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Settling into Uncertainty: migrants in suburban Beijing¹

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Abstract

Reform period migration in China has commonly been described as a rural to urban movement of short-term character, facilitated and circumscribed by kinship or native place networks. In this paper I discuss a new type of migrants who understand themselves as settled long-term, if not permanently in urban centres, who are not necessarily badly educated, sometimes marry locally and build relations of support based on their job and life situations. They put up with a significant amount of uncertainty regarding their living, working and social situations that comes with their status as “second-class citizens”. Nonetheless, I argue that the dynamic fringe of large urban centres today offers a space where migrants can carve out a niche to work and live. In fact, migrants have become so vital to the larger urban transformation and so deeply rooted in the modernisation process of Chinese cities that they might actually not be able to “return” to their places of origin. The paper attempts to broaden the analysis of Chinese migration by drawing attention to its spatial dimension. In particular, I want to highlight the (hitherto neglected) importance of “locality” for migrants’ urban experiences.

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I Introduction

Since the beginning of the reform period in 1978, China has undergone tremendous social and economic transformations; a significant departure has been made from the Maoist economic system towards a socialist market economy, or market economy “with Chinese characteristics.” The privatisation of collective resources, the opening of the country to foreign investment and the growing availability of a vast amount of cheap labour have generated unprecedented economic growth with an average eight percent annual GDP growth rate over the past two decades.

The most important foundation for this reform process was the agricultural reform and the introduction of the household responsibility system at the end of the 1970s, which improved agricultural productivity and the efficiency of labour allocation. Only shortly after, the opening of Special Economic Zones with favourable investment policies, which in the following years were extended to fourteen coastal cities, enabled the influx of foreign investment. The effect of the latter has been that the distribution of the new wealth and development is very localised and concentrated in these same coastal regions and cities.

Reform-period transformations depend to a large extent on the labour of millions of migrants – rural labourers from the countryside who became redundant by the reforms in the agricultural sector. Since post-reform labour policies are geared towards liberalism, market mechanisms are replacing state planning in hiring and firing as well as setting wage scales. Special Economic Zones and the emerging service sector in the cities have offered the rural population new employment opportunities, especially since previous migration restrictions were eased. Accordingly, prime migration destinations are the economic boom areas along the coast and large cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. Estimates of migrants’ numbers now range from upwards of 100 million.³ Behind these numbers and sheer facts, however, stand individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Much has been written about the new phenomenon of labour migration in China. While generally more men than women migrate, migrant women have received special attention in various anthropological studies.⁴ Female workers in Special Economic Zones are one of the recurrent subjects of investigation (e.g. Lee 1998). Other studies (e.g. Dutton 1998; Lietsch 1995; Shi n.d.; Sun 1998), have looked into the phenomenon of female domestic employees, *baomu*, most of whom are rural women from all over China. A second strain of research has delved into the emergence of peasant enclaves in bigger cities, such as “Xinjiang” and “Zhejiang” villages in Beijing⁵ (e.g. Ma and Xiang 1998; Wu 2002; Zhang Li 2001).

³ Since the late 1980s a large number of surveys and analyses on the migrant population have appeared. Precise numbers on its size, however, are still hard to come by since differences exist in defining “migrants” as well as what type and distance of movement is included in the studies. In addition, official classifications of “urban” and “rural” have also changed. The 1990 national census calculated a migrant population of 35 million (Fan 1999: 961), while a 1994 report by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation spoke of 120 million people. A more conservative, but widely accepted number, based on provincial survey data, gives the number of 80 million migrants in the mid-1980s (cf. Gaetano and Jacka 2004: 31 footnote 2 and footnote 3). At the end of 2005 this number had risen to 125.78 million migrants according to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ For a recent account with rich ethnographic detail, see Gaetano and Jacka 2004.

⁵ Zhang Li (2001), for example, describes how migrants who share local origins have created their own enclaves within many Chinese cities. These native-place-based migrant groups tend to monopolise a particular informal economic sector by excluding migrants from other places, a phenomenon common in China historically. In Beijing Zhejiang migrants dominate garment, leather and eyeglass businesses; Xinjiang migrants run restaurants that serve regional specialties; Henan migrants sell vegetables and recycle trash; Hebei migrants work in construction; Anhui migrant women work as maids and Shandong migrants work as tricycle peddlers. According to Zhang, migrants from different regions see each other as economic competitors and as social and cultural outsiders.

As divergent as their individual research foci are, a common thread in these studies is the character of the migration described: men and women are channelled via kinship and local ties into their new occupations in locations where they live in native-place-based enclaves and tend to monopolise a particular informal economic sector by excluding migrants from elsewhere. Due to the continuing restrictions on urban residency, the migrants stay only temporarily and eventually return to their native places. Widely reiterated in the literature, these generalisations gloss over important and presumably increasing divisions among migrants based on class, region and occupation. Further, with the on-going economic and social transformations it is likely that migration itself is changing in character and type.

During my 2001 to 2002 fieldwork on suburban development in Beijing, I met migrants who worked and lived in this dynamic fringe of the city. Contrary to common wisdom, however, they neither resided with fellow villagers nor did they have intentions to return to their places of origin. In fact, most of the roughly 30 migrants I interacted with on a regular basis were between 20 and 50 years old and had been in the city for a minimum of two years and often much longer. Many sent remittances back home, but they rarely, if ever, visited their places of origin. Further, they were only minimally entangled in networks of either kinship or native-place. While some such connections might have initially brought them to the capital, these had not resulted in consistent, strong ties that led to common residence or work. These “urban guerilla” (Beynon 2004: 131), instead, formed new relations of support that were Beijing-based. Despite the adversities and discriminations migrants continue to face in urban centres, the migrants I talked to had every intention to stay there permanently. Apparently these migrants had found conditions that enabled them to envision a future in the city, a development that has not been studied as such so far.

Studies of Chinese migration are frequently survey-based, relying on standardised questionnaires or statistical data such as the national and provincial censuses. These data are inevitably flawed or at least limited. More anthropological analyses have focused on specific locations and/or professions – workers in foreign and joint venture factories, household employees and employment agencies, specific service sectors such as the entertainment industry or native-place-based migrant settlements. While I do not question the insights gained by these studies, I see a certain limitation in investigating migration based on such preconceived groups. At the very least, it is not surprising that these studies highlight similarities and commonalities among the migrants instead of their differences.

This paper, in contrast, is the outcome of a larger research project on urban transformations and more specifically on the emergence of and life in new suburban areas in Chinese cities. Combining an analysis of the spatial production of an up-and-coming Beijing suburb with an in-depth ethnography of the people living therein, the study examined a highly diverse populace: long-term residents connected to the public sector, a new middle class living in costly commercial housing estates and migrants from the countryside who work in suburban markets and live in ramshackle houses that are marked for tear-down. Since the purpose of the project was to examine the production of a new suburban space, my approach to the migrants was not as an antecedently defined group but as agents whose only commonality was that they were not urban residents. This is a change of focus in the ethnographic analysis of Chinese migration, reflecting Nina Glick Schiller’s recent (2005) call for migration studies to go beyond ethnically defined groups of migrants and to examine the impact of locality on migration and migrants themselves.

Based on the interviews and observations I gathered during my research in Beijing, I would here like to address some of the issues and important questions that emerged regarding these migrants' specific life situations and experiences. How do these long-term migrants confront everyday life in the city? How do they organise their residential and working situations? How do they see themselves? How do these migrants resemble or differ from others who have been described before? What could be the reasons and conditions that prompt migrants to claim to stay? Finally and most importantly, what is the interconnection between the suburban space and the migrants' situation? I suggest that the dynamic suburban realm offers a space where migrants can carve out a niche to work and live. While this constantly shifting and transforming environment offers no security, private entrepreneurship gives migrants the necessary flexibility to accommodate the various challenges they face in the city. I argue that, in fact, today migrants are so vital to the larger urban transformation, and so deeply rooted in the modernisation process of Chinese cities that they might actually not be able to "return" to their places of origin.

Presenting my research findings and theses, I would like to stress, however, that these are preliminary thoughts; this is a work in progress, not a finished project, based on a relatively small sample of migrants in a specific research locale.⁶ The migrants I spoke to during my research are certainly not representative for the millions who have left their native places or even for all those in metropolitan centres such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. As long as the government continues to impose restrictions on migrants' settlement, a large number of them is likely to eventually succumb to hardship and pressure and return to their native places. Nonetheless, no matter how small their numbers, the existence of migrants who see themselves as permanently settled in the city merits attention and analysis to understand if this is an exception or indeed a significant development.

I begin this paper by a short review of approaches to the study of migration and how China is a somewhat special case. This leads to a discussion of the "apartheid-like" registration system that continues to divide Chinese citizens into "urban" and "rural" residents. In the third section, I discuss the important spatial changes that the reforms have brought about and zoom my ethnographic lens on the suburb where I conducted my research. The subsequent main part of the paper offers an ethnographic description and analysis of the migrants' lives and experiences, highlighting how they differ from others' that have been described before. The paper concludes with a reflection on migrants' position in China's modernisation project.

II Background

Migration Theories

Migration has been studied from various theoretical perspectives. The neoclassical approach, for example, stresses economic factors and explains mobility in terms of income, employment and social well-being disparities between migrant sending and -receiving areas (e.g. Todaro 1969). The

⁶ During 14 months of fieldwork in suburban Beijing, most days I "hung out" for several hours in two to three makeshift in- and outdoor markets, where migrants sold a variety of products. I regularly interacted with about 30 migrants and talked to roughly 20 of them in more detail. Only three of the migrants agreed to be formally interviewed, that is, to meet at a set time and place to talk about their lives and experiences. These interviews were recorded and quotes are cited as "Interview" with the date. All other conversations were reconstructed after meeting the migrants, based on notes I took during our exchanges. The information I gained in this way is cited as "Notes" with the respective date. All conversations were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. In order to protect the interviewees' identity I will use fictitious names and avoid mentioning personal details.

structural approach to the study of migration, in contrast, emphasises historical transformations of regional and national economies, spatial organisation of production and expansion of capitalism (e.g. Frank 1969; Sassen-Koob 1983). These theories, however, have come to be considered as too simplistic. Discussing migration theory, Castles (2000), therefore, calls for more effective approaches that understand the complex dynamics of migratory processes. The “new economics of labour migration,” for example, explains migration not simply by income differences between two countries, but also by such factors as chances of secure employment, availability of capital for entrepreneurial activity and the need to manage risk over long periods. Castles, however, points out that the decision to migrate is not necessarily made by individuals but often represents family strategies to maximise income and survival chances. In his view, the use of remittances for consumption and investment can only be fully understood through a “whole-household-economy” approach (ibid.: 2). Migration systems theory, which Castles propagates, therefore seeks to integrate all the above factors in conceptual frameworks that facilitate analysis of the interactions that shape each specific migratory process. Migration here is seen as embedded in broader processes of economic, demographic, social, cultural and political change, and as an integral part of globalisation and social transformation. Both internal and international migration is a way for individuals and groups to sustain or rebuild their livelihoods under conditions of rapid change (Castles 2000).

Examined superficially, Chinese migration appears to simply fit the neoclassical model where the poverty in the countryside is the “push,” and the wealth of urban centres the “pull” factor behind peasants’ rural-to-urban movement. While this is an undeniable aspect of the phenomenon, growing numbers of studies (e.g. Fan 1999; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Roberts et al. 2004) show that the process is more complex and therefore rather to be analysed in terms of migration systems theory, as outlined above. Chinese migration involves, however, one factor that distinguishes it from most other population movements, namely state planning. For decades the Chinese government has regulated migration through an “internal passport system” (Chan 1996), the *hukou*. This kind of state intervention in population movement remains in place even in today’s “socialist transitional economy” where market mechanisms operate simultaneously with state planning. While historically and currently many states around the world have been concerned to limit people’s movement for various reasons,⁷ what is notable about China is that it regulates internal migration in a fashion that parallels other state’s regulation of international migration.

The Hukou System

Established in the 1950s, the *hukou*, or household registration, is a small book that lists an individual’s registration classification – usually the birth place. The system effectively divides the population into those with agricultural status (*nongye hukou*) and non-agricultural status (*feinongye hukou*). Whereas the latter entitles to an array of state benefits and subsidies, agricultural status means little state support other than the right to farm (Cheng and Seldon 1997; Solinger 1999; Tang and Parish 2000: 25). After the new system was fully implemented, every person needed police

⁷ For centuries people in Europe needed official permission to move within states. The reasons for this form of control have varied but generally they reflected a need to control labour and prevent the growth of political opposition. In Western Europe these restrictions ended in the 1880s. At the time of World War I the regulation of movement was reinstated but the boundaries of containment became the borders of the nation-states. To justify regulating the flow of labour, states commonly conceptualise the migrants whose movements they restrict as in some way undesirable to others. See, for example, Torpey 2000. (I would like to thank Nina Glick Schiller for pointing out these interesting parallels to the Chinese case).

approval to change residence, and migration from rural to urban areas and from small towns to cities was prohibited.⁸ Up until the reform period, state surveillance in combination with the rationing system through government channels and the absence of markets made it virtually impossible to move between locations without official permission.⁹ Besides tying Chinese peasants to the countryside, the *hukou* system also contributed to low levels of urbanisation and mobility (Fan 1999).

Reform Period Migration

In 1978 the Communist Party resolved to embark on a new campaign of economic modernisation, which began with several years of useful changes in the agricultural sector before the party confronted the challenge of urban reforms. The rural reforms significantly improved agricultural efficiency, but at the same time made a large amount of rural labour redundant, giving rise to increasing numbers of surplus rural workers. In 1983, the State Council issued a directive allowing peasants to move to and settle in towns. Millions of surplus workers were absorbed in the growing rural industries that emerged after the abolition of the commune system. Millions of others sought their fortunes in urban centres. In effect, already by the early 1980s the “bamboo curtain” that the *hukou* system had established between city and countryside showed holes as officials either issued temporary work permits or ignored illegal migrants. Since peasant markets returned to cities and rationing was gradually abandoned, migrants were able to live in cities even without legal permits (Ma and Xiang 1998; Tang and Parish 2000).

Today migrants are subjected to a maze of administrative regulations and formalities. In the mid-1980s, the central government introduced obligatory temporary residence permits (*zanzhu zheng*) for migrants at their destinations. Migrant women of child bearing age are also required to carry a “marriage and fertility permit” (*hunyu zheng*) issued by a body responsible for family planning in the place of temporary residence. The Ministry of Labour further stipulates that migrants have an employment registration card (*waichu renyuan liudong jiuye dengji ka*) issued by the labour recruitment service in the county of the migrant’s household registration. This is the basis for receiving an employment permit (*jiuye zheng*) at their destination. Some urban regulatory organs also require a certificate of good health before allowing migrants to register for other permits (Gaetano and Jacka 2004).

Hukou regulations are currently under review, with some advances by the government to grant migrant workers a change of resident status. The overall trend, however, has been towards diversification and commodification of urban *hukou*. Local governments have discovered residence registration as a welcome source of income. In addition to the costs of permits and certificates, various administrative bodies, unscrupulous employers and landlords frequently charge migrants

⁸ The *hukou* system was first set up in cities in 1951 and extended to rural areas in 1955. Initially, it served as a monitoring system of population migration and movements, not as a control mechanism. With the growing influx of peasants into cities, however, in 1958 the National People’s Congress decided on legislation that gave way to an altered system of migration permits, and recruitment and enrolment certificates, which in effect made rural-urban migration practically impossible (see Chan and Zhang 1999). Some scholars have compared the *hukou* to the Indian caste system in which one cannot ever leave the caste into which one is born (see, for example, Gong 1998; Potter and Potter 1990).

⁹ The *hukou* system of strict controls over migration could succeed only because of China’s tightly organised structure of social control, one element of which was the *danwei* (work-unit). Based on the workplace, *danwei* were an extension of the state apparatus that took on the function of social organisation. Since virtually every adult man and woman worked in China during the Maoist era, work-units became an all-encompassing institution affecting practically all aspects of life (see Tang and Parish 2000).

fees and taxes, not all of which are legal. Not surprisingly, the majority of migrants are not registered by the urban authorities (Jie and Taubmann 2002).¹⁰

Despite the administrative hurdles, Special Economic Zones and urban centres continue to attract millions of migrants. Here they work in (1) high labour intensity, low-income but formal jobs concentrated in secondary and tertiary industries, where they earn half the salary of urban residents or less;¹¹ (2) stable, contractual but temporary jobs, such as manual labour in small firms;¹² (3) unstable, temporary and insecure jobs such as supplying outdoor services,¹³ or (4) as either employees or employers in small firms, such as the garment cottage industry set up by migrants from Zhejiang province (Gu and Liu 2002). In particular the emergence of the private sector economy, and especially retail trade and personal services, offers job opportunities for undocumented migrants. Many employers recruit extensively in rural areas, hiring migrants as temporary contract workers and frequently provide dormitory housing for them. In sectors with labour shortages, the process of labour recruitment is often well organised and conducted by public agencies (cf. Logan 2002).

City governments, however, have been reluctant to either build the infrastructure or give migrants legal access to urban amenities that would prevent social problems (Jie and Taubmann 2002; Tang and Parish 2000: 30ff). Without urban registration, migrants face numerous obstacles: they are prevented from entering into certain occupations and trades; they are denied subsidised work-related housing, medical care, pensions and social security; they are often forbidden to buy or build property; they and their offspring are excluded from or charged exorbitantly to attend local institutions of higher education and elite local schools; they are excluded from community- and work-based political, social and recreational activities. Moreover, lacking proper documentation, stable residence or secure employment, migrants may be considered criminals and subjected to fines, deportation or even arrest (Gaetano and Jacka 2004). Thus, many migrants in the city are forced to live an uncertain existence on construction sites, in market stalls, on the streets, in rented rooms, or in makeshift settlements, located especially on the urban periphery.

III The Transformation of Space

The reforms in China have dramatically transformed urban space. The number of cities multiplied, and the formally registered urban population grew to nearly 240 million.¹⁴ Changes in the political economy have altered the lines of authority and the flow of resources between the central government and the municipalities (Davis 2000). In the process of shifting from plan to market

¹⁰ According to the 1995 census, 13 percent of the city residents of Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai did not have local registration, and more than three-quarters of these out-of-towners were from rural areas (see Tang and Parish 2000).

¹¹ The jobs include positions in chemical industries, some office services, public service in catering industries and private services that urban residents do not like to take up, for example, professional typists, printing clerks, retailers, cashiers and waitresses.

¹² For example such as family servants, house decorators, furniture repairers, deliverers, street cleaners, family electrical equipment cleaners, movers and porters.

¹³ Such as street stand owners, peddlers, rickshaw boys, shoe menders, bicycle mechanics, locksmiths, watch repairers, seal engravers, knife sharpeners and trash collectors.

¹⁴ Chinese statistics regarding “urban residents” are quite confusing. Realising the socialist ideal of self-sufficiency, municipalities like Beijing, Shanghai or Guangdong, include both built-up – urban – space and the agricultural hinterland, and therefore residents with non-agricultural *hukou* as well as those with agricultural registration. Some statistics include all residents within a municipality, while others only count residents who do not work in agriculture. As Davis (1995) points out, between 1980 and 1990 the number of residents in towns and cities grew from 191 million to 301 million. These numbers, however, include agricultural households. The number cited in the text, 240 million urban residents, is derived by restricting the count to non-agricultural households.

mechanisms, space has become commodified and is now graded, or scaled, along parameters such as west and east (or interior and coastal areas), rural and urban, urban fringe and urban centre. Today, space and people are redefined and repositioned based on qualities such as young/old, educated/uneducated, inside/outside and backward/progressive and are ranked in a hierarchy of modernity and exchange value (Chen et al. 2001). As a result, Chinese cities are currently undergoing a concerted effort of reshaping, redesigning and restructuring. The Maoist pattern of relatively undifferentiated urban space, with self-sufficient districts characterised by residential compounds with standardised buildings, is increasingly giving way to new city planning which centres around shops, office and residential high-rises and ample roads (cf. Gaubatz 1995). Relatively homogenous and undifferentiated cities such as Beijing, today face growing economic and social differentiations. The emerging stratification of the populace is increasingly reflected in the city's changing structure and environment, with emerging exclusive "zones of affluence" and a marginalisation of poor residents to unattractive, cheaper locations. Decentralisation and greater reliance on market mechanisms have thus eroded the "hard edges" of cities that segregated rural and urban populations during the Mao-era "as clearly as a moated city wall" (Davis 1995: 2) and resulted in visible urban – rural differentiation.

In fact, one of the most profound results of the land and housing reforms in Chinese cities is the increasing separation of workplace and home. Today, "bedroom suburbs" are emerging on the edges of Chinese centres. They consist of high-rise and low-rise buildings, with schools and some stores, parks or recreational centres; but few of them reach true functional integration. Residents commute to work either in public buses or in shuttle buses provided by their employers since their places of work are beyond bicycle range (Gaubatz 1995; Zhang Tingwei 2001; Zhou and Ma 2000).¹⁵ These suburban areas are somewhat like "windows" on some of the larger social and economic processes in China. Prime areas such as city centres and business districts are geared to attract foreign businesses and to display a representative imaginary to the world; they are the focus of prestigious construction projects and have come under increased surveillance. Emerging suburbs in the urban peripheries, however, are much more dynamic zones where old and new structures exist at the same time, residents are more diverse and development is less controlled.

It is in one of these new suburban areas on Beijing's north-east side that I conducted my investigation. Here, the reform period changes have been immense. In the 1990s, due to its proximity to the international airport, the area experienced the influx of foreign direct investment and various international businesses established themselves in this newly designated residential and commercial development zone flanked by the elevated six-lane Capital Airport Highway. Generous new roads were built around a few older compounds and apartment complexes surrounded by walls, gated and guarded by security, invaded former agricultural land. On the edge, towards a neighbouring older factory zone, some streets were still lined by single-storey make shift buildings in 2001 that had sprung up during the early reform period and which housed businesses of all sorts: occasional book and clothing stores, various bakeries, telecommunications offices, one or two banks and a wide array of restaurants – from fast food to specialty restaurants. Scattered throughout the area were left-over islands of the brown brick *pingfang* (single-storey) houses that are typical for the countryside. These were usually comprised of only one room, had outside kitchenettes and no private bathrooms. Huddled together and accessible only through a labyrinth of small dirt paths, these used to be the houses of the agricultural population within the Beijing municipality. These

¹⁵ See Wu and Liu (2000) for a comparative study of suburbanisation in China and abroad.

areas were generally in unsanitary conditions; as they were bound to be torn down in the near future, the city seemed to have given up on the provision of services such as garbage collection, for example.

In 2001, the suburb was still bustling with construction. Towered over by cranes, on some days one nearly suffocated in the clouds of dust that hung above ever new building complexes. Over the course of my research the neighbourhood changed constantly: old structures were razed overnight and new fences were put up around yet another construction site. Within 14 months, I experienced the rise of about seven new residential complexes with ten or more apartment towers each as well as two supermarkets, which both in style and in price clearly aimed at a wealthier clientele. While the new residential compounds varied greatly in quality and price, they were all in the upper middle to higher price range and therefore out of reach for most Chinese. Residents belonged to the new class of “chuppies” – Chinese urban professionals. The most upscale finished development in the area at the time of my research was Atlantic Place where apartments had initially sold for a minimum of RMB 4,000 (US\$ 500) per square metre. By the end of my research, it was about to be superseded in price by several new complexes that had set up sales offices in the neighbourhood.

In the midst of this emerging sleek vision of Chinese modernity, however, one could also find migrants, working in local shops and restaurants, but most commonly in the various temporary markets in the suburb. These were usually designated outdoor areas or cheaply put together structures set up by the local government and filled the district coffers with the income produced from renting out sales stalls or selling permits to offer one’s products. In the course of suburban redevelopment, however, the markets were closed or taken down as easily and quickly as they had been put up. Sales people were usually given a one-month notice to find a new place to work.

IV In Search of a Livelihood

When I began my research in the summer of 2001 there were several popular markets in the suburb. One of them was, for example, a combined in- and outdoor affair. The outdoor area was the size of a soccer field, on what seemed to have been in the past the yard of an industrial plant or similar. Every day vendors and customers streamed into the square to look, bargain, trade, buy and sell everything from toilet paper to herbs, paper decorations for the Chinese New Year, clothes, fruit, electrical appliances, aquarium fish, flowers, puppies, fake antiques, cigarettes and so forth as well as freshly prepared food, such as dumplings, fried rice, tofu and meats. The sales stands were all make-shift structures, sometimes an old bedstead or a table, sometimes moveable carts with window panes around a cooking device. The indoor-part of the market, in contrast, initially did not attract much attention from customers because it was crammed, humid, and badly ventilated. Shortly after Chinese New Year in February 2002, however, the outdoor area and all of its permanent structures were razed, having been designated as the site for yet another new edifice. From that time on, some of the previous outdoor vendors rented stalls in the market hall to sell their wares and produce. Just before I left the field in the fall of 2002, however, the market hall was also torn down and the migrants scattered in all directions.

It was in this outdoor market that I first began to talk to one of the migrant sales people, Liang Jiehua, a middle-aged woman from Shandong province who had come to the capital 15 years ago to “learn something” and “gain experience.” In Beijing she met and married an urban resident who worked in the city’s horticultural department. She had a 13 year old son. While Liang had a sales

stall in another market around the corner where she sold young, sporty-style clothes, three times per week she set up shop in this place. Offering slightly different – cheaper – clothes, she tried to attract a different clientele than in her other venue, which was taken care of in the meantime by one of her nieces. The outdoor market was also the place where an elderly couple from Harbin (a city in the north-east of China) sold freshly prepared pancakes. They had moved to Beijing after the wife retired, the husband was laid off and their daughter had not been able to find a job. Now she was a sales person, employed in a local shop. Finally, through Liang Jiehua, I met Ling, a woman in her late 20s, who had followed her husband to Beijing in 1999, since neither she nor her husband had been able to find work in their home province Hubei. Now Ling sold baby and children's clothes and her husband worked as a helper in a nearby bread factory.

As diverse as their backgrounds and stories were, these migrants had carefully evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of coming to Beijing and decided that an uncertain life in the capital was preferable to the desolate living situation in their home places. What they had in common, and what distinguished them from other migrants, was their occupation – private entrepreneur – and their location in the capital – the suburban realm – as well as the fact that they claimed permanent residency in the city. Nonetheless, they certainly also shared characteristics with other migrants, evidently because *all* migrants are subject to the same legal (political) regulations and ideological environment.

In the following I will discuss key aspects of the migrants' lives, such as reasons to migrate, life in the city, social relations and identities and show how these correspond or differ from what has been described for other migrants. I am framing the discussion around the life story of Liang Jiehua who became my closest informant. While her situation is somewhat special – being married to a Beijing resident – it is far from singular, and in many ways her experiences reflected those of the other migrants I met in the markets. The focus on Liang springs from the fact that she volunteered the most comprehensive and encompassing information among the migrants in the suburban markets, possibly because her marriage to an urban resident put her into a somewhat safer situation than other migrants. Nonetheless, interviews with other migrants revealed many similarities with Liang's account. Furthermore, when I hung out in the markets even the more hesitant migrants chipped in on conversations and shared bits and pieces of their lives with me, thus adding to Liang's account, contrasting or complementing her information, as will become apparent in the following.

Leaving

After more than two decades of migration, there is hardly a place in China where people have not heard some direct or indirect account of migrants' predicaments through the media. Thus, even if the extent of the obstacles and difficulties migrants face in urban centres might not be entirely clear to the rural population, incentives to leave native places must be rather strong. Analyses of the motivations for migration in China frequently focus on economic factors (e.g. Goldstein and Goldstein 1996: 198; Scharping and Sun 1997: 45-47). Among the migrants in my investigation, however, strictly economic reasons appeared to be less important than a desire for new experiences and personal development. In fact, migration decisions were a complex mix of various factors.

Liang Jiehua described her decision to migrate to Beijing in the following matter-of-fact way: "I came to Beijing during the Spring Festival of 1986 in order to get away from farm work. [...] My teacher [...] introduced me to [my classmate's] uncle in Beijing and encouraged me to find a job

here. So I came to Beijing to work in the clothing factory” (Interview June 4, 2002). In reality, of course, it was not such a straightforward story. It took months of getting to know each other better before Liang revealed more about her background and her motivations to come to Beijing. What came to the fore was an account of failed aspirations and lack of opportunities combined with a certain determination to not simply accept her lot.

Contrary to the widespread notion that all Chinese migrants are uneducated, Liang Jiehua had actually finished high school and even taken the university entrance exam. After she had failed the test for the third time, however, she gave up on her dream to study. “I thought I was getting further and further away from being admitted to university and I would never have a chance to study” (Interview June 4, 2002).

While the perception that migrants are uneducated and unskilled has been shown not to be true globally (e.g. Castles 2000), in the Chinese case this is somewhat different – at least until now. Early in the reform period, migrants were indeed mainly young, little educated, unmarried peasants who could not find employment in their native places and considered the chance to earn money through wage labour in the booming coastal areas more attractive than to toil away on their parents’ farms. The generally precarious situation in the countryside, where the dismantled commune system left people without any state benefits, contributed to the exodus of youth, who were expected to support their parents and families. The migrants were primarily drawn (and after a while channelled through networks of kinship and shared origin) to the Special Economic Zones where foreign and joint venture companies offered new employment opportunities.

With the continuation of the reforms and the concomitant transformations in China’s social and economic structure, however, migration is changing its character. Growing numbers of studies question previous assumptions and findings about migration in China.¹⁶ The level of migrants’ education might be another aspect of such transformations. While some of the migrants in the suburban markets could indeed barely read and write, the majority of people I talked to had actually finished middle school, some, like Liang Jiehua, graduated from high school and a couple of them had attended technical training colleges. Similarly, in a survey among one hundred migrant women in Beijing, Jacka (2005) found that 46 percent of them finished junior high school and 30 percent had senior high school education. Seven percent had been educated to the tertiary technical level. While this is not a very high educational level, it shows that migrants are not necessarily all middle-school drop-outs. At the same time, however, there is growing concern over the rise of illiteracy among the Chinese, and especially among migrants, mainly due to dropping out of school and lack of practice (cf. Li 2007). Both observations are not necessarily contradictory, but just another proof that broad generalisations about the migrant population fail to capture the – presumably growing – differences among them.

One of the main problems for young people in the countryside, however, is to find (satisfactory) jobs once they graduate from school. Liang Jiehua, for example, began to help her family work their land. This, besides being tedious, does not hold much allure – today less than ever. She said: “I didn’t like that kind of life at all” (Interview June 4, 2002), but that simple statement had a significant real and ideological baggage. In contrast to the booming coastal cities and Special Economic Zones, life in the countryside is generally marked by dearth and lack of perspective.

¹⁶ Fan (1999), for example, shows that there are actually a multitude of migration types ranging from legal job transfers to marriage migration – both aspects that have been either overlooked so far or are indeed new developments. Similarly, Roberts et al. (2004) have recently challenged the notion that women do not migrate after marriage. Their study shows that since the late 1990s married women from Anhui and Sichuan province migrate, both with and without their children.

Villagers have built local industries, but these can employ only a limited number of people. Furthermore, many of the earlier projects have failed. At the same time, nurtured by TV and other media, cities have become the epitomes of modernity, evoking desires and nourishing dreams especially among the rural youth. Whereas under Mao, peasants stood at the ideological forefront of the revolution, their lives cherished and their contributions to the state project of socialism seen as essential, today, peasants and agricultural work represent the past, that what is to be left behind, to be overcome and to be rejected. The decision to migrate to the glitzy centres of the new, globally framed modernity is therefore much more than an economic endeavour: It is time travel from perceived backwardness to an imagined future, an almost desperate attempt by many migrants to jump aboard the “bullet train” into a new life and century.

The decision to leave the countryside is also influenced by gender ideologies that affect men and women differently. Women, for example, are less likely to receive good or higher education in their places of origin, since in the countryside boys still experience preferential treatment.¹⁷ Thus, Liang Jiehua was actually lucky to attend high school. Other migrant women I talked to revealed that they had not continued their education because their parents spent the necessary funds on a brother.

But issues of gender are even more complex and they also affected Liang Jiehua. At the time of her migration in her early twenties, she was already considered old in her village. Other women were not only married, some even had a child. This gender ideology apparently contributed to Liang’s giving up her dream of studying, but it did not change her perspective on life; while she accepted to work in the fields for the time being, her statement that she “did not like that kind of life at all” not only referred to the work but also to getting married to a villager, having a child and, in the end, to staying in the countryside. At some point during the research Liang almost sheepishly admitted that going to the city she had also hoped to find “a better husband.”

There are more connections between gender and migration. Women are often considered marginal to the rural economy. Farm work can be taken care of by their parents, parents-in-law, brothers or male relatives. Several of the migrant women in my investigation said that they had brothers who worked the land in their home places. Similarly, while Liang Jiehua worked in the fields, this was not considered essential for the household economy. Unwilling to get married and not needed for agricultural labour, she was left in limbo. Even if there would have been off-farm employment available, this was likely to be dominated by men because they are considered more suitable for that kind of work and because women usually have less education. Domestic chores, in turn, are often taken care of by an older woman in the household, or may only take up a couple of hours per day. Thus, Ling, a woman in her late twenties from Hubei province, for example, said that she had decided to try her luck in the capital because at home there was “nothing to do.” Jacka (2005: 60) importantly points out that while a woman may be busy with child care and domestic work, since such chores do not bring in an income they are so devalued in rural China that they are not considered “work.” Therefore, if women say there is “nothing to do” in the countryside, this connotes not just inactivity and the boredom that goes with it but also a sense of worthlessness. Maybe this was the reason why especially among the young migrant women I talked to there was a

¹⁷ The preference for sons is related to various issues. Among them is the continued idea that the family line is carried through male descendants and that women upon marriage cease to be members of the natal family. This latter point in turn produces further economically based considerations: if the labour power of a daughter is lost by her natal family upon marriage, then there is no economic reason to invest in a daughter’s education or training. This ideology has been supported by reform period developments. Since the state no longer provides social services in support of old age, the physical labour power and potentially higher income of a son is more likely to substitute for this loss.

strong desire for self-education and learning. “To gain experience” was a frequent answer to my question why they had decided to come to the capital. This is a rather common motive for migration among young women, as has been described by various scholars (e.g. Gaetano and Jacka 2004).

Apart from their marginalisation in the rural economy, single women might be further compelled to try their luck in migration because they reject that the only important thing in their lives is marriage, which, due to continuous patri-local, exogamous marriage patterns also means departure from the natal family and often from their villages. In certain ways, therefore, gender ideologies facilitated migration decisions of women, many of whom said that they had actually been encouraged by friends, relatives and/or their parents to try their luck in the city.

Men, in contrast, appear to view migration as a way to fulfil their obligations as family breadwinners. Studies have found that in contrast to other countries where daughters usually send more money home than sons, in China it is single migrant sons who remit most (e.g. Murphy 2002, Cai 2003; Sargeson 2004). Jacka (2005) suggests that men feel more pressure on them and their families to construct a new house to attract a bride while young women may feel those obligations less strongly and may therefore be relatively “free” to pursue more individually oriented goals. Since I did not meet any single migrant men during my research,¹⁸ I cannot confirm or reject Jacka’s suggestion. There were, however, about 10 married couples who ran their businesses together. Interestingly, these couples emphasised economic motivations – “there are no jobs,” “there are no perspectives” in the countryside – much more than the single women.

To conclude, the reasons migrants gave for their decision to leave the countryside and to try their luck in the capital were a complex mix of economic incentives, new desires and ideologies. In this the migrants in my investigation were not different from what has been described in the literature. What distinguished them, and the basis for their claim to want to stay in the capital, therefore, must have been their situation in the city.

Arriving

The decision to go away is only the first step for migrants to leave the countryside. Given their general lack of “cultural capital,” or “street smartness,” their inexperience, often young age and usually limited (or second-hand) information about life in the new centres of economic development, it is not surprising that migrants commonly rely on networks of kin and fellow villagers to reach their destinations, find jobs and getting established. Liang Jiehua, for example, found her way to Beijing through her teacher and the uncle of a classmate who already worked in the capital. As with other migrants from the countryside, she relied on these personal connections to find her first job in the city. Without this introduction she would probably have been less likely to migrate:

So [when] I came to Beijing, I had a place to live and the uncle had found me a job before I went. The day after I came to Beijing I went to work. There were altogether 15 workers both from the countryside and the city who were employed there. My cousin also worked with me. We lived together in the factory’s dormitory and also ate at the factory. The situation

¹⁸ Probably because the markets were I hung out were dominated by the clothing trade, a sector commonly in the hands of women, who are said to have greater ability in this kind of business.

was totally different from knowing nobody in Beijing and coming to look for a job blindly. The uncle was the head of the personnel office in the factory. (Interview June 4, 2002)

Similarly, the other migrants I talked to knew at least one person who had either been to Beijing or was still there. This was clearly an important factor in their decision to migrate to the capital. Nonetheless, it did not mean that after they had established themselves in the city they remained entangled in close ties with these relatives or fellow villagers. Liang Jiehua, for example, did not stay in her first job for long but soon began an extended journey through a number of different jobs and positions that she usually found with the help of new Beijing acquaintances:

[After quitting in the factory] I worked in a greenhouse for a year, and one of my co-workers introduced me to her brother who became my husband later. We got married in December 1986. Then I worked in a clothing factory. My salary was very low, it was only 2.5 Yuan¹⁹ per day and 0.5 Yuan bonus, that is, I had 90 Yuan per month. In the clothing factory, I could make 3 Yuan for making one suit, I could make 3 a day, that is, I earned 9 Yuan per day. It was very hard work so I decided to change my job again after one year. That was in 1987. I had my son in 1988. In order to take care of my son, I took the material back home and made clothes there. I also did some embroidery at home. I went to a shop to sell cigarettes, sugar, tea and wine when my boy was one and a half years old, which was too young for him to go to kindergarten, so my mother-in-law came to help me to take care of him. My salary was 4 Yuan a day. After half a year I thought it was not a good job so I changed to go to work in a restaurant. They paid me 5 Yuan per day, 150 Yuan per month. I worked there for another half year.

Finally she set up her own business:

It was at the end of 1989, my son was nearly two years old; I sent him to kindergarten. I had to bring my son to kindergarten and pick him up again every day. One day I met a girl who came from Henan province in a market that was on the way to my son's kindergarten. She had her own stall and she told me 'Don't go to work. You can have your own business. How much do you make a day?' I said it was 5 Yuan a day, so she told me where to get clothing wholesale. I asked her how much she can make a day and she said 50 to 100 Yuan. It was a lot of money. So I quit my job and had my own clothes stall at the end of 1991. (Interview June 4, 2002)

Liang Jiehua's account draws attention to the constantly changing and highly unpredictable life the migrants led in the city. This applied both to their work and to their homes. They never knew what was going to happen to either the market in which they were currently working or to their houses, which sooner or later were all doomed to be torn down. As one woman expressed it, "Everything is very much up in the air. I never know how much money I can earn or what is happening with our house. I mean, maybe they will really tear it down and we will have to look for another place" (Notes April 7, 2002).

¹⁹ 7.5 Yuan roughly equal 1 US\$.

But the above account also outlines a typical career of the migrants I met during my research. After a couple of years in which they usually worked as employees in the service sector, the migrants decided to set up their own businesses and to become private entrepreneurs selling various products in suburban markets. It is this career path in combination with their location in the suburban realm that distinguished the migrants in my investigation, and which points to the main argument of this paper, the emerging economic and spatial niche on the urban fringe. I suggest that the transformations on the edge of the city have created conditions for migrants to find work and housing; and with a certain amount of flexibility they are able not only to make a living but also to envision a permanent existence in a continuously unstable and insecure environment.

Life in the City: finding a niche in the suburban “market” economy

Even if they hold a temporary residence permit, migrants only have limited accommodation options in the city since they remain excluded from the more affordable public housing sector. They therefore rely on renting rooms or houses from the rural population in the suburban realm, which often depends on this source of income. Due to the continuous expansion of the city into the urban fringe, many farmers have lost their land and are no longer able to live from agriculture. Since they often reject low-paid and strenuous jobs, they have difficulties finding work. Renting rooms or entire houses to migrants has, therefore, become an essential source of income, especially since these former peasants are still required to pay grain tax in cash. Migrants are, however, often threatened by eviction since the houses are forever vulnerable to being torn down to make way for new development projects. While registered residents are compensated and resettled when their houses are torn down in the urban transformation process, migrants have to find new quarters by themselves. Usually, these lie further out of the city in the rural hinterland.

Several of the migrants I met during my research lived in such locations. The bus ride from the market at the centre of the suburb to the village where two of them, for example, had found accommodation, took about one hour. Almost identical, the single-storey brick houses they rented consisted of a four by five metre room that they had divided into two halves with furniture and curtains. The parents slept on one side and their child on the other. Besides two beds, a closet, shelf and small desk for the child to study, there were some stools and a folding table to eat at. The kitchen was in a small brick construction just outside of the house. It was just high enough for a person to stand upright and contained only a stove and a small table. Another square structure housed the toilet. In the summer, the families washed themselves outside in the small space between the house and the kitchen. In winter, they had to take turns inside the house.

Simple and quite far out of the city as these houses were, the migrants considered themselves lucky to have found them. Nonetheless, there was no stability in their housing situation. When I visited them in the spring of 2002 after they had lived there for about a year, it was rumoured that the village was going to be torn down within the next few months to make way for an expansion of the Capital Airport Highway and the migrants had begun to look for new accommodation. Frequent changes of residence, therefore, was very common among the migrants and generally there was a pattern of them being pushed further out into the rural hinterland as the city expanded and new suburban zones developed. Even so, the migrants were confident they would find a new place to stay, not only because of the local farmers' need for cash income but also because local – district, township and village – governments earn considerable administrative fees from their presence there.

Besides housing, the urban fringe – suburbs and the villages in the rural hinterland – also offers various employment opportunities. Since the reform period, ecologically harmful state and urban enterprises, for example, have been relocated to the city's outer areas. Here migrant workers can find dirty and strenuous jobs that urban residents usually do not accept. In addition, numerous township and village enterprises employ mostly non-local people to do the unpleasant jobs while the local residents work in administration and management (cf. Jie and Taubmann 2002). In addition, the rapid increase in new suburban residential and commercial buildings has created various demands. Construction workers need food and clothing, and the projects materials for construction and interior decoration. Serving these needs are the migrant markets that have sprung up in the urban fringe. These markets also attract residents of the remaining old residential complexes who generally have limited financial means and even residents from the new, exclusive edifices. Notably elderly parents who had moved in with their adult, middle-class children appear to favour these migrant markets where they can touch produce, bargain and build personal relationships with salespeople, all important practices, at least among the older generation (see Veeck 2000). Thus, the migrant markets are in high demand.

In fact, analogous to the housing situation, registered local residents, local governments and even public sector work-units all have an interest in renting business premises to migrants to ease their financial problems. Some old residential compounds in the suburb had literally knocked-down the walls around their properties and built small business premises to rent to migrant entrepreneurs to gain cash income. Similarly, even some of the state-owned companies and research institutes which had been planted into the undeveloped hinterland during the 1950s and 1960s, and had remained spatially separated from the city at least until the 1980s, were so interested in the suburban conversion and the establishment of a variety of services that they too offered business premises to migrants.

Migrants in the suburban realm therefore have a positive impact upon the locality; legal residents, the urban labour market, the construction industry, and the service sector all profit from the migrants' presence. Despite this "symbiosis" between migrants and local residents and the important economic function that migrants have assumed in this environment however, without legal protection they have no security as regards their housing or work situation. The suburban markets, for example, are generally short-lived affairs. As an official of the local "Office of Redevelopment" (*chongjian fazhan bu*) explained, plans for the suburbs' (re)development had already been laid down in 1993; there was nothing to change about it or any surprises. Now this government office oversaw the different stages in which pre-reform structures were scheduled to be torn down and land to be opened up for new commercial housing and industrial development projects. The migrant markets had certainly no place in the new suburban vision.

The migrant entrepreneurs, however, were also always themselves scouting the different options and possibilities throughout the city. They discussed and exchanged ideas about different markets and places where they got their supplies. Visiting relatives, acquaintances and friends in other places, they compared each others' profits and evaluated if they could possibly be better off in a different marketplace. New opportunities arose just as quickly as the old ones disappeared; for every market that was closed or torn down a new one was opened in another location. These were likely to be a bit further out of the city proper, in an area where (re)development had just begun, but they never seemed to completely disappear. Thus, knowing of the fleeting nature of their

business premises, migrants took a flexible approach and tried to continuously improve their situation by changing locations and staying ahead of the next close-down.

In many ways it is private entrepreneurship that offers the – apparently necessary – flexibility to survive in this ever-changing geographical realm and economic niche. As outlined above, the migrants I met in the markets all had initially worked as employees in various businesses and companies. After several years, they had gained experience and saved enough money to start their own business. They chose to become private entrepreneurs because they felt that they would be more in charge of their lives, and their future. As private entrepreneurs they were exposed to the whims of the market, but also able to determine their physical and material input. The success of their businesses, the profits they could make, depended solely on their own input, talent, diligence or effort. Thus, despite certain risks, “being one’s own boss” was considered an achievement.

Importantly, as self-employed entrepreneurs the migrants also did not have to deal with, or suffer under an employer, and they did not have to worry about work schedules or times. They could accommodate their private lives with their work lives without the need to justify absences for example. This was all the more important since migrants cannot rely on any state-provided services from which they are excluded. Not infrequently they had to take care of sick relatives or acquaintances, young children or run errands. As self-employed salespeople, they had no problem taking off during the day to do so. As employees, they would either not be allowed to leave or were likely to lose their job if they could not avoid an absence.

Interestingly, among the married migrants there appeared to be a particular occupational pattern: while the husbands sought (temporary) employment in local factories, their wives engaged in this kind of private business. With this dual strategy they had one regular, if limited and temporary monthly income and one which was more unpredictable. At the same time, more flexible hours allowed the women to attend to everyday tasks that arose from the migrants’ insecure living conditions.

In sum, the city’s suburban fringe and the rural hinterland offer migrants not only work and housing opportunities, but various local conditions actually enable them to carve out a niche that gives them a long-term perspective. This new economic space in many ways actually needs and relies on the migrants’ labour and money. Importantly, however, it offers no guarantees but instead is characterised by high uncertainty and unpredictability. Migrants, thus, have to be extremely flexible and adaptable. While private entrepreneurship does not offer any guarantees or certainties either, the flexibility of trade, with little necessary start-up money and know-how, with self-determined input and working hours makes it possible to counter, confront or circumvent many of the difficulties that arise from migrants’ semi-legal status in the city. Choosing private entrepreneurship could therefore be interpreted as a strategy that migrants employ to adapt to the adversities they are confronted with in the city.

Settling Down: establishing social relations and forging positive self-perceptions

We have seen that the suburban fringe of the city today offers migrants a space in which they can make a living, albeit one characterised by uncertainty and fluctuation. While this might explain the economic basis for migrants’ claim to permanently settle in the capital, the question remains how migrants deal with the discrimination and scorn they are subjected to. In the following I will discuss how the migrants in my investigation saw themselves, their social relations and how they confronted the discriminations and adversities of urban life.

With the frequent changes of work and housing locations, the migrants I talked to could hardly form long-lasting and complex social networks. To counter the difficulties and adversities that the migrant salespeople faced in their everyday lives in the city, they built local relations of support. These, however, were rather based on being at the same stage in the life cycle than on coming from the same native place: Young, unmarried women hung out with one another and often shared rented rooms, couples exchanged information about the business and where to best school their children and mothers helped each other out when they had to tend to their babies.

Liang Jiehua, for example, received help and advice from fellow migrants, but these were not from her village or even home province. Instead, she had bonded, built relations and friendly ties with fellow market people who were in a similar life situation, of the same age and especially with other mothers. Similarly, 35-year-old Yang Fengmei occasionally had to leave her sales stall to either attend school conferences for her son or to take care of her ailing mother-in-law, who (in an exceptional case) had come to join the family in the city. While Yang was absent, her neighbour commonly took care of her business, as Yang did in return when the neighbour had to run errands. Coming from different provinces, the two had formed a friendly relationship based on the fact that they had rented opposite sales stalls and were both mothers of young sons. But even Yang and her neighbour's relationship ended when they went home at night. Nonetheless, both had formed lasting relations with women and men they had met in previous places of work. Time to see them, however, was rare because of everybody's busy schedule. "We don't have much time to meet. But we call each other every other week or so" (Interview March 27, 2002).

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the migrants were not connected to their families and other people from their home places. Migrants' support for the family expressed itself in money transfers and material goods sent home. Some had also either left behind or brought back small children to their home places to be taken care of by their parents, which certainly was a vital connection to the native place. Another form of "networking" among migrant families was the support for the migration of other family members. In many cases, after a migrant became somewhat established in the city and found a way of making a living, other family members followed. They initially depended on the help and resources of the established relative to support them. In the case of Ling, for example, some time into my research her little sister, who was 17 years old, came to Beijing to stay with her. The sister had finished high school, and, with the same bleak job perspectives at home, hoped to find a job in the capital. First she helped her sister at the market while she learned *putonghua* (standard Mandarin Chinese). After about three months she was able to find work in the factory where Ling's husband worked.

My point here is that the migrants' connections with their family and their home place were not necessarily their first and foremost contacts and social relations. This became apparent when I asked some of the migrants whom they would turn to if they needed help. While they answered that they would most likely turn to kin, I repeatedly could observe how stall neighbours loaned each other money, a transaction that requires a certain amount of familiarity and confidence. They apparently trusted their colleagues enough to engage in such kinds of transactions. Thus, living and working outside of close kinship or native place networks, the migrants in my investigation had formed relations of mutual support and help, which were often grounded in necessity. Importantly, through the formation of locally based networks of friendship and support, the migrants also became more rooted in their new living environment.

Strengthening their grounding in the urban environment and supporting their claim to permanently settle in the capital was the fact that many of these migrants already had or were in the process of bringing their children to Beijing, which apparently is a new development. Without urban *hukou*, the choices for schools are limited, but with the payment of higher fees at least some are accessible to migrant children. Most small children had been left with parents or parents-in-law in the migrants' home provinces because they did not have the time to take care of them. Once they reached school age, however, the migrants often tried to bring their children with them to the city. This was the situation of Ling, who had a three-year-old son whom she had left with her parents in Hubei province. During a 2002 summer vacation, Ling brought her son back with her to Beijing. After he had lived with her for two months, she decided to let him stay and was planning to send him to kindergarten in Beijing: "I am not going to send him back home. The educational system there is very bad. I want to send him to a kindergarten here in Beijing" (Notes August 17, 2002).

The fact that the migrants in my investigation claimed to want to permanently settle in the city is not only surprising or remarkable in the face of the real adversities they face in the everyday lives, but also because of their perception by urban residents and portrayal in public discourse. In official and urban discourse migrants are presented as a homogenous, inferior group that needs to be civilised and transformed by higher moral codes set by permanent urban residents (Zhang 2001). Peasantry and the countryside in official discourse are usually regarded as lagging behind the nation's march to modernity (Cohen 1993, Zhang Li 2001). As Anagnost (1997) points out, the readying of the Chinese population for participation in global capitalism has taken place through a state-initiated civilising process aimed at remaking subjectivities into those appropriate for a disciplined, efficient work force. "Modernity,"²⁰ in fact, has become the new government legitimation for public surveillance and control. Migrants and the countryside, however, are conceived of as decidedly un-modern. Their lack of legal status only supports negative stereotypes and anti-rural bias held by urban residents. But it also reinforces people's general perceptions. Migrants speak of themselves as *nongcunren* (peasants, literally "countryside people"), whereas city residents refer to them as *waidiren* (people from outside). In addition, many of the current problems in the city, such as dirt, rudeness and increasing crime rates are blamed on the "uncultured" (*mei you wenhua*) migrants from the countryside with their "low quality" (*suzhi di*), such as in this statement by a middle-aged woman during my research: "More and more people are moving here, people from all kinds of places. It's a social problem. Beijingers want to go abroad and the other Chinese want to go to Beijing. Nobody can stop them. But it's a big problem of the quality (*suzhi*) of the people" (Interview August 7, 2002).

Interestingly, the migrants I met during my fieldwork engaged in a discourse portraying themselves as "uncultured," "uneducated" peasants, through which they effectively justified the socio-economic position they were in, only to juxtapose this narrative with one that centred around hard work and honesty. They had built a very strong sense of moral virtue, of being good people who worked hard for a living. Migrant market women, for example, frequently pointed to female customers who were allegedly prostitutes, remarking, "They are bad women. I would never do *that*, no matter how poor I was. I would rather die than do *that*!" (Notes August 15, 2002). Several of the

²⁰ I use the words "modernisation," "modernity," and "modern" as somewhat empty markers of the state project of transformation and development of the country. This project is centred around reforming the economy in terms of marketisation, an emphasis on efficiency and the generation of wealth and the improvement of living standards. The terms are weighted down by the enormous debate of what exactly "modernity" is, but here I will steer free of a more detailed discussion.

migrants I talked to also prided themselves in being honest salespeople. They did not try to convince someone to buy clothes that did not fit or did not look good, they were willing to exchange products that customers returned and the customary bargaining was conducted according to very specific rules.

As outlined above, migrants are generally not treated very well, or seen in a very positive light by the permanent residents of Chinese cities. It has become quite common to blame crimes and problems in the metropolis on the migrant population. Many urban residents who I interviewed blamed the dirt and pollution in the city on the “uncultured” migrant population who did not know how to behave properly. Reports of crimes in the city committed by people from the countryside were standard fare in local newspapers. But when I asked the market people if they had experienced any form of maltreatment or if they felt looked down upon, one of them said: “Some [people] look down on me, but I can look down on them the same and I can give back in words. I think it is all about who you are, not where you are from. If you are a good person or not” (Notes June 7, 2002).

“Its all about who you are,” “if you are a good person or not,” these statements reflected a general attitude that I observed in the migrants I talked to. Through this discourse of diligence and honesty they wanted to distance themselves from the official and public discourse on the “*liudong renkou*” (floating population). In fact, together with their laments about their difficult lives, this discourse was a new form of “speaking bitterness.”

Speaking bitterness was a political praxis perfected and dispersed by the Communist Party in the process of revolution. Party cadres used it as a fundamental method to teach peasants and later workers how to speak as socialist subjects of the new nation. “Speaking bitterness, in other words, provided a means of interpellation; it led people to conceive of themselves as new kinds of subjects, as subaltern subjects” (Rofel 1999: 138). The suburban migrants’ form of “speaking bitterness,” in contrast, was one that stressed the hardship and effort they put into improving their living conditions without complaining. They had thus internalised the state’s recent emphasis on the need for “self-development” (*ziwo fazhan*) and the improvement in “human quality” (*suzhi*) as vital ingredients in national development; they had adopted the claim that migration to the city is the key to “self-development” and high quality for young rural people, statements which are common in the mainstream media (cf. Jacka 2005). Portraying themselves as morally valuable, self-developing persons, the migrants had thus forged a positive self-identification in the face of societal scorn and discrimination.

Closely related to the perception and self-identification of migrants to the urban realm is the question of modernity, which looms large over China’s present-day transformations. Once I asked Liang Jiehua to compare her life in the countryside with how she lived in the city. She answered: “I am busier [than my siblings in the countryside]. My income is higher and my life is more comfortable than theirs, but my life is [also] very tense. They work in the field and can take a rest whenever they want to. Their life is more relaxed” (Interview May 15, 2002). Despite the fact that she worked almost every day from early morning until late night, constantly felt tired, had experienced urbanites’ scorn and portrayed rural life with a certain “nostalgia,” devoid of hardship, Liang was very clear in that she preferred urban life. One of her most adamant “proofs” of what she had gained was that she had not even seen a train nor had she known TV before she came to Beijing. Her current house, even though small with an outside bathroom and located far from the city in a hinterland village, she considered an improvement to where she came from because it was

made from bricks. And there was always the hope, through hard work and thrift, to improve one's situation. Liang and the other migrants I met had apparently discovered and embraced the trappings of modern life in the capital. Maybe it was not so surprising that they did not even contemplate returning to the countryside.

Indeed, the question is if these migrants *can* "go back"? Tamara Jacka (2005) and Yan Hairong (2003) both give a negative answer. Jacka shows, for example, that the migrants' stated wish to stay in the city as long as possible often conflicts with complaints about the hardship migrant women faced there. On the other hand, they described their home in the village with fondness and nostalgia, but said that they never wanted to go back. According to Jacka, these apparent contradictions grow out of the complex interweaving of national discourses and personal subjectivities: "Understandings of modernity and of the place of the city and the countryside are thoroughly entangled with gender relations and with discourses and practices relating to age, marriage, and the life-course" (Jacka 2005: 69). Yan, on the other hand, argues that rural young women's pursuit of a modern identity has to be understood in the context of changed rural-urban relationship resulting from China's postsocialist development in an era of flexible accumulation. In her interpretation, post-Mao development has actually robbed the countryside of its ability to serve as a locus for rural youth to construct a meaningful identity. According to Yan, the city has proven not to be a high place of hope but merely displaced old despair with new despair.

The conundrum persists; between the country and the city, these young women have no place to pursue a modern personhood. The conditions and contradictions that have enabled and are constitutive of young women's search for modernity also overdetermine their inability to become subjects of modernity and development (Yan 2003: 590).

This latter point I would challenge: the migrants in the city have become entangled in the modernist project by their insertion into the urban realm and by becoming part of the urban-based system of producing this selfsame modernity. It is not that they have no ability to become modern – they, in fact, already have become "more modern." The problem is that they will never be "modern enough" to be fully accepted by urban residents. Nonetheless, it is exactly this gradual "translation" that migrants have undergone that makes their return to the countryside difficult, if not impossible.

V Conclusion: rural-to-urban guerilla migrants

I have tried to make a case for expanding our rather narrow understanding and interpretation of present-day migration in China as being short-term, young, low-educated people-driven and circumscribed by networks of native place or kinship. The rural-to-urban migrants who I met during my fieldwork in suburban markets varied widely in their educational, social and economic backgrounds. They were between 20 and 50 years old. They came from Shandong, Hubei, Anhui, and the Northeast. Most had migrated to Beijing between five and ten years ago, but some even longer, and they had no intentions to return to their native places. If we interview migrants in job placement centres, migrant associations or migrant settlements in the cities, then it is relatively clear that we will find the same migrants again and again. Instead, in this paper I draw attention to a – maybe rather new – group of migrants who understand themselves as having settled long-term,

if not permanently, in urban centres, who are not necessarily badly educated, sometimes marry locally and build relations of support based on their jobs and life situations.

My research shows that the suburban fringe offers migrants not only work and housing opportunities but that various local conditions actually enable them to carve out a niche that gives them a long-term perspective. In fact, the suburb in many ways relies on the migrants' labour and money for its development. Nonetheless, this economic, social and geographical space offers no guarantees, but is instead characterised by high uncertainty and unpredictability. Migrants, thus, have to be extremely flexible and adaptable. It is as suburban private entrepreneurs that migrants can adapt to the adversities they are confronted with in the city. The paper thus shows how important locality is for understanding migrants' urban experiences.

There are, however, important questions that remain to be answered. For example, what is the long-term effect on migrants' native places if they indeed stay in the city? What happens to the migrants in the city once they are old and cannot work any longer, given that they cannot rely on state provided social security? Finally, and most important in the context of the current discussion of locality, how are migrants' interrelations with other, low-income groups of urban residents structured? Increasingly, in this dynamic fringe of the city, we can find not only migrants but also poor urban residents who compete for the same opportunities. It remains to be seen if this is the beginning of a new urban "underclass", which would transgress the popular notion of dichotomous rural-urban opposites. While the *hukou* regulations remain a radically differentiating characteristic, Mobrand (n.d.) points out that migrants are not only subject to this national level of categorisation, but also to local levels of subjectification. It is on this latter level that these apparently so diverse groups of people might in fact already be very close to one another.

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