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# MAKING CHENGZHONGCUN FROM WITHIN: IDENTITY AND SPACE IN MIGRANTS' EVERYDAY LIVES

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Making *Chengzhongcun* from within: Identity and
Space in Migrants' Everyday Lives

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___FENG, Lei_____ (Name of Student)

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# Abstract

*Chengzhongcun* as migrant settlements in cities of South China is widely believed to be a result of urban economic development and state policies. This study, by contrast, explores how *chengzhongcun* can also be produced by migrants from within. Drawing on Lefebvre's three-dimensional dialectic (the perceived, conceived, and lived), it looks into three dimensions of migrants' everyday lives in *chengzhongcun*—social interaction, consumption, and alternative uses of space—to find out how migrants construct their identity and influence local spaces, and how these two processes interrelate. Based on a six-month ethnography in Wu village—one of the largest migrant settlements in the northern part of Guangzhou—in 2017, this study brings into light migrants' intended, yet conflicted, roles in producing *chengzhongcun*. First, migrants in Wu village are often isolated from each other, uncommitted to communities or companions; such loose, fragile relations make the village a reality of vigilance and self fulfilment rather than mutual understanding or support. Second, as consumers, migrants tend to think of Wu village in a negative sense, assuming many of its spaces to be exotic and dangerous and thereby mentally reinforcing the disorder of the village. Third, nonetheless, with their creativity and genuine feelings, migrants sometimes do take advantage of local spaces and can thus invest in the village their meaningful meetings, rebellious images, as well as their aspirations and memories. In sum, this study argues that it is in and through a sort of structured urban experience that *chengzhongcun* is continuously "othered" from the city, and that this othering process cannot be easily challenged without changes in both migrants' and "our" habitual social practice and commonsensical knowledge. On this basis, it questions a dual-city framework that takes identity and spatial differences in global cities for granted and, instead, stresses that urban division has to studied and tackled at the level of everyday experience.

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# Chapter 1

# Introduction

*"If you ask me what I feel about this village, my answer will be very simple: bad!"*

*Lao Zhang from Wu village*

*"Until a completely new politics—that is, a politics no longer founded on the exceptio of bare life—is at hand, ... the 'beautiful day' of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it."*

*Homo Sacer*

*Giorgio Agamben*

*Chengzhongcun* has entered my life since 2008, when I moved with my parents to a residential estate in a north suburb of Guangzhou. Throughout the last decade, I have personally witnessed, right through the window of my reading room, how this suburb has been speedily urbanized: farmland disappeared; a new metro line stretched across my home underneath; shops, hotels, bars, and restaurants mushroomed along the main street. But Wu village—an assemblage of same-sized buildings on the other side of the street—has stayed almost the same, submerged quickly under the taller, shinier urban fabric. To me, this was an unfamiliar world. Even though the village appeared outside that window day in and day out (see Photo 1), I had made no attempt ever to walk deep into it before this study set forth. Two years ago, embarrassed by my own ignorance about the suburb, I decided to focus on Wu village and *chengzhongcun* in general as I started my research career in Hong Kong. Frankly, when I travelled in Wu village for

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the first time, I was profoundly overwhelmed by a feeling of displacement.



Photo 1: A view of Wu village from my new home.
(Taken by Lei Feng on 21 August 2016)

I was not alone in being troubled by this world. Upon knowing that I would stay in Wu village for months, my next-door neighbor, a caring middle-aged doctor, found me and expressed her worries about my health, "You need to be smarter while doing your research. Food in the village is not clean. You should go back home to eat as frequently as you can. Besides, don't you forget about a mosquito repellent. You don't want to be infected with diseases there."

When I introduced my study to another neighbor in the commercial estate, a well-off young lady whom I got to know in a local gym and who held a Hunan *hukou*, I was warned against theft, "My house cleaner lives there. She told me that her money had been stolen several times in Wu village. You should always be careful with your stuff during research, especially your computer." Right before my fieldwork began, I came across that lady again and asked her whether she had ever entered Wu village before. She responded firmly, "No! I'm afraid of those migrant workers (*nongmin gong*)!" For her, it seemed that to affirm a "non-urban" population and the threat they imposed was

an almost axiomatic, obligatory response to my inquiry about her relationship with the village, even though she was, institutionally speaking, a migrant as well[1].

Perhaps few urbanites in South China would disagree that *chengzhongcun* is in but not of the city. *Chengzhongcun* is considered a different world because of not only its unplanned and underdeveloped built environment but also those which it self-evidently contains, namely, illness, crime, and particularly "migrants", people who have no eligibility for citizenship and who threaten the wellbeing of rightful citizens. This being the case, however, little do we know about *chengzhongcun*. Its differences are easy to tell, but most of us never need or want to set foot in it, so that we understand it based more often on our conception than facts. How different *chengzhongcun* truly is from the city, from "us", begs for much clearer descriptions of both its geography and residents.

The goal of this enquiry is to, on an epistemological level, rescue *chengzhongcun* from what Bridge and Watson (2011) call "the dual-city framework" among studies on urban division (and certainly in our daily lives as well), in other words, from a dichotomous treatment of the city, a way of thinking that rests upon two opposing categories of urban lives, such as migrants/citizens, slum/city, danger/order, and agency/control. This is a framework in which the division of the city itself, as an unquestionable consensus, dictates our views of *chengzhongcun* and other "dark" urban settlements in the world, leading towards somewhat homogeneous, stereotyped topics, observations, and political propositions. As will be seen in the following literature review, the framework can be clearly identified among earlier studies on *chengzhongcun*, which, despite their large quantity, are rather discursively consistent—treating *chengzhongcun* as a locus of either risk or agency, looking forward to either complete urbanization or the resistance of non-urban societies. While urban division in my neighborhood is undoubtedly sharp and real, I am interested in searching for evidence of connection, of commonality, and

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[1] In today's China, the *hukou* (household registration) system, as an institutional arrangement that aims to regulate population flows and welfare distribution, greatly restricts domestic migrants' entitlement to many urban public facilities and services, in particular housing, education, and medication (Alexander & Chan, 2004; Chan, 2010). In the young lady's case, holding a Hunan *hukou* implies her limited rights to the city's resources, and hence her constant status of being a "non-local" resident. Yet, living inside the commercial estate still allowed her to talk about *chengzhongcun* from a vantage point, to construct herself as someone not allied with but under the threat of migrants.

hence a holistic view through which the city's internal differences can be seen as ideas other than facts, and a better future for all city dwellers can be imagined.

It is for this very purpose that I approach Wu village through the lens of identity and space. By invoking identity, I maintain that "migrants" cannot be thoroughly understood unless this name is placed "under erasure", being constantly challenged and redefined (Hall, 1996). By invoking space, I speculate that, behind walls and fences, between Wu village and the city, there is to be found links that are able to somehow reclaim a degree of sameness (Simmel, 1997).

I choose to locate this study in the area of urban studies, which allows me to engage with different perspectives and theories. My theoretical approach in this study owes a great debt to key works of urban sociology, geography, and most importantly, social theories around the notion of everyday life.

## *Chengzhongcun* in the Dual-city Framework

### *What is Chengzhongcun?*

Definitions of *chengzhongcun* vary with different concerns. In terms of lifestyle, it is understood as villages that have been changed by urban planning but still retain their rural features (Liu, 2003; Li, 2005). In terms of its function and internal institutional arrangement, it is taken as migrant settlements and self-governing units (Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010). In terms of social relations, it is defined as rural communities grounded on familial and localistic networks (Xie, 2005, p. 30).

Accuracy aside, very little attention has been paid to how *chengzhongcun* is experienced in daily life. The ways in which these places haunt urbanites and disturb urban lives are seldom recognized as good and solid empirical facts. Even less discussion has been made to show how migrants' identity inferiority in the city (Yan, 2003; Anagnost,

2004; Jacka, 2009; Sun, 2014) has been naturally coupled with *chengzhongcun*. In fact, as my stories above imply, migrants' dangerous, lawless presence plays a decisive role in creating the ghostly image of *chengzhongcun*. Seeing migrants and their settlements as mutually constitutive, this study redefines *chengzhongcun* as people and places that are easily reducible to the other of today's South China megacities, and understands it via both identity and space.

The concept *chengzhongcun*, which literally means "villages-in-the-city", has been used to refer to a wide range of urban societies in present-day China. Some uses of the word are ambiguous and a few are very misleading. Chung (2010) has made a valuable effort to conceptually distinguish *chengzhongcun* from "urban villages" in the West and Beijing's migrant settlements in the 1990s, for example, the famous "Zhejiang village" (Ma & Xiang, 1998)[2]. To avoid possible misconceptions, this study chooses to engage with indigenous works that are only spatially specific to Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Confusion also arises from *chengzhongcun*'s various kinds of economic and social landscapes. The word might refer to villages that lie at the city's outer rim, encircled by industrial zones. Often, factory workers flock in these places to find goods, leisure, and cheap housing, using them as cultural and commercial centers in local areas. The "Jade village" studied by K. Siu (2016) serves as a good example of this kind. Some cases of *chengzhongcun* can be found within the city's built environment. These places usually embody an equilibrium between rising land price and migrants' growing demands for cheap housing (Hao, Geertman, Hooimeijer, & Sliuzas, 2014), so that their residential buildings can survive the quick expansion of consumer society. There are also cases of *chengzhongcun* completely swallowed by physical urban landscapes. This kind can be exampfied by the Liede village in the new CBD of Guangzhou. Having been converted from collective-owned to state-owned property, the village is now widely accepted as a

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[2] Chung (2010) stresses that, although "*chengzhongcun*" and "urban villages" have been interchangeably used, the latter in Western contexts may be understood as a kind of utopian community with decentering planning and heterogenous social relations. This western version of urban villages is in essence a critical response to the modernist view of the city. He warns that the famous "Zhejiang village" in Beijing, often treated as a Northern-China counterpart of *chengzhongcun*, is also different in its administrative structure. Unlike *chengzhongcun*, the village is self-organized by migrants from Zhejiang and other provinces to meet their own residential and commercial ends.

model of successful urban renewal (Li, Lin, Li, & Wu, 2014; Kan, 2016). In this study, Wu village is representative of the second kind.

*Three Discourses on Chengzhongcun*

Among prior studies on *chengzhongcun*, three dominant discourses—teleological, idealistic, and structural—can be identified in accordance to their distinct themes and intentions. I would like to discuss how *chengzhongcun* in these discourses are conceptualize and what possibilities remain untouched. In response to these discourses, I will clarify three basic guidelines that assert the uniqueness of this study.

The first discourse expects *chengzhongcun* to blend into the city. It prevails among functionalist studies whose highly abstract discussion often revolves around an idea of urban redevelopment. While they may have tried to complicate the process and results of *chengzhongcun*'s urbanization, these studies still reflect the interests of the state and capital, and hold firmly that, in any case, *chengzhongcun* should be changed (See Hao, Sliuzas, & Geertman, 2011; Lin & de Meulder, 2012; Li et al, 2014). This discourse can also be evidently found in political suggestions of some empirically grounded studies. For example, Song, Zenou, and Ding (2008), by stressing migrants' reliance on *chengzhongcun*, alert that these villages have to be rebuilt in order to lower the risk of social unrest. When Lin, de Meulder, and Wang (2014) identify strong economic cooperation between *chengzhongcun* and the city, they believe that such relationship can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of different renewal projects. Likewise, He (2015) concludes his study of students' consumption in *chengzhongcun* by calling for introducing consumer culture to upgrade migrants' culture and their settlements. Traces of this discourse are even noticeable in cultural critiques. In her analysis of migrants' changing identity, C. Anderson (2014) cogently blurs the boundary between *chengzhongcun* and the city; but, in the end, she revives a teleological view by anticipating "the spatial inclusion of migrants".

The second discourse understands *chengzhongcun* as a vital means of survival for

migrants. It is particularly popular among studies that lay emphasis on either migrants' practical demand for non-urban support or their inherent potential to organize lives that somewhat differ from those in the city. For example, *chengzhongcun* is often viewed in a more positive light in regard to its provision of cheap housing (Song et al, 2008; Wang, Wang, & Wu, 2009; Liu et al, 2010). *Chengzhongcun* may become more essential when it not only accommodates migrants but also offers job opportunities, affordable education, and most importantly, their intimate, dependable social network (Lin, de Meulder, & Wang, 2011). This point of view is further expanded by Liu, Li, Liu, and Chen (2015), who suggest that urban villages can support migrants to actualize their agency, in other words, to climb social ladders and adapt to urban culture. In the light of these arguments, Kochan (2015) suggests that *chengzhongcun* should not merely be imagined as migrant settlements, but rather as "liminal spaces" in which migrants enjoy momentary freedom, "everyday spaces" in which they subvert spatial norms, and finally "neighborhoods" in which their social, emotional needs can be satisfied. These new images no doubt lighten, if not romanticize, *chengzhongcun* to the point that it now somehow stands for what the city lacks and regrets.

The third one concerns with the othering of *chengzhongcun*. This discourse focuses not on *chengzhongcun* itself but instead on the ways in which it is made to be different from the city. It clearly challenges the first two discourses by seeing identity and spatial boundaries as outcomes rather than starting points. For example, Zhang (2011) ascribes *chengzhongcun* to a crisscross of political and economic forces, for example, the *hukou* system, dual land ownership, and the benefits of the state, local villagers, and migrants. She also relates *chengzhongcun* to other "informal urban spaces" across the globe, and suggests that informality is an inevitable result of power and capital. Bach (2010) takes this othering process to the domain of representation. He explains how the line between *chengzhongcun* and the city is mobilized by ideologies of civilization and development and, in turn, used to fuel urbanization. On this basis, he acutely points out that "the rural" and "the urban" do not collide, but collaborate closely with each other to benefit from the market of urban space. Finally, H. Siu (2007) explores how the rural-urban distinc-

tion penetrates, and further reproduces itself in, daily lives. She details the circulation of fear and disdain among residents of urban villages and points out that this distinction can be not only physical, ideological but also experiential. She hence suggests that the othering of *chengzhongcun* is in fact far more entrenched than it is discussed in prior studies.

*The Guidelines of This Study*

The first and second discourses are two sides of the same coin. *Chengzhongcun* is entangled in the dual-city framework insofar as it is treated either as a problem in itself or as a wonderland that may magically resolve its own problems. This diverts readers' attention from systematic problems such as inequality, economic exploitation, and discrimination. Another problem of the framework is that these discourses present *chengzhongcun* as an ambiguous whole, largely discounting its internal complexity. Who else can those who live in these villages be, apart from "migrants"? Where do they go and what routes do they travel therein? These questions cannot be answered unless *chengzhongcun* is imagined as something more than an antithesis to the city.

"One person's text is another person's shopping center or office building" (Zukin, 1996). Whether intentionally or not, this dual-city framework has political implications that influence our ideas in urban planning and policies. As can be seen, the teleological discourse looks forward to urban redevelopment, whereas the idealist one is commonly accompanied by notions such as "agency" or "local social network".

I share more but not total agreement with the last discourse. Rather than containers of migrants, *chengzhongcun* in this discourse reflects more critical issues such as power, capital, and subjectivity, and hence the complex mechanisms of urban division. Yet, this discourse cannot fully break away from the dual-city framework, since it does not come up with a way to transcend the othering process it attempts to critique. Its strong, almost fatalistic emphasis on the effects of economic, political, and mental structures has ruled out possibilities of transcendence. If urban division takes place on multiple levels and

in multiple ways, on what basis can we tackle it? If it is improper to either demonize or romanticize *chengzhongcun*, what kinds of futures should we anticipate? To find out a political solution for urban division, it is pivotal, as Massey (1999) argues, that we first develop a different imagination of space, which, unlike other abstract concepts, is a site where creativity, diversity, and transgression actually take place.

Instead of repeating the three discourses above, I choose to approach *chengzhong-cun* under the guidance of the following ideas:

1.  *Chengzhongcun* is made to be the other of the city. Rather than its otherness itself, it is the mechanism of urban division that should be the focus of this study.

2.  *Chengzhongcun* cannot be adequately understood without a closer look at its internal lives. It is not just an idea nor an object, but a world in which migrants actually live, filling and changing it with their life experience.

3.  It is necessary to imagine a different, more positive form of *chengzhongcun* outside the dual-city framework. This additional form of *chengzhongcun* accommodates ways of subversion against urban division.

**Everyday Life and A Three-dimensional Dialectic**

*Understanding Everyday Life*

These guidelines draw this study to the notion of everyday life. Having inspired a multitude of social theories and studies, everyday life is now exceptionally broad and often disappointingly vague. Roberts (2006, p. 67) in his clarification of everyday life unravels two branches of philosophical thinking: "everydayness", which points to "the homogeneity and repetitiveness of daily life", and "the everyday", which indicates the "space and agency of its transformation and critique". Due to this inner contradiction, everyday life is understood as either "a field of doubt" or "a field of experimentation,

of possibility" (Highmore, 2002). On one hand, it assists "abstract reasoning about the social", but, on the other hand, it is usually related to "the postmodern turn" (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013). Several key perspectives on everyday life can be loosely, if not too inaccurately, differentiated by these two opposing branches.

For Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 35), everyday life constitutes "the reality *par excellence*", the "paramount reality", which by comparison with other realities of the social world is the one that constitutes basic orders of meanings. To investigate everyday life is of great difficulty because, in this reality, human knowledge is objectified to the highest degree. Yet, as Berger (1991, p. 23) himself also claims, the value of social research lies precisely in its interest in prima facie facts, in levels of meanings hidden behind the veil of everyday life. Foucault (1982) also takes everyday life as a realm of objectified knowledge but believes that the making of knowledge is inseparable from the diffusion of disciplinary power. In his study of modern sexuality, Foucault (1984a, p. 139) explicates how power can pass through individuals from the top, creating and controlling the ways in which they deploy body to make sense of the world. As such, individuals take on different subjective forms, capable of acting upon themselves and others, expressing their emotions, and framing their moral standards (Foucault, 1988). For Bourdieu (1990, p. 53), everyday life is organized by "habitus", that is, structures that unconsciously generate and regulate distinct forms of human behaviors. As individuals internalize their structured outside in the past and reproduce it with their structuring practices at present, habitus combines subjective and objective realities, which explains why social classes are likely to maintain themselves.

Perspectives of the other branch are no less influential. E. Goffman (1959) regards everyday life as an ensemble of small settings across which different roles are played. With his meticulous description of undisciplined daily activities inside a hotel kitchen, E. Goffman demonstrates the distinction between the "front stage" and the "back stage", which for him marks the margins of institutions and thus individuals' potential to evade given authority and control. de Certeau (1984) underscores "the everyday" by looking specifically at everyday applications of social and mental structures. His famous chap-

ter *Walking in the City* explicates how ordinary walkers of the city may subvert urban planning and add different meanings to urban spaces. For de Certeau, with its creativity and heterogeneity, everyday life can never be fully conquered by Foucault's power or Bourdieu's habitus.

To combine the two branches is rather difficult. For example, Foucault's power is incisive in analyzing the formation of a particular form of subjectivity but leaves little room for the possibility of resistance. While de Certeau opens up chances of resistance, he refuses to let them engage with any grand structural forces.

*Lefebvrian Everyday Life*

In contrast, Lefebvre's version of everyday life is one of the few that can synthesize "the everyday" and "everydayness". Taking this notion as a central pillar of his Marxist philosophy, Lefebvre (1991a, p. 97) proclaims that everyday life is "profoundly related to all activities" and "must be defined as a totality". For him, this totality embodies not only despair and hope but also their interrelation and ceaseless development. It is both where different forms of alienation become entrenched and where chances of effective revolution can be fostered. In this holistic, dialectical treatment of everyday life, I find three key layers of implications that correspond to the three guidelines of this study:

"Everything is suspect" (Lefebvre, 2003a). Lefebvre first treats everyday life as a realm for critique. He holds that capitalism has expanded from economic and political spheres to bits and pieces of daily routine. Not just commodities but also habits, ideas, values, and philosophies are shrouded in myths and turned upside down. Since nothing is pure or innocent, Lefebvre warns that critiques of capitalism should no longer reside in any specific regime, be it a factory, a class, or a political party, but be undertaken in everyday life, that is, in all aspects and moments of life. To pinpoint the root of myths and contradictions, Lefebvre calls attention to "production", which is in Marx's (2003) words "the point of departure", the realm in which all human works, whether concrete or abstract, honest or deceitful, are made (Merrifield, 2006, p. 104).

By the same token, the making of *chengzhongcun* can be regarded as a process of production. Similarly, this is a process that does not simply take place in state policies or political economy but more fundamentally in trivial, mundane lives of living beings.

Second, everyday life cannot be contained by any abstract categories. "Plants" and "soil" are the metaphors Lefebvre (1991a, p. 87) chooses to illustrate the dialectic between non-everyday activities and everyday life: "flowers and trees should not make us forget the earth underneath, which has a secret life and a richness of its own". Clearly, Lefebvre inherits Marx's base-superstructure model but takes everyday life as the base and all that which can be named as the superstructure. Whereas the former gives birth to the latter, the latter is used to manifest the former (Goonewardena, 2008). The latter wants to understand and change the former, but in doing so it detaches from the former and therefore alienates itself. Lefebvre (1991a, p. 40) then contends that all critiques of capitalism shall return to everyday life, and look for their own critiques within it. That is to say, everyday life is in itself a fundamental critique.

In this sense, it is crucial that we analyze the production of *chengzhongcun* with reference to everyday experience of ordinary people, in particular those who live in or at least have direct contact with these urban spaces.

Third, everyday life illuminates many ways of subversion and resistance. It is "an inevitable starting point for the realization of the possible" (Lefebvre, 1984, p. 14). Although everyday life has been deeply invaded by capitalism, its possibilities and contingencies can never be exhausted. For Lefebvre, if nothing is totally innocent, no form of alienation is purely evil, either. Even the darkest moment may harbor certain truthful and hopeful elements. Everyday life is in any case heterogenous, because its living beings are never completely passive or rigid: they "cannot live without generating, without producing, without creating differences" (Lefebvre, 1991b, p. 396). But, unlike de Certeau, Lefebvre maintains that different elements of everyday life still have to form a kind of unity in order to challenge capitalism. True revolution in this case indicates both specific life choices of each living being and a totalizing, lasting project pointing towards a collective future.

To be sure, the production of *chengzhongcun* is not entirely fatalistic. To imagine a new form of *chengzhongcun* is to search for, again in everyday life, various elements that living beings have created along with the general production of *chengzhongcun*.

Drawing on Lefebvre's notion of everyday life, this study tries to understand how *chengzhongcun* is produced from within. This "within" is simultaneously physical, epistemological, and political. It represents, respectively, the internal lives, the subjective forms, and the concrete differences of *chengzhongcun* all at once.

*A Three-dimensional Framework*

Identity and space are where this study embarks. Identity, broadly speaking, is the process through which the self falls under social and conceptual control to articulate its inner complexity and will (Woodward, 2002a, p. 2). This notion helps to capture structural changes migrants in *chengzhongcun* undergo and the interplay between the limits and power of their urban experience. Space bespeaks a place's affiliation to the global capitalist order (Merrifield, 1993). It reminds me that Wu village is never a concept in and of itself, but has to be understood in relation to larger flows of goods, images, and populations. Of course, identity and space are mutually dependent. In *chengzhongcun*, spaces entail identities to be known and migrants cannot possibly identify themselves and others without thinking about spaces. These notions are the tools by which I make sense of migrants' everyday lives in Wu village.

But how should I observe everyday life, this totality, in a balanced and organized way? Influenced by Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, Lefebvre blends dialectical thinking, historical materialism, and artistic creation by proposing a three-dimensional dialectic, an analytical tool that, respectively, involves three sovereign but interrelated moments: "material social practice"; "knowledge, language, written words"; and "a remainder, an

inexpressible and unanalyzable but most valuable residue" (Schmid, 2008)[3]. Lefebvre (1991b, p. 39) himself elaborates on the framework most explicitly in his discussion of space, where he divides space into "the perceived", "the conceived", and "the lived"[4]. But, as Schmid (2008) argues, this three-dimensional framework can in fact be used to analyze different kinds of realities, for in Lefebvre's philosophy a totality may be either micro or macro, individual or social.

I draw on Lefebvre's analytical framework in this study, and postulate that the production of *chengzhongcun* takes place on three respective dimensions, which are social interaction, consumption, and alternative uses of space (see Figure 1). How these three dimensions ought to be comprehended and operationalized is detailed in what follows.
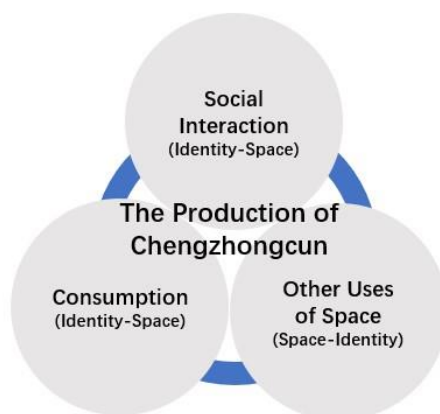


Figure 1: The Analytical Framework of This Study

Social interaction, in Blumer's (1969, p. 10) theorization, is a process in which individuals develop meanings that allow their actions to fit with each other. Social interaction is often privileged by perspectives that focus on micro settings, especially face-

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[3] According to Schmid (2008), Lefebvre develops the three-dimensional framework because he is dissatisfied with Hegel's dialectic, which for him is dissociated with the materiality and art of daily life. Lefebvre therefore modifies Hegel's dialectic with Marx's materialism and Nietzsche's emphasis on art, juxtaposing abstract human knowledge with actual social practice and changing life experience. In this case, Lefebvre's version of dialectic, unlike Hegel's, embodies three equally important dimensions, which contradict and depend on each other, but do not merge into one abstract synthesis.

[4] Lefebvre's treatment of space is representative of his three-dimensional dialectical thinking. His application of the framework can also be seen in his engagement with, for example, language (the syntactic, paradigmatic, and symbollic) and music (melody, harmony, and rhythm) (Schmid, 2008).

to-face situations. In urban sociology, it has been the focal point of the famous Chicago School, which dedicates itself to analyses of urban minorities of great U. S. cities. For the Chicago School, interactive processes continually unite and divide urban residents, accounting for the formation of different types of social association in the city, for example, Italian neighborhoods and black ghettos. The School believes that each minority settlements "takes on something of the characters and qualities of its inhabitants" (Park, 1925a) and thus has to be observed and analyzed separately (Burgess, 1925; 1928).

In this study, I follow such logic so as to understand how distinct traits of *chengzhongcun* are produced through migrants' social interaction. Nevertheless, in line with Tonkiss's (2005, p. 34) unease about the School's naturalistic attitude in dealing with poverty and race, I agree that identity and spatial distinctions are not natural; they are nothing but outcomes of larger social structures of the city.

Identities in this first dimension of everyday life are "relatively stable elements of objective social reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 195). Although they are human products, many of them have been crystallized by hard social structures such as work and income. Given such stability, they also have a capacity to structure social lives on an everyday level (p. 194). Identities therefore implies certain organizing principles of social relations, in other works, certain ways in which individuals know about and act upon each other. As such, in the following chapter I will concentrate on how migrants, influenced by objectified social identity, navigate their social relations with strangers, friends, and lovers in *chengzhongcun*. Here, space is seen as a reflection of its internal social relations (Simmel, 1971). A space can be distinguished from other spaces based on its specific organizing principles of social relations. For example, a community-like space is usually defined by a greater degree to which its residents are linked with each other and willing to consider themselves a whole. Likewise, a home-like space differs from other public ones due to its intimate relationships and exceptional sense of safety and familiarity. *Chengzhongcun* is likely to be portrayed as a community or a home in which migrant are happily embedded in familial and localistic network. To what extent are these portraits real? My first empirical chapter will verify and debunk these ideals.

Consumption, the second dimension, marks today's capitalist mode of production. It is in other words a "capitalist version of consumption" characterized by global trade, fetishism, and pursuit of new lifestyles (Storey, 2017, p. 104). Playing a central role in worldwide societies, this particular type of consumption has now come to define what is called consumer society, a social world in which identity has been deeply enmeshed in shopping. Perspectives on consumer society tend to bifurcate. The Frankfort School, for instance, sees it as a derivative of capitalist production and hence fiercely criticizes its manipulation of consumers' class consciousness (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). The opposite side argues that consumers have their own culture and can imbue consumption with their desires, dreams, and aesthetic experience (Featherstone, 1991, p. 13).

In this study, however, I seek to strike a balance between these opposing sides by asserting a dialectic between capitalist colonization and consumer culture. I acknowledge that consumption is now determined by the capitalist mode of production and that, as migrants transform into consumers, they step into a regime of capitalist domination, of certain modes of mental structures. But I also accept that consumption does provide migrants with essential meanings of life and bears great importance for their everyday identity and spatial experience.

Consumption is where identity intersects with abstract knowledge. Giddens (1991) locates consumption in a post-traditional context, in which enduring social and cultural orders have begun to melt. This uncertain environment forces individuals to constantly search for new reference points to make sense of who they are. Consumer society emerges precisely as this historical juncture to offer them ideas about the self. Packaged as lifestyles and narratives, commodities permeate everyday life and take part in personal choices on a daily basis (p. 199), leading to highly predictable, controllable subjective positions. Identity is then linked to, and directly interfered by, the global market whose knowledge is derived from abstract exchange across time and space instead of concrete use in specific settings. As for migrants, this suggests that consumer society, aside from *chengzhongcun*, may have become an additional source of identity, one that involves certain mental structures that need to be observed and questioned. To entrust identity to

commodities is also to reproduce capitalist spatial relations that presuppose social and cultural distinctions beyond face-to-face interaction. Capitalism feeds on spatial representations, taking them as quintessential materials of its production (Harvey, 1990). In her analysis of everyday consumption of food, Valentine (1999) argues that consumers infuse spatial representations into their identity while eating and may thereby reinforce the reductive, exotic image of the Other. As migrants consume in Wu village, it is very possible that they concomitantly internalize abstract spatial boundaries and use them to (re)produce *chengzhongcun*.

The third dimension of everyday life features concrete differences over which social and mental structures have little control. Given their complexity and richness, such differences often lack clarity and readability. E. Soja (1989) approaches this dimension from a spatial viewpoint and coins it as "Thirdspace", a spatial entity that exists alongside the perceived and conceived space (p. 122). Soja (1999) describes it as "a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representtations". This Thirdspace "can be creatively imagined but obtains meanings only when practiced and fully lived". Soja no doubt offers a good approximation of the third moment of Lefebvre's dialectic, but these two notions differ in a fundamental way. While Soja seeks to celebrate a postmodern world in which differences gather but remain dissociated from each other, Lefebvre hopes that a totality can arise from such differences and that it can, in return, revolutionize everyday life (Kipfer, Goonewardena, Schmid, & Milgrom, 2008). In this study I agree with Lefebvre that a quest for the openness of *chengzhongcun* has to be dialectically linked to a cohesive project that aims to change the production of otherness.

The third moment incarnates Lefebvre's (2003b) ideal of what the city should be: "a place of encounter, assembly, and simultaneity", "a center of attraction and life" (p. 118), a social world in which "different things occur one after another and do not exist separately but according to their own differences" (p. 117). To wit, it is an ideal whose use value can be realized by residents to the full (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 131). Like music, space now becomes a means by which identity develops and diversifies (Frith, 1996).

Rather than a passive reflection of social relation or a kind of distorted representation, space now is where creative, revolutionary elements germinate. Lefebvre's ideal casts new light on how *chengzhongcun* can be differently imagined. Apart from one of which identity and space are each shackled by social and mental structures, it can be imagined as a site where the two closely collaborate: identity attends to space and space in return participates in the making of identity. That is to say, in our new imagination of *chengzhongcun*, migrants regard their settlements as a property of their own; and conversely, these settlements offer them chances to improve their everyday lives. It is based on this new imagination that ways of genuine subversion can come into view.

## A Historical Background of Wu Village

*Economic Transformations*

Agriculture dominated Wu village's economy in the Socialist Era. Back then, the village chiefly grew vegetable and rice. As historical archives (Baiyun District Annals, 2001) suggest, before 1995, the town to which Wu village used to be affiliated was in charge of one fifth of the city's vegetable demand each year. At that time, State-owned industries did appear in north Guangzhou, but they were far from the village to avoid contaminating the nearby Baiyun Mountain, which has been considered as the "lung" of the city.

Farming life lasted around Wu village until the early 1990s, when leasing farmland out for private and foreign enterprises had become a popular trend. Garment, shoe, and toy factories were major components of local economy (Baiyun District Annals, 2001). Despite radical economic changes, production teams in Wu village were preserved to manage leases and allocate rents on their own land sections. In pursuit of more profits, each team competed to attract and collaborate with external investments. This further accelerated the village's industrialization. Before long, extra income were used to build

more spacious apartments to improve villagers' living standards and to earn more rents by accommodating factory workers from elsewhere. During the mid-1990s, farmland to the east of the village was gradually transformed by villagers themselves into a new residential zone (See Map 1). By the early 2000, the village had had the largest amount of buildings in the town.

The inflow of migrants can be traced back to the early 1990s. Migrants first came to Wu village as construction or factory workers, bringing in not only their hard labor but also their familial and localistic ties. Alongside factories, these social ties vitalize self-employed industries in the village—for example, small shops and home-style restaurants catering for workers' leisure and social demands—and other informal economic forms, such as family-based garment workshops, which can still be found nowadays in the village when other large-scale factories have already begun to quit. At that time, Wu village for migrants was a residential, social, and cultural center.

The growth of migrant's population in Wu village started to surge at the beginning of the new century, especially after 2004, when the old Guangzhou Airport was moved further north. This was a time when a new market of space emerged, transforming the north side of Guangzhou from a site of manufacturing into one of commerce, tourism, and residential estates. In 2005, the government's eleventh five-year plan clearly states that the district's land, environment, and transportation have become the key resources for its future economic growth and that the third industry will be the biggest economic pillar in fifteen years ahead ("The Eleventh Five-year Plan", 2005). In 2008, when the construction of the Wu village metro station finally got underway, it was clear that the remaining farmland of Wu village will be turned into a completely new commercial and residential center. Residential estates around the village were quickly built up and, with their high-rises and modern designs, have drawn to the area thousands of middle-class residents. New tastes of consumption have then let hotels, restaurants, cinemas, bars, gyms, and shopping malls mushroom around Wu village, covering its east frontier with global goods and signs. This consumer society, in return, has also created thousands of new job opportunities for service workers, attracting an immense population of young

migrants to live in this place, turning the village into one of the most populated settlements in north Guangzhou.

*Institutional Forces*

From 2000, *chengzhongcun*, as a token of disordered spaces and populations, has become a problem the municipal government could not afford to neglect. In 2002, the official document on "four changes"[5] marks the beginning of the government's direct intervention (Guangzhou Municipal Government, 2002). Since then, the municipal government, usually in the form of sub-district administrations, has gradually taken over the responsibilities of public hygiene, fire prevention, and electricity and gas provision in these villages. In 2009, another official document on the improvement of the "Three Olds"[6] was announced to further accelerate these villages' transformation (Guangzhou Municipal Government, 2009). The document appoints 138 villages as targets and declares that 52 of them—including Wu village—are to undergo "overall renewal" in the coming decade. Before long, as demolition-based interventions were forcefully implemented, the government noticed that developers had in the meantime raised land price, which made it even more difficult for villagers' buildings to be fully removed. For this reason, the 2015 official document adopts the term "minor renovation", which emphasizes on partial demolition, heritage preservation, as well as environmental protection, signifying a more tolerant and decentralized attitude to *chengzhongcun*'s urbanization (Guangzhou Municipal Government, 2015).

Little has been changed at a micro level. Despite that a new urban sub-district was founded in 1999 to take charge of Wu village, stipulating its official status as an urban community, and direct administrative subordination to the municipal government, the actual power of finance and governance is still in the hands of villagers. Although the

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[5] These are changes from villagers to citizens, from village committee to residents' committee, from collective economy to the shareholding company, and from collective-owned to state-owned land. In retrospect, the policy is no doubt idealistic, as it overlooks how the informal housing market in *chengzhongcun* continue to assist new forms of economy at a later stage. Today, the residential land of Wu village is still collectively owned and most villagers still hold rural *hukou*.

[6] These refer to old towns, old factories, and old villages.

village's rural committee had then been cancelled, its internal administrative structure has been directly borrowed by a "Wu village shareholding company" that handles huge amounts of money obtained from the rental market and land transfer (Chung & Unger, 2013). Today, the village still pays for its own units of public security, fire prevention, housing renewal, sanitation, which are supposedly sponsored by the sub-district office (Zhao, Zheng, Wu, & Gong, 2003).

Needless to say, villagers' centralized political position is by no means friendly to "outsiders". Although migrants are much more active on the eco-nomic front, they do not have a say in the residents' committee originally designed to express the voices of all residents of village, not to mention local governance or finance. Villagers do allow migrants to enjoy some outdoor amenities, for example fitness equipment in the central square, but at the same time keep them strictly away from several key spaces, such as the square's platform where senior villagers gather in groups every morning for chit-chat and mahjiong. Communal life in Wu village, if there is any, is only transitory and always hampered by villagers' intertwined financial and political interests.

*Demographical Categories*

As confirmed by several villagers in my pilot study, there are currently more than 100,000 migrants in Wu village. Due to their extremely high mobility, it is always difficult to calculate the exact number of them. Migrants arrive from a variety of origins, but those from Hubei, Hunan, Henan, Jiangxi, and Guangxi account for the majority. Today, migrants' population keeps increasing in tandem with the development of the village's commercial activities and the improvement of transportation. With regard to differences in their income, work, and lifestyle, migrants in the village can be roughly categorized into middle-class-like migrants, migrants as service workers, and poor or jobless migrants.

Monthly salaries of middle-class-like migrants are usually above 6,000 *yuan*. This category is characterized by those who are below the age of 30, single, well-educated

and trained, employed in big urban institutions and companies, and acutely sensitized to urban lifestyles. For them, living in Wu village is only an expedient decision in the face of the soaring prices of the commercial housing in the city. Many of them regard living in the village as a way to save money for their important future decisions. Culturally, middle-class migrants have developed a penchant for clean and stylish environments. In Wu village, they are often willing to spend more money to live on higher floors that receive more sunshine and fresh air, or in buildings that stand closer to the metro station. Aside from its cheap housing and convenient location, the village does not seem to have anything else to attract these young migrants.

Migrants as service workers have an income level between 4,000 and 9,000 *yuan*. These migrants are between the age of 20 to 50 and can be employed as delivery men, bartenders, chambermaids, and waiters/waitresses in local shops, bars, hotels, and restaurants. Service-based businesses are colorful but also fragile, so that these migrants are constantly mobile in quest of new job openings and cheaper rental housing among different villages in the city, and are thus short of a sense of belonging to any of these places. On the one hand, costly housing and, for those who raise children, limited educational resources in the city largely deny these migrants' entitlement to urban culture. On the other hand, however, as they actively participate in, and are intensively influenced by, consumerist culture, their body, daily practice, and values have indeed taken on an urban form. While their experience of urbanism is often scattered and transient, their desire for new urban identities is no less strong.

Marginal migrants refer to street cleaners, peddlers, shop keepers, taxi drivers, vegetable and food hawkers, construction and manufacturing workers, and those who are precariously or not employed. Their income lies between 2,000 to 4,000 *yuan*. Without solid economic foundation and welfare support, these migrants have to depend largely

upon their localistic and familial networks to survive[7]. Consequently, they tend to live in the village for much longer periods. With families and friends, many of them hold a much stronger sense of belonging. But this is not to say that they enjoy the village more than other types of migrants do. Poverty for them is without question a main barrier to their rights to local commodified spaces. Even if some of them have enough money to consume in or outside Wu village, their meanings of life are still substantially derived from kinship, intimacy, and reciprocity.

## Methodological Concerns

*Assumptions of Ethnography*

Akin to practices by which people produce meanings out of everyday life, ethnographic methods are deployed in Wu village to bring in empirical knowledge. Ethnography is usually known as "a research process in which the researcher directly joins and observes lives of others over a considerable time span" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1). But as a sort of methodology ethnography is not without its varied philosophical and political assumptions and can be highly idiosyncratic in use. To present my fieldwork in the village, some of these assumptions entail clarification before particulars are introduced.

First, I take ethnography as pathways to multiple subjective realities of everyday life. Dealing fundamentally with meanings, qualitative research interprets but does not come closer to the truth. Whether or not its interpretations are valid can only be judged by how much they match their specific contexts (Smith & Heshusius, 2004). To ensure

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[7] Marginal migrants in Wu village are able to transplant these networks into their jobs, so as to maintain efficiency and solidarity at work (also see Liu et al, 2015). For example, taxi drivers come predominantly from Henan; workers of small clothing workshops are mostly Hubei migrants, and many choose to work only with their family members. With clear-cut boundaries, these groups are not, in general, accessible to culturally or occupationally different others. Therefore, it has to be admitted that rural communities, as a culturally closed and geographically specific social form, do differentiate the village from the city to a great extent.

its validity, ethnography is often carried out in an unstructured fashion to take account of contextual nuances and make believable its findings. In Wu village, it is doubtless that migrants' identity and spatial experience is relative to their life histories, as well as their changing interests, goals, and emotions. In my fieldwork, I kept myself open to as many details as possible. Building close friendship with them allowed me to gradually accumulate my knowledge about their backgrounds before and outside the village. As I presented myself as an agreeable and tolerant person, informants felt less hesitant to tell me about their ideas and stories. Although key questions of this study stayed in my mind, I seldom threw them directly at informants but rather let answers spontaneously unfold. Beyond what was easy to capture, I was equally sensitive to words informants did not say and things they refused to do. In my opinion, all these strategies helped to enhance the validity of my fieldwork.

Second, I insist that politics and ethics in ethnographic research should be treated separately. It is undeniable that political and ethical concerns of social research are in many ways consistent (Ali & Kelly, 2012). In this study, for example, my commitment to differentiating the negative and positive production of *chengzhongcun* has resulted in my critical attitude towards migrants' everyday lives. As I hung out with informants in Wu village, I kept making judgements on their experience, placing their words and practices into different types and selecting their "good" instances from "bad" ones. In very few cases, for example, when a key informant was lonely but afraid of strangers, I did encourage him to talk to his neighbors. Yet, I am also aware that, unlike politics, ethics is inextricably interweaved with much subtler forms of human existence, such as happiness, trust, responsibility, and perfection. To impose a political stance on others, even though it works for their emancipation, is inevitably to generate another form of domination over these people (Foucault, 1984b). It is for this reason that my fieldwork hardly intervened in informants' everyday lives, regardless of how they actually radicalized the otherness of *chengzhongcun* by themselves.

Finally, I acknowledge that ethnography is co-produced by the self and others. In social research, the role of the researcher is in fact always disruptive and embarrassing.

For positivists, subjective elements contaminate the objective reality and hence has to be obliterated or at least controlled. For postmodernists, any attempt to know about the external world is devoid of a vantage point and doomed to futility. I do agree that the researcher is entangled in his or her empirical knowledge but, between extreme realism and relativism, I see such entanglement as an integral part of research itself, a valuable resource as opposed to a vexing problem (Okely, 1996, p. 28). In my fieldwork, I not only realized the impacts of my own presence but also tried to use them to understand migrants' everyday lives. For example, whenever informants accepted me as a friend, I was curious to know why they trusted and needed me. When they cordially invited me to their events, I was also keen to answer what kind of experience they wanted to show me and why they reached me but not others. Meanwhile, I believe that although I am by no means comparable with informants in economic and cultural terms, my own experience in Wu village was still suggestive of theirs. As short-term residents, we might face similar difficulties and risks.

*Particulars of Ethnography*

My fieldwork lasted for six months—from July to December 2017—and was conducted solely inside Wu village. Except for weekend, I met informants regularly during the evening, when they returned from work elsewhere and when the village was most lively. For the rest of the day, I normally wrote fieldnotes, explored unfamiliar spaces, and consulted senior villagers about the village's past in the central square. I hung out with my informants most frequently along the border between the new and old village (See Map 1). The square's platform in front of the village temple allowed me to get to know most of them. Nevertheless, it was often in the Oriental mall, restaurants, karaoke clubs, and street corners, that I could hold longer conversations with them.

Map 1: The Layout of Wu village and Key Sites of Fieldwork.

In practice, ethnography involves a multiplicity of methods ranging from participant observation to interview, from photography to map drawing (Jupp, 2006, p. 101). Participant observation and unstructured interview are the main body of my fieldwork.

Most of my interaction with informants took place in their habitual group events, including sports, dinners, and karaoke parties. On these occasions, I carefully watched how they got along with each other and ardently listened to whatever they wanted me to know. Although I did ask questions to pursue what I found interesting, my curiosity was restrained from embarrassing them or disrupting their usual practice. Most of my questions were saved for private encounters where informants, facing me alone, were more liable to unveil their hidden stories and feelings. A list of questions was prepared but it was only selectively used when I ran into those with whom I had fewer chances of interaction or a specific topic to talk about. To make sure that informants feel at ease with my identity as a researcher, none of our dialogues had ever been recorded.

Supplementary methods include archival analysis and photography. The former facilitated my knowledge of Wu village's historical background in my pilot research; the latter helped me clarifying my writing when more contextual details were needed, and when informants' visual experience was relevant to my descriptions and reflection.

Table 1: A Brief Profile of Key Informants

| Name | Social Category | Social Relation | Age, Gender, Origin, and Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ah Wen | Middle-class-like workers | Solitary | 21, male, from Meizhou; A contract worker of a government department; |
| Xiaofang | | The "shuttlecock group" in the square | 23, female, from Zhaoqing; An office worker of a travel agency; |
| Xiaoli | Service workers | | 26, female, from Jiangmen; An attendant of a sanatorium; |
| Lao Zhang | | | 38, male, from Jiangxi; A delivery man of a logistics company; |
| Lao Liu | | | About 45, male, from Hubei; An online clothing store owner; |
| Ah Hao | | | About 35, male, from Hunan; A delivery man of a drinking water company; |
| Zhiqiang | Marginal migrants | A gang of jobless youths | 29, male, from Henan; A daily paid worker or a pickpocket; |
| Ah Chao | | | 17, male, from Sichuan; A waiter or a pickpocket; |
| Ah Xu | | | 23, male, from Shantou; A daily paid worker; |
| Xiaolan | | A friend to Zhiqiang | 22, female, from Shaanxi; A food vendor and later a cashier; |

Good sampling in social research can widen the relevance of empirical experience (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 199). I came to know most informants in Wu village by chance, but I managed to secure a group of key informants by carefully fostering and strategically adjusting my relationships with them. Below is a brief profile of these key informants, who are to a certain degree representative of the three demographical portraits of migrants mentioned above (see table 1). This being the case, I feel the need to admit that I was unable to immerse myself in migrants' familial or localistic networks, such as the Hubei and Henan groups, which otherwise would tell me more about migrants' preexi-

stting social relations and about how these relations affect migrants' everyday lives in Wu village.

Ah Wen is my first friend in Wu village. Before we met, he had just graduated from a vocational school in Guangzhou and found his first job at a local government department. He moved into a room right next to mine not long after my fieldwork had begun. I learned much from Ah Wen, but his solitary life contributed little to my further research. I hence moved my focus to the platform later, the upper half of the village's central square, where many migrants would gather and play every evening. Having visited the space on a daily basis, I built tight relationships with a number of migrants who played shuttlecock in a group, including Xiaofang, Xiaoli, Lao Zhang, Lao Liu, and Ah Hao. Except Xiaofang who enjoyed an office environment at work, others of the group were employed as typical service providers. Lao Zhang and Ah Hao had wives and children, who stayed mostly in hometown but sometime would live with them in Wu village for a while. To support them, they had to send much of their earnings back home.

I left the group for a while, as Zhiqiang popped up in the square and guided me to a world of poverty and theft, a world I had no knowledge before. Because of Zhiqiang, I got to know his followers Ah Chao and Ah Xu and then a food vendor called Xiaolan, who offered my study an important female perspective. In this world, I noticed that the darkness of Wu village was tangible and that it was in fact largely necessitated by poor migrants' own pursuit of decency and dignity. Zhiqiang later was put to jail, because he paralyzed someone in a fierce fist fight. With adequate stories about them, I returned to the platform and enriched my knowledge of the shuttle-cock group in the last month of my fieldwork.

### The Organization of This Thesis

The following empirical chapters correspond to the three moments I have clarified

above. Chapter 2 is concerned with migrants' social lives in Wu village. In view of the three demographic categories, I will demonstrate not simply how different types of migrants establish and abolish their social relations in this local context but most importantly how they think about, and what they expect from, these relations. Such meanings and expectations are suggestive of migrants' social identities and therein the structures of their social relations. As will be shown, these structures, albeit seemingly dissimilar, all point to the underlying fragility of migrants' social lives. For Wu village, this means that spatial solidarity may never exist, and that ideals such as rurality, community, and home are transient, if not unreal.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to migrants' structured mental worlds. From migrants' different patterns of consumption, I will discuss some ideas on which the exchange value of commodified spaces is grounded and the mental structures they imply. Within these structures, migrants' identities are homogenized to the point that they are nothing more than consumers, even if consumption does enable them to realize various truthful ends. Very often, what follows this identity change is migrants' antipathy towards Wu village. As consumers, they are more likely to reproduce its otherness by imagining a dark side than to take the village as, or to feel responsible for turning it into, their own properties. Consequently, the village is made no less threatening, as consumer society keeps transforming migrants and local spaces.

I turn to migrants' lived experience in Wu village in Chapter 4. This is the moment in which migrants truly grasp the village's use value. To explain how this moment may subvert the former two, I will first sum up different forms of identity-spatial alienation I have discussed and then elaborate on how migrants' alternative uses of space reconnect their experience with the village. Specifically, by these uses of space, migrants not only feel more optimistic about their surroundings, but also understand themselves and other in a more complex way. To be sure, positive elements of migrants' everyday lives are short-lived, for they do not conform to any social or mental structures. Yet they still illuminate a new politics for Wu village and *chengzhongcun*, one that has to rely on intimate, continuous changes in each migrant's everyday experience.

Chapter 5 situates my findings and discussions in the discipline of urban studies. Having recognized the middle ground between migrants and "us", Wu village and the city, I will revisit and question the dual-city framework, arguing that neither side is in fact absolutely innocent or evil. I will then compare *chengzhongcun* with the ghetto to emphasize that, empirically, urban division can be rooted in a sort of shared urban experience and that, conceptually, a dialectical approach is becoming ever more necessary. Finally, I will explore the possibility of adopting the new approach by explaining how urban division as ideas and practices is capable of reproducing itself in our urban experience and why it ought to be critiqued from within. Subsequent to this chapter is an appendix that reflects on my subjectivity in the village and writing. The social and cultural conditions in which I learned about *chengzhongcun* delineate the limits of this study.

# Chapter 2

# Migrants' Social Interaction in Wu Village

What types of social lives in Wu village do migrants expect? What identities emerge as migrants build or deny social relations in the village? How can Wu village be perceived on the structures of these social relations? By looking specifically at isolated strangers, ephemeral communities, and quasi-intimate relationships, the chapter points to the loose and fragile ways by which migrants' social relations are organized in Wu village, reminding us that *chengzhongcun* should be understood an urban reality.

This chapter puts forth two major arguments: first, what distinguishes Wu village from the city is not its rural sociality. Rather, it is the extraordinary degree of fear, mistrust, and discontent that profusely lie within migrants' social relations and continually inhibit migrants from co-producing their solitary identity at the local level. This means that *chengzhongcun* shall not be seen as a reality of familiarity; it is marginal precisely because its internal differences cannot be shared and exchanged.

Second, this chapter argues that, as migrants start adapting into urban villages and routinely interacting with each other, friendship, community, and even intimacy are still possible to be developed. But these new social relations (unlike those in the countryside) are often unstable, transient, and sometimes instrumental. They are instead developed for the benefits of migrants' own self.

## Social Lives of the Three Categories of Migrants

Migrants are socially embedded before they come to Wu village. Certain larger structures of social relations have historically determined the roles they can choose and

play in their social relations in the village. Among these, migrants' work, lifestyles, and rural networks are of primary significance. Respectively, they influence social lives of the three categories of migrants—middle-class-like, service-providing, and informally employed migrants—in a profound way.

*Middle-class-like Migrants*

First, a huge number of migrants nowadays come to Wu village not in groups but as individuals. These are those having been successfully transferred to a new capitalist regime centering on service and consumer culture. As implied in the previous chapter, migrants of this new regime are profoundly individualized, since they have gained not only sufficient financial power but, most importantly, various packs of meanings from work to sustain their personal lifestyle and identities. This makes possible the dissociation between migrants as solitary individuals and their traditional social support. Xiaochen's changing career accurately represents this social transition and dissociation.

Xiaochen was a twenty-five years old customer manager of a fitness room in the Oriental Mall. He told me that he used to work together with his relatives in a private clothing factory in south suburban Guangzhou. Before long, he found his interest in a fitness room nearby, where he got to know new friends and job opportunities in customer service. He said, "Making clothes was tiresome. When I noticed someone earned more than I did simply by selling membership cards for the gym, I thought I could do it, too." Decidedly, Xiaochen left his relatives and started to work with his friends at a fitness room in the city center. Two years later, a new job position in the Oriental Mall drove him to Wu village, pulling him further away from his original society. He knew nobody in the village upon his arrival, but, as he was already familiar to fitness rooms and his job positions, he needed no support from others.

Likewise, most of my informants—Ah Wen, Xiaofang, Lao Zhang—chose to live in Wu village only for the sake of cheap housing and easier access to work. They, too, arrived with no acquaintances or friends and had to build new relations from scratch.

One therefore can say that a significant feature of Wu village is a profound degree of anonymity.

*Migrants as Service Providers*

A drifting way of life may give rise to migrants' extra needs of social ties in Wu village. For those who are isolated, away from family, and continually on the move, to settle down in an unfamiliar place is to be not only necessary but also meaningful and memorable. Often, this requires settings of face-to-face interaction in which meanings can be fully created (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 43). Close, immediate relationships are the best way available for migrants to record their stories about a new place.

For instance, when Ah Hao and Lao Zhang, who had both carried on a migratory life for more than ten years, recalled places they had been to, they mentioned friends and lovers. "Outside of home, one has to rely on friends." This dictum had been said multiple times in my conversations with Zhiqiang, Ah Hao, and other migrants in the square.

But, to a certain degree, this way of life also liquidates migrants' social relations. When there are always future destinations beyond the village, migrants do not feel the need to blend in with the local. Their roles as "sojourners" are in part perpetuated by their unskilled positions at work—which are often easily replaceable—as well as the unpredictability of the service industry itself, in particular privately-owned and small-scale firms that usually do not survive the market long enough. Even if their jobs are secured, migrants have to change their locations of life from time to time in response to a wide array of contingencies, including housing qualities, rising rents, intimate relationships, or families' short-term visits. As my landlords told me, in their apartment buildings tenants' maximum length of stay normally does not exceed one year.

*Informally Employed and jobless Migrants*

Familial and localistic network continue to play a supportive role in everyday lives of those living outside of formal economy or on the brink of survival in *chengzhongcun* (Liu et al, 2015; Siu, 2016). For example, Xiaolan lived and, for quite a while, worked with her parents in their small rice-noodle workshop in Wu village. Although she made stringent money as a food vendor, she felt happy to be exempt from paying her own housing rents and to get away from managers' excoriation she used to face as a cashier in a supermarket. When Ah Chao was in urgent need of money, he would choose to work with his uncle in the home decoration business for several days and quit the job soon after he got paid.

However, rural communities are sometimes less a sort of support than control. For example, Ah Chao preferred to sleep at a cybercafe than going to his father's place only a block's away, since, as he complained, his father would force him to save money by confiscating his salaries. Likewise, Xiaolan could be seriously beaten by her parents if she hung out with friends after ten at night. For poor young migrants in the village, lives painfully oscillate between the lure of freedom and the grasp of their rural origins.

## Strangers in the Village: Anonymity and Vigilance

This anonymous feature of Wu village opens up a different social context in which migrants' relations with each other are characterized not by closeness but by separation. In this context migrants are assumed to be not insiders, who are, as usual, naturally and permanently embedded in a given society whatsoever, but rather strangers, whose identities can be seriously at odds with a novel social milieu when they come to the village.

But strangers are not merely the opposite of insiders. According to Simmel (1971), strangers come to a city in order to stay there rather than leave. No matter how heterogenous they consider themselves to be, they share with others certain abstract qualities, which, as Simmel further suggests, may give birth to new relationships that are able to

link a stranger with any other from near or far.

This twofold quality of strangers can be traced in social lives of many of my informants in Wu village. As outsiders, they find other residents of the village repulsive, sometimes intimidating, and reject encounters as much as they can. But, curiously, the fact of being outsiders is also treated as a key aspect of their common experience, and thus potentially capable of bringing them closer. Being same and different all at once, migrants negotiate among themselves exceedingly loose and ambiguous relationships, which gives the village an urban form.

*Being a Stranger in the Field*

Anonymity can be instantly felt, when newcomers arrive in Wu village and try to quickly settle down. In these situations, it is usually hard for them to divert their attention from a huge number of housing advertisements—small flyers with brief information about room types, monthly rents, and contact numbers—that flood on tree trunks, walls, bulletin boards in almost every street and alley. These advertisements lead newcomers to housing agents, who are migrants themselves but have stayed in the village long enough to learn to profit from local land market.

The first month of my fieldwork in the village well captured this feeling of anonymity. Searching for my own room on the first day of my fieldwork, I was completely bewildered by the sea of housing advertisements, as to me they were eye-catching yet not visually distinguishable from one another. In the first day's fieldnotes I wrote:

> These flyers have no characteristics. Aside from different amounts of rents they specify, their patterns and contents make no differences at all. I did not even know to whom those cellphone numbers will lead me. Such are housing ads in a *chengzhongcun*: they are of a great quantity but hardly meaningful, just like the empty faces of strangers all around me. These flyers are constantly replaced and replicated, given that old tenants will always leave and new tenants will always come. In that case, there is really no need for housing agents to put extra information in the flyers since there is nothing in a stranger to cherish or care for.

I then dialed three randomly selected numbers, but no one I reached in the phone was patient enough to come over and guide me to their rooms. I lingered in front of a bulletin board, where also stood two young migrants glancing through the board aimlessly. A middle-aged woman appeared a few minutes later and promised to escort us to a nicely furnished room. I delightfully accepted her offer, while the other two looked hesitated, perhaps scared, for a while and eventually decided not to follow the woman. At that stage, they found it extremely hard to trust anyone else in the village. Indeed, to embark on an unpredictable life within a dense, nameless crowd is for migrants and me a great challenge. But, compared to an ethnographer who is well trained to be curious and courageous, migrants in their primary contact with strangers may undergo a much higher degree of anxiety and doubt. At the same time, housing agents who play the role of hosts had no more interest in their guests either. The woman who voluntarily came up to me seemed hospitable at first but, soon after I signed my contract, changed her attitude and handed me over to another migrant who would only reach me on Wechat once a month to collect rents. Later, I met that woman only twice elsewhere and failed to revived her hospitality anyhow.

My entire first month in the village was clouded by loneliness. Although I ardently hoped for, and tried as hard as I could to create, friendship, very few reacted positively, not to mention any gatekeepers who were able to introduce to me a larger community or neighborhood in a way as many successful ethnographic studies was carried out.

Rather, vigilance was the most common response I got. At some points, ironically, I felt I had to control my friendliness to make sure that I would not scare my neighbors away. There seemed to be, especially in the village's residential space, a grave concern of self-protection that forbade migrants from opening their doors and talking with their neighbors on casual occasions. Throughout my fieldwork, not even did I see any greetings held between neighbors in any of the two buildings in which I had stayed. In this culture of silence physical closeness was not a catalyst for migrants to form additional groups but a tremendous threat to their already individualized self. In their own rooms, migrants would rather suffer great loneliness than risk their personal life through many

possible chances of contact.

Comparatively, I found it much easier to start conversation with migrants in public spaces, where they could come together face to face and were more prepared to speak. The central square is the only site of the village where conversations between strangers took place regularly in sports, poker games, and square dancing. However, apart from a few who later became my key informants, it was in general still not easy to cultivate trust in this less hostile atmosphere. Conversations were never supposed to be long or personal. Vigilance could possibly appear at any points of interaction. Of those whom I met many were reluctant to speak with me for a second time. Some left me before too much of their own lives was to be disclosed. Several went straight away when they saw me only walking towards them. During that month, in fieldnotes I wrote in low spirits, "Residents shun their neighbors as if they are about to leave and abandon Wu village. If so, how can we justify the village as a community or even expect it to develop into one in future?"

*Building Friendship with Vigilance*

Ah Wen reminded me several times of his necessary distance from his neighbors. Likewise, he believed that others in Wu village were potentially harmful to his safety. Since his arrival he had made no friends other than me. Rather than holding frustration as I did, he explained to me that his isolation was in fact a deliberate choice:

> "I've met many of our neighbors and I know in which rooms they live. But I will never talk to them even if they want to talk to me, because I don't want to get into trouble with any of them. It's already enough to have one or two friends whom you can go to dinners with after work."

Although I noticed that Ah Wen did talk to random people at the Youth Cybercafe to team up in computer games, he nonetheless never saw them as real friends. Needless to say, Ah Wen concerned himself even less with local groups or cultures. Whenever I tried to share with him different groups of migrants I met, he would divert my focus to his cultural background, telling me stories about his high school and Hakka hometown.

There was no doubt that he constantly positioned himself as a total outsider. Even when I asked him whether he would like to meet a bunch of Hakka migrants I came across at the central food court, Ah Wen declined and questioned my intention, "Why do I have to meet them? You don't know if they are good or bad people, even if they are Hakka."

Alongside his effort to protect his own life, Ah Wen also tried to persuade me into taking care of myself. As my fieldwork moved on, he realized that I had been drinking with jobless migrants in the square from time to time, and solemnly warned me,

> "As a friend of you I have to remind you: you'd better not go around and drink with random people. Do you really think you know them after meeting them only several times? We should always be wary of others when we are not at home."

> I smiled and responded, "I will try." Ah Wen was a bit irritated,

> "Is this a joke to you? If you are drunk, you won't know how they will cheat you. You will regret if someday they dope you and steal your money."

> I apologized and promised to be more careful next time.

In regard to Ah Wen's excessive caution about strangers, my friendship with him was indeed rare. Why did he accept me as a friend? Ah Wen's own account was "luck", since we moved in to the village around the same time, lived on a same floor, and were both alone. I speculated that in fact it was my identity as a research student that assured him that I was safe enough to hang out with, and alike to him in terms of our experience at school. Practically, he regularly treated me, one with more working experience in big cities, as his personal consultant on how he could adapt to his first job. In addition, he relied on me to guide him to the nearest basketball pitch outside Wu village every time when he wanted to do some sport. Whatever reasons our bond can be ascribed to, they all pointed to a basic fact that, for him, I was as much an outsider as he was.

I gradually noticed that, behind our friendship, there was a mismatch between the different sorts of identity we inscribed on each other. Ah Wen only cared about who I was in the city and, to legitimate his trust in me, had to understand us as more or less similar. I focused on, however, his daily experience inside the village and expected to

find out how he would imbed himself to this social milieu. Whereas he never intended to be a part of Wu village, I had been constantly searching for his local experience and knowledge. From Ah Wen, I began to learn a different mode of friendship I hardly predicted before, a relationship that presupposes not the inherent gap but rather the common ground between migrants and me.

By paying more attention to this middle ground, I was relieved to find others more approachable than before. In the meantime, I was greatly shocked by the extent to which their everyday experience overlapped with mine. For instance, Ah Wen enjoyed talking with me about his favorite NBA player Kobe Bryant (he also used this name as his Wechat ID), whom I happened to know much about. Lao Zhang and I liked to watch football games and would regularly discuss different European teams' recent performance when we met in the central square. Xiaofang shared with me a love of comedic crosstalk and often sent me videos of crosstalk shows on Wechat. Occasionally, I also exchanged guitar skills with Ah Sheng, a forty-year-old stallholder from Shantou, at the food court during his break time. It was through these areas of interest and knowledge that I stabilized my relationships with Lao Zhang, Xiaofang, and several other young migrants in the square bit by bit.

Still, again, I was fully aware that our shared interest and knowledge were highly abstract, so that our relationships did not have a clear location and certainly bore little relevance to Wu village itself. The deeper I engaged with them, the more I felt myself displaced from the village, deviating from my original purpose to observe lives inside the field.

*Is Wu Village a Rural Reality?*

The fact that strangers have come to be basic components of Wu village challenges how *chengzhongcun* is predominantly perceived. What earlier studies fail to see is that, as migrants are increasingly atomized by work, *chengzhongcun* harbors a social world in which migrants' relations are oriented towards not integration but separation. It is th-

erefore inaccurate to assume *chengzhongcun* to be a container of, in Tonkiss's (2005, p. 8) words, "non-urban residues". Rather, it is where migrants embrace radical individualism, freedom, intense interest in themselves.

As can be seen, profuse housing advertisements in Wu village are made precisely to meet the demand of migrants relying solely on themselves to decide where they are to live. After they settle down, their isolation can be further maintained as they choose to lock up their single rooms and evade their neighbors. For those who are friendly and brave enough to approach others, fear and even hostility are very likely to be what they commonly receive. To the extent that isolated migrants gather but cannot interact, their sporadic differences exist side by side but barely merge. If for Lefebvre (1996, p. 109) the very nature of the city is defined by the coming together of irreducible differences, Wu village and perhaps other villages in the city in general are as much urban as they are rural, and maybe even more so. As such, it is vital that, first and foremost, *chengzhongcun* can be perceived as an urban reality and empirically studied with reference to urban social theories.

To this, a key question remains unanswered: why are migrants in Wu village averse to and even afraid of social interaction? While isolation for many migrants is predetermined when they first come to the anonymous village, it is they themselves who choose to be alone in following days of their lives there. This voluntary act of leaving the social has been a central concern of urban sociology ever since the discipline's emergence. By probing deep into the forming of urban subjectivity, Simmel (1903) explains this act as an attempt to protect inner stability from the disturbance of gathering differences in the city. For example, Ah Wen explicitly expressed that he only needed one or two friends in the village and that extra friends would bring him trouble rather than help.

But a more decisive reason of his isolation had been a fear of the village's lurking danger, which, according to Ah Wen, refers to theft, drugs, and deceit. If, being contiguous to the city, *chengzhongcun* as a hotbed of social anomie has always been considered as a durable harm, migrants living in the village are further exposed to this harm and hence confronted with greater difficulty to maintain their urban identity. A vigilant

attitude is therefore invoked to not only keep a safe distance from strangers but also to think of them as potentially bad. The mechanism of reinventing of the dangerous other is clearly illustrated by Foucault (1980, p. 158) in his critique of the panopticon, where each person has power to inspect others, so that distrust permeates social relationships.

Now we see at least two mechanisms taking place in Wu village: keeping oneself aloof and keeping the social away. They add to the rationality of urban culture pointed out both by Simmel (1903) and Wirth (1938), in other words, a higher degree of separation between the subject and the object. This being case, a vital, if not dominant, aspect of migrants' social identities in Wu village is an obvious absence of the influence of the local society. Migrants live in the village in a way as they live outside of it.

Nevertheless, considering my friendship with Ah Wen, I have to admit that new relationships do arise between isolated migrants in Wu village. However dissociated they are from the local society, there are always chances whereby silence can be broken and vigilance can be transitorily put aside. But still, these chances are not the antithesis but rather an outcome of migrants' identities as strangers. The abstract qualities (shared interests and knowledge) that connect my informants and me made me realize that we are after all not so different social beings. And, if ethnography is a profession that naturally positions oneself as a stranger in a research field (Agar, 1996, p. 17), migrants who bear the same qualities as I do are, at least in part, ethnographers as well. To simply put, like me, many migrants in the village also face unknown people and spaces, try to maintain their differences from others in a rational way, and anticipate leaving the village in near future, except that I am set apart from them by uneven economic and cultural power.

At the same time, my friendships with Ah Wen and other strangers in Wu village have put the notion of field in crisis. In any case, ethnography is a set of practice that aims to crystallize a field, to create an ontological space that belongs to the other and differs from our own (Hobart, 1996). Yet, in actual field situation, informants' ambiguous identities can often sabotage an ethnographer's experience of "being there" by denying the reference point it needs (Crick, 1995). Although I had been constantly vexed by my failure to discover a field in which migrants were deeply embedded during

my fieldwork, the displacement of Ah Wen and others reminded me that this field was perhaps less a reality than a fantasy I tried to impose on them. In this sense, the otherness of *chengzhongcun* is a problem of "us" instead of "them".

## Community as a Necessary and Transitory Supplement

Migrants who have been drifting long enough may demand something more than security or arbitrary friends. While most remain reluctant to interact with others, some become gradually reliant on certain spaces of Wu village where a few faces repeatedly show up. When solitude has become their everyday routines, an orientation to community, to a familiar and immediate society in which they were once embedded, has also emerged and developed into part of their social identities. Through intense interaction and group activities, community-based identities are able to dilute not only migrants' loneliness but also their negative perceptions of Wu village. Nevertheless, this orientation is more often a supplement than a challenge to their status as strangers, insofar as their pre-conditioned differences can hardly be resolved.

In communities, members and participants only have partial knowledge about each other. Keeping distance continues to be the principal solution to doubt and dispute. The goal of forming communities is therefore only restricted to generating a transient sense of belonging, and never supposed to trespass on their own safety and joy. In this desert of meeting and communication, the power of community has to be taken only as a kind of life experience but not overrated in terms of its scale.

*The Shuttlecock Group*

I use "the shuttlecock group" to refer to a group of migrants who regularly played shuttlecock together for companionship on the upper platform of the central square (see

Photo 2). The group consisted of several core members—Xiaofang, Xiaoli, Lao Zhang, Ah Hao, and Lao Hu—and dozens of more flexible participants, including Ah Bin, Ah Qiang, and me. The core members gathered in the square almost every evening and had the most energy to play and talk. Other participants showed up less often but were still welcomed to join the group if they were not distracted by other activities in the square or happened to pass by. As they played shuttlecock in circles, each player was regarded as an essential member of the game as well as an integral part of a playful, relaxed, and tolerant atmosphere. Skillful players tried to deliver all of their techniques to entertain others, while unskilled players would be occasionally teased in a friendly manner.

During breaks, the group of migrants would sit on the ground and lean their backs against the high wall of the village temple, playing with their mobile phones and telling jokes about each other, and exchanging recent information about local housing market. After the platform turned quiet, Lao Zhang, Ah Hao, and several other followers would sometimes go to Lao Hu's place to play poker till midnight. Once in a while, the group would also get together at dinner tables nearby, where they would drink, joke, and talk about stories they heard of and people they met in the square.



Photo 2: Transitory Community on the Platform of the Central Square. (Taken by Lei Feng on 19 August 2017)

The shuttlecock group no doubt had an important role in these migrants' everyday

lives. For Xiaoli and Lao Hu, it was able to influence some of their major life decisions. Xiaoli used to live in a neighboring village and had to spend half an hour to travel back and forth between the two villages every evening to play with other members. Before I finished my fieldwork, she eventually decided to move to Wu village, and quickly found a room only three-minute walk from the square. Living much closer to her companions, Xiaoli offered me the only positive comment on Wu village I had ever heard throughout my entire fieldwork,

> "I always think that Wu village is better, because all of my friends are here. I know most people feel terrible about the village. But I am satisfied about it as long as I can hang out with my friends here every night and go to dinners with them from time to time."

As for Lao Hu, despite that he first appeared in the square a month later than I did, from the group he found a way out of his previous incurable loneliness before long. Lao Hu told me that,

> "Before I started to come to the square I mostly played computer games in my own room. That kind of life lasted for three whole years. I tried different games but was still bored to death. I felt all alone but didn't really know what to do. Until one day when I happened to walk a wrong way did I see that there were many people hanging out on the platform every evening. Now, with you guys, I finally find some pleasure of life."

Ah Hao's emotional attachment to the group once was candidly expressed. During the national holiday, when Ah Hao found out that others of the group were all back to hometown, he could not help saying in their Wechat group how much he missed them,

> "Today I waited on the platform for whole evening but none of you turned up. After you guys come back to Wu village, I will definitely treat you to a dinner. In Wu village I expect for nothing else other than a bunch of friends like you. If you guys feel happy, I am happy."

*Differences That Cannot be Resolved*

Although the group provided migrants with pronounced identities, it barely had a fixed form. For one thing, migrants in the village are always on the move. Neither core

members nor extra participants of the group could maintain long-lasting presence and membership. As the earliest group member, Xiaofang once told me that the group was very different from what it was a year ago:

> "I came to the village in January last year. A bunch of friends I got to know in the village later brought me to the square for fun. It is with them that I started to play shuttlecock day by day. But by last Spring Festival they have all gone. Then Lao Zhang came to play with me intermittently. Xiaoli started to show up in the square only three months ago."

When I asked her if she still kept contact with her previous friends in the village, Xiaofang's reply was negative.

For another thing, the group itself was only loosely organized. While members and participants enjoyed being together in the square or at dinner tables, the group did not seem to have additional effects on the rest of their everyday lives. As soon as they leave the square, their group identities instantly vanished. Except for Lao Hu who invited intimate friends to his room at times, never did any others of the group explicitly disclose where they live in the village or try to bring anyone to their places. Even less did they talk about their work experience or families. During one dinner, I was shocked to learn that Lao Zhang, who had the longest friendship with Xiaofang in the group, had no absolutely idea of where her hometown was. When I revealed my surprise to Xiaofang afterwards, she responded calmly,

> "Do you really think we are that close? Actually, you know these guys no less than I do. I never know or care about what kinds of work they do. We only play to be friends."

Conflicts occurred soon after Zhiqiang attempted to blend in with the group. Zhiqiang went to the platform frequently to play badminton during the evening, and would stay there longer when he could not afford to go to cybercafes or karaoke clubs nearby. He was counted as a group member for a short period of time, whether in the square or in Wechat, until he borrowed money from Xiaoli and Lao Zhang but could not return it back. Xiaoli and Lao Zhang were irritated and played with him no more. Zhiqiang continued to play in the square but rarely joined the group, either. He later explained to me

that he did not want to pay them back since he had been treated with little patience and friendliness. In response, Xiaoli and Lao Zhang cancelled the former Wechat group and rebuild a new one that excluded Zhiqiang and other "trouble makers", as well as those who no longer appeared in the group's activities.

I lost membership of the new group as well, as the group caught me getting closer to Zhiqiang and his gang in the following days. Only after Zhiqiang was arrested did I eventually repaired my rapport with them and returned to their new Wechat group[8].

To my surprise, however, others of the group had no intention to take sides in this confrontation. Xiaofang secretly told me that, despite her close friendships with Xiaoli and Lao Zhang, she kept talking to Zhiqiang in private. When Zhiqiang built a different Wechat group for his gang, she felt all right to be a member of it:

> "I met many people almost every day in the square. I don't want to annoy any one of them. All I care is whether I can have fun. The bottom line is that you don't get too close to any one of them."

Ah Hao was another group member who kept contact with Zhiqiang. When he saw me hanging out closely with Zhiqiang, Ah Hao offered me a rather similar suggestion, regardless of his emotional attachment to the group,

> "I shouldn't say too much about this, but I have to remind you. You shouldn't get too involved in any relationships here or spend too much money for your friends. That's how I get along with people in the square. If you have extra money, save it for yourself or send it back home."

*Is Wu Village a Community?*

Can there be communities organized among isolated migrants in Wu village? The answer is certainly positive, if "community" is in general imagined as a local, intimate

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[8]  It is also worth noting that these Wechat groups were no less, if not more, loosely organized than those in the real world. Online interaction took place mostly when group members urged each other to go to the platform early or arranged dinners after work. Except for Ah Hao, who would occasionally share his feelings or beloved songs, others on the phone were rather quiet during day time. While being used to declare a shared identity, these Wechat groups had very limited authority in themselves. As each member could build online groups based on his or her own social relations and purposes, they were in fact easily replaceable. Before I left Wu village, the new Wechat group built by Xiaoli and Lao Zhang became already obsolete.

social form in comparison to the global, abstract capitalist city. The shuttlecock group clearly has much in common with Park's definitions of urban communities. Spatially, the group has a locality, be it a corner of the central square, a dinner table, or a Wechat group, in the same way as, in an urban community, "a collection of people occupies a more or less clearly defined area" (Park, 1925a). Socially, the group is founded on a set of practices—rules of games, habits of passing on jokes and news, and expectations of pleasure and acceptance—which is also consistent to, in Park's words, "a collection of institutions" that "distinguishes a community from other social constellations". It was through these practices that these migrants create their shared identities, histories, and experience that are unique to the village and they themselves.

For Park (1925b), there is also a third configuration of urban communities—what he calls "moral regions", where individuals are able to escape the control of the city, to let go the suppressed elements of their human natures. Similarly, the shuttlecock group enables migrants to reclaim trust and affinity, to build affirmative relationships that are mostly denied elsewhere in the village. Such is precisely the task which urban dwellers today assign to the idea of "community". As an "antidote" (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 26), urban communities today become almost a marker of "good life", since they enrich our urban experience and can make the insecure and nameless city a habitable place. As showed in the cases of Xiaoli, Lao Hu, and Ah Hao, the village turned out to be tolerable, even somewhat pleasant and memorable, in certain moments of their everyday lives, simply due to their participation in the shuttlecock group.

However, communities organized by these migrants does not last. Young (2010) in her reflection on the idea of community points out two key factors that prevent communities from being solidified. The first one is the fact that community is always challenged by its inherent differences. Despite the shared identities the shuttlecock group cultivates, group members are still vastly different from one another. Some differences are predestined and cannot be avoided. For example, it was hardly possible for Xiaofang to try, or expect, to maintain her friendships with others in the square, when she and them were set to accomplish distinct life projects and leave to divergent future destinations.

Some of their differences were not meant to be reconciled. Migrants of the group had a strong will to keep their lives opaque since they did not want to give up their own rights to be strangers. As Xiaofang plainly stated, the group was only supposed to contribute to fun but not necessarily mutual understanding or dependency.

Second, face-to-face interaction cannot eliminate differences within communities, in that, as Young (2010) also explains, even the most intimate human relationships can be disturbed by larger social and mental structures. In the square, despite a harmonious atmosphere, migrants in their social relations held different assumptions and expectations, which could possibly lead to tensions and conflicts. While Zhiqiang assumed the group to be financially dependable, Xiaoli and Lao Zhang refused to believe so, so that it was difficult that their confrontation could be resolved. When Xiaoli and Lao Zhang chose to cut off their connections with Zhiqiang and redefine the group, Xiaofang and Ah Hao only stayed aloof to protect their own interests.

Therefore, while the shuttlecock group as a community does infuse good elements to a small group of migrants' everyday experience, it contributes little to how the entire village can be differently perceived. Unlike Wirth's (1956) ghetto which is defined by Jewish social unity, or Gans's (1962) urban village that corresponds to a closed society of Italian immigrants, the way by which migrants organized their social relations in the group cannot shape the village into a coherent whole. Different from ethnic groups that often have solid social relations, the kind of communities the group stands for is rather a nostalgic dream, a way of life that migrants in Wu village are hardly able to actualize (Bauman, 2000). This is because the group is inherently fluid and vulnerable in coping with differences. The group, so to speak, is not powerful enough to challenge the dominant stranger society and provide Wu village with an alternative social form.

In fact, as Delanty (2003, p. 154) acutely put, communities never aim to challenge capitalist social relations, but instead they are based on the premise of isolated, rational individuals and works to supplement as well as to reinforce this premise. For migrants of the group, it is their distance, not closeness, that constitutes their will to come together and construct shared identities. This argument also applies to migrants that dance

or play chess or poker in groups in the square. Despite such transient togetherness, their identities as strangers are unimpaired. For this very reason, it is of great importance for studies on *chengzhongcun* not to aggrandize or pin their hopes on the power of "urban communities". The inferiority of these migrant settlements, as I venture to argue, stems not from their inability to integrate into the city, but from the fact that they have already been deeply integrated into the capitalist order, but meanwhile failed to derive the same degree of stability, security, and trust from it as the rest of the city does.

## The Pragmatism of Brotherhood and Love

It is difficult, whether financially or culturally, for poor and jobless migrants to be strangers. But this does not mean that they do not aspire freedom or have few relationships beyond their familial and localistic networks. Despite their poverty and entanglement with rural societies, many of them, like strangers, do invest great effort in carving out their solitary lives in Wu village. Consequently, the lack of means and meanings for survival on one hand and the quest for solitary life on the other have created identities that oscillates between unity and conflict.

Running away from the burden and control of their rural networks, these "strangers" choose to reinvent intimacy among themselves in the name of brotherhood and love in order to maintain their livelihood and moral integrity. But, as this different form of intimacy only serves the wellbeing of the self, it is almost destined that they will run into conflicts with each other. Beneath the mask of fidelity and romance, responsibility and familiarity, their intimate relationships are nothing more than cursory patchworks of instrumental and exploitative practices. These "quasi-intimate" relationships pose serious questions for studies that understand *chengzhongcun* as a "home" for migrants.

Zhiqiang had known Ah Chao for more than five years. As Zhiqiang recalled, they first met in the square when Ah Chao, a boy back then, came up to him alone and asked for a cigarette. At that time, Zhiqiang had already gave up his job in a factory, idling in the square and playing poker all day long. Shortly after he came to Wu village with his families, Ah Chao was sent to a substandard junior high school nearby, but spent most of the day wandering around in the village. At night, both would like to sleep at a same cybercafe rather than their parents' places; and both had stolen several mobile phones there, according to Ah Chao. It seemed that the two were destined to develop a special bond.

Speaking of Ah Chao nowadays, Zhiqiang always sounded helpless yet at the same time still tried to be as generous and responsible as he could,

> "I didn't have a choice. Even if he has families around, no one really looks after him when he is outside. I feel that he has been my younger brother for such a long time."

On one hand Zhiqiang did feel sick and tired of Ah Chao, hoping that this younger brother would trouble him no more. Every time when I talked and drank with Zhiqiang in private he had something to complain about Ah Chao. Once he showed me a Wechat chat log between the two of them,

> "You see, I send him money every now and then. Three *yuan*, six *yuan*… This is four *yuan*. And I can't remember how many times I treated him to karaoke clubs and big dinners. He always takes money from me, but never even pay back any good words. I really don't want to see him in this village again."

At another time he accused Ah Chao of interfering his private life:

> "I had a dinner with my adopted younger sister a few days ago, a girl I got to know on the platform just a week before. But Ah Chao suddenly broke in our dinner. When he saw my sister, he had a crush on her. He then tried to hug her! My sister got very annoyed and now she doesn't even want to talk to me. From now on, he is not allowed to come to my dinner anymore!"

On the other hand, however, Zhiqiang never ceased to take Ah Chao to dinners and

karaoke. It seemed that his patience with this troubled brother could never be used up. He kept giving Ah Chao pocket money and encouraging the boy to find a job in factory. For Ah Chao, the price of this relationship was nothing but Zhiqiang's tireless teaching on reciprocity. As long as the gang assembled, it was certain that Ah Chao would be given a five-minute lesson in how great a debt he owned to Zhiqiang:

> "You know how good I am to you in all these years, right? Ask your consciousness. I took you like we have the same blood, fought beside you every time when you stirred up conflicts. But I expect nothing from you. I know you are young, and I don't blame you. I have only one word to say to you: Don't you forget about me, your elder brother, if you get rich some day later."

Ah Chao rarely spoke anything about his leader. But when he did, he showed more antipathy than Zhiqiang did to him. One night, I found the boy sitting alone on the platform. He told me that he had decided to quit the gang, for Zhiqiang did not stand on his side when he had a fight with Ah Xu. I consoled him that his relationship with Zhiqiang would never go wrong. Ah Chao said,

> "Do you believe what he says? Honestly, I had been putting up with his words for a long time. He always puts on airs, saying big stuff about himself, but he never does anything useful when real matters come. Whatever you want to say about him, to me he is not a moral man."

I asked about the specific problem between them. Ah Chao answered,

> "Money is the only reason of our conflicts. Last week we played poker together. I lost many times and owed Zhiqiang three hundred *yuan*. He urged me to return him the money and shouted at me like he didn't know me. I will never borrow him money again. Money hurts feelings."

However, two days later, when I went to another dinner with Zhiqiang and Ah Xu at the Sichuan restaurant, Ah Chao rejoined the gang, talking with the other two lightheartedly, as if nothing serious had ever happened before. Excitedly, Ah Chao took out a used iPhone from his pocket and showed it to me, a present Zhiqiang gave him that morning. I was instantly sure that Zhiqiang had just made another large sum from his underground business and bought the younger brother an second-hand iPhone.

Notwithstanding that no tension had occurred between Zhiqiang and Ah Xu, their

bond was rather practical and candid. Zhiqiang used Ah Xu's remaining money to sustain their lives during times of poverty, while Ah Xu did not have to find a job to savor the charm of lavish consumption. But this is not to say that they truly understood each other. Zhiqiang frequently expressed his approval of Ah Xu, saying that the boy was loyal and shrewd, and a model from whom Ah Chao should learn. Their brotherhood, for Zhiqiang, was a base on which they could envisage a more prosperous future. Zhiqiang once said to me confidently in a karaoke box,

> "Next year I will take the boys to Shandong. There we can earn a lot of money from the fishing business. As brothers we should always get rich together."

However, Ah Xu did not plan to stay in the gang for long. I had a chance to listen to his thought after Zhiqiang's incarceration. In private, Ah Xu admitted that Zhiqiang was good enough for him, but the very reason that kept him in Wu village was his beloved girl, a young waitress in the Sichuan restaurant. He told me that he would return home anyway before the Spring Festival because his father needed him to work for the family. But before that he would try to win the girl's heart and take her back to his hometown.

Zhiqiang also attempted to build other relationships, which were, however, proved not equally successful. He had his own Wechat group, which contained more guests but far less dialogues than that of the shuttlecock group. Most interaction occurred between Zhiqiang and Ah Chao themselves. Some of the guests had only played badminton once or twice with Zhiqiang on the platform. Even Zhiqiang himself acknowledged that there were in this group three to four who he did not really know.

Xiaoyue, a seventeen years old office worker of a printing company, the girl whom Zhiqiang called his "adopted younger sister", was also one of the guests but did not talk much, either. One evening, Zhiqiang decided to invite both the girl and me to a dinner at the Sichuan restaurant. But Xiaoyue was reluctant to join us. Zhiqiang tried very hard to coax her in his phone, telling her that he purposefully ordered prawns and fish, dishes she favored the most. The girl eventually showed up after Zhiqiang hailed a motorbike and picked her up from the other end of the village to the restaurant. Whereas Xiaoyue

ate up all prawns but did not turn a bit happier, Zhiqiang continued to display his generosity by saying that he would help her to find a better job and support her to go to a university. Xiaoyue declined, saying that she could manage her own career. When Zhiqiang left the table to pay the bill, the girl told me that she felt compelled to get so close to Zhiqiang, "I do not mind him calling me his younger sister. But we've actually only met two times before. I don't even know what his job is and not even where he comes from."

During one of his penniless periods, Zhiqiang paid daily visit to Xiaolan's corner beside the square. Every evening, he would buy a bowl of rice noodle from her, help to look after her food trolley in her absence, and stay with her until midnight. There, Zhiqiang looked genuinely happy to have someone willing to accept his stays and, in particular, someone to whom he could work out a sense of responsibility. In those days, he would drag me abruptly out from the shuttlecock circle and take me all the way towards Xiaolan's place, simply for the purpose of showing me the desirable social roles he had obtained. Zhiqiang said proudly,

> "I'm trying to take care of her business. I buy her rice noodle every day and
> never once did I eat her food without a charge. Besides, she is alone out there
> in the street. When she finishes her business at night, someone has to help to
> pack her stuff and send her home."

Unfortunately, their relationship, again, only worked out for about a week, for, this time, Zhiqiang was not as generous as he was to his adopted younger sister. One night, Zhiqiang stopped me before I was about to visit Xiaolan for super. He told me that the girl had irrevocably disappointed him,

> "Last night I added a little bit more noodle to my portion. I gave her two *yuan*
> in addition to the original price. But she insisted that I had to pay her another
> two *yuan*! I got mad and almost throw that bowl of noodle on the ground."

I suggested that a two-*yuan* dispute should not amount to an end of their friendship. But Zhiqiang sounded resolute,

> "She shouldn't treat an old customer like that. She forgets how much I have
> done for her all these days. I will never go to her place ever! There was only

money in her eyes!"

*Romance as Quasi-Intimate Relations*

Xiaolan took great pleasure in her customers' visits and even more so when some of them could stay with her to dissipate her boredom. Still, she was also clear that her goal was to earn as much by selling rice noodle as she could. After her intense quarrel with Zhiqiang, Xiaolan told me that he was always welcomed, but she would never indulge any customers to eat more than they paid. In order to survive in the street, Xiaolan had learned to build extensive relations, of which her friendship with Zhiqiang was only one that she could utilize.

Xiaolan targeted specifically on the Henan group, one of the largest rural communities of Wu village, to stabilize her informal market. Although she grew up in Xi'an, she insisted on speaking the Henan dialect, the dialect of her mother, most of the time at work. During my stays, I found that this readjusted identity had indeed drawn to her place a large number of Henan customers, among whom she purposefully called males "fellow countrymen" (Laoxiang) and young girls her "good sisters" (Haojiemei). Still, of course, Xiaolan had few or at best vague ideas about these people's past or present lives. Other than the three "good sisters" with whom she went to night clubs for several times, her designed proximity to customers existed only at that specific street corner.

Xiaolan had also taken much advantage of her boyfriend, a thirty years old Henan taxi driver in the village, who had converted many of his brothers to her customers and frequented the street corner to protect her from violence and harassment. But being too protective, sometimes violence was brought to her by himself. Xiaolan one day told me that her boyfriend slapped her face that morning, when he saw a flirting massage in her phone sent from a man he did not know. She complained to me angrily but then tried to consoled herself,

> "I have been thinking about breaking up with him all the time. I simply need a boyfriend. I never want to get married with him. After all, I'm leaving this vi-

llage next year and we will have no more connection."

Her boyfriend disappointed her again a few days later, after she found out that he had been secretly seducing one of her "good sisters". I suggested that she could put an end to their relationship. Xiaolan replied rather apathetically,

> "If he really wants to change his girlfriend I won't oppose and I won't be sad at all. I always want to break up with him. By the way, my mom has just introduced to me a dating partner in Zhejiang. He will come to the village if we fit."

However, regardless of her will to part from him, Xiaolan kept going to her boyfriend's place every morning by the time I left the village. She explained,

> "We have already broken up, but we still keep contact. Actually, he is good to me. When my family moved to a new room, he helped to pay our first month's deposit and rents. He always buys this and that for me, snacks and dishes from restaurants."

### *Is Wu Village a "Home"?*

Intimacy is no doubt at the heart of marginal migrants' social lives. In contrast to formally employed migrants who cultivate friendships and communities to lessen their loneliness, the poor endow their friends and lovers with more expectations. When jobs and incomes do not keep, intimacy is not only expected to satisfy psychological needs but also charged with the provision of material well-being, such as food or money. For example, Ah Chao could not get rid of Zhiqiang even though he was annoyed by the elder brother's endless moral inculcation, for, without Zhiqiang, karaoke and restaurants for him would not have been so reachable, let alone an iPhone. Xiaolan had to reinvent her Henan hometown to sustain her small street business and at the same time to endure her boyfriend's violent abuse and affairs in exchange for housing rents and other occasional rewards. In the same way, Ah Xu traded with Zhiqiang for entries to extravagant spaces he otherwise could not obtain.

Even with sufficient economic power, marginal migrants' dependence on intimacy

does not dwindle away. This is because, in today's consumer society, poverty is at once material and cultural (Bauman, 2005, p. 37). For migrants, A decent job in the city guarantees not only means of livelihood but also meanings of life. Although Zhiqiang sometimes did have large sums of illegal money at his disposal, he could not level up his cultural "poverty". He had to spend money on his friends, followers, and younger sister to construct an additional social world in which his existence made sense. I guess that Zhiqiang was not unaware that his expenditures on Ah Chao and Xiaoyue could never be reciprocated in future, and nor could he buy their loyalty and respect. But his goals in these relationships had well achieved. By indoctrinating Ah Chao, fawning on Xiaoyue, and helping Xiaolan, he was happy enough that he performed himself as a caring, indulgent, and responsible man.

Intimacy was imperative, but it is no less fragile than any other forms of social relations in the village. As long as it fails to accomplish its instant tasks, warmth will be quickly replaced with discontent and malice. Ah Chao's complaints against his leader erupted when Zhiqiang lost his generosity. Zhiqiang blamed Xiaolan's coldness after she debunked the altruistic role he played at her street corner. If crisis of intimacy has not yet break out, it is brewing up beneath a seemingly peaceful surface. Xiaoyue consented to Zhiqiang's role as her "elder brother" but was troubled by his somewhat too aggressive make-believe. Xiaolan held great indifference as well as disappointment to her boyfriend so that, ironically, she managed to maintain this relationship and benefit from it. In short, these relationships shall be called quasi-intimate, in a sense that they put on a strong and dependable cloak but are extremely ad hoc and opportunistic in its nature.

This form of intimacy in Wu village is not unique. Liebow (1967) in his classic on a black ghetto corner in Washington, D.C. tells some strikingly analogous stories: like Zhiqiang and Xiaolan, his informants are also away from their families, rootless in the street, poorly paid in their jobs, and greatly reliant on social ties which, "lacking depth in both past and present", can be "easily uprooted by the tug of economic or psychological self-interest" (p. 133). For these poor blacks, intimacy also works as specific so-

lutions to day-to-day problems. There are no solid bases on which it can be defined.

In his theorization of modern social relations, Giddens (1990) points out that intimacy has now deeply enmeshed in abstract social systems and hence become "a mode of reembedding" (p. 119). This means that, when individuals find themselves within a social milieu where norms and rules of personal life have been emptied out, they have to reconstruct intimacy according to their own needs and wills. In both Wu village and Liebow's ghetto corner, histories and futures, ideas and emotions have become all uncertain and individuals have nothing but their immediate self to make sense of what an intimate relationship can be. This explains both the necessity and fragility of intimacy. Compared with the middle class whose identities can be securely attached to work and consumption, intimacy is perhaps the poor's only hope of survival and moral integrity. The poor have no choice but to face the high risks of brotherhood and love.

Despite a semblance of care and responsibility, social lives of poor migrants in Wu village add a vaguer image to *chengzhongcun*, a perception that differs from, or at least complicates, those which exaggerate the power of intimacy, assuming these villages to be home-like spaces in which local social ties generate stable, unconditional support. It is certainly true that many migrants in Wu village are still embedded in familial and localistic networks, and that these packs of intimate relations are crucial to their economic and inner sufficiency. But it would be wrong to understand all internal intimate relations as predetermined or immune to any further accounts. In fact, judging from the cases of Zhiqiang and Xiaolan, money and meanings may not only be the outcomes but also the very reasons of being intimate. That is to say, intimacy can well be a product, a calculated response of the poor to their changing identities and difficult lives.

Intimacy is not stable, either. While the poor do profit from their friends and relatives, they pay great prices of freedom and self-esteem. It is thus likely that a friend is cherished earnestly today but cast aside coldly tomorrow. Whether to end or continue a relationship is possibly asked on a daily basis. Intimacy indicates norms and rules, but it at the same time sees poor migrants' effort to redefine, abolish, and break away from it.

Finally, to assume intimacy to be peaceful and harmonious is largely to reproduce a bourgeois ideology that "home" and "work" are separated social realms (Woodward, 2002). For many in Wu village, this distinction is non-existent. Although intimacy for them may appear to be warm at times, it is never short of conspiracy, anger, and hatred, as each side tries to get as much from the other as possible. It is for these reasons that migrants' intimacy is inadequate, if not totally unable, to constitute *chengzhongcun* as their home.

This chapter has explored migrants' social structures in Wu village by looking into their socially-embedded identities, different organizing principals of their social relations, and these principles' implications for local spatiality. While, due to different social settings in which they are conditioned, migrants in social interaction have different expectations and needs, the ways in which their social relations are organized all point to a fact that Wu village is not a reality of familiarity but rather one of indifference, vigilance, and distrust. To be sure, this fragmentary reality is not only a result of migrants' social conditions but also their mentality. How do they understand Wu village and each other in their knowledge and imaginations is then explored in the next chapter.

# Chapter 3

# Migrants' Consumption in Wu Village

What are the patterns of migrants' consumption in Wu village? In these patterns of consumption how have migrants changed or maintained their identities? And how have migrants, in their attempt to become consumers, possibly (re)shaped local spaces? This chapter explores ideas that manipulate migrants' understandings of themselves and the village. These are in essence mental structures that energize consumer society and underpin the making of urban subjects in today's China.

In Wu village, migrants' mental structures are most evidently reflected by three patterns of consumption, characterized each by distant urban spaces beyond the scope of Wu village, an internal spatial division inside Wu village, and violent ruptures with the village's dark side. For migrants, these different patterns of consumption are the crucial means by which they construct citizenship, search for safety, and perform themselves. As they consume, they passively engage themselves in the production of *chengzhongcun*, relegating its use value, keeping away its concrete differences, and reinforcing its darkness. This chapter suggests that consumer society has failed to eliminate, or instead perhaps aggravated, the lasting image of *chengzhongcun*.

## Work, Leisure, and Spaces of Consumption

*Production as a Precondition*

Income and work schedule set the limit of migrants' consumption in Wu village. Monthly income among my informants diverges sharply. It may go up to about 9,000

*yuan* for experienced workers like Lao Zhang or, for low-end service workers, decline to 2,500 *yuan*, which can barely back one's survival. Ah Chao, when employed as an assistant cook of a hotpot restaurant, earned only about 2300 *yuan* per month. He told me that he had to control his needs for cigarettes if he wanted to buy a dinner for his beloved girl. Between these extremes, the majority of informants has an income level ranging between 4,000 to 7,000 *yuan*, of which more than half are at their disposal for commodities beyond bare necessities. This relative financial autonomy has made possible a transition of migrants' consumption from centering on how to survive to who else they can be.

In contrast, work schedule is quite fixed among not only office workers who normally work for 8 hours each day, but also service providers whose daily working time can be longer—ranging from 9 to 12 hours—but leisure time no less stable. My fieldwork started usually at 6 pm every day, for this is precisely the time when informants collectively showed up in the central square or other commercial spaces of the village. Informally and precariously employed, Xiaolan, Zhiqiang, and his followers had rather more, albeit sporadic, leisure time. For instance, although Xiaolan as a food vendor had to stayed at a street corner near the square selling cold rice noodle every day from noon to midnight, she would often sneak into nearby shops and stalls as long as she had me or other friends to look after her food trolley.

Today's capitalist mode of production may define consumers even more deeply, if consumption is understood as a form of disciplinary culture (Rose, 1999, p. 87; Bauman, 2003) rather than simply an act of buying goods. Ma (2006) witnessed new disciplines taking place within migrants themselves in his story about how migrants as bartenders at a late-night bar learn new ways of consumption in order to cater for the taste of bourgeois customers. As service providers, migrants are expected to not simply invest their labor, but also their body and identities to the market. This forces their senses of self to merge with commodities they produce and develop into part of commodified representtations.

Same stories prevail in Wu village. Ah Bin, a forty years old cook of a high-class

karaoke club, told me that workers of the club were given coupons to consume at their own workplace at a much lower price, so that he and his workmates could learn to entertain in the same way as their customers did in karaoke boxes. Xiaofang, as a ticket seller of a travel agency, was also happy to let me know about her special "welfare" at work. She said that her privilege access to the nationwide ticket system allowed her to keep cheap tickets for herself before selling them to customers. Many tourist sites reserved for her customers were thereby within her reach.

Sometimes migrants' contacts with commodities may not necessarily involve any actual monetary exchanges but still say something about a kind of identity change. Ah Chao enjoyed posting photos of hotpot dishes in a Wechat group he shared with others and me when working at the hotpot restaurant. Below these photos were often his teasing words, "A customer just now ordered a big dish of beef slices! Do you guys want to try some?" Others would reply with compliments or emojis of thumbs up. Constant exposure to hotpot dishes was apparently responsible for the pleasure of his consumer gaze, even though it was hard for Ah Chao to imagine himself consuming the dishes in reality. To be sure, migrants are now trained, and trains themselves, as consumers so as to be qualified producers. Entertainment has now turned into work and work cannot be finished without entertainments. The line between the non-everyday and the every-day has hence been largely blurred (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 40). In view of migrants' disposable income, fixed leisure time, and cultivated interest in bourgeois lifestyle, it is clear that consumption is now colonizing migrants' everyday lives, changing their daily routines, realities, as well as identities.

*Knowing the City through Media*

Technological diffusion across China has led to migrants' huge reliance on mobile phones (Qiu, 2009; Peng & Choi, 2013). Consistent to earlier observations, this multi-functional technology was one of the central subjects of my daily converstaion with informants. When I sat in clusters with Xiaofang, Xiaoli, Lao Zhang, and others at inter-

vals of sport on the platform, we would often exchange our phones and examined their different functions and apps. My smaller phone was usually a target of sniffs. Xiaofang suggested that I ought to have bought a bigger one, and that for them expenditure on a good phone should not be limited by budget. She took out her iPhone six plus and said,

> "Next time if you are to buy a new phone, buy one with a screen as large as mine. We all know Apple is expensive. But my friends and I all pay in monthly instalments to get our iPhones. This one is for work only. I also have a Samsung with a much larger screen. I use it to watch TV dramas at home."

Mobile phones also pave ways to consumption that crosses spaces. When in need of a badminton racket, Lao Zhang chose to browse Taobao (an online retailer in China) and discussed with friends on the platform to make a reasonable decision. On Wechat, Xiaofang as my closest friend in the shuttlecock group frequently share with me video clips about live concerts, talent shows, and information about cheap flight tickets.

Others whose survival is at risk are certainly unable to purchase iPhones, but they are as much dependent on the same technology. In the street, Xiaolan spent most of her time watching funny video clips and variety shows on her second-hand phone, waiting for customers to come. She told me that without this phone it would be impossible for her to stick to her food trolley all day long.


*The New Center of Wu Village*

Consumption can take place in part inside Wu village as well. The newly designed Oriental Mall, with its restaurants, fitness room, fashion boutiques, cinemas, cafes, provides migrants with every means possible by which they make their imaginations of the city come true (see Photo 3). At the same time, small restaurants, food stalls, hair salons, supermarkets, and cybercafes on each bank of the streets have transformed part of Wu village into a sensational overload. Walking along the streets, migrants find themselves stepping in a world drastically different, if not so distant, from their actual living space in the village.

Notwithstanding how much goods and services may cost, the world opens itself to

all migrants, including those whose budgets were limited. Window shopping and street strolling, similar to how migrant maids engage with supermarkets and shopping malls in Beijing ten years before (Sun, 2009, p. 120), are prevalent among young migrants in the village. When Xiaolan gave up selling food in the street and became a supermarket cashier, I sometimes went home with her after she finished work at about 11 pm. Every now and then, she would stop by one or two clothing stores on our way home. Sometimes she would walk in, put on clothes she liked, wander around, and then return them back. I was fully aware that she could not afford, and never wanted to buy, the clothes at the first place.



Photo 3: The Oriental Mall as a New Center of Wu Village. (Taken by Lei Feng on 18 May 2017)

I used to walk the main streets with Ah Wen as well. With relatively more income, he was more prepared to consume in a self-controlled manner. A cybercafe was thus for him an ideal, due to not only its acceptable prices but also a whole set of dreamlike environments it provided. In Wu village, a cybercafe costs only 4 to 7 *yuan* each hour but serves migrants with a multiplicity of choices ranging from standards of seats, types of games, to sets of light meals. A single game could open up even more possibilities, including different modes of combat, tasks, outfits, weapons, and rewards. With Ah Wen

I frequented a cybercafe called Youth in the village. There, I also witnessed a great population of young migrants who chose to spent most of their leisure time to a complex virtual world.

*Extravagant Consumption*

In Wu village, there can also be found cases of consumption in which migrants do pay in large quantity, but not on a daily basis. This type of consumption usually occurs in boisterous and festive locations, such as karaoke clubs, night clubs, gourmet plazas, where migrants gather in groups and play hard, exhausting their energy to the extreme. These spaces concentrate around the central square and the east border, and, apparently, have become the village's landmarks. Some were repeatedly mentioned—for example the Celebrity Karaoke Club—when I asked migrants about their leisure activities in the village, although many of them had never been there and others once or twice at most. When I first went to the club with Zhiqiang, I was greatly shocked by its furnishings— bright lighting, golden pillars, marble ground, and extraordinarily spacious rooms—as well as high prices. A medium-sized karaoke box of the club costs 300 *yuan*, not quite as expensive as other Karaoke clubs in the city but still extravagant for any of my informants regardless of their different income levels.

Even if these locations are expensive, there are still migrants who have developed a penchant for it. Zhiqiang was the only one of my informants who had several visits to the Celebrity. In addition, he consumed regularly at the Sichuan restaurant and another karaoke club called the Sky near the central square, and took them as the "base" of his gang. He told me that he could not remember how many times he had been there in the past few years. The two sites were not of the highest rank in the village—about 60 *yuan* per person for a heavy meal and 180 *yuan* for a four-hour stay in one karaoke box—but would nevertheless quickly exhaust his pocket. Of course, Zhiqiang had his own way of making money, so that he never seemed anxious about being broke at all. There, we often got heavily drunk and went home after midnight. Sometimes Zhiqiang, Ah Chao,

and Ah Xu would prefer to sleep in boxes for the whole night.

## Distant Spaces and Knowledge of the City

*Chengzhongcun* is usually taken as a key channel where migrants make possible their primary contact with the city and urban life. However, this idea overlooks other ways that urbanism can travel, and is at odds with many instances of my informants' experience of the city. Under the expanding capitalist order, as Lefebvre (2003, p. 10) acutely put, what can be called urban is no longer restricted to any material forms of the city, but has been increasingly tantalizing and swallowing the rest of the world in multiple ways. Among them, work and media are two of the most important resources that foster migrants' knowledge of the city and interest in bourgeois lifestyle. This has led to the fact that many migrants' urban identities are made before their arrival in the village. More importantly, consumption has become a vital, if not the most important, medium by which migrants' urban identities are constructed. For many, to be urban is primarily a matter of being consumers, knowing what and where to consume. To legitimize their knowledge and membership of the city, migrants have then paid growing attention to commodified spaces outside the village. As a result, the role of the village has been significantly downplayed, for it is now no longer a central locus of migrants' identity and everyday lives.

### The Lure of Distant Spaces

Distant spaces were brought to the village as migrants repeatedly told stories about their urban experience when they gathered in the square after work. Among them, Ah Bin was the chattiest one. The middle-aged man had lived in the village for more than fifteen years, much longer than the length of his work in the club. But it was his work

rather than the village that defined him. He was well aware that his workplace, a high-class karaoke club, could make him a center of attention and a man of knowledge. As long as others and I sat by his side, Ah Bin would brag about how luxurious that club was and how much money customers had spent there,

> "It is the biggest karaoke club in this area. It has four floors and can hold as many as four thousand people at one time! Do you know how much my boss spent to furnish the buffet hall in the club? Three million! Imagine what that hall looks like."

Although this same story had been told many times, his fellow listeners always responded with admiration and jealousy. They complimented,

> "Ah Bin is definitely the most knowledgeable guy among us. At that club he is surrounded by fancy food and stuffs that we don't even know. That is a place we've never stepped in."

On behalf of his customers, to teach his fellow migrants the "right" way of consumption was for Ah Bin also something to be proud of,

> "If you guys go there, I can help you to get a free karaoke box. I can also get you some girls to sing together with you, Russian, Black, all kinds of girls. But of course, you have to pay for them, they are very expensive. If you go there, you will know that you can enjoy everything you want as long as you have money."

By media, migrants could get into touch with more spaces of consumption without physically crossing the village's border, regardless of how far or irrelevant these spaces actually were. Judging by their intimate relationships with mobile phones, the intensity of their desire to consume was therefore hard to be overestimated.

Despite her stringent budget, Xiaolan, for example, would spend large sums of money on a distant space she learned from her mobile phone. For a while, Xiaolan became a fan of a variety show called Running Man, in which a group of movie and pop stars travel to different places and take on different challenges. In her spare time at that street corner, she familiarized herself with every episode of the show and, sometimes, would play me some excerpts while I visited her. Because of this show, Xiaolan got to know

the Guangzhou Chime-long Paradise, a Disneyland-like theme park where an episode of the show was filmed, and later became greatly obsessed with the park. She watched that episode again and again.

> "This is the part I enjoy the most. You see, they (movie stars) are scared to death on this roller coaster. I really want to try it myself."

Two weeks later Xiaolan told me that she went to the park with friends:

> "We played madly last Saturday in the park! We came home by midnight. That roller coaster is the most exciting thing I have ever tried. I will definitely go to the park again if I have some days off next month."

The ticket of the theme park costs 250 RMB per person. Xiaolan managed to get a seventy percent discount, but she nevertheless confessed that she had exhausted all her monthly savings. But she was happy, as she had her dream fulfilled.

Furthermore, touristic attractions were mentioned by two of my informants to define themselves. Given her privileges at work, Xiaofang, for example, told me that her ambition was to go to as many tourist spots as possible. In the square she liked to talk about places she had been to, Yunnan, Guangxi, Hainan, and planned to go to, Taiwan, north China, and even foreign countries. During my stay in Wu village, Xiaofang once travelled to Chiang Mai with friends for four days, posting loads of photos about rain forests and delicate food on her WeChat page. Not long after she returned to the village Xiaofang had launched her new plan,

> "I would have been to somewhere further if my salary were enough. I really want to see snow in Harbin. But flight tickets to go there are too too expensive. I am thinking of Taiwan instead for the remaining days of my annual leave."

In the village, I also encountered a migrant who have already developed a touristic lifestyle. Ah Qiang, thirty years old and jobless, told me that, in whichever destinations he went to, he would stay as long as possible, until all his savings were used up. When we first met on the platform, Ah Qiang could not stop talking about his previous trip in Yunnan,

> "Three months ago, I suddenly decided to go to Yunnan alone. There I travelled for two whole months and visited many beautiful places, Lijiang, Dali, Shangri-

La… If you go to Yunnan you will run into many poor travelers like me, mostly university students, sometimes people of my age or even older. If you want, you can team up with these people. You won't feel lonely as long as you like to talk."

When I asked about his plans for future, Ah Qiang said,

"I have heard that Tibet is way more beautiful than Yunnan. But now I have no money with me, that's the reason why I came to Guangzhou. I have to first find a job here."

*Negative comments on Wu Village*

When many migrants chose to locate their identities in faraway spaces, Wu village was left with a kind of blasé and disdainful attitude. Even though, during my fieldwork, I was always cautious about using the word "*chengzhongcun*" to avoid imposing a negative discourse upon my informants, their understandings of the village bore far more negativity than I ever expected. As can be seen in former cases, Wu village was at best a low-end market that gave Xiaolan a basic means of survival, or at worst an expedient for Ah Qiang to simply save money for his bigger plans in future. When I asked Ah Bin how he thought about the village shortly after he flaunted his workplace, he replied bitterly, showing an utterly opposite attitude,

"The village is the worst! Here all you can buy are rubbish, fake stuff. I have been here since 1999. But there is really no big difference made in such a long time. You see, even today, rubbish is all over the square. No one wants to clean it and no one really cares."

His repugnance for the village exemplifies not migrants' inability—mentioned already in many eariler studies on *chengzhongcun*—but their voluntary refusal to claim this living space as a product of their own.

*An Abstract System of Space*

While experience of distant commodified spaces does not amount to indicate that

*chengzhongcun* contributes little to migrant's urban identities, it does evince that these urban identities can be developed in ways independent of *chengzhongcun* itself. On the one hand, this implies that Wu village alone cannot possibly encompass migrants' total knowledge and experience of the city. To simply assume that Wu village separates migrants from the city is to exaggerate the power of its material boundaries. Rather, as in the cases of Xiaolan and Xiaofang, the village helps to deepen migrants' engagement with urban spaces they dream about. Meanwhile, to understand migrants only through the village itself also runs the risk of underrating the complexity of their identities and subjective positions. Ironically, at some points of my interaction with informants, I felt that I was the one who had to learn more about pop culture so as to find more common grounds to win their acceptance.

The proliferation of urbanism has indeed rendered unstable the word "migrant" as a social category. Without referring to their occupations, media usage, and other trans-local channels, it is insufficient to accurately tell who migrants really are and how they possibly make use of different urban spaces.

On the other hand, however, migrants' urban identities have already been hijacked by consumption, as they are already tied to spaces that are expropriated by capital, quantitatively designed and managed, and targeted on typical bourgeois consumers. For Ah Bin, urban experience were to be derived from his workplace where extravagance, hedonism, and unbounded sexuality were norms. For Xiaolan, it was a Disneyland that promised exceptional events and dreams. For Xiaofang and Ah Qiang, urban identities were to be found in spaces that charged for the gaze of bored urbanites. While Ah Bin might never truly consume at the club in the way he described, in his stories he understood the club from a consumer's perspective, turning himself among his audience into an authority on consumption. The theme park and tourist spots seemed to be outside the scope of the everyday, yet they were given equal importance to migrant's everyday lives and activated in their minds on a daily basis. In this case, they are no longer what Lefebvre calls "the non-everyday in the everyday" but rather the very core and goals of migrants' everyday life, no matter how distant or unrealistic they may seem to be.

Having eradicated the potential possibilities of urban knowledge and citizenship, these commodified spaces for migrants are nothing but a disaster. In their attempts to acquire citizenship, migrants have no alternatives but a single path, that is, the cult of consumption lying in faraway spaces.

Although, at first glance, migrants' urban identities are not directly associated with *chengzhongcun*, they do tell much about how migrants may understand their own settlements. Embedded in the global market, these identities allude to an underrated fact that a variety of spaces, whether global or local, can be placed together and co-exist in migrants' subjective worlds. As a result, migrants think of *chengzhongcun* no longer as solitary places—whose meanings and social relations are only specific to themselves—but rather as one of an abstract system of space, making it "placeless" or even bringing it down to the level of "non-place" (Clarke, Doel & Housiaux, 2003, p. 80), where stability, solidarity, and belonging are all emptied out (Augé, 1995).

Migrant's sense of belonging in *chengzhongcun* could have been developed if the spaces can be refilled with new meanings, identities, and social relations. However, this possibility is largely hindered by the rise of consumer society, which has harmfully replaced urban realities with commodified spaces to be the foundation of urban Knowledge and membership. In consumption, migrants estrange themselves from their settlements in a way as, in Marx's critique, factory workers give up their natural links with products they produce. As urban spaces are now judged solely by their exchange value but not use value (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 131), *chengzhongcun* has nothing much to offer other than its convenient locations and cheap housing.


**Everyday Entertainment and Imaginations of the Dark**


Migrants' consumption does not always depend on remote spaces. With numerous spaces of consumption, Wu village is no doubt a crucial place where migrant's desires

and needs can be brought into play. Nevertheless, whereas consumption elsewhere signifies a greater degree of citizenship, in this local context it is for migrants more often a practical means to procure a sense of safety. On one hand, goods, lights, and symbols of commodified spaces have occupied the village's east frontier and main streets, constituting its "bright side". On the other hand, the hyper-density of apartment buildings and the culture of fear and silence have turned the village's residential district into its "dark side", a forbidden forest of little visibility and significance.

Many migrants have to negotiate their identities with this internal spatial division on a daily basis. The dark side is not supposed to be known or showed, while the bright side provides a shelter, a place to evade potential danger and anomie. To a large extent, this double understanding of the village has replaced migrants' differences with a single way of life, rendering many local spaces and people distant to themselves.


*Knowing Wu Village by Consumption*

Ah Wen's stories serve as a good example of many young migrants' reaction to the internal spatial division. He moved into a single room right next to mine not long after I had just started my fieldwork. As a collage graduate fresh from campus life, Ah Wen was shy, innocent, and particularly cautious about people and places he did not know. In spite of a monthly salary of more than 6,000 *yuan*, his budget remained rather tight at the beginning of his career. He had to look for cheap rental housing near his workplace, although this was for him a big challenge. In our first exchange, Ah Wen could not resist telling me how scary his first trip in the village was,

> "Without my landlord I would never be here. When she escorted me inside, I thought I must have been cheated by her, and, on that way, I really wanted to escape. You had that feeling when you first came here, too, didn't you? The whole lane stank awfully! It is dirty and smelly. But anyways, the price is more acceptable than outside, so I finally decided to live here."

The division naturally emerged as Ah Wen expressed out his initial feelings about the village. A new room from the "inside" was less a pleasure than a compromise. Ah

Wen was adamant that he did not belong there. Instead of seeing himself as one of my informants, he tried to console me when he noticed that I was also alone,

"Anyways, we are both fighting our ways to a better life outside. We are boys and we are alone. We can live simpler and easier. This place is no big deal."

Ah Wen had no intension of long-term stay,

"As long as our contracts end, we can move to somewhere else."

When I asked why he chose Wu village rather than other villages nearby, Ah Wen's answer was quite simple,

"I had no clue at all. I have never been here before. I simply went north, starting from where my office was, to visit the stations along this subway line one after another, until I saw a big shopping mall beside the Wu village metro station. I thought this place might be good."

Like many, Ah Wen did not have any local networks and had to make a decision on his own. Aside from cheap housing and short distance to work, there seemed to be no other incentives for him to decide whether to enter or leave this village. On top of that, the only decisive factor is the visual power of the Oriental Mall, which somehow promised Ah Wen a good quality of life, and which he later on visited almost daily on his way home. Together, at his request, two of us went to different food stalls at times in the mall and watched a film once there. The front gate of the Mall later also became a rally point where we chose to meet up and made decisions on where to go next, and sometimes where we simply ran into each other coincidentally.

Ensuing the metro station and the mall, the third location Ah Wen got to know in Wu village was a cybercafe called the Youth. Ah Wen normally returned to the village from wok around 6 pm, had a quick meal in the street, and spent the next four to five hours playing computer games at the Youth before he went to bed. On weekends, time for games would last from noon till late night, when he finally felt hungry. Each day, Ah Wen would spend at least 20 *yuan* at the Youth. Albeit moderate, this amount was the largest portion of his daily expenditure in leisure time. The cybercafe was certainly much more comfortable than his hollow room, but it was his feelings of certainty and security that explained his addiction to the space. Ah Wen told me that he started to go

to cybercafes at middle school and that he kept this habit all the way to his college in Guangzhou. This familiar setting of the Youth ensured a sort of continuity of his sense of self even if much of his physical and social environment had changed. While living in Wu village put Ah Wen's urban identities greatly at risks, in this cybercafe he could quickly change back into a master of his own self. At the Youth, Ah Wen also wanted to make me feel at home. He was always happy to instruct me techniques and make decisions for me in computer games.

To be sure, Ah Wen's dependence on cybercafes was shared by many migrants of similar ages, mostly male and noticeably female. On work days, as I had mindfully observed, cybercafes in Wu village would be densely packed from evening till midnight. On weekends, an empty seat of these spaces could be extremely difficult to get. Some would rather spend the whole night at cybercafes than go back to their rooms or even bother to find one, because, quoting Ah Xu's words, nobody wants to waste money and time on a place he might leave shortly. The reason that drove Ah Xu to the village was even simpler. Soon after he arrived in Guangzhou, Ah Xu found that his mobile phone was running out of electricity. He then settled down in one of the nearest cybercafes, a space which he was sure would satisfy all his immediate needs. He stayed there for the next few days and supported himself by daily paid jobs until he met Zhiqiang.

*Ghosts and Rumors*

During his first week in the village, Ah Wen had to rely on a mapping app on his mobile phone to visualize his ways and directions. After we went to the Youth for a few times, I noticed that the routes he travelled in Wu village were strictly patterned under the guidance of the electronic map. Being more familiar with the village, I told him that between our rooms and the Youth there was actually a shortcut lying inside the forest of apartment buildings and asked him to explore it with me. Ah Wen agreed after a few minutes of hesitation, but then fell into panic when we started to deviate from the main street. More frightened he quickly became when his mobile phone lost signals and the

mapping app failed to work out an itinerary (of course, the cartographic representation is only useful within the range of well-planned spaces). Ah Wen would rather trust the map instead of me. He anxiously questioned me, and proposed that the trip had to be cancelled immediately. Eventually, we had to return to the main street half way. By the time I left Wu village, Ah Wen still walked the same route and showed no interest in exploring anything lying within the dark (see Photo 4).
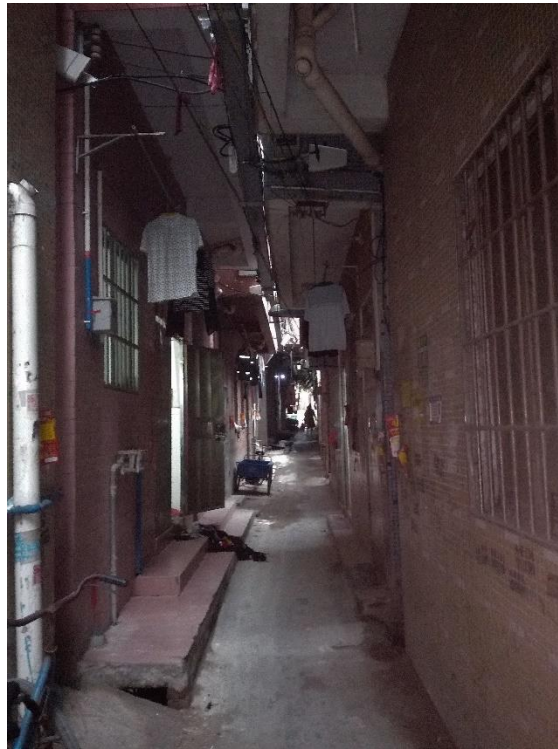


Photo 4: A Typical Dark Alley in Wu Village.
(Taken by Lei Feng on 17 May 2017)

Whereas Ah Wen found the dark side intimidating, others took it as a land of mystery and a target of their curious gaze. Whenever the shuttlecock group strolled along the main streets, Xiaofang, Xiaoli, Lao Zhang would talk about dark alleys by their sides. Rumors about the dark side were frequently brought up. One evening, pointing at the entrance of an alley, Xiaoli said,

> "They say there are many Xiaojie (young female sex workers) hidden in these lanes. If you go in there, some pretty girls with miniskirts will grab your arms and ask you what kind of girls you like. I once went in there but didn't find any."

Xiaofang replied,

"So brave of you to go in! I walk pass these lanes almost every day, but I have never dared to go in there. Maybe they are not here, they are somewhere else."

Xiaoli turned to me and said,

"You see, I'm always curious about this kind of places, even though I'm a girl. Every time when I walk pass these lanes in the village, I really want to check them out."

*Making the Dark Side in Minds*

Clearly, the inward spread of consumer society has split migrants' understandings of Wu village, whether they do consume or not. The spatial division challenges the dual-city framework, which tends to regard *chengzhongcun* as a base of migrants' identity, a self-evident whole that either prevents them from integrating into the city or somehow embodies a refuge ready to embrace their otherness. But the link between space and identity in *chengzhongcun* is not always simple, if migrants' deep affiliation with commodified spaces is taken into account. Ah Wen's stories well exemplify how migrants may redefine the geography of *chengzhongcun* by protecting their identities from the threat of social disorder, by distinguishing "the bright" and "the dark". In Wu village, the dark side is a world external to migrants' social life, somewhere they deem dirty, threatening, and sometimes mysterious. By contrast, the bright side is a colony of capitalism, which connects the city and at the same time falls inside its cartographical representation. The dark side can barely be read or analyzed, whereas the bright side is always transparent, standardized, and predictable.

As consumers, migrants in Wu village are no less haunted by their own version of disorder than urbanites by *chengzhongcun*. With its looming and permanent darkness, Wu village for migrants is never a transparent whole. Even for Lao Zhang and Lao Hu, who had lived in the village for three years, their territory is nothing but a few trajectories and locations.

Why do migrants prefer where they consume over where they live? To answer this

question, one needs to know how migrants find safety and familiarity in spaces of consumption. Of course, such kinds of experience are not intuitive, but rather cultivated in migrants' day-to-day engagement with standardized goods and services, in their irrefutable trust in global systems and crystalized ideals of urban life. In the cases of Ah Wen and Ah Xu, it was the mall, the cybercafes, the main streets, and the mapping app—not rural network—that brought them to the village and sustained their knowledge about it. Only in these spaces could they feed their urban identities and make themselves much more at home.

Being homogenous and lucid, commercial spaces are perhaps the easiest option to which young migrants may entrust their identity in the city, if they lack any familial or localistic support. Ritzer (1992, p. 74) in his discussion of the rationality of commercial spaces has also pointed out some other related qualities, for example predictability and calculability, which mean that consumers can be ensured by their choices before they actually pay. These qualities have inspired Langman (1992) to compare shopping malls with cathedrals: the former stands for modern cultural and identity centers and the latter for traditional ones. He claims that consumption today has simply replaced premodern rituals to inform visitors of the spaces about who they are and what power they submit themselves to.

This centralization of identities has inevitably reduced the possibility that different groups and cultures in Wu village can meet and understand each other. The lucid, homogenous outside is thereby celebrated at the expense of keeping away the variegated and unknown inside. This mechanism is well documented in Engels' (1971) famous critique of 19th-century capitalism, in which he describes how Manchester's shantytowns were blocked out by the commercial façades of the street, so that bourgeois consumers became oblivious of the other side of the city. So to speak, the problem of today's consumer identities, as Robins (1993) accurately points out, is being reluctant and afraid to come across peoples and spaces that have been long forgotten by the city. Ah Wen's attempt to run away from the village's hinterland is in this regard highly typical of this modern pathology.

However, this hinterland can still be mentioned as long as consumers are bored by the ordered outside, as exemplified by Xiaoli's intense curiosity about the village's dark alleys. This suggests that the dark side is not all empty, but rather can conjure up myths, dreams, and rumours that set the margins of consumers' knowledge and identities. It is, according to Vidler (1996), the unconscious side of urban consumer culture, constantly adding fresh, exotic materials to the market of space to keep our urban experience meaningful and real.

Migrants' resort to consumer society is in essence driven by their spatial imaginations, in which lies a different form of *chengzhongcun*, a conceived space that has rarely been touched in extant studies. By far, *chengzhongcun* is predominantly understood as physical. This one-sided, although not entirely invalid, understanding has led many, in particular functionalist studies, to consider the feasibility of integrating *chengzhongcun* with the city. It is widely held that *chegnzhongcun* can be cured as long as urban (consumerist) culture penetrates it deep enough and transforms migrants into proper consumers. In fact, in spite of the expansion of consumer society and migrants' reprogramed identity, images and ideas of *chengzhongcun* persist. Even if, in a recent case of "successful urban renewal", the land of Liede village in central Guangzhou has been totally taken over by shopping malls and residential estates, covered by brand new high-rises, the village remains tangible in multiple ways (Kan, 2016).

More curious is a fact that the dark side of *chengzhongcun* seems to have haunted a growing number of people, as its border, on the contrary, keeps shrinking and moving further away. The paradox between diffusing urban experience and lasting spatial division calls into serious question the dual-city framework. Physically, uneven economic and institutional arrangements do distinguish *chengzhongcun* from the rest of the city. Mentally, however, *chengzhongcun* has now become the other side of the city and both can no longer be fully understood without referring to each other. That is to say, much of the darkness of *chengzhongcun* is created not out of but rather from within the city, not before but rather after the colonization of consumer society. The fundamental problem of today's urbanism, as Robins (1993) incisively contends, lies in the fact that the

postmodern city is always spatially partial. Consumer identities simply celebrate a few urban spaces but alienate the rest.

## Carnivals of the Poor: The Visible and Invisible Identity

Additional to the two patterns of consumption is a more reckless one, in which large quantities of money are squandered in exchange for only short periods of enjoyment and comfort. This pattern of consumption is not uncommon in Wu village, for it allows migrants, especially the poor, to instantly transfer from their actual living conditions to a world of wealth, status, and success. More importantly, it illuminates a way out of this hidden reality, in which migrants' voices are endlessly silenced, desires suppressed, and occasionally perhaps, moral standards violated.

Being consumers in this scenario therefore concerns with not so much citizenship or safety, but instead a taste of visibility, a liminal capacity for migrants to make themselves seen and heard, to reinvent their identities as morally legitimate and socially accepted. For many migrants, especially marginal ones, to become visible entails a sharp identity break with their real lives. It can be said that carnivalesque consumption does not resolve but simply leave behind the hard, evil aspects of migrants' everyday lives, storing them up in the dark side, which, as a result, continues to terrify other migrants of the village.

### The Front and the Back of the Stage

It was indeed ironic that I experienced the most lavish style of consumption in Wu village with Zhiqiang and his followers, who were without any doubt the poorest three of all my informants. My friendship with Zhiqiang begun in the square, when his relationship with the shuttlecock group had not gone bad. But, as we got closer, Zhiqiang

preferred to locate our meetings at his "base"—the Sichuan restaurant and the Sky Karaoke Club. In his affluent days he would arrange consecutive dinners and parties with his followers or other friends at this base, and cheerfully asked me to join them. Every time when I came to these group events, I would buy Zhiqiang some beers and snacks to show my thankfulness and respect. But Zhiqiang also had his penniless days. These were the periods when he could not even top-up his own mobile phone bills and would sometimes disappear from the village for a week or two. In this case, I would lend him some money and treated him to suppers. This further tightened our bond.

The source of Zhiqiang's income had always been an enigma for his acquaintances and friends, including Lao Zhang who claimed that he had known Zhiqiang for almost three years. Zhiqiang had never elucidated what his job was even when I directly asked him about it. Somehow, at certain moments of our conversations he referred to his job title as an office manager of a small company outside the village. Despite some truthful elements (he probably knew an office manager in reality and then transcribed that identity into his own stories), the job is no doubt fictional, considering his extremely changeable income and work schedule. But it nevertheless tells much about a way of life he aspired but could not possibly achieve.

Some other truthful elements, if pieced together, reveal a rather harsh and painful reality. Ten years ago, Zhiqiang had a child with his girlfriend, whom he met by QQ at a cybercafe, and later brought to Guangzhou from countryside to live with him. Together, they worked at a factory near Wu village. But, because of the girl's betrayal, this relationship was soon shattered. Zhiqiang consigned the child back to his home village and, from then on, took on a highly unpredictable life. He worked in many places and had many affairs, which he did boast about, but was also painfully afflicted, according to Ah Chao, by his failure to send enough money back to his child. More fatal was that his old criminal records kept preventing him from getting a good job, so that he could only obtain scattered money out of daily-paid jobs or theft. As Ah Chao also revealed, Zhiqiang used to work on construction sites from time to time, making urgent money by hard labor, but he tried hard to keep these stories in secret.

Zhiqiang lived outside the village with his father, a janitor and a garbage collector of a neighboring estate community. But he usually did not want to go back home until all other companions were gone. This is because he, as I speculate, could not comfortably stay with someone whose social status was overtly inferior. Zhiqiang once complained to me at a dinner, half drunk,

> "We migrant workers (the only time this word was used in my fieldwork) cannot mess with people living there. You never know whether they are big company owners or government officials. Sometimes the manager of the estate rebukes my dad badly, but all we can do is to be humble."

Consumption was hence one of the few ways left by which Zhiqiang—a betrayed husband, an impoverished adult, an irresponsible father, a despicable pickpocket, and a "migrant worker"—could attend a better world he dreamed of, and escape from the one that denies his success and dignity. He clearly knew that this fictional world had to be performed so as to be lived. At the base, Zhiqiang had to not only squander huge sums of money but also tell fake stories about himself to others, among whom I was for him the most allegiant listener. Every time at the Sky, whereas other guests were busy singing and dancing, Zhiqiang would sit by my side, drunk but excited, talking to me about his imaginary past and future. At some points, when some of his best stories were to be shared, he would call off the music and ask others to join us.

In some stories he imagined himself winning huge social recognition:

> "I don't have to do anything at my company, but my boss still pays me each month. You know why? Because I saved him once before, when he was fighting with a gang of tough guys. I stopped the flighting with my own hands but my shoulder was badly wounded. He sent me to hospital and promised to pay me for the next three years."

In some stories he kept his morality untainted:

> "When I first came to Guangzhou, two young guys reached me and said they could offer me a job. So, I joined them. But when we were on a bus they forced me to steal a girl's phone. I refused many times and told them I was not their kind. They took me to their leader and wanted to punish me. But at that very moment I ran to a police station nearby and finally got safe."

In other stories he envisaged his bourgeois abundance and power:

"I will buy a car in two years' time, not for convenience but for the purpose of finding girlfriends. If I have a big car in the future, let's say a SUV, I can hook up any girls I want."

In any case, these stories to me was far from tenable. But since I could feel how much they meant for Zhiqiang, I never once tried to cast doubt on them to his face[9].


*Pleasure and Meanings of Life*

Ah Chao, by contrast, took part in the form of consumption simply for the sake of fun. Whereas he had short-term jobs more often than Zhiqiang did, his meager income could take him to nowhere. Having worked at different restaurants, he had been trained to be a faithful consumer. But on the part of himself there was never possibly a way for him to actualize that consumerist self. The immense gap between his power and belief clearly explains his desperate attitude towards consumption. Once at the Sichuan restaurant, when I asked Ah Chao why his salaries vanished so quickly, he responded in a steadfast way,

"Even if I have five hundred *yuan*, no, let's say two hundred, from now on, I will spend them all out by tomorrow night. It's easy. I just have to play from the head of the main street all the way to its end. This is my character. I will not be wholly comfortable until all money in my hands are gone."

This attitude also explains his dependence on Zhiqiang, because it was only with Zhiqiang's illegal income that he could transform him into a real consumer. As long as Zhiqiang had enough money, he would quit his job and attend Zhiqiang's parties and theft.

Ah Xu, the new guy, followed Zhiqiang for pretty much the same purpose, except that, unlike Ah Chao, he was not in dire need of self-actualization. Ah Xu told me that,

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[9] Of course, Zhiqiang did not always lie about himself. I learned more about his real feelings and background when we were idling at Xiaolan's corner or drinking in private at small restaurants or random places. Away from the delusion of extravagance and wealth, Zhiqiang was willing to mention his daughter and home village, expose his anxiety, and even admitted his failure. I believed Zhiqiang at those moments took me as a real friend instead of someone from whom the credence of his fictional identities can be bought.

in his hometown, he used to earn stable money at his father's hardware store and went to nightclubs after work quite often. When he arrived in the village, however, he could only find daily-paid jobs on construction sites during the day and slept at cybercafes at night. He might give up working at any time because, in his own words, those jobs are extremely boring and tedious. While Ah Chao had visual pleasure at his workplace, Ah Xu saw nothing else but livelihood in this daily routine, which was by no means comparable to the way of life Zhiqiang granted him later on, in terms of not only physical comfort but also meanings of life. Normally, Ah Xu was a taciturn young man. But, at the Sky, he and Ah Chao were always the most energetic ones. As the only artist of the gang, Ah Xu took charge of most singing and would also try to teach us how to dance in the way he did at nightclub.

"Ladies and gentlemen (in English), brothers and sisters, let's go high together!"

Ah Xu's impersonation of an American DJ displayed on a big karaoke screen left me a strong impression.


*The Necessity of The Dark*

This desperate, reckless manner of consumption is not madness, when it is understood with reference to the background of Zhiqiang, Ah Chao, and Ah Xu. Considering how much they suffered the distress of failure, fetters of poverty, and banality of work, it is not unsurprising that they took consumption as their salvation, clutching it as though it was their last hope of happiness.

Consumption never let migrants down. It put magic spells on their lives by giving them a performative world, a stage on which their desired but unattainable roles can be freely played. Singing and dancing in the Sky karaoke club transformed Ah Xu and Ah Chao in a dramatic way, as they used their bodies to translate lyrics and beats into new meanings about themselves. Storytelling was something Zhiqiang did best. He falsified and reorganized bits and pieces of others' experience to let his own self cogently unfold in stories.

Lavish consumption, as I noted earlier, bears great resemblance to carnival, an old western cultural tradition that often brings together lower-class people, squanders huge sums of money, and takes place in places outside everyday routines (Paterson, 2018, p. 115). In Hetherington's (1992) description, modern carnival is where the disadvantaged use their changing identities to celebrate lifestyles that are denied by the city, and where they are able to seize fleeting visibility and power through excessive leisure, consumption, and bodily demonstration. But a fundamental distinction between migrants' extravagance and carnival is that, whereas the latter, as discussed in Hetherington's study, is practiced in informal and liminal spaces, the former takes place only within the colony of consumer society. Whereas carnival works as a resistance to the uniformity of urban life, for poor migrants, visibility and power are to be found within such uniformity, and can only be achieved by conforming to the capitalist order.

The cost of visibility, nevertheless, involves not simply excessive expenditures but also a violent rupture between poor migrants' carnivalesque and everyday identities. In other words, the roles migrants play in this pattern of consumption were vastly different from those they play in reality. By means of singing, dancing, and storytelling, migrants are certainly able to make their desired roles come true. But the imaginations on which such desired roles are based are mostly irrelevant, and sometimes contradictory, to their actual lives. This immense gap between the real and the ideal often leads to the making of self-deceptive, sometimes absurd, identities. For instance, in his stories Zhiqiang described himself as a moral, respectable, and self-sufficient middle-class worker, while in reality he had to starve, steal, and do hard labor to survive. Ah Chao was determined to spend more than he could earn. Ah Xu's passion of life was only likely to be ignited by nightclubs, which was, however, somewhere he could not afford to visit. In order to perform their desired roles, migrants had to try to conceal or temporarily forget about their true self.

Here, I find Foucault's (1986) remarks on entries of spaces called "heterotopias" most relevant:

"There are [entries] that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally

hide curious exclusions; we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded."

For poor migrants in Wu village, consumption is without question the easiest entry of the bright side. But it is at the same time also a barrier that keeps away their poverty, weaknesses, and moral responsibilities. In recklessly consumption, they willingly leave their real lives to the dark.

This rupture of identity has intensified the internal spatial division of Wu village. To get access to the bright side, Zhiqiang and his followers had no alternatives but to sacrifice the social and moral order of the dark side. Theft in shadow is the prerequisite to harmony in daylight. Innocence has to be first destroyed in the underneath in order to be restored on a surveilled, ordered surface. The dark side does not promise anyone success, but it can nonetheless be abused, exploited, and betrayed without paying too much price. For the poor of the village, the boundary between the two worlds may not just be a barrier but also a curtain that helps to cover their moral deviance, a strategy they can use to savor consumer society and urban culture. This was perhaps the reason why Zhiqiang had to make sure that nobody, except Ah Chao and Ah Xu, should ever know his life in the dark side. Although Zhiqiang took me as his most loyal listener, I had never been offered a chance to meet him in any private locations. When our talks ended, he either insisted on sending me home, or would soon fell asleep in cybercafes or karaoke boxes before I left. The "back stage", as Goffman (1959, p. 70) wisely put, must be well covered so that the "front stage" can look purer and more believable.

To shun the hostile gaze on the poor and to naturalize their presence in the ordered world, Zhiqiang and his followers chose to internalize the fear of, as well as the resentment against, the darkness of *chengzhongcun*, and imposed them upon their own lives. They had thus (re)produced inside both the village and themselves what Cohen (2002) in his reflection on urban minorities' strategy against racism calls "invisible, symbolic spaces of self-containment", spaces where minorities choose to lie low, keep quiet, and sometimes even dehumanize themselves to get tickets to their unrealistic dreamworld. Whether Zhiqiang felt truly happy about his severed life was hard for me to know. But

it is undeniable that he had been trapped in this vicious spiral. His attempt to leave the dark has somehow made the otherness of him and the village ever more realistic.

This chapter has explored migrants' mental structures in Wu village by probing into different modes of consumption, identities gained via consumption, and the impacts of these identities on local spaces in migrants' everyday lives. It reminds us that consumer society should be seen as a distinct capitalist regime, in which migrants are likely to be controlled by abstract knowledge and to produce a reality based on such knowledge through their practice over themselves and others. Consumer society is thought to dispel *chengzhongcun*, but in so doing it reinforces the darkness and hence migrants' negative impressions of each other and their own settlements. One might then ask whether there is way out of the social and mental structures, whether *chengzhongcun* can be positively linked with migrants' everyday lives. This possibility will be explored in the following chapter.

# Chapter 4

# Migrants' Alternative Uses of Space in Wu Village

In view of the previous chapters, how are migrants alienated from Wu village? By what alternative uses of space can they reclaim their rights to the village? What kinds of identity do migrants develop as they use the village in their own ways? This chapter first sum up different forms of migrants' spatial alienation by revisiting the structural forces identified both outside and inside the social and cultural lives of *chengzhongcun*. It then explores possibilities of genuine subversion, that is, instances in which migrants can elude, alter, and transcend extant structures. In Wu village, these include migrants' spontaneous meetings in the street, tactical presence in the public, and earnest feelings in specific moments.

As trivial and private elements of migrants' everyday lives, these instances cannot come together to form a consistent political project that would either integrate the village into the city or resist the incessant spread of urbanism. But, still, they evince that *chengzhongcun* is always more than its perceivable or conceivable forms and, on this basis, bring into light a political project that does not posit abstract differences.

## Migrants' Spatial/Temporal Alienation in Wu Village

By far, judging by migrants' structured lives and the historical condition in which they are trapped, one can say that migrants are alienated from the village—they live in the village as if they do not. Specifically, their spatial alienation results from not only objective structures, such as stretching urban culture and centralized local institutional

arrangements, but also subjective ones, which in the above two chapters have been cl-
early manifested by migrants' negative attitudes towards local residents and spaces. In
what follows I will point out three forms of migrants' spatial alienation, namely social
isolation, symbolic marginalization, and the loss of time.

*Social Isolation*

First, in spite of their physical proximity, migrants in the village are socially distant
from each other. This in part has to do with growing surveillance enforced by the state
and developers, a necessary result of the village's economic transformation in the new
century. As introduced in chapter 1, Wu village has not been strongly intervened by the
municipal government until its engagement with translocal goods and services began.
Identified as part of urbanism, the village is expected no more to be a location of sheer
industrial productivity, but one of order and homogeneity, where urbanism is to be en-
sured and legitimized. Surveillance in this case has to be laid on migrants, in particular
the poor, to suppress social unrest and anomie.

For instance, restraining the availability of public spaces, as a surveilling strategy
commonly deployed in western cities (Davis, 1992; Mitchell, 2003), has been also ef-
fectively undertaken to regulate social lives in Wu village, so that migrants cannot ea-
sily convene, or even meet and interact. For those who intend to stay out late in public
spaces, ID cards are indispensable, as they could very possibly be interrogated by local
security guards at any time and location. Random detention, legitimized by the discri-
minatory *hukou* system (Alexander and Chan, 2004), keeps haunting poor migrants in
the street.

In recent years, the village's public spaces have also significantly shrunk, replaced
by apartment buildings parceled out into small single rooms. As confirmed by Lao Liu,
a fifty years old construction worker who had stayed in the village for ten years, the ce-
ntral square used to be much larger, but in the past few years its complete east half had
been gradually changed into a new built-up area.

Nevertheless, even if chances of interaction are given, many migrants would still isolate themselves by choice. Sennett (1992, p. 23) in his famous historical analysis of the public life argues that, ever since the emergence of capitalism, urban public spaces have begun to change from a hub that absorbs heterogenous groups and cultures into a retreat, where individuals try to attain total control over their own lives. In Wu village, while public spaces do see crowds of migrants at times, they are not used for different ideas, habits, and ways of life to be displayed or understood. In the street, Ah Wen kept himself aloof to feel safe. In the square, members of the shuttlecock group mindfully protect their privacy, although they gather together habitually to search for familiarity and belonging.

Restaurants and shopping malls in the village are seemingly busier, but, likewise, they are used more often to extend migrants' self-fulfillment to the public rather than to exchange differences. Ah Wen played many evenings at the Youth with other young migrants but did not make any friends. Zhiqiang hosted big dinner and karaoke parties largely because he wanted to perform the identities of his own and, simultaneously, to conceal his true stories from the inspective eyes of the public.

*Symbolic Marginalization*

Second, migrants' social and cultural diversity rarely influences how Wu village is imagined and described. Although most local spaces have been rented out to migrants, it is those which migrants can hardly access that define the village. Migrants' culturally marginal status is largely a result of the village's inner administrative structure, which, as I mentioned in chapter 1, relies on the *hukou* system to prioritizes villagers' financial and political interests. Holding non-local *hukou*, migrants are neither entitled to many local welfare (Zhang & Treiman, 2013) nor expected to be recognized as "local" (Chan 2010). For example, as a space of villagers' entertainments and a key spectacle of their common history, the upper half of the square was strictly guarded against migrants. In day time, migrants were forbidden to enter or even stay close to the village temple for

too long. During the morning, no migrants' entertainments were allowed to be held on the platform.

Another factor of migrants' symbolic marginality in the village has been the commercialization of local spaces. The Oriental Mall and the main streets are without question attractive to most migrants, but they only welcome those who are willing to pay. To my knowledge, except for Ah Wen, none of my key informants paid regular visit to the Mall. Xiaolan told me that she did hear about some expensive restaurants there but she had nonetheless never stepped into it.

Migrants rarely challenge dominant representations of Wu village, either. Even for those who had lived in the village for more than a decade, to identify oneself as a local resident was nearly impossible. Fifteen years of stay had not left Ah Bin anything but pejorative comments on his living condition. Informants often responded with puzzled faces when they were asked about the village's history. For quite a while, Ah Wen and Xiaofang thought that my study on Wu village had nothing to do with them, although I constantly and honestly reminded them of my purposes.

Migrants' symbolic passivity is also associated with their commitment to consumption and urbanism, which inevitably entails a denial of different cultures and different aspects of themselves. Thinking about or walking into commodified spaces was rather an act of leaving the village, as shown in Ah Wen's case, or of covering one's real life, as practiced by Zhiqiang and Ah Chao. Even when they had enough money to purchase their rights to commodified spaces, hardly would they bring their concrete differences and thereby complicate the standardized images of Wu village.


*The Deprivation of Time*

Finally, migrants are deprived of time. As Lefebvre (2004, p. 73) comments in his rhythm analysis, capitalism has severely impoverished everyday life in a way in which time is widely experienced and used by virtue of growth, evolution, and accumulation. Like space, time in the industrial age has been increasingly synchronized by relentless

technological innovation, transfigured into both a kind of capital for production and a marker of productivity (Thompson, 1967, p. 80). In an attempt to expand urban spaces that can be sold and controlled, developers and the municipal government have played a crucial role in eradicating the time of *chengzhongcun*. By devaluing the past and future of migrants' everyday lives, they have discursively turned *chengzhongcun* into an obstacle to the spread of urbanism and thereby something ought to be demolished and renewed.

Kochan (2015) is absolutely correct to state that *chengzhongcun* has been "trapped in a state of fixed temporality", insofar as its histories are sacrificed for villagers' higher rental incomes and its future for economic development and urbanization. In this case, when migrants arrive in Wu village, they are unable to feel time in the first place. They know that their lives cannot change the fate of the village, and that the village in return cannot offer them any hope. Comparatively, as certified owners of the village, villagers may preserve some of their history by building spectacles and sustaining their familial and localistic networks. But, even if migrants try to inscribe in the village their stories, their effort will be spent in vain as soon as housing prices rise up or buildings are torn down.

At the same time, the capitalist time line exerts great influence on migrants' use of time. As can be seen in chapter 2 and 3, migrants themselves may undermine the time value of Wu village via both social interaction and consumption. Socially, their sense of intimacy and shared identities do not last, so that it is greatly difficult for local time to be consolidated and unified. Culturally, migrants in their way to become consumers tend to draw the village further apart from the city. This sends the time of Wu village into exile, reducing local identities and cultures into a static or exotic whole. Migrants themselves are well aware that this disordered, excluded time cannot guide them anywhere closer to progress and success. To stay in the village is almost synonymous with failure, as Ah Chao once said to me in private,

> "I know a couple of friends of my elder brother. They have been working as janitors or security guards in this village for many years. They haven't even

tried to leave the village once! Whatever job I will find in the future, I will definitely not do it here. A real man should face challenge and make his living outside!"

While these different types of spatial alienation are deeply entrenched, they dialectically set the conditions of possibility for migrants' subversion. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to these possibilities, each of which involves a particular way of producing "anti-structural" spaces for Wu village as well as its respective form of identity for migrants.

## Street Corners: Making Liminal Spaces and Identity

Migrants' social isolation in Wu village does not necessarily means a total absence of interaction in public spaces. Their public lives survive in spaces that lie outside or in between social structures and urban designs. In my observation, these spaces are street corners. They are small, covert, but extremely helpful in forming casual dialogues, and thus replete with migrants' knowledge and everyday experience. By deepening mutual understandings, these spaces may further catalyze more equal, solicitous relationships. Street corners hence stand for a transitional phase of migrants' identity development, a liminal condition in which migrants' practice over the self breaks loose from the norms of patterned and designed spaces. The right to define who they are has then fallen into their own hands, even though it is not what they always desire.

### Improvised Dialogues in the Street

I did not recognize that migrants in Wu village had a close affinity with the street until I began to frequent Xiaolan's corner. Before then, despite that I did witness a few migrants squatting in small clusters on either side of the street, my entire attention was given to the square and some other commercial spaces. For me, at that time, the street

was nothing more than a site of flowing traffics and people, as well as stimulations of signs and goods. It channeled me to places I wanted to go, presented food I needed to buy, but hardly contained anything meaningful within itself. But when I first sat down beside Xiaolan and disentangled myself from my daily itineraries between those fixed fieldwork locations, I was surprised by how much mutual understandings this tiny and almost unappealing street corner could cultivate in short time spans. There, by hanging out with Xiaolan, Zhiqiang, and others anonymous visitors, I saw an engaged mode of interaction, a mode unseen in the other public spaces in the village.

The corner was particularly helpful for migrants to share their ideas, even if it was not deliberately arranged to be so. To allow customers to have food on the spot, Xiaolan brought to the corner a round dining table and a couple of plastic stools. The table was so cramped that if two or more customers happened to dine there at the same time they had to sit side by side or face to face with each other. Since in most cases customers at the table were total strangers, conversation was urgently needed to break the ice of such intense closeness. Sometimes, thanks to their good personal relationships with Xiaolan, the whole table could be easily driven into a discussion as long as she initiated a topic. Once when Xiaolan was telling Zhiqiang and me about her plan to visit the Chimelong Paradise next Monday morning, another old customer across the table could not wait to express his opinions. As a taxi driver, he recommended the quickest route to the theme park and told her to set off as early as possible to avoid traffic jams. Whereas Zhiqiang never met the driver before, they kept talking after Xiaolan went off to get some drink. The driver complained of his shrinking salary while Zhiqiang repeated his plan to work in Shandong and taught the man to think differently like him.

Sometimes, the corner was also visited by fresh faces with whom Xiaolan was not on familiar terms. Without her help, migrants at the table could still come up with their own solutions to trigger dialogues. One night, a middle-aged migrant bought a bowl of rice noodle and joined the table by my side. Xiaolan had no idea of who he was. Before I found out a way to kick off our conversation, the man already pointed the beer in my hand and asked, "What kind of beer are you drinking?" I showed him the can. The man

said, "This beer is too light. If my friends and I go for dinner, we would choose much stronger ones." I told him that I did not want to get drunk. He conceded,

"That's right! A man should behave with good character and drink with self-control. Last week, I invited some friends to my fellow countryman's restaurant. But one of them was so drunk that he got into a flight with the restaurant owner. Security guards came in and took him away. I was so embarrassed. A real man should never be like him."

He ended the story as he finished his food. Even though the meeting was abrupt, the man managed to ease it with his concerns and insights.

*Caring Relationships in the Street*

Migrants' active roles in the streets concern not only their dialogic desire but also their willingness to attend to others' troubles and needs. Xiaolan's corner felt quiet and somewhat boring during slack hours. Even though Zhiqiang wanted to stay and assist her business, there was in fact usually nothing at the corner for him to do. After three of us got tired of chatting and began to pass our time in silence, Zhiqiang had to look for other opportunities around to carry on the altruistic task he assigned to himself. An opportunity came to him one evening, when a fierce quarrel broke out right in front of his face. A young man on his way across the street was enraged by the blaring horn of a car he blocked and started to curse the driver. The driver jumped off his car and was about to fight back. Before a crowd of bystanders gathered in the street, Zhiqiang had already dashed towards the middle of the two men and pushed them apart. As the tension resolved, he gave a cigarette to the younger man and patted his shoulders like an old friend, with a confident smile on his face. I asked him whether he knew anyone of the two men after he sat back beside me. Zhiqiang said,

"I can't really remember. I've met so many people here in the past few years. I even made several friends simply by stopping their fights in the street. This is me. I just couldn't stand by."

To be sure, not all migrants were as dauntless as Zhiqiang. But others in the streets could still take up an attentive role in their own ways. Xiaofang, for example, expressed

from time to time her sympathy towards an old woman called Aunt Li. The woman was a ragged, lonely vendor, selling sweet soup at a street corner by which Xiaofang passed almost every evening on her way home. Xiaofang not only frequented the corner to buy soup but also introduced Aunt Li to several of the shuttlecock group. Her attachment to the space, however, was not due to the soup but instead her sense of responsibility and willingness to support the woman's business. Xiaofang told me,

> "I can't stop thinking about how poor she is. She stays in the street alone every day until midnight. I feel that I have to help her as far as I can."

One night, when Xiaofang took me to the corner, she also brought Aunt Li a pack of off-season dresses a clothing merchant in the village gave her. The woman was sincerely delighted to receive the gift. Xiaofang commented proudly, "These dresses will definitely make you ten years younger. Aunt Li, now you can also become a fashionnable woman."


*Liminal spaces and Passengers*

In Wu village, street corners' capacity to elicit effective social interaction rests on its distinction to public spaces. On the platform, in order to speak to others, newcomers usually had to go through a set of practices, for example, to kick shuttlecock, share information, and join group events. In karaoke parties, most likely, they had to play and drink hard, perform intimacy, and, in my own case, show belief in whatever stories the host might tell. At these corners, by contrast, migrants were expected to talk and participate as soon as they showed up. Whether new or old, every face was taken as equally conducive to endowing the corners with ideas and bringing them alive. While meanings and practices are crystallized in public spaces, those in the streets vaporized and transformed quickly as different migrants constantly dropped by and left.

These corners are in essence liminal spaces. Liminal, in the sense that, in Turner's (1995, p. 95) words, they are "neither here nor there", but rather "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" so that

their "ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols". Moving from one structured space to another, migrants are perhaps only able to attain a breath of spontaneity by stopping halfway in the street. It is at these corners, in this "nowhere", that they realize their full creativity to produce and use spaces for the making of their self. This being the case, one can say that, in *chengzhongcun*, the fallen public life lamented by Sennett has not totally died under the tenuous shelters of street corners.

Street corners are to be stopped by but not dwelled at, otherwise they lose their openness and flexibility. Migrants in these spaces therefore act like "passengers" (Turner, 1995, p. 94), whose identities suspend in a transitional phase and are hard to recognize. The kind of transitory and vague identities, on the one hand, implies that migrants may understand themselves and others only in terms of "here and now", of their immediate presence in the street. That is to say, each migrant in liminal spaces can be understood as a "total being" (p. 127), a person identified by virtue of infinite possibilities instead of fixed and abstract categories. This in part explains, I speculate, Zhiqiang's penchant for the street as well as his passion in street affairs. There, he was not only treated with little bias and skepticism but also capable to win social recognition and respect by putting himself in the front line of conflict. This maybe also explains why Xiaofang could think of Aunt Li as more than a poor vendor, as one in need of safety and fashion in the same way as she did.

On the other hand, however, to be a passenger in any way is to proceed a journey and finally return to structured spaces. Migrants are only "total" insofar as no one asks about who they, or what their lives, truly are. Despite those friends he claimed to have made in the streets, Zhiqiang had found no company other than his two faithless followers. Xiaofang's sympathy for Aunt Li was heart-warming, but her feeling was nevertheless confined to that specific location. For me, even though it was easier to meet and talk to migrants at Xiaolan's place, I had to spent more time in the square, cybercafes, and karaoke clubs to stay with familiar faces and to observe patterns of their everyday lives.

## Spatial Tactics and Migrants' Presence in the Public

Migrants start to procure their symbolic access to Wu village when they enter and appropriate certain local spaces from which they are mostly excluded. While these are not friendly spaces, migrants therein manage to evade surveillance, seize minute chances, and overcome preexisting orders to meet their alternative ends. By that, they have not only made visible their existence, but also brought heterogenous meanings to these spaces, and thereupon destabilized their otherness based on which the village is usually defined. Being differently used and understood, Wu village presents itself as an open-ended concept, constantly soaking up migrants' new stories and life experience.

*Transforming Commodified Spaces*

The central food court well exemplified how migrants made different use of commercial spaces in Wu village. Built one year ago, the arcade-like space was comparatively clean, spacious, and equipped with plenty of seats and a large television at one of its ends. With varied, affordable choices of food, it targeted on young migrants such as Xiaofang and Ah Wen, who had sufficient income to outsource their daily meals to the consumer society. More often, however, the space was dominated by migrants who did not actually consume. These uninvited guests consisted of jobless youths, off-duty taxi drivers, seasonal construction workers, and young housewives with babies in their arms. Given their limited budgets, they rarely used the space as a food court. Instead, as one of the few spaces that did not charge for their environments and amenities in the village, the food court was in fact their promenade, where they could rest, sleep, gather with friends, and take their children together to socialize. Sometimes, an exciting Hong Kong movie played on the television would attract even more migrants to the food court, turning almost half of the space into a cinema.

Xiaolan took this space as a treasure as well. After she gave up her street business and became a cashier in a nearby supermarket, I came across Xiaolan several times at the food court. Having stood for hours at work, Xiaolan said she desperately needed a seat during breaks, and that the food court was the only choice where clean seats were offered for free. If Xiaolan finished her work early, she would also go to the food court to play mobile phone games or watch reality shows on the television to enjoy a breath of fresh air before she went home. She said,

> "If I go back now, my parents won't let me go out until tomorrow morning. I'd rather sit here doing nothing than going back home."

One evening, while resting with me at the food court, Xiaolan offered to buy me some snacks. I thought she would turn to one of the food stalls by our sides. But she left for the street outside and soon returned with a pack of cakes, which were indeed much cheaper.

During his poor times, Zhiqiang also had his own ways to use commercial spaces without consumption. One night, he reached me with a bottle of spirits he got from his father, to thank me for the urgent money I lent to him. We met at the central food court but Zhiqiang refused to drink there, "We can't stay here with nothing but spirits on our table. My brothers may walk in any time. I will definitely lose face even if you won't!" He pondered for a while and took me to a cybercafe next to the Sichuan restaurant. On our way he spent his remaining ten *yuan* on a handful of snacks and two bottles of water in a store, and procured a handful of paper cups from a food stall owner he claimed to know. At the cybercafe's counter, Zhiqiang told the manager that, since he forgot to bring his identity card, we would like to use only one computer. The manager registered my card and sanctioned his request. He picked a seat in the far back of the cybercafe, a corner which the manager could barely notice. When a cleaner of the cybercafe walked by, Zhiqiang gave her a bottle of water and asked her to keep our conduct unknown. Of course, the cybercafe did not forbid its customers from having food and drinks in their seats. But using the space without paying for anything was still somewhat deviant and risky. Zhiqiang kept his voice low, but felt matter-of-fact about our trickery,

"This is nothing. When I ran out of money few years ago, I even took showers in a cybercafe's toilet. At that time, cybercafes were not regulated as strictly as they are today. I often went there to sleep."

After we finished a whole bottle of spirits around one o'clock and both got dizzy, Zhiqiang slurred, "I'm going to sleep here overnight. I'm most at ease when my dad is not present." He fell asleep before I left.


*The Central Square at Night*

Solemn as it appeared in the day, the square turned lively along with sunset. This was the time when migrants quickly take hold of the platform by a variety of activities and sensations. A few clusters of poker players first arrived at about six, soon after the village temple was closed and no more monitored. In rainy days, before the sky darkened, they would gather on the porch of the temple, the only roofed corner of the square, to carry on with their games as usual (see Photo 5). This protected spectacle, a key symbol of villagers' local identity, was in these moments converted into a playground.

At around eight, the shuttlecock group, badminton players, and square dancers all flooded in, occupying every remaining corner of the platform. This usurped space was then split into a sport venue and a performing stage. Badminton players delivered their skills unreservedly. Dancers tantalized male spectators with their swaying bodies. So loud and funky was the music of square dancing that it spilled out into the main street, attracting even more migrants to the square. Children chased each other in front of the temple, laughing and screaming, jumping on and off its porch.

The square returned to peace after eleven. Still, if the weather was good enough, there might be some who preferred to stay on the platform a bit longer. Lao Liu often chatted with two of his work-mates beside the temple until the lamps of the square all went off. With several bottles of beer and a bag of peanuts, they took the platform as their bar.

Photo 5: Poker Games on the Porch of the Village Temple. (Taken by Lei Feng on 11 August 2017)

The midnight platform was also where migrants could reveal their hidden thought and feelings. During the night when Ah Chao stay with me on the empty platform and complained about Zhiqiang, the boy at the same time grievously confessed that he stole mobile phones for money with Zhiqiang. I asked whether he had ever thought of giving up stealing. Ah Chao paused for a few seconds and replied,

> "I've never said anything specific about my ambitions to others. Nobody wants to understand what I'm thinking. But let's say tonight is for a heart-to-heart talk. To tell the truth, I do want to find a new job. Next year, I must start a different life. I'm going to be a fast-food delivery man and depend on my own abilities to make money."

At that moment, Ah Chao demonstrated more confidence than he ever did in front of Zhiqiang.

Ah Hao disclosed himself to me on another night, when the platform was left completely to us. He told me that he received a phone call from his ex-girlfriend lately, and that he could not stopping recalling the time when they were together all those days. He sighed,

"I didn't say much to her in the phone, because we're now both married. But I still have to say that she has been a very caring woman, though she was not so beautiful. If I could choose, I would choose her instead of my wife."

Ah Hao overwhelmed me with his love stories in the rest of our talk.

Despite villagers' protection during the day, migrants' nocturnal occupancy of the platform had almost become a public acquiescence in Wu village. Although local security guards still patrolled the square vigilantly at night, they barely interrogated people during the liveliest hours. When I asked my landlord Uncle Wang—a 65 years old villager living by himself—whether he would go to the central square to mingle with his neighbors and friends, the man shook his head, telling me that the square had already run out of control:

> "It has been a long time since I last went there. I don't like the square now because it is too messy and chaotic, especially at night. It is difficult to regulate a place like this, you know, a place with a dense crowd of migrants and complicated backgrounds."

*Spatial Tactics and Poachers*

Migrants' clever uses of space in Wu village can be called "tactics", which, for de Certeau (1984, p. xix), refer to activities that do not have any fixed locations and have to take advantage of formal spaces to realize their ends. Due to their lack of economic power and land rights, migrants take part in neither the village's consumer society nor its rural history; they monopolize the village by population but in its dominant representations do not seem evidently existent. However, with tricks, schemes, and transgresssive acts that exploit but never conform to given rules or norms, migrants infiltrate into the village's authenticity. Their "disturbing" presence is for sure unwelcomed and always stringently suppressed, but at the same time impossible to be fully comprehended and controlled. Free riders become the majority at the central food court during the day. The solemnity of the village temple surrenders itself to migrants' games and joy at night.

Apart from these collective conquests, migrants also have more personal modes of tactics to apply. Zhiqiang sneaked into the back of a cybercafe for an informal feast to evade the gaze of more successful consumers. Ah Chao and Ah Hao took advantage of the quiet midnight platform to disclose their inner worlds. Although it is doubtless that these tactics, whether collective or personal, cannot possibly revolutionize the village's official images, they represent a different level of migrants' spatial experience, one on which meanings in private uses of space are always open for change and variation. For example, the food court is not only a promenade for most migrants but also a hideaway from parental control for Xiaolan herself. The platform is at one time a venue for sports and plays and, at another, an intimate chatroom in which Ah Chao and Ah Hao would store up their most private stories.

These artful, almost arbitrary spatial practices identify migrants as "poachers" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi), who can always find a way out to "insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text". When Wu village, as a text, is under the strict control of capital and institutional legacies, migrants are still able to improvise ways to intrude into it, disrupt its meanings with their unruly images, and, if threatened by authorities, hide themselves further into its margins. Whereas those in power want this text to stay pure, it cannot avoid being appropriated by migrants to meet their various demands, to interpret it with their own knowledge and experience.

It is as poachers that migrants pose direct challenge to the structural processes through which this text is produced, notwithstanding that the purposes of so doing were oftentimes inconsistent and difficult to yield solid or lasting results. Whether or not migrants can successively inscribe their presence onto the village's authenticity is hard to know, but with tactics they have, to some extent, extricated the text from the desires of developers and villagers and let it have a life of its own. Through tactics the text keeps changing, enriching itself with migrants' ambitions and memories, comfort and sensations, laughter and sadness.

**Nostalgic and Romantic Moments: Migrants' Sense of Time in Wu Village**

The time of Wu village has not been entirely wiped out if it is observed in specific moments of migrants' everyday lives. These moments are instances in which migrants' melancholy, passion, hope, and romance suture the village and themselves. As they put these feelings into words or practice, they inadvertently create the past and future of the village, illuminating spaces different from and better than those in which they actually live. These possibilities no doubt destabilize the capitalist time line and add differences to the village's spatiality.

*The Past in Nostalgia*

My fieldwork saw few cases in which migrants mentioned the past of Wu village based on their own experience. The only exception occurred in one of my exchanges with Zhiqiang, when we two were drinking at the central food court and staring at the main streets outside the front gate. As he was telling me about the friends he made in the street, a sense of melancholy arose in his words. With many memories coming to his mind, Zhiqiang complained that the street was not as enjoyable as before:

> "I feel the village had more people than it does nowadays. Several years ago, this street was filled with people. Back then you could find so much fun in that street. But now, you see, it is so quiet."

> I asked him why. Zhiqiang answered,

> "Supervision from the top is getting tougher. The good thing is that the village is safer than before. In old days I did not dare to take my wallet out, because it would be easily stolen."

Stronger surveillance on the village had certainly brought safety, but it had meanwhile damaged the social life of the street. Zhiqiang's nostalgia soon came back, as he started to recall his innocent days:

"I prefer the life I had before in the village. Like many other boys back then, I didn't know how to spend money. I simply hung out with a bunch of friends outside all day long. We spent little money but we were happy. When we ran out of money we could earn enough back by working in factory."

Zhiqiang's longing for good old days, I believed, resulted from not only his previous not yet tarnished moral integrity but also a lost society in which he did not have to steal in order to be socially accepted. From his words, I was able to imagine, for the first time in my fieldwork, a long-ago crowed street of Wu village, a place where differences of migrants could co-exist and meaningful relationships could be cultivated.

*The Future in Romance*

Wu village also offers migrants a taste of future, although in a covert and evasive manner. It was very surprising that, as an excessively cautious newcomer, Ah Wen was in fact the first one to remind me that migrants might still entrust their hope in the village, regardless of how threatening its people and spaces were. One night, as two of us walked out of the Youth with empty stomachs, Ah Wen told me that he had lost plenty of weight since he moved here. I advised him to learn to cook his own meals. Ah Wen replied, "I think I will start cooking next year after I find a girlfriend. I will cook together with her." I tried to confirm if he meant a girlfriend in this village. He smiled and said,

"I don't know yet. It is possible. Actually, I've met the type of girl I like here. But I've never got a chance to talk to her."

Ah Wen undeniably anticipated romance, but he did not seem to be fully prepared for it.

Ah Wen's romance was kindled three weeks later, when we two were standing in front of a fried-chicken food stall waiting for our food to be cooked. Ah Wen suddenly nudged me and whispered, "My eyes are myopic and I can't see things clear. Can you walk up closer to that waitress in the food stall, the girl in blue, and tell me about her face? Is she good looking or not?" I checked her face and told him the girl was pretty.

Ah Wen could not help extoling her, "I have been watching her for a while. She never stops working. How diligent she is. This is the type of girl I like." I encouraged him to talk to the girl. He lingered there until we almost finished our food but was not brave enough to walk towards her, anyhow. On our way home, Ah Wen's regret was mixed with excitement,

"I could have asked for her Wechat number, if I was not so shy! We should go to that place again."

To my knowledge, he revisited her a few times later before the girl resigned from the food stall and no longer appeared. But Ah Wen was not depressed by his failure to win her favor or even speak to her, partly because he constantly wavered between partnership and solitude.

Romance is not solely restricted to the young. For Lao Hu, an old bachelor living by himself, it was also something in the village to be found and dreamed about. Every evening, Lao Hu would show up on the platform wearing a clean and tidy white shirt, which strongly distinguished him from others, who were either in sportswear or casual styles. During one group gathering, I asked Lao Hu why he always dressed himself in such a formal way. Lao Hu blushed and said nothing. Unlike Ah Wen, he preferred to keep things close to his chest. But Lao Zhang quickly jumped in and questioned him,

"You do have a plan, don't you? Otherwise you won't look so different from us. Let's be honest. You've already met several women since you came to the square. Tell me, which one you like the most?"

Placed under the spotlight of the group, Lao Hu finally had to confess. Lao Zhang advised him to pay attention to a woman who often brought her daughter to the square. But Lao Hu believed that she was not single:

"I'm sure she's not divorced. I've listened to the way she talks. Last week she told her daughter to stay with his dad at home. This means she has a husband. I know about her family from these details."

Lao Zhang laughed and said, "Oh! I didn't realize you had already watched them so carefully. You are such a scheming man!" Lao Hu replied with a bitter smile,

"Now that you all know it, the whole square will know it, too. They will take me differently later. I still want to play with others like a normal person in the square."

Lao Hu leaked no more his secrets with the group before I left the village. His disclosure implies that there can be far more dreams and anticipations hidden behind spoken words and established social relations, but that they are usually fettered rather than unleashed to avoid disturbing given identity and needs. [10]

*Moments and Experimenters*

Bereft of time by capitalism and migrants' structured lives, the village nonetheless harbors a form of time that can be discovered in moments and, in this way, retains some of migrants' optimism for itself. The moment, by Lefebvre's (2002, p. 348) definition, refers to "the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility". It emerges as one from the haziness of everyday life "perceives a possibility, chooses it from among other possibilities, takes it in charge and becomes committed to it unreservedly" (p. 351). The moment is no doubt short-lived, compared to the unending projects of development and capital accumulation above everyday trivialities. But it is also rich and intense, as it put faith in everyday life, sees it as a way to make differences, and tries to live them to the full.

The moment opens up an alternative perspective from which migrants' experience and use of *chengzhongcun* can be judged. Whereas in Wu village the capitalist time line is hard to be restored, migrants are still able to develop of a sense of time in moments, in heartfelt but often clandestine, unintended ways. For Zhiqiang, the past of the village was to be found within his youth and the long-lost lively social world. For Ah Wen and Lao Hu, the village's future was constituted by their aspirations for romantic compani-

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[10] Here, it is also interesting to mention Ah Xu, who fell in love with a waitress of the Sichuan restaurant. Ah Xu said very little about his interaction with the girl, but he did confirm with me that it was this relationship that kept him staying in the village. This makes me further speculate if his brotherhood with Zhiqiang was for him nothing more than a tool to get closer to the girl. But, at least, what is certain is that, for Ah Xu and other single migrants, the impact of romance on their ideas of Wu village cannot be underestimated and that these ideas are usually well hidden, even to their most intimate friends and families.

onship. These cases allow us to entertain the possibility that, notwithstanding migrants' profound spatial alienation, *chengzhongcun* is always intimately relevant to the everyday experience of its residents, and that, as their memories, passions, and dreams accumulate, it becomes a place brimming with time. They also give us a hope that migrants in moments can turn *chengzhongcun* into their property, to the point that they consider it no longer as a desert of meanings or social bonds, but as a true locus of possibilities, a repository of chances by which they can create and tell their own stories.

The moment is in its nature "experimental" (Merrifield, 2006, p. 60). It is original because migrants are willing to realize their full potential, bringing into force their deepest and most genuine feelings. It is also adventurous, as migrants, faced with an unknown and risky social reality, are dedicated to expose their vulnerabilities and search for meanings that are very likely to be ignored or devalued. In moments, migrants turn *chengzhongcun* into a laboratory, where they attempt to seize every chance possible to achieve different qualities of life. While experiments are not always fruitful or satisfactory, they learn from their own creations and hence come to know more about *chengzhongcun* and themselves.

But the moment itself cannot secure the possible, as its results for migrants are always partial. Zhiqiang mourned for his good old days at one time but admitted the benefits of growing surveillance at another; Ah Wen wanted to approach his beloved girl but continued to withhold his solitary life; Lao Hu aspired to find love in the square yet suppressed this aspiration to keep himself normal.

In their pursuit of past and future, migrants quickly realize that they cannot afford to lose safety, solitary life, and belonging, and that they are by no means to be too different from the rest. As Lefebvre (2002, p. 348) cautiously writes, "the moment wants to be freely total; it exhausts itself in the act of being lived." To be an experimenter is at the end to negate the possible one has discovered and cherished, and to pull oneself back into rationality, into the time line of capitalism. The power of experimenters thus lies not in realizing their differences but only in their constant attempts to increase the diversity of their everyday lives.

In sum, migrants' transgressive practices remind us that *chengzhongcun* is always open-ended. In spite of the social and mental structures, migrants are after all creative beings and their experience in *chengzhongcun*—memories, aspirations, trajectories of development—are by no means consistent, albeit as much opaque as well. While, at a cursory glance, these spatial practices are far from relevant to issues of urban division, they contribute to the time— the very content—of *chengzhongcun*.

# Chapter 5

# Conclusion

This study re-presents *chengzhongcun* by looking closely into its inner social and cultural lives. It disputes that *chengzhongcun* cannot be differentiated from the city if how it is produced by migrants, its residents, is sufficiently considered. Equipped with the notions of identity and space, Chapter 1 reflects on the dual-city framework in prior literature, a way of thinking that, too often, takes urban division for granted and simplifies migrants' urban experience. To capture this "inward production", this chapter then draws on Lefebvrian everyday life to understand migrants' identity and relationships to their living spaces, to find out the possible ways in which they either harden or subvert the production of *chengzhongcun*'s otherness.

Migrants' everyday lives in Wu village are approached via three dialectical moments: social interaction, consumption, and alternative uses of space. Chapter 2 examines strangers, community members, and intimate companions—roles that emerge from migrants' face-to-face interaction—and their spatial implications for the village. Chapter 3 distills key ideas—citizenship, safety, and visibility—and their inexorable links with the village's dark side from migrants' consuming self. Chapter 4 peers into instances in which migrants invent, alter, enrich local spaces and their identities and, on that basis, conceptualizes the positive potentials of migrants' own subjectivity. All together, with thorough, multifaceted understandings of *chengzhongcun*, the three chapters bring into light not only the subjective causes of urban division in today's South-China cities but also an alternative political project fueled by migrants' everyday existence.

In this concluding chapter, I will first review major findings in Chapter 2 and 3. Revolving around identity and space, these findings will point to the middle ground between *chengzhongcun* and the city, in other words, socially fragmentized and cultu-

rally colonized lives of both migrants and urbanites, lives in which *chengzhongcun* is ceaselessly produced to be the other of the city. Second, I will demonstrate the complicity between migrants' social and mental structures and, with regard to findings in Chapter 4, underscore the political potential of their lived experience. I will argue that, since these structures are mutually constitutive, effective subversion lies in neither the city nor *chengzhongcun*, but rather in migrants' effort to reconnect themselves to local societies and spaces. Third, I will compare *chengzhongcun* with the U.S. ghetto to clarify how my study may contribute to our current discussions on urban division. Empirically, the two's distinctions imply that urban division may well be a matter of sameness, not difference; conceptually, their similarities confirm the danger of the dual-city framework. Finally, I will link urban division to our everyday experience, a problematic domain that awaits our collective and on-going self-critiques.

## The Middle Ground between *Chengzhongcun* and the City

### *Questioning Identity: Who are Migrants?*

As presented in Chapter 2 and 3, migrants' ways of life do have much in common with that of their urban counterparts. A growing number of migrants in Wu village, like Ah Wen and Xiaofang, found jobs in office environments and, as workers, bore no definitive contrast to the urban middle class. More of them, such as Lao Hu, Xiaoli, and Ah Hao, were directly employed as the labour of consumer society and well trained to be professionals in consumption. Even marginal ones like Zhiqiang, Ah Xu, Ah Chao, and Xiaolan were able to grasp limited tastes of urbanism via media and consumption, and transplant them into their identities.

Migrants' social lives are far more fluid and ad hoc. In Wu village, it is easier to lose than to establish friendship, community, and intimacy. For atomized migrants like Ah Wen, the corollary of extreme physical proximity was a culture of extreme apathy.

Belonging among Xiaofang, Lao Zhang, and Xiaoli was only to be found in transitory spaces—for example, dinner tables and corners of the central square—and often constrained so that each's privacy and sense of safety remained unharmed. Excluded from formal economy and institutions, poor migrants like Zhiqiang and Xiaolan had to bring into play brotherhood, homeland, and love to obtain means of survival and meanings of life. In their relentless pursuit of self-interest, however, they often quickly exhausted the warmth of their intimacy and ended up indifferent and hateful to each other.

Culturally, commodity fetishism and hostility towards differences prevail among migrants in Wu village. On one hand, migrants have to rely on consumption to develop themselves. Xiaofang and Xiaolan worshiped distant commodified spaces in order to secure their "tickets" to the city. Dealing with his sense of displacement, Ah Wen took the shopping mall, cybercafes, and the shiny main streets as a safe and familiar sanctuary. Zhiqiang and his followers deemed karaoke and dinner a crucial way by which they could rescue their voices, desires, hope, and morality from poverty and crimes. On the other hand, to become legitimate consumers, migrants have to protect themselves from the looming disruption of *chengzhongcun*. Among migrants, very few comments on Wu village were positive. Many young migrants—such as Ah Wen, Xiaofang, and Xiaoli—found the village's hinterland—a dim, stifling residential district— extraordinarily frightening and enigmatic. Pickpockets like Zhiqiang and Ah Chao chose to seal their dirty secrets there, making this dark side even more threatening to other residents of the village.

*Questioning Space: What is Wu Village?*

Wu village cannot be seen as an anti-urban reality. The fragility of migrants' social relations implies that the village neither embodies a rural society nor approximates to any kinds of home or community, but instead consists of heterogenous groups and cultures that rarely engage with each other. Ah Wen would only make one or two friends in the village to eschew extra responsibility and trouble. Surveilling power passed th-

rough him, constituting his vigilant gaze upon potential anomie and danger, corroding his trust in strangers nearby. Community, despite its liveliness among the shuttlecock group, only compensated for migrants' solitude and had no orientation of shaping the village into a whole. As for Zhiqiang, Ah Chao, and Yinging, intimacy was cordial on the surface but self-centered, exploitative at the core. When brotherhood and romance became games of survival, the village presented itself as less a home than a jungle. It is, in a word, fragmentation, instead of solidarity, that socially characterizes the village, distinguishing it from its surrounding urban spaces. Clearly, the village is where many migrants break loose from social webs that once shackled them; but it is no doubt also where they willingly sacrifice social relations for continual practices over the self.

Wu village does not want to be anti-urban, either. Migrants' faith in abstract goods and services has not made the village safer but, instead, has reified its disorder as most urbanites do to *chengzhongcun*. Having procured sufficient knowledge from work and media, Xiaofang, Ah Bin, and Xiaolan tended to understand Wu village simply through a capitalist market of space. In their minds, the village is never of urbanism and should not be charged with any good futures. Meanwhile, commodified spaces in Wu village work only to disembed migrants from the local. Drowned in cybercafes and the main street, migrants like Ah Wen, Xiaofang, and Xiaoli were hardly, if not never, in touch with other groups and spaces in the village. An image of *chengzhongcun* persisted in the dark forest of buildings, constantly conjuring ghosts and rumors. The darkness was also ravaged by Zhiqiang, Ah Chao, and Ah Xu, migrants who had not given up adapting themselves to consumer society. As they stole in one world and daydreamed in the other, they fortified the spatial boundary between the two. For these reasons, it can be said that Wu village harbors little resistance against the colonization of capital. By embracing consumer society and urban culture, it simply (re)produces its difference as the city always does.

**Thinking beyond the Dual-city Framework**

*The Complicit Structures*

When findings in Chapter 2 and 3 are reviewed with reference to each other, the connection between migrants' social and mental structures also becomes very evident. On one hand, social fragmentation in Wu village has paved the way for the coming of abstract ideas. Take Ah Wen as an example. Because of his isolation, Ah Wen had to manage his everyday life in the village largely by himself. With limited social support, he could still find joy and get to know local geography by means of a cybercafe and an electronic map. Nevertheless, in his intensive contact with such well-conceived spaces, he had no choice but to internalize the boundaries between safety and danger, comfort and misery, that is, a set of reductive knowledge about the village and its migrants. It can be said that, although Ah Wen's isolation had promised him freedom, it had at the same time sent him into another regime of alienation, one of self-discipline, in which migrants are constrained by their strong will to transform themselves into "proper" beings (Foucault, 1988).

On the other hand, the colonization of capital in Wu village may further radicalize migrants' alienation from their immediate social settings. Already accustomed to homogenized spaces of consumption, Ah Wen convinced himself of the dark side's danger without truly encountering it in person. Suspicions of theft, drugs, and deceit continuously inhibited his creative interaction with others around him. But in his mind a more crucial cause of his isolation was the village's inferiority in a market of space. Having located their desires and ambitions elsewhere, not only Ah Wen but also Xiaofang, Ah Qiang, Lao Zhang, and Xiaolan found it pointless to invest in the village sturdy, transparent relationships. One can say that, under abstract forms of control (Foucault, 1991), migrants are losing their motive in embedding themselves in Wu village, even if some of them do enjoy momentary community and intimacy.

This combined reading of Chapter 2 and 3 challenges the teleological and idealist

politics grounded on the idea of the dual city. Seeing the city and *chengzhongcun* as distinct entities, earlier studies are liable to anticipate either the former's intervention under the guidance of urbanism or the latter's "agency" in the name of migrants' local bonds. The two's chasm constitutes a subjective-objective relationship in which they are supposed to act upon each other. However, judging by the complicit relationship between migrants' social and mental structures in Wu village, neither party alone can possibly lead to a positive future: the city's intervention dispels far less vigilance and fear than it brings while *chengzhongcun*'s agency is more often denied than celebrated by migrants themselves for the spread of consumer society. To wit, separating the subjecttive and the objective is a dead-end, a kind of alienation in itself (Lefebvre, 1991a, p. 249). An effective political project for *chengzhongcun* is to be no longer trapped in the dual-city framework.

*The Political Potential of Chengzhongcun Itself*

Chapter 4 is needed in that it illuminates a political alternative for *chengzhongcun*. Beyond the dual-city framework, it explores "the extra" of migrants' everyday lives, in other words, instances in which migrants re-embed themselves in Wu village by transcending their social and mental structures. Elusive as they may be, these cases did add to the total production of *chengzhongcun* a flavor of optimism. Socially, Zhiqiang and Xiaofang had relatively easier times to engage with, and attend to, strangers at corners of the main street. Active interaction in the village could still be seen when interstitial spaces were placed under close scrutiny. Culturally, Zhiqiang, Xiaolan, Ah Chao could challenge the ways by which some key public and commercial spaces were used. With their tactics, they reinterpreted these spaces, and thereby reconfigured the village's dominant representations. Finally, in moments of intense feelings, Ah Wen, Zhiqiang, and Lao Hu linked local spaces to their inner worlds by means of their most sincere nostalgia and anticipation. Albeit ephemeral, these moments brought back to the village migrants' own senses of time. In these alternative uses of space, the production of *chengzhongcun* appears to be most creative and subversive.

# A Comparison between *Chengzhongcun* and the Ghetto

*The Crossable and Uncrossable Gaps*

A comparison between *chengzhongcun* and the U.S. ghetto—poor black districts of American cities—may help to widen the empirical and theoretical implications of Wu village to a global context. Caused primarily by economic and identity exclusion (Marcuse, 1997), the ghetto is one of the most iconic cases of today's marginal urban settlements.

According to Wilson (1987, p. 39), these black districts did not lose upward social mobility until the 1970s, when an economic restructuring of cities took place, replacing factories with service-based industries. The ghetto, since then, has begun to move away from formal economy for many of its dwellers are considered no more valuable to these new industries in terms of skills, knowledge, and identity. Racism has then perpetuated the ghetto's marginal condition. Prejudice against black people remains common in housing market, confining many ghetto dwellers' effort to mingle with different cultures (Massey & Denton, 1993).

However, whereas similar processes of urban division are obvious in China, *chengzhong-cun* can also be seen as a result of economic and identity integration. As the cases of Xiaofang, Xiaoli, Lao Hu, and Lao Zhang have shown, migrants do play active roles in service economy by work and consumption and can be acutely sensitized to urbanism. Despite that they suffer no less bias and suspicion than ghetto dwellers in the U.S., even the poorest kind, exemplified by Zhiqiang and Xiaolan, are still able to construct urban identities and win transitory social acceptance.

*Chengzhongcun* and the ghetto also differ at the micro level. Whereas social fragmentation has been evident in both scenarios, ghetto dwellers still hold commitments

to local cultures and societies. E. Anderson (1999) unveils the ghetto's magnetic pull by looking into a different system of meanings organized around crime and violence. Among his informants, John, a promising young black man from the ghetto, had to abandon decent jobs to eschew discrimination and join drug dealings to retrieve dignity. In her stories about the negative impact of excessive policing on black neighborhoods, A. Goffman (2015) demonstrates how young black outlaws used their social bonds to evade arrestment. Chuck, one of her key informants, may ask cover from a neighbor or a lover as soon as police officers showed up nearby.

In the case of *chengzhongcun*, however, abstract meanings and social relations influence migrants' everyday lives much more than concrete ones do. Despite that Xiaoli, Xiaofang, Lao Hu, Lao Zhang, and Ah Hao were emotionally embedded in the shuttlecock group, it was de facto cheap housing and quick access to work that brought them to Wu village. While Ah Chao and Ah Xu strategized brotherhood as Chuck did, these relationships were only necessary when they could help to transform these young migrants into consumers.


*The Danger of the Dual-city Framework*

*Chengzhongcun* and the ghetto are analogous to the point that they are both being reproduced in dualistic ways. By highlighting their entrenched difference, social conceptions, media, and even academic research itself have, to a larger or a lesser degree, set a base for further identity and spatial exclusion. Some studies have started to query the dual-city framework in which the ghetto is entrapped. For instance, Duneier (1992) attacks the academic representation of the ghetto in his reflection on stereotypical portraits of poor black people among urban studies. By analyzing the social and historical contexts in which the word "ghetto" is used, the scholar points out that the ghetto can be essentialized when it is spatially pinpointed by social research and welfare (Duneier, 2016, p. 223). Ironically, division stems from where poor blacks are found and helped. It seems that the ghetto in its direct contradiction to the city has embarked on a life of

its own, regardless of whatever empirical evidence we can find within it (E. Anderson, 2012).

No doubt, the dual-city framework is useful for urban studies to look into poverty, bias, and other issues related to power, capital, and subjectivity. But it is also, as I have tried to show in the case of *chengzhongcun*, intrinsic to the mode of capitalist production in post-industrial cities. Urban studies must realize that they are not exempt from ideas that energizes capitalism, so that they need to think beyond conceptions of urban realities.

## Towards Critiques of Urban Experience

### *Urban Division as Shared Experience*

Viewed in a holistic rather than dualistic way, the blame for the ghetto and *chengzhongcun* has to be laid on no one or everyone. If urban division has a root, this root is nothing but a set of structured experience shared by both "us" and "them", "here" and "there", one that consists of our fear, solitude, as well as endless quests for knowledge, freedom, and the ordered self. There are now in global cities no longer hidden realities to be explored (Cohen, 1997; 2003). Despite the masks we wear and lines we draw, it has in fact become difficult for us to single out truly different groups or cultures from our urban lives. We therefore have to realize that urban division, if it is accepted as our collective product, is only beatable when we choose to debunk our dread, reach out to people around us, challenge our views and moral judgements, and most fundamentally make our urban experience unique and sincere.

Through our everyday experience, however, the growth of capitalism necessitates urban division. The fact that we change our urban lives into a total progression cannot be divorced from the othering of *chengzhongcun* as well as other marginal groups and

places. The obstacles to suturing our divided cities rest not only on the social front—such as the *hukou* system, land ownership, economic change, and hyper-policing—but also within the self—for example, our reliance on media, commodities, and disciplines at work. But, in spite of our critiques of the former, it has been difficult for us to problematize the latter and even more so to associate it with our partitioned realities. This is because we have entrusted the capitalist progression with too much of our own ambition, dream, and moral integrity.

It is perhaps within our urban experience that capitalism enjoys its most comfortable accommodation. Unless our critiques of the capitalist city and urban culture reach this depth, our social and mental orders will be firm, and we will continue to take part in in the constant production of the city's darkness.

Still, that we collectively produce the divided city is not to say that we equally pay its price. It is obvious that, among us, those who have less economic and cultural power as Xiaolan and Zhiqiang did are more likely to go through exclusion, conflict, distrust, moral bankruptcy and other sorts of disorder in consequence of condensed poverty and identity inferiority. The price for the powerless can be even higher. What has in fact alienated them from the lives they deserve is their faith in capitalism, or in other words, their own refusal to subvert the structures in which power operates (Allen, 1999). For example, Xiaolan would like to exchange almost all of her monthly savings for a quick roller-coaster ride; Zhiqiang was determined to sacrifice his real life in exchange for a disguise of wealth and self-respect. To obtain access to the ordered side of the city, the powerless have to make tougher commitments to the social and mental structures. The more desperate they are for urbanism, the deeper they are trapped in fragmentized and colonized realities.

*A New Politics against Urban Division*

We have to critique our urban experience, for it is a crucial, if not the only, place in which we may falsify our boundaries and recognize how they are maintained. Spe-

cifically, to tackle urban division, our critiques must come down to small instances of our everyday lives. They must at the same time transfer their targets from the objective outside we try to control to the subjective inside that inescapably controls us. Last but not the least, our dispersed critiques cannot converge to build a unified politic without being guided by an imagined urban form, a collective future, in which urban division, whether as ideas or practices, will no longer constrain our relationships to the city. We ought to reach a consensus that this urban form does not rely upon any abstract differences and has no sanctified goals or demonized enemies; It is, instead, a natural habitat for our concrete differences, differences driven by genuine qualities of life and produced only for the purpose of production itself. We need to be aware that the urban form is always on its way to be achieved. The form is only viable when it is not accepted but challenged, functional when it is not conceived but used.

Nevertheless, this timeless politics does involve some urgent tasks. Based on my findings, I believe that there are presently at least two explicit solutions to *chengzhongcun* and, if relevant, ghettos, slums, and ethnic enclaves across the globe. First, policy makers and urban planners ought to realize that social interaction is far more effective than surveillance in alleviating our antipathy to the city's dark side. The former might dismiss our fear and mistrust, while the latter simply reifies them. This also means that political intervention and urban design should work to guard public spaces against the rampant spread of urbanism. Second, urban studies should be mindful of the danger of the dual-city framework, in particular the ways in which their dualistic thinking spurs urban division and energizes capitalism. Identity and spatial boundaries are not unreal. But it is of great necessity that they are discussed with an acknowledgement of shared urban experience, which ought to be found within everyday life.


*Epilogue: A Critique of My Urban Experience*

This study is driven by a critique of my own, a desire to interrogate the difference of Wu village and its negative impact on my everyday life. While I am unsure whether

my critique qualifies as a good example of our politics against urban division, at least at this point I do feel less baffled and displaced by Wu village than before. Thanks to my friendships with Ah Wen, Xiaofang, Zhiqiang, and Xiaolan, I was able to take on a vibrant and variegated ethnographic journey and later to get along with the village in a more positive light. At the same time, the concurrence of migrants' pursuit of ideal success and dismissal of actual happiness has let me to wonder about the underlying relation between the making of urban culture and the making of otherness, and hence the partiality of my sympathy and radical political expectations for them.

What has profoundly struck me, above all else, is the sort of urban experience I share with migrants. I have to admit that, since I seclude myself and feed on consumption no less than they do, there is absolutely no excuse for me to separate my self-critique from my critiques of them. I therefore come to understand that I must insert myself into the urban text I once read behind the window of my reading room for so long (de Certeau, 1984, p. 92), in other words, to position myself first and foremost as an ordinary dweller of the city.

Still, Wu village has retained some of its difference since I finished my fieldwork. Nothing can be heard from Zhiqiang upon his arrestment. I have no idea whether he has been kept in jail for all this long or has moved to a new village after being released. Ah Xu has gone back to his hometown alone but Ah Chao is still at large. Several months later, when I returned to the square, I was not surprised at all to come across many new faces. Xiaoli and Lao Zhang showed up again in that evening. They said that Xiaofang played with them less frequently nowadays, and Lao Hu had moved somewhere else. I lingered around the square by nightfall but did not find Ah Hao, Ah Bin, or Ah Qiang. At the supermarket where Xiaolan once worked, a cashier claimed that the girl has left the village with her parents before last spring festival. Only Ah Wen promised on Wechat that he would go for a dinner with me next time. The village itself remains unchanged, but it is now not quite the one I used to know.

# Appendix: The Researcher's Autobiography

I must acknowledge that, despite my critiques of the dual-city framework, I am not immune to the structures in which my informants are entrapped and cannot avoid alienating *chengzhongcun* in an attempt to de-alienate it. It is no doubt difficult for me to find out my own limits, unless I would like to impeach my own subjective position, or in Bourdieu's (2004, p. 93) remarks, to make relevant the historical conditions in which I develop into a subject of research and research others to construct the social world in this study. To do so, I choose present in this appendix two packs of my personal history: the first one shows how my social and cultural background gave birth to this study; the second one explores how, in field, my relationships with informants shaped the reality I tried to observe. I sincerely hope that this reflexive autobiography will shed light on, for myself, more questions to my experience of *chengzhongcun* and, for readers of this study, more critiques of the capitalist production of our urban lives.

## Stories behind This Study

*Between "Them" and "Us"*

I consider myself a "migrant". In 1998, at the age of 9, I was brought from a small city in Shanxi to Guangzhou by my parents, who were back then determined to move to the South in pursuit of higher income and better education for me. As university lecturers, my parents soon achieved local *hukous* and in years that followed have steadily raised our lives up to a middle-class standard. Of course, I became gradually aware that my life could be hugely different from those of other migrant children whose parents struggled painfully for better lives outside or on the margin of formal institutions in the city. Nevertheless, despite such difference, I do relate to other migrants through

many vignettes of my migratory experience. So far, I can still recall, for example, how my parents and I pushed our way into those 32-hour trains heading towards the South, how excited and worried I felt about my future in the new city, how proud I was to be surrounded by tall buildings and fancy goods, and how difficult it was for me to blend in with local classmates.

I noticed by chance that migrants could also transform themselves after I became a university student in Beijing. My university lies right next to *Zhongguancun*, a place famous for technological innovation, IT market, and high-class services and entertainment. It was 2008, when IT products and consumerist lifestyle in China had just begun to diffuse. I often went there with my roommates to watch movies, explore restaurants, or simply take a close look at new smart phones on display. These occasions made me aware of a different group of migrants, who, rather than working at factories or on the domestic front, chose to seek jobs in IT stores, restaurants, and malls; and rather than giving hard labor, chose to sell services, taste, and sometimes professional knowledge that I did not have.

I was very sure that there was something similar between migrants and me, something about the greatness of the city and the permanent status of being an outsider. But how can I articulate this "in-between-ness"? And why, in media and research, do migrants appear to be so different from "us"? Although back then my limited understanding of the social world could barely give me any answers, these questions had intrigued me profoundly and drove me to pursue an academic career afterwards.

*An Invented Identity Boundary*

In 2014, I travelled to Sydney for a master degree and was instantly captivated by a series of courses in cultural studies that mainly focused on the representation of race, gender, and social class in contemporary Australian society. From these courses, I learned the notions of identity, discourse, authenticity, and gradually came to realize that "migrants" and "us" might well be performative and imaginary. In particular, works on

aboriginal identities in Australia and racism in the post-colonialist era had inspired me to think about power relations between different races, and how they could be perpetuated by political rhetoric, market demands, and cultural imaginations.

This made me wonder whether "migrants" and "us" are in fact mutually constitutive, created in a total historical process: the former provides the latter with a durable image of "the Other" to confirm the latter's privileges, while the latter exercises many forms of control over the former to actualize the former's presence. It was at that time that I began to associate migrants' inferiority with urban experience, especially the commitments to development, urbanization, consumerism, individualism, and even equality and freedom. It was also during that period that I found myself no longer enchanted with teleological or idealist discourses commonly found within studies on Chinese migrants, since neither of them truly questions the difference between "migrants" and "us".

A year later, when I finished my overseas program and returned to China, I could not wait to exchange my thought with scholars and students at home. In that following year I attended three academic conferences to explain how the distinction between migrants and the urban middle class is invented, demonstrating migrants' changing identity and active role in estranging other more powerless people and urban spaces. But new questions soon arose: If "the Other" is ceaselessly made, is it still possible for us to envisage a future without prejudice and exclusion? If our shared urban experience is to be blamed, in what way can we distinguish positive elements from negative ones?

*The Positive Side*

With these questions in mind, I came to Hong Kong in 2016 to further familiarize myself with social theories. Fortunately enough, I was able to take part in a study group organized by my supervisor Dr. Kaxton Siu to read Marx's classic *Capital* and discuss key ideas of Marxism, such as fetishism, use and exchange value, alienation, and dialectic. These ideas had remarkably sensitized me to the spirit of political thinking—

the effort to look behind, to find the possible among the impossible, to reunite mankind with their worlds—and no doubt prepared me for Lefebvre's theory at a later point.

Under the guidance of Dr. Siu, I also engaged closely with key writings on urban division, such as classics of the Chicago School and some recent works on the ghetto, and was deeply impressed by the link between marginal identities and spaces, and the possible impacts of local social lives on these spaces. It was clear at that stage that my thesis would be concerned with migrants' social and cultural experience, experience of their own self, of each other and their spaces, and of alienation and subversion. These concerns easily drew my attention to the topic of *chengzhongcun* and then Wu village, a world that directly constitutes my urban middle-class identity.

My six-month fieldwork left me about eighty pages of typewritten fieldnotes, crammed with all sorts of descriptions and dialogues. While a large portion of fieldnotes was already clear enough to demonstrate some main structures of migrants' social and cultural lives, there seemed to be few stories for me to entertain the possibility of subversion so as to map out a third chapter about the positive side of migrants' experience.

I came across Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* almost on the verge of despair and was quickly convinced by his discussion of "moments", a powerful but no less transient form of revolution. I recognized that the positive side had already been recorded in fieldnotes, only if I regarded it as, for example, a gesture, a line of words, or a second of silence or maybe excitement. It is, for Lefebvre, by dwelling upon these particulars, by going back to everyday life, that a good future can be seen and achieved. Accepting this as migrants' real political potential, I decided to directly draw on Lefebvre's notion of "everyday life" to elucidate the ontological and epistemological ground of my study.

This thesis is both the fruit of my consecutive attempts to problematize migrants' and my shared urban experience; and a destined product of my background, positions, and resources. It is, in a word, a fiction that tends to be real.

# Stories behind My Fieldwork

*The Uneasiness of Field Relationships*

For most informants, my research project was a world they felt reluctant and embarrassed to step in. Zhiqiang and his followers, with whom I spent most of my time in Wu village, never asked anything about my project, except about the length of my stay in the village to confirm whether I would still be around when they got enough money to go for dinner or karaoke in near future. To talk about what he knew little of was for Zhiqiang, I supposed, a huge threat to his authority in the band. Likewise, Xiaolan did not seem curious about why I repeatedly visited her let alone my goals in the village in general. Xiaofang was the only one who showed interest in my academic background, but she still retreated in the face of our difference. One evening in the square, she asked about my discipline in a playful tone, "Can you explain to me what sociology is? Let me see if I can understand." But when I really started to answer she cut me short by blaming herself, "Alright, alright. I know you've tried your best. It's just that I couldn't understand. It's still too deep for me!"

Instead, most informants tended to understand my research as a dependable job, or at least a passage to it, with reference to how much I got paid. In this case, my role was translated into one of the few well-to-do figures they had ever met in the village, or at least so in promise. "You know you are a rich man in the village! I wish I could be like you one day. I thought I should treat you to a dinner just now but you know what, now I've changed my mind." Ah Wen exclaimed after I told him about my monthly stipend. Zhiqiang once expressed a similar idea, "I always care about their futures (Ah Xu and Ah Chao), but I never care that much about yours. You are different from us. I am sure you won't have to worry about food and drink in your future. You can work anywhere you want after school."

Indeed, I was inclined to pay more than informants did when we stayed together, for the sake of building trust or fulfilling a sense of moral responsibility. Such genero-

sity was sometimes useful—Ah Wen often asked me out for supper for he knew that I could take him to good restaurants in The Oriental Mall. But it also ran the risk of reducing me into a person of bare financial value. In his penniless times, Zhiqiang once exhausted my fifty-*yuan* game account at a cybercafe without my permission, which at that time disappointed me greatly.

Compared to them, Xiaolan knew how to exploit my money better. Except for her usual request for beer, she also had some larger plans. One night on our way home, she pulled me into a clothing store near the square, pointed at a sweater hanging on a wall, and told me she had been thinking of buying it for almost half a month. She wandered beneath the sweater for five minutes, explaining to a saleswoman that she came tonight inadvertently and took no money with her. (Actually, during that month her pocket was always empty.) The saleswoman turned to me and said, "Here is money. Ask your boyfriend." Xiaolan clarified that I was a friend but stared at me eagerly, waiting for signs of my concession. I said nothing, not for lack of money but for my aversion to the role she always wanted me to put on.

*Other Possibilities of Field Relationships*

To Ah Wen, I was very often less an ethnographer than a key informant. As a timid and cautious newcomer, Ah Wen got to know the village mostly by me, his only friend. "Can you take me to the closest basketball field this weekend? I want to do some exercise." "Have you found any good restaurants recently?" "If you have time, shall we walk around the village after the dinner?" Such were his usual expectations for me. When I told Ah Wen I was planning to move to a different room in the village, he looked very depressed. I told him that he could always find me. He replied, "How can I find you? I can't find that place even if you show me on a map."

With my in-depth contact with Zhiqiang and friendliness to strangers, I gradually became a key source of gossip about Zhiqiang and his gang as well as a gatekeeper to new visitors in the square. Hoping to retrieve their money from Zhiqiang, Xiaoli and

Lao Zhang, would regularly consult me about the man's whereabouts after he stopped showing up on the platform. Others, such as Lao Hu and Ah Hao, enjoyed me telling stories, especially affairs, of Zhiqiang, even though I had always been trying to protect his privacy. When a new guy Ah Qiang appeared on the platform in November, I was the first one to introduce the shuttlecock group to him on Wechat. But when I saw his courtship of Xiaofang turned into a sexual harassment, I was also the only one of the group to stop him with a forceful warning. Xiaofang was particularly grateful for my voluntary act.

Sometimes in my interaction with informants I was identified as a migrant. Whoever I met in the field showed much more interest in my hometown than my research or family. My guess is that, for both of us, by imagining a shared "home", we created a sense of sameness and equality so that our gap could be quickly bridged. For instance, since my hometown was close to that of Zhiqiang, and much more so than mine to his followers' (Ah Chao is from Sichuan and Ah Xu from Shantou), Zhiqiang always introduced me as a "half fellow-townsman" (*bange laoxiang*) to his friends. When I hung out with Zhiqiang and Xiaolan together, I tried to speak Henan dialect at times, which made us feel even more connected.

My migratory history could be further crystallized in the shuttlecock group, since among all the group members I was the only one who came from the northern part of China. For them my hometown was as remote as the hinterland of the village. "Does anyone know which city is the provincial capital of Shanxi?" Lao Zhang tended to puzzle the rest of the group during one dinner. The rest looked all confused. Xiaoli tried, "Jinan?" "No, you fool. It should be Taiyuan. Am I right?" Lao Zhang responded with a smirk on his face.

At the end, I want to reassert that my age, gender, and class background have structured this study even before my fieldwork began. How my informants understood the

study and what do they truly expect from our friendships—something often missing in post-ethnographic writings—are also worth asking to appreciate the limits of my field experience. I cannot help wondering how different this study will turn out to be, if, for example, I had more chances to engage with older generations of migrants, or I worked and lived together with my informants, or I followed them all the way to their families or hidden realities. I look forward that these aspects of lives in *chengzhongcun* will be covered in future studies.

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