INTRODUCTION

Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World

Biao Xiang

Abstract

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

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

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

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

Migrants born after 1980 change jobs every 1.5 years, compared to 4.2 years among those born before 1980. Women change jobs more frequently than men, every 1.6 years compared to 2.3.[2] Hypermobility is not entirely new. According to a survey that my colleagues and I conducted in 1994 in the Pearl River Delta (south China), factories there lost 5 percent of their workforce every month, with an overall turnover rate of two years. To retain workers, some factories charged bonds and withheld two months' wages during the first two years, which means that workers would lose out on both if they left within two years. But these measures had little impact, and migrants kept moving.[3] Hypermobility is not unique to rural-urban migrants: international outmigration is often an extension of hypermobility inside of China;[4] those who returned from overseas continued their migratory journeys both in China and across borders.[5] With the rise of the gig economy worldwide, labour hypermobility is now a global phenomenon.

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

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

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

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

[4]   Yang Wei, this issue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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9   Biao Xiang, "Chinese people are like hummingbird, vibrating wings in order to suspend themselves in the air." Interview by *Interface*, 17 December 2014, http://www.jiemian.com/article/215429.html. An online lecture by me on suspension was downloaded 20,000 times between 8 November and 10 December 2019, even behind a paywall, https://www.ximalaya.com/jiaoyu/29648636/218163126. A more recent video interview that touched on related topics was watched 30 million times on Tencent and 60,000 times on YouTube in the first two weeks (28 November–10 December 2019). The video can be viewed on Tencent (https://v.qq.com/x/cover/mzc00200c5sxk4p/o3026pze76s.html?), and on Youtube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj0Hu-HJMcI). I thank Beryl Liu, co-founder of Matters Lab Limited, for collecting the data.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suspension as Experiences, Strategies, and Perceptions

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

Sacrificing short-term benefits to secure a long-term future is not new. Similar rationalities can be found in deferred gratification[12]—and, on a much grander scale, socialist modernization campaigns, such as China's Great Leap Forward Movement (1958). But suspension is not only a rush to the future;

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

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

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

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

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

[15] Xiang, "Dongzhen mingong no. 3: tiaocao," 40–42.

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

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

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

Suspension as an Exception and Norm

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

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

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17 Biao Xiang, "Dongzhen minggong no. 5: Gonghuizuzhi, liyi biaoda he quanyi yishi" [Migrant workers in Dong Town no. 5: trade union, interest expression and rights consciousness], *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu,* issue V (1998): 46–49.
18 Jane Guyer, "Prophecy and the near future: Thoughts on macroeconomic, evangelical, and punctuated time," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 403.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Complexed Development: Suspension as Part of a Larger Structure

Suspension is, in a way, developmentalism writ small: get rich first, worry about the rest later. Migrants' perceptions mirror the famous Chinese official line: "problems arising from development should be handled through development." The officials do not necessarily believe that development will provide solutions, but they are convinced that development must continue as this is the most effective way to push problems aside. In other words, development dissolves instead of solves problems. After four decades of frantic development, China faces multiple challenges, ranging from widening inequalities to environmental deterioration. The faith that things will only get better is losing appeal.[26] But the doubt about developmentalist promises ironically enhances a *political* developmentalism. Political developmentalism is different from general developmentalism in that while the latter believes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[29]   Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).
[30]   Chung Kyung-Sup, "The second modern condition? Compressed modernity as internalized reflexive cosmopolitanization," *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 444–464, 444.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[34]   Author's interview in Wenzhou, southeast China, 4 November 2017.

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

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

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

Entrepreneurial as the Means, Conformist in the End

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suspension in Specific Cases, and our Journey Forward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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