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A DIFFERENT PLACE IN THE MAKING

The Everyday Life Practices
of Chinese Rural Migrants in
Urban Villages



Introduction

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

Field note, 9 October 2006

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

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

percent per year, the urban population in China is accordingly growing at around 4 percent per year.¹ As one of the driving forces of such dramatic growth, the massive rural-to-urban migration since the 1980s has driven an officially estimated 12 million peasants to seek work in the city,² forming probably the biggest population flow in history. However, what is even more astonishing is the invisibility of such an immense scale of mobile population in the mainstream urban landscape. As a work force, they have penetrated into every fabric of urban life, but as citizens, they are institutionally banished from the urban system. Under the prolonged rural-urban divide household registration system, those who come from the countryside and live in the city without an urban *hukou* are still not counted as urban population, nor even as ‘migrants’, but as ‘floaters’ or ‘outsider population’, who are perceived as temporarily sojourning in the city but still belonging to their rural origins. Such population control and social belonging regulation enable Chinese cities to make the most of the cheap labour of the rural outsiders without incurring the heavy costs of accommodating them, so that a highly ordered and good-looking image of a city can be maintained alongside its rapid growth. The idea has been crystallised into a manifesto overtly or covertly stated by many municipal authorities in recent years, praising China’s urbanisation as ‘urbanisation free of shantytowns’ (Zhang and Zhao et al., 2003: 931). In a sense, most of the cities in China seem to deserve this praise. Unlike what one might assume, the Chinese government’s strength in controlling the urban space has not been weakened by the prosperity of the market economy. Under the state’s pervasive governance deep into the neighbourhood life of the city, there is little room for the classical forms of shantytowns to be built and occupied by rural migrants as their urban settlements, as has happened in Lagos, Mumbai or other developing cities. There can be little doubt that the worldwide existence of shantytowns or slums represents the worst of urban poverty and inequality and has posed huge challenges to human

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

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

society (UN-HABITAT, 2003). But the alleged non-existence of the shantytown in contemporary urban China is nothing to celebrate. Its purpose is to create an illusion of a one-dimensional city and top-down modernity where the challenges of population mobility in the process of urbanisation is dealt with not by including and integrating, but by suppressing and banishing. In this illusion, not only has the institutional inequality over rural migrants in formal systems been legitimised, but also the rights of rural migrants in seeking their urban settlements through informal approaches has been denied. Having been intoxicated with such an illusion for a long time, people tend to be reluctant to face a fundamental question: if there are really no shantytowns in Chinese cities, then where are the places that millions of rural migrants could live? How can such massive scale of population really be floating over the city without any place in which to settle down?

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

To picture this hidden island in the city, I started my ethnographic work in Gaowang and Wujiawan. But my intention is not to picture it holistically, but more particularly from the perspective of their rural migrant dwellers. I chose such stance not simply because they are the residents who have made up the majority of the population in the area as the result of continuous influx during the past decades, but also because they are the group in the city who has been largely marginalised, and therefore whose voice could provide us with an alternative vision of the place and the city. But this stance

does not point to the reduction of the place into an enclave of rural migrants, for I did not want to close my eyes to the constant encounters of rural migrants with the indigenous residents and other actors, who equally dwelled in the place and imprinted on the place their own investments and identities. Neither do I intend to isolate the rural migrants' settlement practices in the two urban villages from the tidal transition both the city and the nation are undergoing in the post-reform age. This transition has, over the past decades, been underlying the transformation of the place from two rural villages to a migrant urban settlement site. It is also fundamentally determining the fate of the place in the future landscape of the city. Even for the rural migrants' themselves, the classical image of enclave does not fit with their identification with the two urban villages, for their embedment into the urban villages is far from fixed or exclusive in their migration trajectory. Given such multiplicity and fluidity, it is out of my attempt to present a holistic picture of the place as an enclosed community or a cultural (sub-cultural) territory. What I attempt is to capture a snapshot revealing contingent conjuncture where a group of Chinese rural migrants have their trajectory of migration and settlement intersected with the shifting process of a small place in the transitional urban China of the recent past. I understand my exploration as a dual mission: to re-ground the rural migratory subjects to the place of their urban settlement on the one hand, and to re-value the people-place relationships in this locale on the other.

From the theoretical perspective, my research can be seen as a response towards one of the focal debates in recent academic enquiry joined by the multitude disciplines of social science, which sees a recent renaissance of the concept of place as a dynamic tool in re-asserting the geographical and spatial importance in the on-going dialectical process of modernity, a touchstone for critical social and cultural theories coping with the challenges posed by the growing power of networks on the one hand, and the springing voices of locality and authenticity on the other. In this context, the romanticised and essentialist notion of place once nurtured by the humanist geography has been put under scrutiny, while a progressive and dynamic notion of place is rising in academic thinking. Our

imagination of place has turned from a status of *being* to a process of *becoming*, wherein place is no longer a fixed point bonded by geographic territories in the opposition against power of flow, nor an authentic identity exclusively pertaining to any singular insider. On the contrary, it is imagined as an arena where movements from various dimensions encounter, contest, and negotiate, an outcome of co-production by multiple social actors. It is this imagination opening up the richness of the concept, which allows me to reflect on the complexity, connectivity, and tension in the modernising Chinese society through observing and interpreting the social drama staged in a small place.

Yet, so far academic interest in this debate has mainly unfolded along a global-local nexus, overwhelmingly dominated by the phenomena generated by transnational movements. It is easy, but too hasty, to assume that the struggles and contradictions of place-making within a nation state is less tense or less complex, because the conventional modern geographies of the last two centuries of nation-state building are defined not only by boundaries between nations but also by those within. Particularly in a country such as today's China, which is undergoing dramatic transition, the issue of place and place-making geared by internal movements (not separated from the global flows though) is equally urgent. Since the 1980s, the economic and institutional reforms in the country have broken down the walls between regions and work-units, industries have been restructured, the administrative system has been re-organised and the planning has been laid down for a new round of urban renewal and sprawl. New geographies of homogenisation and differentiation are fundamentally changing the landscape of both city and countryside. But they are only one dimension of place-making in today's China. We should also be aware that under these epochal changes, the lives of 1.3 billion Chinese people are literally 'on the move' (Friedmann, 2007: 260). Either passively cast out into an unfamiliar world or spontaneously in seeking a better world, they are commonly experiencing spatial and social displacement and desperate to reorient themselves. In the process, life routines are readjusted, the sense of place is reconfigured, the belongingness to place is renegotiated, and mechanisms in space ordering and regulation