indisputably stamped their identity on the locality of the urban villages and reshaped the physical and cultural landscape of the place. This feeling of emplacement based on the resilient adaptation and creativity is crucial for the rural migratory subjects not only because it provides a harbour in their migratory trajectory, but also because it solidifies their efforts and struggles to claim a just position in the city, to refuse being ideologically constructed as rootless and floating outsiders, given that they are largely voiceless in the current political system in Chinese cities.

By virtue of these spatial struggles, the greater contribution of Chinese rural migrants in urban villages is manifestation of Massey's (1997) 'progressive sense of place' in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Chinese urban society. As demonstrated in my study, what tied the rural migratory subjects to the urban village was not a geographically bounded and socially enclosed community, but a sense of place dynamical in its multiplicity, fluidity, and connectivity.

First, the two urban villages illustrated very clearly how multi-layered meanings and identifications can co-exist and interact in one place. Like many other migrant settlements, the urban villages in China, are far from isolated enclaves solely inhabited by the rural migrants. Rather, the co-habitation and the intricate interactions between indigenes and migrants are constitutive of the neighbourhood life. These two groups had different connections with the place but also bonded with each other in their communal interests. For the rural migrant residents, seeking settlement in the place evokes a cultural

competence to recognise both the conflicts and opportunities in the constant confrontation with others, further, to creatively integrate their practices of urban settlement into the co-production of the urban village undertaken by multiple actors.

Second, in the two urban villages, we witness how a place can be constantly set in motion by the power reconfigurations of historical progress. As distinctively exemplified in its housing form evolution, the physical landscape and social contents of the place had never been static. Multiple social forces in the past decades transformed the place from two rural villages into a migrant settlement. Intertwined with this transformation was round after round of shifting demographic structures, geographic features, neighbourhood dynamics, and dwelling patterns. It can also be reasonably expected that the place will undergo an even bigger wave of transformation in the near future. I will detail this later.

Third, the existence of the two urban villages forces us to accept the ductility of place beyond its geographic borders. The deeper we look into the rural migrants' local life in the area, the more we realise that the urban village is only one phrase or one site in the rural-urban migratory trajectories. Its social meanings are both produced and consumed by the rural migrants by reference to the social networks that link them to other multiple locations. In other words, what happens in the urban village and how it matters has much to do with what happens in the migrants' rural origins and other sites of urban settlement, and vice versa. My examinations into their return journey during the festival and their TV set possession are particularly effective to visualise the influence of such translocal interconnections on their localised life.

Finally, our observation in the area once again points to the huge impact of the networking technologies in place-making. But the consequences of this impact seem more complex than we used to imagine. What people experienced in the urban village was no longer a face-to-face community life solely influenced by who lives next door or in the same street. The exposure of the urban village to various forms of mass media and networking technologies enable them to establish and maintain distant social relationships on a daily basis almost as easily as they deal with their immediate daily existence. But my study also suggests that the use of media technologies by the rural migrants does not contradict but contributes to their attachment to and embedment in the place of their urban settlement. As illustrated in the previous chapters, the public telephone was used not only to reach the distant, but also to open up and reinforce close relationships in the neighbourhood; TV set possession and placement were exercised as a practice of homing; cable connection was

undertaken as a neighbourhood business and household DIY project to counteract the uneven distribution of cable access in the city. Putting all these phenomena together, we can draw the conclusion that emplacement in the urban villages is not opposite to but at the intricate intersection with the power of networking and movement. As an important node in the trans-local circuit of migration, the significance of the urban village for the rural migrants is exactly associated with its ability in interweaving multiple dimensions of social resources and relationships, here or there, present or distant, into a concrete social web, a distinct landscape, and a local way of life, whereby the migratory identities can both be anchored and extended.

All these features were distinctively demonstrated in the two urban villages, but they are not exclusive characteristics of this single area or solely of Chinese urban villages. In today's China, when geographical and social transformations have become increasingly intense and frequent, this 'progressive sense of place', as proven by the case study in a small indigene/migrant co-habited community, can be seen as a model applicable in other forms of urban communities.

### **How do the little things make a place different?**

The emergence of the urban village in China as the settlement place for millions of rural migrants is indeed an intriguing phenomenon and deserves exploration from various angles. Many insights have been derived from the structural and macro perspectives, such as the economic and social divisions between the urban and the rural, the household registration system, the land and housing regulations, the social conflicts in city planning and reconstruction, and so on and so forth. But we have to notice that, compared with other urban communities in China, the existent urban villages are one of the few locales that have not been directly controlled by the formal city institutions. Their locality arises not from conscious planning, but from un-programmed union of people usually unaware of the whole they help create. This forces us to focus more attention on the place-making process occurring at the micro level: the ordinary, habitual, banal, personal aspects of people's social life, the daily activities that are pervasive and yet frequently overlooked and taken-for-granted. Walking down the street, dwelling at home, making a telephone call, turning on the TV, posting a couplet on the door, having a family meal, all these little things are put under scrutiny and examined as the bedrock of place formation which makes the urban village what it is.

The academic fascination with the everyday life lies in its potential in accommodating critical alternativeness in modernity. As Lefebvre (1991, 2002) points out, given the undeniable 'colonisation of everyday life by the commodity and the State through the imposition of an abstract space', the richness of everyday life seems always to contain 'redemptive possibilities... for more authentic living as well as the potential for radical changes and the production of other differential spaces' (Gregory et al., 2009). From the phenomenological perspective, no matter how deeply our relationships with places are socially and discursively defined, in the normal daily existence, we are living in a 'lifeworld', where 'we conduct our day-to-day activities without having to make it constantly an object of conscious attention' (Giorgi, 1970, see in: Seamon, 1980: 149). A large portion of our daily activities in this context is directed by what Seamon calls 'body-subject', which has an independent capacity to tackle behaviour in a fluid, habitual and thoughtless fashion. Over time, when a set of habitual bodily behaviour is stabilised into a time-space routine and many time-space routines join together into a whole, a strong sense of place and a supportive space-environment are the result (Seamon, 1979: 143, 1980: 154-57). In the light of this formulation, the formation of the urban village is essentially an automatic or even unnoticed process authored by the people who live here, including both indigenes and the rural migrants. The meanings of the urban village to them have more to do with everyday living and doing rather than thinking. That means there exists a practical space for the ordinary people that power strategies, no matter how all-encompassing they aim to be, cannot master. It is indeed this non-deprivable agency of place-making in everyday life that empowers the rural migrants to shape the urban village into a organic dwelling place and a supportive neighbourhood of themselves, despite their disadvantages and marginality in the urban mainstream system.

However, the aim of this research is not just to re-emphasise the power of everyday life in place-making. It also sheds light on certain risks attached to such an approach to grasping the complexity of place-making in today's China. First, we should be cautious about the exclusive emphasis on routine and taken-for-grantedness in the phenomenological idea of lifeworld, which 'fails to account for the inventiveness, questioning, spontaneity and ad hoc problem-solving that also inform everyday experience.' (Felski, 2002: 641) Especially in the situation of a migratory community like Chinese rural migrants in the urban village, whose position in the place is in settling, the unquestioned acceptance of habits and routines is insufficient. While they did strive to stabilise their daily activities into certain time-space routines, very often, they had to challenge the old habitual ways of life and invent other time-space routines in order to adapt to the new environment or to solve the

problems they encountered. For instance, to make the most of local resources, hot water consumption was changed from the private space to the public. Likewise, to orchestrate work and entertainment, some migrants did not mind moving their TV sets between different locations day in day out. These examples really put the self-evident and immutable idea of everyday life into question. They suggest that, in the daily encounters between habits and events, people's behaviours could easily deviate from their existing routines and slip to other directions and therefore are always open to new opportunities. For the same reason, we have to give up the assumption that there is a universal concept of everydayness glossing over cultural and social differences. The everyday life landscape and tactics developed by the rural migrants in the urban village are place-specific, for they are the responses to the unique nexus of social and spatial movements in the transitional Chinese urban society.

The second risk is to use the idea of the 'everyday' to promote a 'depoliticised populism', whereby 'the question of asymmetries of power and socio-economic inequities is easily supplanted' (Gardiner, 2000: 8). As demonstrated in my research, everyday life in the urban village is far from harmonious but a key terrain of struggle. Not only the whole area is under surveillance by the local police and the wrenching threat from the government's reconstruction project, but also, within the neighbourhood, the construction of people's daily routines and social boundaries are permeated with the tension between landlords and tenants, men and women, as well as conflicts between migrants from different rural origins. One of the agendas that is inevitably generated by the focus on daily activities is gender politics, which has surfaced in almost every chapter of my writing though I did not intend in the beginning to present a feminist study. Because the focus on daily life blurs the boundary between work and home, it sheds more light on the role the migrant women play in place-making, which used to be undermined by the gender division of work. Those migrant women were resourceful in integrating their domesticity and livelihood into the local environment, creating and maintaining home comforts for themselves and their families. More importantly, they also demonstrated an impressive agency in employing the daily activities such as neighbourhood interaction, domestic furnishing, and festival returning, to construct their own social networks and to express an independent sense of home and belonging. The exercise of this agency in their daily life adds another power nexus in the cultural struggle in the migratory and settlement trajectory.

Once we bring politics and power into everyday life, another question arises: does the 'everyday' always promise a bulwark of resistance for the weak against the dominance of

the strong? To answer this question, we need to understand power beyond the fixed oppositions between the monopoly of power and the powerless, domination versus resistance. As Foucault insists, 'practices that are resistant to a particular strategy of power are ... never innocent of or outside power, for they are always capable of being tactically appropriated and redeployed within another strategy of power, always at risk of slipping from resistance against one strategy of power into complicity with another.' (1990: 101-102) Michel de Certeau (1984) also writes about everyday life as the unintended movements of tactics. In contrast with the constituted and end-oriented political struggle of strategies, everyday tactics act without reference to a dominant strategy, without intention to disrupt the social whole. It is this inherent undetermined and 'dilatory character' and the refusal of any external measures that endows everyday life with the resistant power to undermine and deflect the totalising ambitions of dominant power strategies (Colebrook, 2002: 698,700). From this point of view, the daily practices of the rural migrants in the urban village do not begin as directed towards some end or form. Neither do they have their own fortresses. They are truly the little things that reside within the terrain of a social power system. But by adapting themselves to a place that does not belong to them, they make the place more or less different. This is what Henri Lefebvre describes as 'something extraordinary in its very ordinariness.' (2002: 37)

## **More to learn and more to take place**

Despite all the findings and reflections above, there are many questions about the actual processes and dynamics of place-making in Chinese urban villages that remain untouched. The first limitation comes from the research scope of my study. The concentration on the two small urban villages allowed me to build up a close acquaintanceship with a certain number of informants and go deep into their neighbourhood and household life. But the disadvantage of this was to technically separate these two villages from the other three villages in the area despite the fact that they were actually no more than ten-minute's walking distance apart. The neighbouring urban villages shared many commonalities with Gaowang and Wujiawan, but each had their distinctions in terms of locations, scales, population ratios between indigenes and the migrant residents, and the demographic characteristics of the rural migrant residents. For example, contrasting to the migrant residents living in Gaowang and Wujiawan, who were mainly married migrants with more or less complete family structures in the urban settlement, the migrant population in New Xiaoling was mainly unmarried single migrants living in shared accommodation. It is almost certain that including this group of migrants into my observation, if allowed, would

bring many fresh agendas into my discussion. Similarly, although the single-sited study has its special strength in illustrating how one small place has been permeated with the logic of complex connectivity, its weakness in tracing movements between different locations is obvious. The introduction of multi-locational studies that allow the researcher to travel with the migratory communities will lead the study to another level. For example, more primary data about the experiences of rural migrants during the Spring Festival could be collected if my fieldwork could trace those who returned to their rural villages during the festival, rather than only by interviewing them when they came back to the city.

Even in only talking about the two urban villages, my personal observation could only catch a very narrow scope in the huge variety of people's daily activities. There were many interesting phenomena that either could not be studied in depth during fieldwork, or could not fit easily into any section in this thesis. One example was the waste and one-off goods circulation and consumption in the rural migrants' daily life, which commonly existed in Gaowang, Wujiawan, and many other neighbouring urban villages. Although this distinguishing element in the local way of life had emerged in my observation and was indeed very relevant to my subject, to reflect on its complex social meanings would be the topic for another piece of work.

Nothing can make this research field enduringly fascinating better than the rapid, restless, at times unexpected transitions that Chinese urban villages and Chinese urban society are undergoing. After I finished my first draft, I had a chance to pay my second visit to the field in the beginning of 2010. Only two years after the fieldwork the landscape and neighbourhood life in the two urban villages had shifted dramatically in many ways.

Although I was worried the whole cluster of urban villages in the Yaojialing area would have been demolished it had not yet happened by that time. So luckily, I had a chance (probably the last) to meet most of my informants. Every household had undergone many changes in these two years. Xiao Liu had found her first job after five years' full time as a housewife; the Xiao Yue couple had to send their two children back to the home village in Anhui in order to maintain their bakery business in Wuhan; Xiao Yin had finally shaken off part of her burden in caring for two children as her husband had come back from Hangzhou and was living with them. In the street, while the majority of business sites had managed to survive, quite a few restaurants and corner shops had been either shut down or changed hands. One of the hardest hit was the 'telephone supermarkets', which had started



to decline in the area with the advent of greater use of mobile phones as a result of reductions in the cost.

Another notable change in the neighbourhood was the installation of CCTV (closed circuit television) cameras at the village entrances and along the main street, one of which directly faced the road junction in front of Lu Shifu's repairing stall. A police office had also opened in the most bustling location of the main street. During mid-2008 to mid-2009, it had been used as the monitor centre of the CCTV system and the ad hoc base for Ji'an Community assistant police team who had been hired to conduct street patrols twice a day (more frequently than they did in 2007). The leader of the team told me that these two measures were enacted from August 2008 as a heavyweight action to tackle the rise of the crime rate in the area.<sup>129</sup> Interestingly, such invasive surveillance over the whole public space of the two urban villages did not bring about much uproar among the local residents. Both indigenes and migrant residents appeared quite indifferent to it. As Lu Shifu said: 'we were told the cameras would make the place safer. But everyone knows they are little more than a display to scare fools. No burglar would act under a camera.' And so it turned out, Just 14 months after installation, these actions literally turned out to be a mere display. In October 2009, the Ji'an Community eventually 'get rid of this headache place'<sup>130</sup> and handed it to the Xinxin Community. While the former administrator quickly withdrew its personnel and devices from the place, the successor seemed very reluctant to take it over. By the time of my second visit, the police post was still empty and the CCTV system was not in operation.

In addition to these proximate forces, more shifting powers had also been imposed from afar. The global financial crisis since 2008 seemingly had not slowed down the economic growth in China very much but it affected Chinese city space in another way. While many developed countries were tangling with financial deficit and cutting public expenditure, the Chinese government embarked on a course of huge infrastructure projects in an attempt to sustain economic growth. Under this policy, city sprawl was not restricted but boosted. The acceleration of land grabs in urban villages and other periphery areas was consequential. In Wuhan, 12 out of 27 urban villages within the second ring road of the city had been successfully demolished in 2009, a great breakthrough in the city's urban village reconstruction project according to the local press.<sup>131</sup> In these circumstances, the

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<sup>129</sup> My interview with Liu Shifu, the leader of the Ji'an Community assistant police team on December 19, 2009.

<sup>130</sup> An expression from the Community policewoman in my interview on 19th December, 2009.

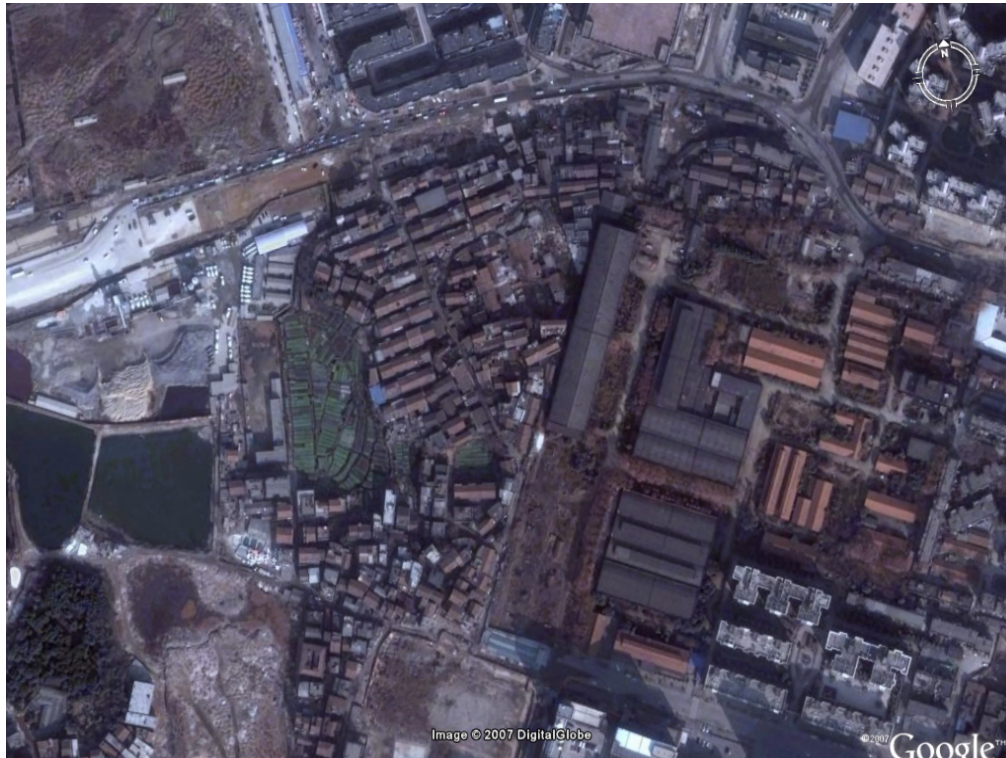
<sup>131</sup> According to *Chutian* Metropolis Daily, 2007-07-24, 2009-02-17, 2009-03-28, 2009-07-18, 2010-01-03

temporary survival of Gaowang, Wujiawan and 3 other urban villages in the Yiaojialing area was exceptional. Had these urban villages not been affected by the new round of local government re-organisation in the middle of 2009,<sup>132</sup> they would have already been demolished as their counterparts in other areas. How much longer they could survive just depended on how quickly a new reconstruction plan could be adopted by the new administration. Even though no wholesale removal had been announced, sporadic changes were already taking place. A comparison between 2007 and 2009 Google Earth views (*Image 9.1. and Image 9.2.*) indicates the shrinkage of the two villages under the siege of new construction from their surroundings. The road to the north was widened to a dual carriageway. A new estate community was built in the east. To the south, the grocery market run by the migrants was demolished to make way for the establishment of a giant office block. The chain of food stalls in front of the entrance to Gaowang village was also cleared for the construction of a new arterial road. (*See Photo 9.1. and 9.2.*) Within a stone's throw, a huge construction site nearly blocked the entrance of another urban village, New Yaoling. This was to be the location of one of the hub stations of Wuhan's first underground system, which was under construction and scheduled for opening in 2012. Apart from the changes in the physical landscape, pressures had been added on the life within the urban villages. The demolition of the nearby urban villages drove another wave of rural migrants seeking accommodation into this last preserve of informal renting properties in the centre of the city, causing an average increase of 15 to 20 percent in 2009 in the rental prices. Three of my informant households were forced to move to smaller houses for they could not afford the raised prices. While the local property owners hastened their housing extensions to seize this last chance of earning and prepare to bargain with the government in the upcoming reconstruction, no particular actions had been widely taken by the migrant tenants. Despite the fact that most of them were aware of the prospects for this place, few had got any clear plan for the future. To my surprise, not many were planning to go back to their rural villages after they would be forced to leave these two urban villages, though some admitted it was their last option. Especially for those whose children were being schooled in the city, it meant a lot to keep a roof over their heads in the city. The general anticipation was that if this place was demolished, there would be somewhere in the city, whether central or fringe, big or small, where they could squat and re-settle.

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<http://news.cnhubei.com>

<sup>132</sup> A commonplace experience for the area over recent decades. This time, it was changed from Hongshan District to Wuchang District.



*Image 9.1. The Google Earth view of the two urban villages in 2007.*



*Image 9.2. The Google Earth view of the two urban villages in 2010.*





**Photo 9.1** The entrance to Gaowang village in 2006.



**Photo 9.2:** The new arterial road in front of the entrance to Gaowang village constructed at the end of 2009.

There is little doubt that the destruction of the two urban villages as a rural migrant settlement site in the modernising city is just a matter of time. Sooner or later, they will be submerged under the reconstructed urban jungle, as has happened or is happening in hundreds of urban villages in Chinese cities. But this does not mean the rural migrants' spatial and social struggle of urban settlement will end here. With the old urban villages vanishing in the urban centres, will there be new urban villages emerging on the urban fringes? Will there be other forms of housing and neighbourhood life created to accommodate the rural migrants in the city?<sup>133</sup> How will the second generation of the rural migrants define their relationship with the city and find their place in the city?<sup>134</sup> When will the rural migrant be treated as an equal citizen and no longer be spatially segregated or socially castigated as the outsider in the city? These are the questions a modernising and urbanising China cannot ignore. The answers depend on the State's progress in reform of the *hukou* system and other policy changes that are required to narrow rural-urban disparities and tranquilise social conflicts.<sup>135</sup> Millions of the rural migrants are also answering these questions in their daily practices.

One day when Gaowang, Wujiawan, and more and more urban villages like them ultimately disappear from the city map, the city might appear neater in the planner's view, as many shabby and unorganised corners are swept away. But also vanishing will be the lived worlds based on them, with bustling streets, familiar neighbours, everyday routines, and various homes in the making. This loss cannot be easily compensated for by the rise of new buildings, squares, straight avenues or estate communities. Somebody might contend this is a necessary price that a rapid growing city and a prospering country can and must bear. Even so, the city should not take the loss for granted. Indeed, whether the

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<sup>133</sup> One example published recently was underground accommodation in abandoned air-raid shelters. <http://www.economist.com/node/18184564>

<sup>134</sup> The problem of the second generation of 'peasant labourers' has been discussed in the No. 1 Document of the Central Government in 2010. See: *Several suggestions about Enforcing the Balanced Development between the Rural and the Urban and Further Compacting the Basis of the Development of the Rural and Agricultures*, by Central Committee of CCP and the State Council of China, December 31, 2009. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-01/31/content\\_12907829.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-01/31/content_12907829.htm)

<sup>135</sup> More beneficial policies have been issued by the state since 2009 to protect the rural labourers' rights in the labour market and reduce some extra administrative charges over them, including the issue of the new employment contract law, the withdrawal of the temporary residential certification fees and remitting extra fees over the rural migrants for their children's primary education in the city, and so on. For the details, see: *Law of the People's Republic of China on Employment Contracts*, adopted at the 28th Session of the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress on June 29, 2007, effective from January 1, 2008; *The Announcement about Withdrawing and Terminating 100 Items of Administrative Fees*, by the Ministry of Finance and National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China, adopted on November 13, 2008, effective from January 1, 2009. [http://www.gov.cn/fwxx/sh/2008-11/20/content\\_1154633.htm](http://www.gov.cn/fwxx/sh/2008-11/20/content_1154633.htm); *The People's Republic of China State Council's Announcement about Remitting Urban Compulsory Education Fees*, adopted on August 12, 2008, effective from the autumn semester 2008. [http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2008-08/15/content\\_1072915.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2008-08/15/content_1072915.htm).

city can achieve long-term prosperity and stability depends on how it deals with the social costs in the course of its growth. Here, at the end of my dissertation, I wish to present this piece of research as a historical archive to carry the memory of a lively and meaningful place that once existed in the centre of the city. This memory is not only important for thousands of rural migrants who have lived here and shaped the place in this fashion even without much consciousness. But also, this is a precious memory for the city. It awakens our sense of place in this increasingly placeless age; it teaches us a progressive idea to understand every place as complex and fluid; it questions the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life and reveals its power in place-making; it uncovers the voices from the marginal and demonstrates the creativity of the ordinary people; it also enlightens us on the possibility of an alternative urbanity and modernity...

# Appendix 1: Informant lists \*

## List 1: 20 focus migrant households (39 informants)

	<b>Names in Chinese characters</b>	<b>Coded pinyin names</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Rural origins</b>	<b>Occupations</b>	<b>Other family members</b>	<b>Years living in urban villages</b>
1	小郭	Xiao Guo	33	Yiyang Hunan	Food stall holders	One daughter left in countryside	6
	小郭丈夫	Xiao Guo's husband	31				
2	小柯	Xiao Ke	31	Yangxin Hubei	Hairdressers	One son living together	7
	小柯丈夫	Xiao Ke's husband	35				
3	电视鲁师傅	Lao Lu	53	Gong'an Hubei	Electronic appliance shop holder	Two adult sons living together	9
	万师傅	Lao Wan	54		Chef		
4	汤元	Lao Chen	46	Hanchuan Hubei	Food stall holders	Two teenage sons living together	3
	汤元老婆	Lao Chen's wife	43				
5	小岳	Xiao Yue	30	Fuyang Anhui	Food stall holders	One son living together, one daughter left in the countryside	4
	小岳老婆	Xiao Yue's wife	28				
6	煤气	Xiao Li	26	Xiaogan Hubei	Bottled gas deliverer	One daughter living together	4
	煤气丈夫	Xiao Li's husband	29				
7	鲁师傅	Lu Shifu	61	Tianmen Hubei	Cobbler	Wife and daughter working in other city, son studying in Wuhan	3

8	小易	Xiao Yi	38	Caidian Hubei	Newspaper deliverer	Two daughters living together	6
	小易丈夫	Xiao Yi's husband	40	Caidian Hubei	Grocery shop keeper		
	小易兄弟	Xiao Wei (Xiao Yi's brother)	23	Enshi Hubei	Postman		3
9	河南电话 超市老板 老婆	Xiao Hong	32	Xinyang Henan	Public telephone site holders	Three children living together	7
	河南电话 超市老板	Xiao Hong's husband	34				
10	刘红	Xiao Liu	28	Macheng Hubei	Housewife	One daughter living together	7
	胡兵	Xiao Hu	29	Gongan Hubei	Chef		
11	小万	Xiao Wan	27	Anlu Hubei	Housewife	One daughter living together	4
	小万丈夫	Xiao Wan's husband	30	Huangpi Hubei	Chef		
12	小芳	Xiao Fang	29	Xishui Hubei	Housewife	One son left in home village	3
	小覃	Xiao Qin	30	Zhongxia ng Hubei	Chef		
13	张师傅	Zhang Shifu	53	Songzi Hubei	Food stall holders	One adult son living together	11
	张师傅老 婆	Fu Shifu	51				
14	文师傅	Xiao Wen	38	Songzi Hubei	Cleaner	One daughter living together	8
	周菊仙	Xiao Wen's wife	35		Odd jobber		
15	小韩	Xiao Han	32	Guangshu i Hubei	Cleaner	One son living together	2
	小韩丈夫	Xiao Han's husband	31		Doorkeeper		
16	尹丽妈	Xiao Yin	35	Xinyang Henan	Cleaner	Two children living	8



						together, husband working in other city	
17	小叶	Xiao Ye	32	Dawu Hubei	Housewife	One child and one fellow villager living together	0.5
	小叶老婆	Xiao Ye's wife	31		Builder		
18	胡思思	Sisi	22	Puqi Hubei	Chef assistant	Single	0.5
	小王	Xiao Wang	25	Huangmei Hubei	Waitress	Husband staying in countryside	
19	小颜	Xiao Yan	25	Caidian Hubei	Hotel waitress	One son and Xiao Yan's mother living together	2
	小颜丈夫	Xiao Yan's husband	30	Huangshi Hubei	Hotel security guard		
20	王爱枝	Aizhi	35	Xinyang Henan	Waitress	One daughter living together, one son left in the countryside	6
	王爱枝丈夫	Aizhi's husband	48		Odd jobber		

**List 2: 17 Non-focus migrant households (37 persons)**

	Name in Chinese characters	Coded pinyin name	Age	Rural origin	Occupatio n	Other family members	Years living in urban villages
1	小叶老乡	Lao Huang	39	Dawu Hubei	Builder	One child left in the countryside	0.5
	小叶老乡 的老婆	Lao Huang's wife	36		Housewife		

	老喻	Lao Yu	35		Builder	One child left in the countryside	
	老喻老婆	Lao Yu's wife	30		Housewife		
2	小莫	Xiao Mo	32	Qichun Hubei	Odd jobber	One child left in the countryside	1
	小莫老婆	Xiao Mo's wife	32		Public telephone site holder		
3	小齐	Xiao Qi	33	Huangpi Hubei	Newspaper deliverer	One child living together, husband working in other city	2
	小齐公公	Xiao Qi's father-in-law	67		Jobless		
4	王艳	Wang Yan	23	Huanggang Hubei	Shop seller	Single	2
5	波波爸爸	Li Bo	36	Xinyang Henan	Odd jobber	Two children living together	2
	波波妈妈	Li Bo's wife	32		Housewife		
6	波波爷爷	Li Bo's Dad	67	Xinyang Henan	Odd jobber		2
	波波奶奶	Li Bo's Mum	65		Housewife		
7	尹嫂	Yin Sao	51	Xinyang Henan	Housewife	One son living together, one married son living nearby	3
	尹嫂丈夫	Yin Sao's husband	53		Odd jobber		
8	尹嫂的儿子	Yin Sao's son	25	Xinyang Henan	Odd jobber	One child living together	3
	尹嫂的儿媳	Yin Sao's daughter-in-law	22		Shop seller		
9	乔大爷	Lao Qiao	70	Xinyang Henan	Boiled water room holder	Two married sons living nearby	13
	乔大妈	Lao Qiao's wife	68				
10	乔家大儿子	Lao Qiao's older son	38	Xinyang Henan	Bottled gas deliverer	One daughter living together	13
	乔家大儿媳	Lao Qiao's older daughter-in-law	35		Odd jobber		
11	乔家小儿	Lao Qiao's younger	34	Xinyang Henan	Boiled water room	Three daughters living together	10

	子	son			holders		
	乔家小儿 媳	Lao Qiao's younger Daughter- in-law	33				
12	覃师傅	Qin Shifu	45	Songzi Hubei	Hourly paid worker	One adult daughter living together, one teenage son left in the countryside	3
	覃师傅丈 夫	Qin Shifu's husband	49		Odd jobber		
13	绍银	Shaoyin	46	Songzi Hubei	Recycler	One son working in other city	4
	绍银老婆	Shaoyin's wife	35	Xiaogan Hubei	Housewife		
14	小孙	Xiao Sun	32	Xinyang Henan	Public telephone site holder	Two children living together, husband working in other city	6
	小孙父亲	Xiao Sun's Dad	66		Odd jobber		
15	小李	Li Ping	27	Xiaogan Hubei	Recyclers	Two children living together, husband's brother's family living next door	7
	小李丈夫	Li Ping's husband	28				
	小李公公	Li Ping's father-in- law	67				
	小李婆婆	Li Ping's mother-in- law	64				
16	张师傅妹 妹	Zhang Shifu's sister	39	Songzi Hubei	Car washers	One son living together	6
	张师傅妹 夫	Zhang Shifu's sister's husband	38				
17	小邹	Xiao Zou	31	Dawu Hubei	Recyclers	One daughter living together	3
	小邹老婆	Xiao Zou's wife	30				

**List 3: Local house owner informants**

	Name	Age	Gender	Village
1	Lao Yu	47	M	Wujiawan
2	Lao Bai	50	F	Wujiawan
3	Yun Shifu	74	M	Gaowang
4	Xiao Wu	35	F	Gaowang
5	Lao Huang	67	F	Gaowang

**List 4: Local Officer informants**

	Name	Age	Gender	Organisation	Position
1	Officer Hong	34	F	Dongting Local Police Station Ji'an Community Branch	Local policewoman
2	Liu Shifu	62	M	Dongting Local Police Station, Ji'an Community Branch	Police assistant
3	Mr. Chen	34	M	Xinxin Community (converted from Yaojialing Village Committee)	Community committee director
4	Mr. Li	36	M	Xinxin Community (converted from Yaojialing Village Committee)	Community committee deputy director
5	Li, Sihai	42	M	Hongshan Local Police Station, Yaojialing Branch	Local policeman
6	Mr. Zhang	41	M	Wuhan Police Station, Household Registration Management Office	Office instructor
7	Mr. Yan	33	M	Hubei Public Security Department, Household Registration Management Office	Office chief
8	Wang, Jiangang	45	M	Hubei Cable TV Ltd., Wuchang Branch	Branch chief
9	Geng, Hongxiang	43	M	Hubei Cable TV Ltd., Shuiguohu branch	Branch chief
10	Mr. Wei	55	M	Sihai Primary and Middle School	Vice principal
11	Mr. Lin	39	M	Wuhan Planning and Design Institute	Vice-dean

\* The data is as of December 2007.

## Appendix 2: List of Chinese Terms

<i>anbao dui</i>	安保队	temporary security team
<i>bao dianhua</i>	煲电话	hours of telephone chat
<i>baomu</i>	保姆	house maid
<i>bixie</i>	避邪	avoiding evil
<i>cheng</i>	城	city
<i>chengguan ju</i>	城管局	the Urban Management Bureau
<i>chengzhongcun</i>	城中村	the urban village
<i>chuanmenr</i>	串门儿	stringing together doors or family visits
<i>chunyun</i>	春运	transportation during the Spring Festival
<i>Chuxi</i>	除夕	the New Year's Eve
<i>danyuan fang</i>	单元房	apartment units
<i>danwei</i>	单位	work unit
<i>daolu</i>	道路	road
<i>dayuan</i>	大院	housing compound
<i>dianhua chaoshi</i>	电话超市	public telephone supermarkets
<i>duilian, chunlian</i>	对联, 春联	matching couplets
<i>fangdao men</i>	防盗门	anti-theft gate
<i>fangdong</i>	房东	landlord or landlady
<i>fangjian</i>	房间	the internal room
<i>feli</i>	废历	calendar abolishment
<i>fenjia</i>	分家	dividing family
<i>fenxiang</i>	分香	dividing family's incense
<i>fenzao</i>	分灶	dividing family's stove
<i>fu</i>	福	good fortune
<i>ganbu</i>	干部	cadre
<i>gewu</i>	歌舞	singing and dancing
<i>geti hu</i>	个体户	small-scale private enterprise sector
<i>guomin xing</i>	国民性	national character
<i>houqin ke</i>	后勤科	rear-service department
<i>hukou</i>	户口	household registration
<i>jia</i>	家	home
<i>jiao zi</i>	饺子	stuffed dumpling

<i>juzhong</i>	聚众	crowd gathering
<i>kan re nao</i>	看热闹	watching the scene of bustle
<i>kejü</i>	科举	the imperial examination system
<i>la rou</i>	腊肉	cured meat
<i>la yue</i>	腊月	the last month of the lunar calendar
<i>laoban</i>	老板	boss, manager or landlord
<i>laoban niang</i>	老板娘	proprietress or landlady
<i>lingdao</i>	领导	leader
<i>liu</i>	流	fluidity
<i>liudong renkou</i>	流动人口	floating population
<i>luan</i>	乱	disorder
<i>mahua</i>	麻花	fried dough twist
<i>mangliu</i>	盲流	blind drifters
<i>men</i>	门	door
<i>mi xin</i>	迷信	superstition
<i>mingong chao</i>	民工潮	tide of peasant workers
<i>neiren</i>	内人	the person inside
<i>nian</i>	年	year
<i>nianhua</i>	年画	New Year picture
<i>nianhuo</i>	年货	festival goods
<i>nongmin</i>	农民	peasantry
<i>nongmin gong</i>	农民工	peasant labourers
<i>pijiang</i>	皮匠	cobbler
<i>pumain</i>	铺面	street houses
<i>qi</i>	气	cosmic energy
<i>'sanwu renyuan'</i>	三无人员	'Three without' population': people who lacked legal residential certification, stable income resources and sedentary accommodation
<i>shaobing</i>	烧饼	sesame seed cake
<i>shangjie</i>	上街	going to the street
<i>shequ</i>	社区	community
<i>shi / min</i>	士 / 民	the scholar-gentry class and the ordinary people
<i>shousui</i>	守岁	keeping a vigil
<i>shourong zhan</i>	收容站	detention station
<i>shuren shehui</i>	熟人社会	the society of acquaintances
<i>sushi</i>	素质	personal quality
<i>tangyuan</i>	汤元	dumpling made from glutinous rice flour
<i>tangwu</i>	堂屋	the central room
<i>tuan nian fan</i>	团年饭	family reunion dinner

<i>wailai renkou</i>	外来人口	outsider population
<i>xiaolingtong</i>	小灵通	the Little Smart:  a low-end mobile phone, using wireless local loop (WLL) technology to connect handsets with traditional landline networks
<i>Xiaonian</i>	小年	the 23 <sup>rd</sup> or 24 <sup>th</sup> of the twelfth month of the lunar year
<i>Xiangsheng</i>	相声	cross-talk
<i>xiaopin</i>	小品	comic skits
<i>yi jia ren</i>	一家人	members of one family
<i>Yuandan</i>	元旦	the New Year's Day (1 <sup>st</sup> January)
<i>Yuanxiao</i>	元宵	the Lantern Festival (the 15 <sup>th</sup> of the first month of the lunar year)
<i>yuanzi</i>	院子	courtyard
<i>zanzhu zheng</i>	暂住证	the Temporary Residential Card
<i>zishi</i>	滋事	trouble making
<i>zhiqian</i>	纸钱	earth paper
<i>zongwu ke (chu)</i>	总务科 (处)	general services department

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