An ordinary China: Reading 'small-town youth'

for difference in a northwestern county town

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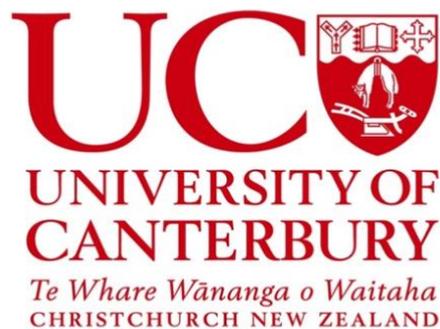
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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that this thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research and the preparation of this draft itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

China has witnessed unprecedented changes across all spheres since the 1978 economic reform. As the previous socialist state shifted towards a market-oriented economy, China's socio-spatial reconfiguration has attracted a vast amount of research interest. One emerging Chinese discourse in this socio-spatial reconfiguration is that of 'small-town youth'. This area of research connects 'small-town youth' with the complex transformations that people and places undergo. However, I identify two major problems in such studies on post-reform China. Firstly, on-the-ground experiences of China's peripheral urban places remain largely overlooked. While both rural villages and large urban centres in China have received great attention, studies on peripheral urban places such as 'small towns' remain limited. Secondly, while a transitional perspective is often adopted by studies looking at the transformation and changes in post-reform China, many fall into the pitfall of equating transitional with teleological. This means that people and places are often positioned on a value-laden linear trajectory — changes and differences of people and places are thus closed and reduced only to reify the presumed modernist trajectory. Such an overarching framework obscures the also existing on-the-ground 'being' and 'happening' where an ordinary meaningful life can be built.

This thesis goes beyond these teleological understandings of people and places in China to research a group of 'small-town youth' in a northwestern county town. I perform an active reading for difference of the mobility and life narratives of 'small-town youth' drawing on rich ethnographic details. This project identifies and challenges the underpinning logic of modernist teleology that prevails in academic and popular discourses on places and people in post-reform China.

In analyzing 'small-town youth', I show how China's post-reform socio-spatial reconfiguration draws on a problematic binary of 'small town' versus

'metropolis'. I trace the roots of this prevailing dualism in the broader context of urban studies, where China is positioned as behind Western urban modernity. I actively read for 'small-town youth' narratives for difference, seeking to transcend overarching frameworks and open up places and subjects so that diverse urban experiences could emerge. A responsive methodology is developed during the research process; as both insider and outsider, I transcend structural ways of knowing, breaking down binaries through rich heterogeneous description. When subjects narrate their mobility, *danwei* (work unit), emerges as a core theme, seeming to confirm a hierarchical social-spatial logic. When these narratives are re-read for difference, less-articulated, multiple reasons for mobility emerge from these complex subjects. When people narrate about the county town, *buxing* (not good) emerges as a core theme, also a consequence of China's social-spatial hierarchy. By making visible the on-the-ground experiences that are less frequently articulated, I show how existing diverse experiences of *yisi* (meaning) can provide the impetus to free places from a hierarchical and teleological imagination.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Under the grand highway bridge, where lines of trucks run day and night carrying coal, the 'black gold', among the barren hills lies one of China's poorest counties. Reflected by the Yellow River, a cultural symbol of ancient Chinese civilisation, the sunset casts a dreamy glow onto the most impressive modern infrastructure. The core motivation behind this thesis is best represented visually by this scene I have just described, captured in a photo which I took in my field (see Figure 1 below). Like many locals, I made taking a walk along the cemented path along the river part of my daily routine during my time in the field. Over years of multiple field trips, I witnessed how the town expanded along the river as the cement path stretched — on one side of the path was the river scenery that remained largely the same, yet on the other side, there were always construction projects going on, where traditional cave-dwellings were being replaced by high-rise buildings, shown in Figure 2, changing the landscape of this county town[1].

Such sharp and somewhat surreal contrasts evoked a deep sense of chaos and confusion — the wealth of resources endlessly passing across the bridge above a National Poverty County (guojia pinkun xian), the ancient river flowing elegantly

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[1] The town of the county seat. China's administrative level will be further explained in the next chapter.

Figure 1 Highway bridge over the Yellow River

(Source: author's own)

Figure 2 Residential buildings near completion by the Yellow River

(Source: author's own)

past the rampant sprawl of urban projects. Thus, each time when I was in the county town, I found myself in constant need to reorient myself, not only in the literal sense, to the new physical landscape, but also in the metaphorical sense, to this place and the life in this place in the face of constant and rapid change.

Change — change at an unprecedented speed, change of multiple scales, and change across all spheres — is an all too familiar theme of not only this county town but of post-reform China in general. Since the previous socialist state embraced an 'open door' policy, with the 1978 reforms shifting the nation from a planned to a market-oriented economy, the world has witnessed China's rise. The country now has the world's second largest GDP with an average 10 percent growth rate (World Bank, 2020) as well as an urbanisation rate that just went above 60 percent (Xinhua, 2020). A vast and still growing amount of research has been devoted to documenting, explaining, understanding and even predicting the future of China in this era of change. It may seem that China, arguably, has been increasingly demystified.

Yet my on-the-ground embodied experience of chaos and confusion suggests otherwise. The more time I spent in the field, the 'China' that emerged in front of me was becoming more mysterious than ever before. How could I make sense of such a 'messy' juxtaposition? As a native Chinese woman, born and raised in 1990s China, I had had the confident assumption that I knew 'China'. This was swept away soon after my arrival in the county town. I developed a vague sense that something more than the ongoing and unprecedented economic and urban changes in China were behind my overwhelming feelings. Something else was challenging and destabilising my perspective on China. This emerging awareness marked the starting point of this thesis. In this introductory chapter, I will first lay out the broad background of this project, starting from my personal impetus. I will then introduce China's newly emerging term — 'small-town youth'. This will be followed by my research questions and an overview of the thesis. It is worth mentioning that this thesis uses quotation marks on 'small town' and 'small-town youth' throughout, whenever they are used to represent generally-held images and identities associated with these places and people.

1.2. 'Small towns': the overlooked side of urban China

> They are not that fashionable, and do not have much character, and
> thus they are often ignored by mainstream media. They appear to live
> on isolated islands far away from cities, and yet they coalesce into a
> silent sea. They are China's most ordinary youth. (Yang, 2018)

These are the opening lines of a photo project documenting 'small-town
youth' by Zhazha Yang, who made a name for himself by photographing young
people in Beijing. According to the artist himself, only when he returned to his
hometown, in a county seat in Shandong, did he realize that he had 'ignored the
familiar young people' there while young people from metropolises had been
'dominating the headlines' (Yang, 2018). Selected photos were published online
under the title: *County town youth, the true colour of China*. Yang's online
photos received over 36,000 comments with thousands of upvotes each. The three
comments with the most upvotes were:

> Hometowns (*guxiang tu*) that one can't go back to! Small cities that one
> can't escape from!'

> Small county towns are actually the reality of China. *Beishangguang*[2] are
> only its surface and business card.

> [In county towns there are] too many petty crooks and new money. The
> *suzhi*[3] of the locals is also too low!'

Apart from the clearly opinionated and stigmatising assumptions articulated
in these comments about small towns and the young people there, what also
emerges from these comments is a shared sentiment of neglect, that China's
'reality' outside metropolises — China's 'surface and business card'— is

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[2]*Beishangguang* refers to big Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou.
'*Beishangguang*', as a term, first became popular on the internet with a heated discussion of
'escaping *beishangguang*', whereby young people, often new migrants and white-collar workers,
find life in the city, and particularly the high property prices there, too stressful.

[3] *Suzhi*, loosely translated into human quality. The term will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

underrepresented and people from 'small cities' and 'small county towns' are a 'silent' and 'ignored' mass living in 'isolated islands'.

When people imagine the people and life of contemporary China, examples from metropolises come to mind far more often than those from small towns, not just in popular media, but also in academia. In fact, the majority of studies of Chinese cities still focus on large metropolises (Lincoln, 2018). In the recently published book *Polarized Cities: Portraits of Rich and Poor in Urban China*, edited by Dorothy Solinger, a group of distinguished China studies scholars came together to discuss the worsening inequality and the formation of a 'caste-like' polarised society alongside China's unprecedented economic growth (Solinger, 2018, p. 4). The book covers, on the one hand, the urban poor, from migrant workers in Shenzhen as 'the passionate poor' (p. 85) to informal migrant recyclers in Beijing as 'on the rough edge of prosperity'(p.107), and, on the other hand, the urban rich, from urban elites in Shanghai's night clubs to businessmen based in Chengdu. While the discussion does provides an insight into post-reform China's sharp socio-economic cleavage, what is intriguing is that though the title refers to 'Urban China', the book really only focuses on what would more accurately be considered 'metropolis China'. Urban experiences in China are certainly not only exemplified by life in a metropolis. Other urban places, such as county towns, are also worth examining for compelling insights, and these will be the focus of this thesis.

Another example of this unequal attention within research on 'urban China' is found in the study of China's rural-urban migrant workers, a well-researched topic that has drawn an enormous amount of attention. A large amount of literature has examined the experiences of migrant workers in various urban metropolises such as Beijing (see among many other examples Yan, 2008; Gaetano, 2015; Jacka, 2005), Nanjing (Zavoretti, 2017) and Shenzhen (Ngai, 2005), just to name a few. However, as Carrillo (2011) points out in her book *Small Town China*, what is excluded from such rural village to urban metropolis migration tales is the work and life experiences of migrants in smaller urban centres that we still have little information about. It seems that for the places

considered in many of the studies of rural-urban migrants, 'urban' is equated with 'metropolis', so other urban places like county towns are again not taken into consideration. It seems that, indeed, we need to broaden what comes to our mind when we think of 'urban China'.

What is certain is that metropolises do not encompass the full range of the urban experience in today's China. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2018, the population of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou combined was 37.7 million, only making up 4.5% of China's urban population of 830 million (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Thus, life experiences in lower-tier urban centres are crucial to our understanding of contemporary China (see Kipnis, 2016; Carrillo, 2011). In fact, with technology becoming more widespread and quickly upgraded, urban places and life outside metropolises are getting an increasing amount of attention. This will be further explained later in relation to the recent rise of the term 'small-town youth'. However, my interest in understanding 'China' from the perspective of 'small towns' was initially driven by a rather personal impetus.

1.3. Personal impetus: an imagined hometown and *Ordinary World*

My query is close to my heart — my desire to make sense of 'China' is a direct result of my own displacement. For many years of education, I spent a considerable amount of time in different countries and places. It has been quite a journey, in both the literal and actual sense. Leaving China behind to study in Singapore at the age of 18 unexpectedly fuelled my desire to understand 'China'. At first, this desire served the purpose of identity formation for a fresh-off-the-boat overseas Chinese woman, helping me to cope with the unease and discomfort I felt in the face of life challenges in an unfamiliar environment. In fact, instead of 'China', what I was searching for was a deeper understanding of self and life. Soon, I found that my imagined homogeneity of 'China' was a shaky ground that failed to provide me with the solid coherent identity I needed to anchor myself to. I then scaled down my ambition and turned to an almost

intuitive search for a hometown — a somewhat cliché and romantic attempt to find one's place by finding one's roots.

'Hometown', like 'China', was an ambiguous imagination of a faraway place for me. I grew up in the compound of a state-owned enterprise located in eastern China. Such compounds have their own systems as a legacy of the socialist era — they exist in parallel to the local villages and cities, both administratively and culturally. Workers from all across China were assigned and posted to the compound, the culture of which was then marked by diversity rather than coherence. Growing up, I had the idea that this was where my home was but it was not my hometown— my roots were somewhere else.

This 'somewhere else' is where my father comes from — northern Shaanxi. Born in the 1960s, my father spent his childhood in a village in northern Shaanxi. Upon finishing high school in the town, he managed to get into a college in Sichuan Province and later was assigned to the state-owned enterprise. He moved to the compound upon graduation, where he met my mother, who had grown up in the compound. Growing up, I was only brought back to northern Shaanxi once every couple of years. My impression of what I consider to be my hometown comes more from the narratives of my parents than my own experiences. My mother, who grew up in the compound relatively privileged compared with my father, often repeated three stories when recounting her first trip to the region in the late 1980s. The first one was that when they went back to the village, she was stunned by the 'absolute poverty'— kids were running around naked simply because pants were unaffordable. The second story was the lack of commodities even in the county town — the only option of meat items in the shop was packed luncheon of a knock-off brand that was 'barely edible'. The third story was how far away and 'remote' the region was — the journey took three days and they had to take trains, then change to buses, and then mini buses. The closer they got, the more 'backward' and informal it became — one time, the mini bus caught fire and the driver just left and they had to find their own way to carry on. Interestingly, my dad also often shares two specific stories that create snapshots of his life in the region. The first one was of living in a small *yaodong* — a

traditional cave dwelling adjacent to a main cave, as shown in Figure 3 below, studying day and night under candle light, hungry in both literal and metaphorical senses, to prepare for the College Entrance Exam. He'd say: 'my biggest dream was to eat commercial rations and maybe be able to eat meat a bit more often than once a year — getting into a college was the only way.' The second story shared how excited and nervous he was when he started his journey to the neighbouring province, Sichuan, as a high school graduate — it was his first time leaving the county. The county town, marked by scarcity and 'remoteness', according to my mother's narrative, was 'so bustling and intimidating for a village boy like me. The county town is as far as I dared dream about.'

Figure 3 Yaodong – traditional cave-dwelling

(Source: author's own)

Little did he know that his fate, intertwined with the coming tide of the reform era that swept across China, would bring him to places far away from that mountainous northern Shaanxi county town, to live a life beyond his 'biggest dream'. In fact, the provision of 'commercial rations', the product of the socialist planned economy, was fully abolished in 1992 as part of the reform. This was the same year I was born. As my father recalls: 'the wildest dream I had, studying in that cave, was to live a county town — never in a million years would I even think that I would have a child who lives abroad.' His life story is typical of those who lived through the reform — one of change — the rapid speed and massive scale of which were beyond imagination. As a village boy growing up in pre-reform China, his spatial sense was tightly bound within the county — this would soon be drastically changed as China underwent the social-spatial reconfiguration instigated by the 1978 reform.

There is perhaps no literature other than Lu Yao's novel *Ordinary World* that better describes the momentum of the reform and the beginning phase of such social-spatial reconfiguration. The story is also situated in northern Shaanxi, and it was inspired by Lu Yao's own life — just like my dad, he was a boy from a poor northern Shaanxi village who struggled for upward mobility after the reform began. Covering the period from 1975 to 1985, the stories in *Ordinary World* reflect the drastic political and economic changes that took place in China from near the end of the Cultural Revolution to the early period of Reform and Opening. One of the key characters of the book is a young man, Sun Shaoping, whose story, according to Lu Yao, is inspired by the author's own experiences. Born into extreme poverty, village boy Shaoping goes through numerous struggles to achieve his dream of living an urban life outside the village

Although the dramatic socio-economic change instigated by the 1978 reform is a recurring theme in China's contemporary literature, *Ordinary World* has been ranked by various surveys as one of the most influential books in contemporary China, and has had significant and profound influences since it was first published in 1986. After winning the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize in 1991, Lu Yao and *Ordinary World* became household names. More than 30 years later, the novel

is still selling three million copies a year (Xinhua News, 2019). It has been repeatedly broadcast as an audio book by China National Radio over the years and twice adapted into TV dramas, reaching millions of Chinese listeners and viewers. Like many other Chinese people, I feel Lu Yao's work is part of my personal memory — although the collections of Lu Yao's work on the bookshelf at home never really caught my attention, when China National Radio rebroadcast *Ordinary World* in 2009 during the lunch hour, many of my high school classmates and I started listening to it on a daily basis. Years later, a readapted TV drama aired in 2015 and again won great popularity despite criticism — many of my friends and I watched and discussed the series at that time.

I chose O*rdinary World* as a reference for this thesis for two reasons: its realistic attempt at offering a holistic representation of the socio-spatial landscape of the time and its phenomenal popularity. Lu Yao strived to make *Ordinary Word* an account of the true reality of life across administrative levels from village to provincial capital with a realist approach. This is not to suggest that this thesis takes Lu Yao's representation as somehow unbiased, objective or neutral. On the contrary, I acknowledge that the work is imbued with the author's own values and views, which, however, are by no means only Lu Yao's own. The book's portrayal of life at the time resonates with millions of common readers. It is exactly these underlying common beliefs and values represented by the book and held by many that this thesis draws on. The phenomenal popularity of the book makes it quite relevant to study, as it continues to shape people's imagination of both the region of northern Shaanxi and China's broader socio-spatial landscape. Although the book dates back over 30 years, given how popular it remains, it keeps shaping the imagination of today to a certain extent by reinforcing a representation of the particular socio-spatial landscape at the early phase of the reform. It certainly shaped my imagination of my 'hometown'. When the 17-year-old me listened to *Ordinary World* on National Radio in 2009, its stories shaped my understanding of Chinese life and places in a profound way. In addition, the book's portrayal of the particular region of northern Shaanxi at the time remains influential. Over the years, when I introduced myself as

someone from Yulin, Shaanxi, which many people had never heard of, I would tell them that Yulin is part of northern Shaanxi (*shan bei*). On multiple occasions, instant recognition would follow — 'Northern Shaanxi! Like *Ordinary World*!' When the readapted TV drama went on air in 2015, several of my friends jokingly suggested that I should honour my northern Shaanxi origin by behaving, in their words, in a more 'rustic, impoverished and backward' fashion, despite knowing the story in *Ordinary World* was set between the mid-1970s and 1980s. It seems that northern Shaanxi is still imagined to be just like it is portrayed in *Ordinary World*.

Of course, the place and life in the northern Shaanxi region today would be significantly different from the setting of *Ordinary World,* as post-reform China has continued to reconfigure itself. A direct example would be that it now only takes less than six hours to drive from my home in eastern China to the county town, instead of the exhausting three-day trip required in the late 1980s. Such change and connectivity, however, as I have just shown, are often yet to translate into people's imagination of the place. The prevailing view of the county town being 'backward, remote and poor' is not only held by my city-born mother recalling visits in the 1980s, but also by many people including my friends today. Why and how is such socio-spatial imagination produced and reproduced? What are the realities of life in such places and how do they interplay with the overarching imagination? These are the questions that need to be answered not only in relation to my particular hometown but also in relation to the underrepresented 'small towns' of China in general, to which the new buzzword — 'small-town youth' *(xiaozhen qingnian)* — offers an entry point.

1.4. 'Small-town youth' on the rise

On 27th December 2019, I flew back to my home country of China from New Zealand, where I was studying. Flicking through the inflight magazine of the Chinese-owned airline, I noticed an article with an unusually long title: *You need to respect the youth in small towns. They are in control of the 24-hour voice of E-commerce Park*. The article featured a thought bubble in the pop-art-comic

style as shown in Figure 4 below, which reads: 'Let us draw a profile of China's economic figures for the year 2019: it is not retired Jack Ma,[4] not the fashionable white–collar workers … but small-town youth who sank all e-commerce'.

Eight days later, the night before my flight back to New Zealand, I was browsing through TV channels, and CCTV News, the news channel of government-owned China Central Television, caught my attention. The documentary television program *News Probe* was on, featuring two young people who, as reported, 'chose the unusual path' to make their living in their hometowns instead of 'going out [to the larger urban centres] to work', as most of their peers were doing. By sharing their everyday lives in their hometowns on online platforms, they both had become online celebrities with large numbers of followers. Yukang Shang was one of the 'stay-behind youth' who, according to this report, had 'escaped from the big city to hometown'. This featured young man, self-taught online and supported by the local government, became a promising poultry entrepreneur (CCTV, 2020).

Figure 4 Inflight magazine featuring 'small-town youth'

(Source: author's own)

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[4] The founder of Alibaba and one of China's biggest commercial giants.

It seems that stories of young people who reside outside the metropolises are everywhere, all of a sudden. Various news outlets have produced annual reports on 'small-town youth' (for example see Tian, 2019). On China's most popular social platform, WeChat, articles with 'small-town youth' themes have been widely circulated, many with '10wan plus' views.[5] Yet compared with this intense popular interest, academia is still to catch up. While a search returns just a handful of publications with the English keywords 'small-town youth' and 'China', a search in Chinese for *xiaozhen qingnian* in CNKI[6], refined to include academic papers, conference papers and Master's and PhD dissertations, brings back 117 results as of 23rd February, 2020. Despite being a new topic, the number of Chinese-language publications containing articles and studies on 'small-town youth' each year has seen a sharp surge, increasing from 1 in 2013 to 15 in 2017, 28 in 2018 and eventually 51 in 2019.

However, a closer look at these publications suggests that the topic of 'small-town youth' is still treated as a homogenous subject. Among the limited number of studies investigating the lives and mobility of 'small-town youth', apart from a few preliminary attempts that use qualitative methods (see Wang & Wu, 2019 for a brief study), those taking a quantitative approach remains the majority. For example, Luo (2019) surveyed over a thousand youth to find their reasons for returning to their hometowns. His results suggested that the reasons included the 'calling of the government policy', 'young people's social responsibilities' and 'fulfilment of personal will'. Guo & Lu (2020) analysed census data with statistical modelling and argue that housing, social capital and accumulated migration time are all important factors influencing young people's mobility. Similarly, Zhao and Sun (2019) conducted an online survey among county town youth and drew a range of general conclusions such as: surfing the internet and gathering with relatives and friends are their main recreational activity; the majority believe that, although it offers more opportunities, life in big cities is too

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[5] 10wan, or 100k, is the upper limit of views. '10wan plus' has become a fixed term describing an article that has gone viral, that is, that has been widely reposted and circulated.

[6] China's main academic database, similar to SCOPUS

stressful; and most of them are hopeful about the prospects for themselves and the county. Though they provide valuable insights, these particular kinds of qualitative studies have been criticised for their oversimplification, and for risking reinforcing positivistic-empiricist presumptions that help little in deepening our understanding (Liu, 2009). In fact, an analysis of the 117 pieces of 'small-town youth' literature reveals that the majority of keywords that appear in the texts, ranging from 'short video', to 'consumption culture', to 'film industry' to 'party construction work', very much reinforce popular yet problematic discourses around the term. These keywords are, in fact, shaping our current imagination of 'small-town youth', which centres around three popular representations – the marginalised protagonists, the consumers with bad taste and the entrepreneurial returnees.

The marginalised protagonists

On 20th June 2019, on my long drive to Wubu for another period of fieldwork, I stopped for a break at a highway service station in Shanxi, the neighbouring province. A huge billboard advertising the upcoming opening of the FolkCulture Zoo (*minsu dongwuyuan*) in Jia Village caught my interest. Besides not being able to imagine what a 'folk culture zoo' would feature, I was quite interested in the word 'Jia'. In just the previous month, the famous filmmaker Jia Zhangke had hosted a new literature festival in Jia Village as part of a local cultural construction initiative that also included Jia's movie-themed restaurant, cinema and art center (Gao, 2019). Partially financed by Jia Zhangke himself, these establishments also received financial and policy support from several levels of the government (ibid). No doubt this famous filmmaker had 'made it', gaining both commercial and official recognition. Ironically, Jia had operated as an underground filmmaker since his debut in 1996, and his credentials as a director had only been restored by the Film Bureau of the People's Republic of China in 2004 (Jaffee, 2004); by 2019, he had become a celebrated figure by the local government. In his early days, Jia received far more international than domestic recognition, winning prizes at international movie festivals in Berlin,

Venice, Vancouver and Busan (ibid). Only since winning the 2006 Venice Film Festival's top award, the Golden Lion, has Jia become widely celebrated within China.

Jia's initial rough relationship with the government was due largely to him being one of the pioneers in China's arts and cultural realm of portraying the precarious lives of the marginalised individuals in small towns, long before 'small-town youth' became a catchy term (Dang, 2017; Liu, 2006). Jia is 'a small-town youth' himself. Born in a small town of Shanxi in 1970 and later migrating to Beijing for training, he self-identified as a 'cinematic migrant worker' (*dianing mingong*) in the precarious early days of his filmmaking career (Wang, 2013). In the mid-1990s, dissatisfied with the prevailing dichotomous representation of a stable and romanticised life in contemporary urban and rural China, Jia felt the urge to represent the place he came from and the people he was most familiar with, both of which were overlooked by the silver screen at the time (Zhang, 2010; Zhang, 2011). To Jia, the 'shabby, formless fabric of everyday life' in small county towns deeply reflects the lived multiplicity of a 'disparate, uneven, and polarised society' hidden under China's meta-narrative of its economic miracle and progressive modernisation (Zhang, 2011, p. 137).

Jia's own 'small-town youth' narrative is a poignant and evocative one. In his book, Jia wrote about a spontaneous trip to visit his friends back home:

> Arriving around mid-night, I took a taxi and went straight to a small restaurant . . . As I expected, all my buddies were there, as they had nowhere else to go. They gathered at this restaurant every day, killing time drinking and gambling. They never had to make an appointment to see each other (Jia, 2009, p. 170 as cited in Zhang, 2011, p. 153).

To Jia, this group of small-town friends to whom he dedicates his work are 'brothers who are just about to repeat the same routine of eating and drinking, to endure the same solitude and emptiness' (ibid). Clearly, having 'nowhere else to go' extends beyond its literal meaning — it is an 'emptiness' with a sense of 'hopelessness on the margins of Chinese modernisation [that is, far away from the glamour of Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen]' (Zhang, 2011, p. 138, also see

Holtmeier, 2014). The status of small-town youth thus constitutes the leitmotif of his films. A quick look at Jia's influential *Hometown Trilogy* will reveal that all three movies have a 'small-town youth' storyline featuring characters with a strong desire for a life in a larger city of the 'outside' world which, more often than not, fails them. 'Small-town youth' are thus portrayed as being trapped in small towns to a life of dullness and displacement. As eloquently put by Professor Xudong Zhang, the shabby everyday landscape in the county town Jia portrays is 'a ghostly landscape filled with wandering souls and the scattered body parts of shattered dreams, suppressed rage, disappointments and despair running so deep that they, like a chronic disease, become part of the quotidian routine of normalcy' (Zhang, 2011, pp. 137-138).

Trapped between rural and urban, bordering the margins of modernisation and embodying a constant sense of despair and loss, these phrases describe not only the small towns but also 'small-town youth' themselves. In fact, Jia is often credited as the one who 'discovered China's *xiancheng*' (Liu, 2006, p. 166). *Xiancheng*, the Chinese word for county seat, the type of small town that set the scene in many of Jia's films, functions as an important geographical-cultural crossroad marker in China, representing where rural meets urban. However, in Jia's film production, the *xiancheng* goes beyond its technical administrative definition of a geographically bounded small town and becomes a full-fledged concept on its own — in Jia's oeuvre, as Zhang argues, the *xiancheng* represents 'a state of being, an existential mood' (Zhang, 2011, p. 143). It is a rural-urban in-between place, being contradictorily both, yet awkwardly neither. The urban status of the *xiancheng* is clear administratively, yet unlike the 'true urban' metropolises, *xiancheng* are often only seen as nominally urban. They do not possess the 'urban sophistication, fashion, high-paying white-collar jobs, and access to national cultural and political power and to international, global capital and ideas' that constitute metropolises like *beishangguang* (Zhang, 2011, p. 142). On the contrary, small towns like *xiancheng* are the 'hinterland' on the margin as 'an aching reminder' of the compromised if not failed social transformation from socialist industrialisation, to post-socialist reforms to 'the sweeping market

forces, whose forces and edges, brutal as they were' ended up being 'half-measures at best when confronted with this dull, unruly reality' of small towns (Zhang, 2011, p. 142).

Though Jia's 'small-town youth' themed movies were made from the late 1990s to early 2000s, Jia's representations, as mentioned, hold sway in today's imagination. A good example of this is found in another 10wan plus WeChat article, which refers to Jia and his work by describing small-town youth as 'trapped between hometown and metropolis'. It advises small-town youth, who reportedly often feel they have 'nowhere to settle', should stop 'despising the ordinary past' so that they can 'find and save themselves'(Lin, 2017). In other words, the line of narrative of lack and despair represented in and greatly influenced by Jia's films has heavily conceptualised 'small-town youth' as victims and, in addition, has conceptualised small towns as existing on the margin — as if they have failed to be fully transformed into their modern counterparts.

The distasteful consumers

Though 'small-town youth' themed films earned Jia Zhangke many trophies in international film festivals, the 'small-town youth' phenomenon only caught wider attention and emerged as a particular term once their consumption power was noticed by the commercial giants. A new expression was born — *xiachen shichan*. While the literal translation of this expression is 'sinking market', it actually refers to the markets in lower-tier cities where the trickling down of consumption reach. This expression refers to the buying power of small-town and rural consumers as opposed to those living in first- and second-tier cities (Fu, 2019). It was the phenomenal success of the e-commerce platform Pinduoduo that first drew people's attention to the vast business opportunities existing in this part of the market. By focusing on domestic markets below third-tier cities (Li, 2019), Pinduoduo became a 'commercial miracle' that rose amid the seemingly saturated e-commerce market dominated by established and mature key players.

The rapid growth of Pinduoduo was unexpected by the e-commerce industry. Founded in 2015, it was listed on the NASDAQ in less than 3 years time, which is astonishingly fast when compared with the 10 years its conventional counterparts like Alibaba and JD took to achieve the same success (Wang & Wang, 2019). The success of Pinduoduo brought the awareness that 'whomever wins the small towns wins the entire market' (Zhu, 2018), and other e-commerce giants rushed to follow in Pinduoduo's footsteps.

Being in tune with new technologies, small-town youth have thus gone from an overlooked social class, belonging to neither side of the rural-urban dichotomy, to a newly found and increasingly powerful group of consumers (Huo, 2018; Jiang & Luo, 2019). They have gained noteworthy public attention, as evidenced by their ubiquitous appearances: from that inflight magazine I picked up on the plane to multiple viral 10wan plus articles on WeChat. For example, an article entitled '*Small-town youth's consumption rises* argues that small-town youth represent a bottomless consumer market when compared with urban elites (Fu, 2018). Similarly, Zhang (2018) wrote about how Japanese clothing brand Uniqlo, following its success among first-tier cities and white-collar workers, was making a strategic move to target small-town Chinese youth. Jia (2018) argued that 'small-town youth are carrying the box office of Chinese movies', especially movies that are seen as uncultured and low in value to the elite viewers from the metropolises.

Indeed, the 'sinking market' refers to not only the material consumption of small-town youth facilitated by e-commerce platforms, but also their cultural consumption of media from movies to short videos. The 2017 domestic patriotic action movie *Wolf Warrior 2* broke multiple box-office records and became the highest-grossing film in China, earning a whopping 5.68 billion RMB with only 18% of ticket sales coming from first-tier cities and 42% from third-tier and below, once again consolidating the crucial significance of small-town youth to the box office (He, 2018). Not only writers of popular media but also academics have become interested in small-town youth from the perspective of their movie consumption. For example, Ling (2017) noticed the rise of the term 'small-town

youth' within the movie industry in the year 2015 and discussed the relationship between China's box office growth and 'small-town youth'. Others have also picked up on the trend that the number of 'small-town youth' moviegoers is surpassing that of 'white-collar elites'. Cui (2018) further concluded that small-town youth prefer films offering strong visual and sensual impact to those with depth (also see Wang, 2106). Lv (2019) also recently did a Master's thesis on *The film consumption patterns of 'small-town youth'*, with an explicit research goal of 'prospering the domestic film box office'.

On the surface, it may seem that small-town youth have gained status, rising from being represented as unheard and unseen marginalized victims in underground films to become a real-life sought-after group of consumer superpowers. However, while being celebrated for boosting box office profits, small-town youth are also being accused of and even shamed for supporting the low-quality and crass domestic films that they are believed to prefer. Their consumption power is seen to facilitate the survival and even success of certain aesthetics and values deemed undesirable in the eyes of the so-called 'real urban elites'(Hu, 2016; Tan, 2020). For example, Wang, Fan and Hong (2019) argue that there is a 'mismatch' between their 'cultural life situation' and 'enormous spending potential' and that the 'complicated cultural environment' has put small-town youth in a position that is not good for 'shaping a consumption culture that matches the outstanding national culture'(p. 1). Jiang and Luo (2019) also warn readers about the danger of the cultural preferences of small-town youth being 'abducted' by capital and markets, arguing that the cultural needs of small-town youth should be 'positively guided'(p. 2). In other words, small-town youth are often stigmatised as a passive group, an easy target to be exploited for 'having money but knowing little about art' (He, 2018).

Similar to the domestic movie industry, short video-sharing platforms have experienced phenomenal success accredited to small-town youth. There have been many recent studies approaching small-town youth through the lens of new media platforms such as Kuaishou (see Liu & An, 2019; Sun & Ma, 2019; Wang & He, 2018; Jia & Huang, 2019). Kuaishou is one of the most popular video-

sharing platforms in China; the majority of its users consist of rural or third- and fourth-tiered city-based Chinese youth (Huo, 2016; Lin & de Kloet, 2019). With such a demographic group, Kuaishou is seen as embracing the aesthetics of the vernacular and representing the grassroots and underclass who are marginalised in mainstream popular culture (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Kuaishou users share a wide range of short videos, from simple footage that captures their day-to-day county lives to absurd shows featuring the consumption of bizarre food and boorish and vulgar comedy performances (Li, Tan & Yang, 2019). The rustic taste and unabashed earthiness of these videos are often despised by the mainstream (Wang & He, 2018; Tan et al., 2020). Kuaishou is often seen as a platform peddling execrable content for low *suzhi* viewers (Huo, 2016; Li, Tan & Yang, 2019). Despite the criticism, the financial success of Kuaishou, with an estimated worth of over US$2 billion, is indisputable (Tan et al., 2020). According to the 2019 'small-town youth report' produced by Kuaishou in collaboration with China Youth Daily, around 2.3 billion small-town youth users are active on the platform every year, publishing over 28 billion short videos that receive over 800 billion likes and 180 billion comments.

To conclude, small-town youth came into the spotlight as the market started to notice their vast consumption potential. However, the current discussion around 'small-town youth' and the domestic film industry and short video sharing platforms also shows that small-town youth are often stigmatised as stereotypical passive consumers brimming with spending potential but lacking in taste. Many studies of this group treat small-town youth as passive consumers in a way that overlooks their agency as well as their heterogeneity. The third popular representation, which I will examine in the next section, similarly homogenises this dynamic group of young people into another category, that of the entrepreneurial returnees.

The entrepreneurial returnees

Small-town youth have gradually made it into official discourse as well, as consumers and entrepreneurs. A very recent news piece by the state news platform Xinhua News Agency reports that the consumption habits of small-town youth will be further encouraged and facilitated, citing President Xi, who points out that China's expanding domestic need and consumption market will generate significant demand and thus boost China's economic growth (Wang, Wu & Huang, 2019). During the 'two sessions'[7] held in March 2019, *China Youth Daily*, the official newspaper of Communist Youth League of China, did a special 'small-town youth'-themed report series discussing a wide range of related topics ranging from their consumption patterns (Zhu, 2019a) and cultural life (Zhu, 2019b) to their preferences regarding hometowns and big cities (Du, 2019). The official coverage features how small towns are becoming more desirable places to live because they possess increasing 'metropolis taste'(Yan, Song &Lei, 2019a) ; thus, small-town youth are becoming more like 'metropolis people'(Chen, 2019).

A closer look at recent official news reports reveals that, apart from mentioning the diversification of recreational activities and employment opportunities in 'small towns', many features manage to conclude with a story of a successful young small-town entrepreneur who chose to return from a big city to take advantage of internet technology and government policies encouraging entrepreneurs to create successful businesses (Li, 2019; Zhu, 2020). Similar stories are seen on other platforms of state media. Examples include the CCTV documentary I watched the night before heading back to New Zealand and the documentary *Surging China* (*jidang zhongguo*), both of which were made in celebration of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). *Surging China* was co-produced and broadcast by several official TV Channels. Episode 13 was entitled 'Small-town Youth'(First Finance, 2017).

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[7] *Lianghui*, referring to the annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which are two of the most important political meetings of China.

As one would have expected, the documentary took an upbeat and somewhat patriotic tone, beginning with the presenter stating: 'Different from that of their father's generation, the true colour of the new generation of small-town youth is no longer that of sadness'. Two successful young small-town entrepreneurs were featured, one of whom had created his billboard-painting business by finding clients and sourcing materials from the internet, while the other had established a bubble tea chain by focusing on the needs and preferences of fellow small-town youth. Following the stories, the narrator explained that 'small-town youth' are the 'main force of urbanisation' and they are traversing between the rural and urban, 'pursuing their dreams' and 'contributing' to China's 'rural revitalisation'.

Reappearing keywords in the official discourse such as 'rural revitalisation', 'the internet' and 'entrepreneur' are in tune with a series of official policy agendas, like the rural revitalisation plan. Officially published in 2018 as part of the No.1 Central Document[8], this plan set out implementation details ranging from improving infrastructure to further developing information technology and encouraging 'social talents' (*shehui rencai*) to 'devote to the construction of the countryside'(Xinhua News, 2018). Information technologies like the internet have been a major focus of the Chinese government's development plan. In 2015, a policy agenda called *Internet+* was introduced by Prime Minister Li Keqiang as part of the 'Chinese Dream' of national rejuvenation proposed earlier by the President Xi Jinping (Keane & Chen, 2019). *Internet+* is a national development strategy that focuses on upgrading digital infrastructure and focusing technological innovation towards a structural transformation of the national economy (The State Council, 2015). As a continuation of the state's economic restructuring plan, which aims to replace the unsustainable export-driven, investment-dependent model with a consumption-based and innovation-driven economy enabled by the connectivity of fast-developing and widespread internet technology, *Internet+* aims to encourage and nurture small start-ups, entrepreneurship and innovation, not only in the digital industry but also in

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[8] No.1 Central Document: 中央一号文件. The first policy statement released by China's central authorities each year; the document is seen as an indicator of policy priorities.

traditional sectors from agriculture to education (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Central to the *Internet+* blueprint is another state policy agenda —*Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation (dazhong chuangxin, wanzhong chuangye)* (The State Council, 2015a). Proposed months after the *Internet+* policy, this agenda aims to capture the creativity and innovative power of *caogen* (grassroots people) as well as further encourage and support grassroots entrepreneurship. According to Premier Li Keqiang, besides producing 'new economic driving power', *Internet+* creates a sharing platform that stages *Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, offering opportunities to not only techno-elites but also 'millions of *caogen*' to develop their talents and special value, which will eventually and profoundly affect 'the economy, society and everyday life' (K. Li, 2018 as cited in Lin & de Kloet, 2019).

In conclusion, the official discourse positions small-town youth within the national development meta-narrative as not only the holders of spending power that will boost domestic consumption, but also as potential entrepreneurs who are encouraged to return to small towns and the countryside. Small-town youth are thus expected to contribute to the ongoing strategic structural economic transformation that the government hopes will lead China onto a more sustainable path of growth.

1.5. Research Questions

While the notion 'small-town youth' is clearly on the rise, it remains an ambiguous yet nevertheless value-laden term. These different discourses may not be able to pin down exactly what 'small-town youth' are like, but we can see what they are clearly not — they are not the so-called 'urban elite'. According to these popular discourses of representation, 'small-town youth' are the young people who desire yet fail to be transformed into urban selves; their spending power does not make up for their lack of urban elite taste and they are in fact nothing more than easily exploited consumers. According to these discourses, they are the grassroots people who will be better off, as deemed by the state, with a place in the rural countryside. 'Small-town youth' may no longer be 'forgotten',

yet a closer look at these discourses raises the question of whether they are indeed truly heard and seen. Who are the people behind the notion? The same question applies to 'small towns' as exemplified by my story of the imagined hometown. Albeit the drastic sea change sweeping across China, a certain imagination of socio-spatial landscape persists. What is the real place like, behind the imagination?

The overarching goal of this thesis is to answer the question, 'How does China's socio-spatial imagination influence the lived experiences of 'small-town youth?' To achieve this goal, I aim to answer the following specific questions:

1. What does the notion 'small-town youth' represent?

2. What does the notion of 'small town' represent?

3. How can we research for difference?

4. Why do 'small-town youth' choose to relocate to county towns?

5. How do 'small-town youth' see the county town and their life in the county town? How can this be understood?

1.6. Thesis Overview

In this introduction, I first point out the lack of academic attention paid to China's lower-tier urban places. These so-called 'small towns' in fact make up a significant portion of urban China and thus need to be examined. By laying out my personal impetus behind the thesis, I explain how the 'small town' of my hometown is overshadowed by imagination from the past that sometimes fails to fully incorporate on-the-ground changes. I then introduce the notion of 'small-town youth', pointing out stereotypical popular representations that need further scrutiny. The chapter then ends with research questions and an overview of the thesis.

Chapter 2 examines the notion of 'small town' behind the notion of 'small-town youth' and provides an overview of post-reform China's socio-spatial hierarchy as the broader context of this thesis. By introducing the context of the

county town of this study, I first point out the town's ambiguous rural/urban status. I then situate the county town within post-reform China's urban-centered and regionally uneven development. I argue that the 'small town' is a collective imagination of China's peripheral urban places as opposed to the 'metropolis' as the center. I then suggest that the reverse mobility of 'small-town youth serves as an entry point to examine and question this hierarchical socio-spatial imagination.

Chapter 3 traces China's binary 'small town- metropolis' urban imagination to the 'Third World city- global city' binary that prevails in urban study in general. I then introduce 'ordinary cities' that calls for urban study to move beyond the dominance of Western urban modernity. I propose reading for difference as a conceptual tool that contributes to knowing beyond hegemony and dominance. In addition, I argue that the openness of place as lived and performed in everyday lives allows diversity and non-coherneces, and thus could serve as a fertile ground for reading for differences.

Chapter 4 tackles how this pursuit of openness is translated into a responsive methodology. Reflecting on the failures and setbacks I encountered in the field, I first explain that such openness is built on the acceptance and embracing of the uncertain and unknown. Through rich ethnographic details, I show how the fieldwork I conducted was a transformative process during which I transcended multiple structural binaries, allowing knowledge to emerge unrestrained from preexisting frameworks.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the so-called 'small-town youth' based on their biographic information as well as their narratives on the subject of their relocation to the county town. Firstly, an analysis on their biographic information reveals them as heterogenous subjects. This not only defies the notion of 'small-town youth' itself but also points out the need to rethink the conventional categories commonly adopted in approaching subjects of post-reform China. Secondly, I argue that while *danwei* (work unit) emerges as an overarching theme in their narratives of relocation to the county town, by performing reading for difference I make visible the complex nature of their decision-making. I argue that the discourses of 'small-town youth' are shaped by the modernist teleology

which positions post-reform China's subjects on a collective trajectory evolving them into modern urban individuals of desire and consumption. Only by refusing to align with such teleology could the subjects no longer be reduced to a single trajectory and freed towards openness and possibilities.

Chapter 6 offers a discussion on the county town through analysis of 'small-town youth's' narratives on the county town. I show that the county town is overwhelmingly spoken of as an undesirable and inferior place, which I argue is underlined by the ingrained belief in and pursuit of Western urban modernity. Drawing on ethnographic observation, I show that while 'small-town youth' themselves partake in the construction of such socio-spatial imagination informed by modernist teleology, a reading for difference that pulls out the contradictions and non-coherences also serve to conceptually open up 'small town' to ordinary places lived and performed that allows enactment of possibilities and hope.

Chapter 7 wraps up with a final overview of my main arguments. I highlight 'openness' as the ethos of this thesis. I also shed light on how Taoist understanding could contribute to the academic agenda of knowing differently.

2. POSITIONING A 'SMALL TOWN' IN POST-REFORM CHINA

2.1. Introduction

It is impossible to have a place lower than village, it is the end of the world. I had two relationships here — maybe just to find something to do. With one of them, I only fell in love with the coat from Beijing. If she had not worn it, then she would no longer have been sublime… The darkness is like a pair of arms restraining me. Oh I would, I just would raise children with a gentle girl here, spend my whole life here. Because of this, I cried and swore to myself to leave now, to the town, to the county. And as if this was not enough, to the city, to the provincial capital, to the coast, to the municipality, to the national capital, to New York! (A Yi, *Modelled Youth,* 2012, p. 11, my own translation).

This is a quote from A Yi's novel, *Modelled Youth,* based on his own 'small-town youth' life experience. What comes through is his despair of being trapped at the 'lowest place', followed with his burning desire to move upwards along the urban hierarchy to get as far as possible away from the rural. Looking closer at A Yi's account, what is interesting is that the layout of his desired path differs from the official administrative hierarchy (town-county-(prefectural) city- provincial capital- municipality-national capital) by adding 'the coast' somewhere in the middle and jumping to 'New York' as a final destination. I have pointed out that 'small-town youth' is a very ambiguous concept. In this chapter, I argue that, similarly, 'small town' is also a collective imagination — instead of being strictly defined by the administrative hierarchy or the actual size in terms of population and land area, it is the product of post-reform China's regionally uneven urban-

centred development strategy. To establish the 'small town' concept, I will first introduce the context of Wubu, which will then be situated in the broader context of the uneven development of post-reform China. I then argue that examining the reverse mobility of 'small-town youth' provides an entry point to problematise and destabilise the urban imagination that is based on the 'small town-metropolis' binary.

2.2. Entering the 'small town' of Wubu

In December 2015, I paid my first proper visit to the small town of Wubu county seat, accompanied by a family member. Before starting the trip, we met up with two Wubu locals in Yulin City, who, along with my family member, could not work out why I was interested in conducting a research project in such a small town. Their opinions were disguised as a series of questions:

What's there to see in this shabby (*po*) place?

Life there is too hard (*jianku*). Is there anything interesting to see? If you want to see interesting things, you should go to the cities.

Coming from abroad, you should at least match with Xi'an.[9] Why choose a small, backward (*luohou*) place?

I was taken aback by these comments, as I assumed that one would speak of their hometown with at least some degree of fondness, if not pride, perhaps introducing some facts of interest about local traditions, cuisines and tourist attractions, especially to a stranger who they had just met. However, on hindsight, looking at the three prevailing discourses around 'small-town youth', I realise that perhaps I should not have been that surprised. In Jia's *Hometown Trilogy*, small towns exist within the dull hinterland and are the cemeteries of the shattered hopes and dreams of the small-town youth who fail to get out. In the eyes of the commercial giants, small towns, where a marginal underclass culture prevails, are an easy target for exploitation. Also, while the state often

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[9] Xi'an is the capital city of Shaanxi province.

emphasises that small towns are becoming more desirable as they increasingly resemble metropolises, the fact that many policies aim to encourage people to return speaks for itself, the subtext being that, at least for now, most small towns and countryside villages are still considered to be undesirable. Is Wubu county town like this? This section will first provide some basic background information about Wubu. Then, following a more detailed description of my visit, I will use Wubu county town's landscape of juxtaposition to introduce the ambiguous status of the 'small town', situated somewhere between between rural and urban.

Situating Wubu: a county town in northern Shaanxi

Located at the northern end of Shaanxi, Wubu County is by far the smallest of the 9 counties of the prefecture-level region of Yulin by any statistical standard — land area, population or GDP (Yulin Statistics Bureau, 2020). The Wubu county town, as shown in Figure 5 below, is 176km from Yulin City and 628km from the provincial capital city Xi'an (Wubu Government, 2019). Thirty percent of the 84,000 county residents reside in the county town (ibid). Yulin has a total population of 3.7 million, covering an area of 43,578 square kilometres (Yulin Government, 2020), meaning that Wubu is a small player in the wider region.

Situated in a semi-arid climate zone with long cold winters and sandstorm-prone springs, northwestern regions of China were considered among the least developed areas in China. The northern Shaanxi region consists of two prefectural regions — Yulin and the famous 'red capital', Yan'an. Sitting on the west side of the Yellow River, the mountainous northern Shaanxi area sheltered CCP soldiers for recuperation after their defeat by the national party and gave them space to prepare for the subsequent retreat — the famous 'long march'. The Yellow River served as a natural boundary that provided protection for the CCP. These 'old revolutionary base areas' are remote and poor areas far from centres of power. In fact, not only the 'old revolutionary base area' of northern Shaanxi, but also the rest of western China have always been seen as relatively 'backward' and poor when compared with the east.

Figure 5 Location of Wubu

(Source: created using dataset "V6 1990 CITAS GBK Encoding" from CHGIS Dataverse, Harvard University. Dataset DOI: 10.7910/DVN/T27RQO)

Until the mid-1980s, agriculture was the dominant source of income in this area. However, since the late 1980s, the shift in development focus to energy resource development has opened up a new growth chapter for Yulin. Its abundant fossil resources have attracted investments in coal and gas projects and created a large amount of wealth (Watson, Yang & Jiao, 2013). Yulin's GDP has been skyrocketing, becoming one of the highest among Chinese cities (Zhang et al., 2009). Although conscious of the need for a structural transformation towards a more sustainable economy, the mayor proudly pointed out, in an interview in 2019, that Yulin's economy ranked sixth largest in all China's western cities and as the largest among prefectural cities that are not provincial capitals (Zhang, 2019). He suggested Yulin's GDP has increased by 7,700 times since the founding of the PRC, and its GDP per capita is now successfully 'catching up with developed coastal cities' (ibid). The mayor was statistically correct: according to the latest official data, in 2018 Yulin's GDP per capita was

RMB112,845, approaching Shanghai's RMB135,000 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).As suggested by the mayor's statements, Yulin takes great pride in being able to align economically with 'developed coastal cities' – this reflects China's unequal regional economic landscape which will be discussed in coming sections.

Specifically, within Yulin, the inequalities of regional development are rather extreme. There is a clear division of the 'rich north' and 'poor south' mainly due to the difference in possession of natural resources. Out of the 9 counties of Yulin, Wubu is by far the poorest. By the end of 2019, Wubu's GDP of RMB2.7 billion sat at the bottom of all counties in Yulin , significantly lower than that of the second last county with RMB5.8 billion, while the richest county, Shenmu, has a GDP of a whopping RMB136.3 billion, thanks to its prospering coal industry (Yulin Statistics Bureau, 2020). Until very recently, Wubu was classified as a National Poverty County.

Wubu's disadvantage in terms of its lack of coal is slightly made up for by another kind of resource. Wubu prides itself on its connection with China's contemporary revolutionary history, and multiple tourism development projects underway centre around this. Its location on the Yellow River, which serves as the natural boundary between Wubu and its neighboring Shanxi province, gives Wubu its historical value. During the civil war, Mao crossed the Yellow River in 1948 at a ferry crossing in Wubu. This was a significant strategic move, marking the beginning of the CCP taking control of eastern China, and finally leading to the CCP winning the civil war. Thus, Wubu and the rest of the northern Shaanxi region, normally referred to as 'old revolutionary base areas'(*geming laoqu* 革命老区), hold a significant position in the history of the revolution. Wubu has been trying hard to profit from this history. Local government has invested heavily in developing tourism, and one major site is the ferry crossing, where Mao crossed the Yellow River. The site, just like many other places in China, went through massive changes during my visits over the years — at first it was just a spot marked by a stone sign, hidden in the high grass and easily missed (see Figure 6 below). In my last visit in 2019, it had become a well-developed site, featuring

Figure 6 Ferry crossing, 2017

(Source: author's own)

Figure 7 Ferry crossing, 2019

(Source: author's own)

brand new squares, a monument, giant slogans with Mao's portrait printed on the hills, and an exhibition hall with a luxurious bathroom (see Figure 7 below). In fact, this is only one of the many construction projects going on in Wubu as part of the government's attempt to develop tourist economies; others include a thermal pool resort and a "mini town" around the Yellow River waterfall. These new projects are rapidly changing the landscape of the county.

Entering the county town – an ambiguous rural-urban inbetween

The two and a half hour drive on the highway from Yulin's Hi-tech Industrial Development Zone to Wubu county town brought quite a change of scenery. While the former resembles a 'Manhattanized style' (Huang et al., 2018, p. 360) crowded with skyscrapers built as part of the latest urbanisation project,[10] Wubu county town is best described as a 'juxtaposition'. Carrillo (2011) described the small-town site of her fieldwork in a similar county seat in Shanxi, 'as a clumsy juxtaposition of the old and new, the traditional (rural) and the modern'(p. xi), such that the rural migrant workers there did not appear as foreign and out of place as they always did in big cities. Because the small town sits in a narrow valley looking across to Shanxi Province across the Yellow River, the expansion of Wubu county town is restricted by the natural landscape and thus has turned out to be somehow layered — along the slope of the hills sit the traditional cave-dwellings and at the foot of the hill, modern-style high-rise buildings spring from the flatland by the river, extending along the valley.

A walk in the county town left me with a surreal feeling, as I took in the obvious contrast of the coexisting urban and rural that I noticed when I first arrived. Standing on a construction site that would turn into a magnificent park before my next field trip, I could see the bare hills on the other side of the river, high-rise buildings next to me, and, showing from the gaps between these, older

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[10] The establishment of high-tech development zones as a common practice of local governments across China has been criticised for inflating urbanisation rates without achieving the actual urbanisation of the overall landscape or economy (Yew, 2012).

low-rise buildings decorated with a touch of European style. Then, further up the hill, the brick cave dwellings, which date back even further, can be seen (see Figure 8 below). The trace of urban development has been more or less visualised in this town, as also shown in Figures 9 and 10. On the outskirts of the town, where the geological conditions allow, cave dwellings are being progressively replaced by high-rise buildings — it is development and modernisation at work, which will be discussed in Chapter 6. It is this landscape of juxtaposition that really interested as well as confused me— the surrounding high-rise buildings, apartments, hotels and supermarkets resemble those in a modern city, yet a walk down a short alley reveals the most traditional dwellings seen in rural villages. For a 'toddler scholar' whose own binary thinking was yet to be fundamentally transformed, it seemed impossible to pin down the notion of the 'small town' to either of the dichotomous labels — is Wubu rural or urban? Is it modern or traditional? Is it developed or backward? What is Wubu?

Figure 8 A scene of juxtaposition in the county town

(Source: author's own)

Figure 9 Yaodong next to a high-rise residential building

(Source: author's own)

Figure 10 New building replacing yaodong near completion

(Source: author's own)

Within the confusion, at least one thing was clear: that this co-existence could be seen as a visual reflection of the town's ambiguous status between the rural and urban. First of all, the rural-urban boundary is becoming increasingly muddled as a result of accelerated urbanisation, during which institutional settings for the criteria for city and town designation have gone through a series of revisions (Smart& Zhang, 2016; Shen, 2005). Besides, 'town' in general, is an ambiguous term in China's rural-urban context. There are three types of towns: township (*xiang*), market town (*ji zhen*), and statutory/designated town (*jianzhi zhen*). The administrative and economic capabilities of the different types of town vary greatly even though they officially sit at the same horizontal administrative level. Statutory towns are far more urban in nature and are also the only type of town out of the three that are considered 'urban' (Ma, 1992). The county town is a statutory town whose status within the urban hierarchy has been approved by the appropriate provincial authorities according to the guidelines of the State Council (Guldin, 2018). Being the host of county authorities, the county town, though still at the same administrative level as other towns across the county, has obvious advantages as the county capitals function as centres of administration, economy, trade, transportation and culture (Carrillo, 2011).

Regardless, we can see that county towns sit at the bottom tier of China's urban hierarchy. Official census and other indices usually recognise the following as 'urban'– four 'city level' areas including metropolises, large cities, medium-sized cities, and small cities and one 'town level' area which is *jianzhi zhen* (Ma, 1992). Thus we can draw a rural-urban continuum of China based on the official administrative division: village-township (*xiang*)-market town (*ji zhen*)-statutory/designated town(*jianzhi zhen*)-small city-medium-sized city-large city-metropolis. Statutory towns including county towns are bottom urban layers with stronger and closer ties to the rural.

However, when it comes to everyday discourse, like the widely used term 'small-town youth', 'small town' is an even more complicated concept. The 'small town' of 'small-town youth', loosely defined, often refers to lower-tier cities in addition to town-level places. Take several studies on small-town youth

for example: while for some, 'small-town' refers to county towns and statutory towns (Wang & Wu, 2019), many others define 'small-town' as third-tier and forth-tier cities and below (see Wang, Fan & Hong, 2019; Hu, 2016). However, the '-tier' level of China's cities is not clearly defined, as it is not an official concept. This stratification first emerged from the commercial real estate industry's assessment of a city's comprehensive strength and competitiveness (Huang et al., 2018). While most agree that first-tier metropolises are Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, it starts to get problematic from second-tier cities onwards. Second-tier cities mainly include autonomous municipalities, provincial capitals, or vital industrial/commercial centres (Fang et al., 2016) such as Tianjin, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Qingdao and Xi'an. Third-tier cities are thus even more conceptually muddled, but are usually the cities that are important in their respective regions, rather than on a national level. However, given the vast size of China and its uneven regional development, the administrative level designation can not solely determine a city's status. For example, in the year 2018, the GDP of Suzhou, a non-capital prefecture-level city in the coastal province Jiangsu, is RMB1859.7 billion while the GDP of Xining, the provincial capital of the inland province Qinghai, is 128.6 billion and the GDP of that entire Qinghai province is 286.5 billion, less than 1/6 the GDP of the city of Suzhou. Another example is that Hefei, the provincial capital of Anhui, is classified as second-tier in some studies (see Huang, Chen, & Hu, 2016), but third-tier in others (see Huang & Qian, 2018); in this case, the young people of Hefei could be considered 'small-town youth'.

The term 'small town' cannot be defined by population size either. In the official system, the words 'small', 'mid-size' and 'large' refer to cities with a population of less than half million, between a half and one million and between one and five million, respectively (State Council, 2014). For example, the Shandong county Tancheng, where the photography project introduced in this chapter took place, obviously regarded as a 'small town' by the author and commenters, has a population approaching 1 million, making it a 'mid-sized' city, by the official standard. Overall, the tier system of China's cities that is

often used to categorise young residents as 'small-town youth' is highly common but also problematic, leaving 'small-town' an ambiguous concept.

In conclusion, towns sit in an ambiguous rural-urban in-between in China. More importantly, similar to the way 'small-town youth' has become a collectively imagined identity rather than a strict demographic group, 'small-town' here also refers to a product of collective imagination that cannot be defined by its actual administrative level or size. To better understand such collective imagination, the next section will look further into the broader context of China's post-reform landscape.

2.3. 'The urban' and 'the coast' – China's uneven post-reform landscape

The Chinese economic reform that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 opened up a new chapter of contemporary Chinese economic development. Radical Chinese economic reform started in late 1978, marking the collapse of China's Soviet-style socialism (Naughton, 1995). Guided by the principle of constructing 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the reform aimed to establish a socialist market economy (Sigley, 2006). Deng Xiaoping's leadership introduced radical economic and social reforms which set the country on a development trajectory that was the reverse of the collectivisation advocated by the Communist Party in the 1950s. Deng's leadership criticized Mao's regime for its 'excessive' political radicalism and egalitarianism (Jacka, 1997). As a stark alternative, the reform led by Deng, as announced during the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978, emphasized the de-politicisation of everyday life, economic pragmatism, economic growth and improvement of the living standard. Although Yulin's growth story may not be representative, given its resource-dependent nature, there is little doubt that China has witnessed unprecedented rapid growth since the reform. According to the World Bank (2020), China now is the world's second-largest economy, and although still

incomplete, the economic reform has successfully lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty.

Yet such development is also marked by the formation of an uneven relationship between both rural-urban and inland-coastal places. This section will show how the urban and the coastal East has been developed as 'the centre' in the particular context of China's contemporary development. I argue that 'small towns' like Wubu county town are regarded peripheral because their muddled rural-urban status, and they are located in the inland West.

Urban-centred development

The urban aspiration to move from 'town' to 'New York' as expressed in A Yi's quote sheds light on China's unequal rural-urban relationship. In fact, the struggle of young people to move upwards along the socio-spatial hierarchy is a recurring theme in China's contemporary literature. *Ordinary World,* for example, offers an insight into this urban desire by telling the life story of the rural-born protagonist Shaoping. Shaoping's personal growth is in fact a process of 'individual urbanisation' (Guo, 2013) in which the struggle to transform one's identity from rural to urban is one of extreme difficulty (Li, 2018), a heroic yet often tragic fight against one's fate. In Lu Yao's words:

> Sun Shaoping will never escape the fate of the majority of rural students. …Real life is cruel. For various reasons, these rural youth, who can neither enter the doors of universities nor the doors of public service, even with extraordinary character and great talent, in the end will still be conquered by the environment (*Ordinary World,* Volume 2, Chapter 23).

Despite enduring extreme hardship, Shaoping ends up working in a coal mine, and finds himself lagging far behind his privileged urban-born peers. Yet his first visit to the provincial capital — 'the big city that has always been in his dreams' offers him some degree of peace. He visits his younger sister, who is attending university here:

He was gratified by her growth. She may be the first one in the family who really gets away from the yellow soil. Younger Sister's change is exactly what he had hoped for her for a long time. At this moment, all his own misfortune faded away. He should live with a passion for having a sister who is worthy of being so proud of (Vol 3, Chapter 29).

The desire to 'get away from the yellow soil', in the words of Lu Yao, and to leave the village, the 'lowest place', 'the end of the world', in A Yi's words, were also what kept my father going — enduring hunger and studying night and day under candlelight in a small cave-dwelling for the university entrance test. Born in a poor village in northern Shaanxi just like Lu Yao and Shaoping, my father received an education thanks to the sacrifice of his younger brothers. The family could only support one out of the four sons and, as the eldest, my father took the opportunity as well as the expectation of earning and caring for the entire family later on. As he later recalled to me: 'my wildest dream was to eat commercial rations that you had to be an urban citizens to be entitled to. Becoming urban meant a complete change of one's fate. It was common sense.'

Underpinning this 'common sense' notion that becoming urban equals changing one's life and fate completely is the extreme inequality between the inhabitants of rural and urban areas in contemporary China. The rural and urban divide is so wide that some see it as an 'internal colonial system' (Song, 2013, p. 1). The urban-centered development policy that set urban areas as the centres of development and peripherised the rural is largely responsible for this rural-urban inequality. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, Mao's government closely followed the development path taken by the Soviet Union, which prioritised industrialisation and urbanisation. The State adopted a system that was modelled after the Soviet Union, with five-year planning sequences and state-controlled industrial production, which allowed the government to have tight control over both agricultural and industrial production (Guthrie, 2012). Policies were put in place to first ensure the running of urban and industrial centres, which often came at the cost of the over-exploitation of rural areas (He, 2007; Wen, 2001).

Among these policies, the rural-urban divide is perhaps most visibly represented and effectively enacted by the *hukou* system, which was developed in the 1950s. According to the *hukou* system, Chinese nationals fall within either a rural ('agricultural') or urban ('non-agricultural') classification. The classification is largely determined by the registration status of one's parents or one's place of birth (Fan, 2008). It was established to facilitate the centrally-planned economy by introducing formal administrative controls that prevented unplanned spontaneous rural-to-urban migration. The system also ensured the lowest possible agricultural product price to facilitate the projected industrialisation in selected cities (Xiang, 2003). In general, the rural registration status secures one's access to farmland while the urban status qualifies one for various kinds of welfare and benefits such as access to stable jobs in the state sector, subsidised housing, medical care and subsidised education (Bao, Bodvarsson, Hou & Zhao, 2011). The direct result was that rural residents were strictly bound to a far more precarious and impoverished life in which the surplus they created was largely extracted and redistributed towards urban communities (Wen, 2001). State policy has gone through a series of significant reforms in post-reform China to address the growing concerns over this widening rural-urban gap. More focus has been directed towards the development of rural communities as well as the livelihood and wellbeing of rural residents in attempts to destabilise the rural-urban dualism (Li, 2008; He, 2007).

Following China's reform in 1979, tight controls over economic and social life dissolved rapidly (Kuhn, 2008). A more flexible *hukou* system evolved to enable rural citizens to undertake employment in cities; this resulted in continuous waves of rural-urban migration (Fan, 2008). After labour migration became a visible phenomenon in China in the early 1980s, a series of policy discussions in the early 1990s led to the government's decision to encourage rural residents to migrate into cities for the sake of future urban and industrial development (Li & Piachaud, 2006). In the early 2000s, under the leadership of China's former President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, the state's policies on migrant workers loosened up further. Official attitudes shifted from

controlling towards encouraging migration, with a greater focus on migrant workers' wellbeing rather than on their negative impact on cities. One example is that, in 2003, the State Council ordered that all discriminatory labour regulation limiting the employment of migrants be abolished (Fan, 2012). The fluidity of *hukou* has also increased as some places began to offer *hukou* with the purchase of urban properties (Fan, 2008). President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang, who took over in the year 2012, acknowledge that the integration of migrant workers into urban communities plays a key role in realising the 'Chinese Dream' through accelerating urbanisation (Gaetano, 2015).

However, despite some progress, the rural-urban chasm is far from overcome. The gap is embodied by the migrant workers in their everyday lives — very recent detailed studies on the lives of migrant workers (see Zavoretti, 2017; Gaetano, 2015) have shown that the same barriers and difficulties identified within influential older studies persist (see Murphy, 2002; Yan, 2008; Jacka, 1997), largely because *hukou* remains the institutional basis for migrant control. Despite relaxation of this policy over time, it still constitutes a large structural barrier that excludes migrant workers from employment opportunities equal to those available to local urban residents. Those who are registered with rural status are classified as 'temporary residents' of their urban destinations, and are therefore denied access to some citizen rights as well as welfare-related benefits that their urban-registered counterparts are entitled to (Fan, 2002). Thus, often migrant workers end up providing cheap labour, undertaking temporary jobs disdained by local residents that are generally riskier and physically demanding and earn relatively low wages, (Shen & Huang, 2003). As a result, in order to support their families who have remained in the hometown, most migrant workers have to increase their income by working overtime. It is worth noting that, although migrant workers' incomes are higher than those of rural residents, the average household income of a migrant worker is still much lower than that of an urban resident, despite the extra hours they work. (Wong, Chang & He, 2007; Yang, 1999). By and large, China's rural lags far behind the urban as a historical product of the state's urban-centred development policy.

Uneven spatiality: coastal east and inland west

As noted, accompanying post-reform China's economic success are significant spatial socioeconomic disparities. In contrast to the equity-centred self-reliance development philosophy of the Maoist period, contemporary economic reforms involve efficiency-centred open-door approaches (Fan, 1995). The eastern coastal regions, favoured by state policy over the central and western regions, were the first to open their doors. In particular, the eastern and southern regions were targeted to develop first given their geographical advantage of proximity to other large East and Southeast Asian economic bodies. This resulted in increasing socioeconomic inequality between China's east and west (Goodman, 2013). Shaanxi, like many other western provinces, was unable to share the phenomenal growth experienced by the eastern coastal region (Vermeer, 2004). Before the reform, Shaanxi had held a crucial position in the PRC's industrial plan, with its capital Xi'an designated as the main industrial centre of northwestern China. The egalitarian overtone of Maoist regional development policies was consistent with the philosophies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where the urban-biased Stalinist industrialisation strategy favoured heavy industries in the cities (Tsui, 1993). Many coastal industries were relocated to Shaanxi as part of the First Five-year Plan for the years 1953 to 1957. Later on, in the 1960s and 1970s, both the heavy and light industries in Shaanxi benefited substantially from state investment guided by the 'Third Front' strategy (Vermeer, 2004).

However, often state-supported industrial economic growth failed to organically integrate with the local economy (Tsui, 1993); places where this failure occurred suffered greatly in the face of the economic reforms towards the market economy. The per capita disposable net income of Shaanxi's urban residents was 10 percent below the national average when the reform started — in 1998, this gap had more than doubled (Vermeer, 2004). However, the expectation was that as the east developed, at some point other regions would experience trickle down benefits from the centre coastal east to the peripheral

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west. The national economic growth arising from foreign trade and industrial production in the east was to eventually diffuse to central and western China (Fan, 1995). Yet the delayed development of the interior regions became unacceptable after 20 years of disadvantageous growth strategies. Officially announced in 2000, the Open Up the West Campaign signalled a change in the state's regional development policy to strengthen state intervention in the development of the west through a series of preferential policies that would lead to the distribution of more resources towards the west. In particular, northern Shaanxi, given its abundance of coal, oil and gas, was designated as a centre for energy development in the Ninth Five-year Plan. With state funding invested in communications and infrastructure that assisted a structural shift from grain cultivation to industries, north Shaanxi has benefited greatly from the Open Up the West campaign (Vermeer, 2004), despite intra-regional inequality. Up until today, 'developing the west' remains an important state agenda, with preferential policies still in place. One of these is the Go West University Student Volunteer Service Plan that directly led to the return of several of the 'small-town youth' participants interviewed in this project, which will be further discussed in Chapter 5. Although recent efforts have been made to mitigate the uneven development between east and west, the general economic landscape of China, which sees the east being significantly better developed than a peripheral west, remains unchanged.

2.4. China's 'small-town — metropolis' urban binary

Sitting between 'rural' and 'urban' classifications, small towns clearly hold a significant position as conveyors of rural-urban linkages, serving as exchange centres of goods, services and information between the two. However, greatly disproportional to the functional significance they hold, small towns receive little attention, not to mention proper representation, as evidenced by the problematic representations of these places, connected to the rising notion of 'small-town youth'. Within academia, as pointed out by anthropologist Andrew Kipnis, China studies scholars have paid a great deal of attention to China's large urban centres

as well as its rural areas, but there is very little work exploring the lived experience in places that do not fall into either of these two poles (2016, p. 18). In this section, I will look into the representational absence of small towns in contemporary China studies. I argue that behind the stigmatisation of 'small-town youth' is the way lower-tier urban places are othered into homogenous collective 'small town' identities in opposition to metropolises. This 'small-town — metropolis' binary gave birth to the ambiguous but value-laden notion of the 'small town'. Just as 'small-town youth' does not refer to a strictly defined demographic group but instead is associated with stereotypical images ranging from marginalised victims to consumers with bad taste, the concept of 'small town' suggests a sense of periphery rather than a reference to particular urban places of certain administrative status or size.

In 2.2, I mentioned that a young person from the provincial capital of Anhui, Hefei, might be seen as a 'small-town youth.'[11] Yet by any standard, Hefei would be considered to be a large city. According to the latest data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020), Hefei has a population of over 7.5 million and a GDP of over 782 billion Yuan. This is a larger population than the entire country of New Zealand and an annual GDP of around half of New Zealand's. Why on earth would a provincial capital, a city of such enormous size, be considered a 'small town'? In fact, I argue that this reflects the underlying binary urban imagination of 'small town — metropolis'. Someone from Hefei being referred to as a 'small-town youth' has very little to do with what Hefei as a city actually possesses that is 'small', but more with what it does not have: an image as a global metropolis.

The regionally uneven urban-centred contemporary development that is a feature of post-reform China further strengthened the formation of a binary 'small town — metropolis' urban imagination. China's rapid urbanisation over the past quarter century has given rise to cities across administrative scales. Large national cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou have grown into global

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[11] See also a report by the popular news outlet Huxiu that "interviewed 100 small-town youth", some of whom were from Hefei (Pan, 2018)

megacentres. The Shanghai Economic Zone, established in 1983, is now the biggest subnational planning entity in the world. The Pearl River Delta has transformed from a series of fishing villages into the world's largest single contiguous metropolitan area, making Guangzhou and Shenzhen metropolises comparable to neighbouring Hong Kong. Other cities have been growing rapidly as well. By the end of 2018, there were 20 cities with populations over 4 million and 42 cities with 2 to 4 million residents. Fifteen years ago, by the end of 2003, these numbers were roughly half — 11 and 21, respectively (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Behind the fast urban growth is an official development agenda that sees cities as strategic sites and means of development. Fuelled by state policies that encourage inter-city competition, the competitive ranking of cities according to all kinds of indicators was a common practice of both the government and popular media (Ma, 2013). Metropolises, not surprisingly, rank at the top and draw the most attention. This has directly resulted in a hierarchical formation of cities, where the 'Manhanttanised showcases', such as the global cities of Shanghai and Beijing, are seen as the embodiment of the 'modern city par excellence in the collective imagination' (Huang, Dong, & Dong, 2018, p. 360). These cities are thus taken as the blueprint that directs the development of other cities of all tiers across China. Such metropolis-inspired development models gave birth to a new urban order — the previous rural-urban income-and-development chasm has been 'replaced by an equally fundamental gap between small, particularly inland, cities and the giant coastal metropolises' (Davis, 2006, p. 7). In other words, 'small town- metropolis' has taken over the 'rural-urban' binary in shaping our socio-spatial understanding of China. In a metropolis-centred development discourse, all other urban places are conceptualised as incomplete forms of the metropolis, othered into the category of 'small towns.'[12]

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[12] Here I draw from the context of post-colonial study. Said's Orientalism questions the very foundation of Western representation and the social construction of the "Orient" as the ultimate Other. Orientalism as a practice is a 'systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically,

One of the consequences of such othering is that the diverse ways that the inhabitants of non-metropolis urban places exist are only seen as transient stages on a teleological process towards life in a metropolis exemplified by New York, which is 'ultimately modern' and 'truly urban'. This explains the significant lack of attention these so-called 'small towns' receive. However, even the very limited studies on these places have already shown that these 'faintly visible' (Davis, 2006, p. 7) lower-tier cities deserve far more attention. For example, Andrew Kipnis' recent book *From Village to City: Social Transformation in a Chinese County Seat* documented the transformation of Zouping, a county-level city in China's eastern province, Shandong, from 1988 to 2013. From a relatively impoverished agricultural county, it transformed into a relatively wealthy bustling city. Its unprecedented rate of economic growth and urbanisation since the reform is not unique — such significant and drastic transformation is common in China. In order to challenge the oversimplification that treats development and urbanisation as progressive and linear processes by which the new replaces the old, Kipnis coined a new organic metaphor: 'recombinant urbanisation', to describe the complicated urbanisation process he witnessed in Zouping. Originating from biological science, the term 'recombinant' refers to recombinant DNA, used in genetics to refer to the exchange of strands of DNA that results in a new genetic combination. 'Recombinant', then, is used in many other fields from chemistry to ecology to describe transformation processes that involve 'the combination of both materials originally present at a given site and those introduced or absorbed from outside of the place where the transformation began' (p. 16). Kipnis uses the term to argue that the social transformation which

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scientifically, and imaginatively during the post Enlightenment period' (Said, 1993, p. 3). The non-Western world is reduced into the homogeneous cultural entity known as the East. The people and culture from non-Western countries are classified and subordinated as the Oriental Other that exists in opposition to the Western Self. The Other is thus homogenised, feminised and essentialised into being backwards, irrational and exotic. Through this practice of othering, the (Western) Self is established as the standard of superior, progressive, rational and civil civilisation against the (non-Western) Other. Western Europe intellectually divides the world in binary terms. The Us-and-Them binary social relation is inhabited by the Other.

occurred in Zouping involved the recombination of 'preexisting elements' into a 'new mixture' (p. 16). By presenting complicated stories of urbanisation and life in general where the 'particular rural past' of Zouping is present in its 'contemporary urban milieu' (p. 10), he shows the organic combination and exchange of new and old materials at a site where 'practices, ideas, ideals, fantasies, dreams (and nightmares) are displaced, reinvented, or shifted rather than simply eliminated' (p. 15).

Overlooked lower-tier cities including county towns are often valuable sites to study the complicated the transformation of the urban environment, lifestyle and lived experience that are never black and white (Kipnis, p. 3). Similarly, in the case of Vietnam, Gillen (2015) calls for more attention to 'periurban' areas, rural-urban inbetween areas like the Chinese county town, to study the complicated development process. By showing the everyday life practices of the residents, he argues that these inbetween areas should not be conceptualised as sites where the urban expands outwards in its development and engulfs the periurban area, dissolving rural practices and ideas. Instead, moving beyond this binary, urban-centred approach, he argues that the folding of the rural into the urban does not deprive the meaning of either. It is not simply a push and pull where the 'old' rural integrates and diminishes into the 'new' urban. Instead, individuals draw on material practices and symbolic discourses of the rural, which are then imbued into the urban.

This rural quality being 'imbued' into newly developed urban places, in Gillen's words (p. 1), and the 'recombinant' 'new mixture', in Kipnis' words (p. 16) both reveal the complicated process, the juxtaposition and coexistence of diverse ways of being in these lower-tier urban places. Such diversity gets lost when places are othered into a collective entity of 'small towns' and thus are fixed with labels opposite to what metropolises are believed to represent — the new, the modern and the developed. Reflecting on the confusion I felt, not being able to 'pin down' the status of the county town when I faced both high-rise modern buildings and traditional cave dwellings, I realise the deeply ingrained black-white binary thinking is what gave birth to my confusion — the desire to

'sort out' juxtaposition, to categorise it into an 'either-or'. To me, the modern skyscrapers challenged my idea of a northwestern county town — an imagination of poverty and backwardness. I did not see how modern buildings could or should fit in there. If, as pointed out earlier, the transformation of places and life is a complicated and messy process, then surely the 'small town-metropolis' binary cannot stand and there is something more to small towns than just being incomplete and imperfect forms of metropolises. The opposition between the old, rural, traditional small town and the new, urban, modern metropolis seems too clear-cut and invites further scrutiny.

2.5. Reverse mobility of 'small-town youth'

Now I have shown that 'small town' represents a collective imagination of China's urban periphery that needs further scrutiny, to which I argue that the study of 'small-town youth' provides a great entry point. This is because their reverse mobility pattern goes against the urban aspiration as exemplified by A Yi's 'town to New York' path. If, the county town is indeed such an undesirable peripheral place, why would these young people choose to live there? In this section, I will explain the rationale behind examining the mobility of 'small-town youth' by pointing out the limitation of current studies.

Post-reform China's spatial unevenness is accompanied by China's massive internal migration. Post-reform China has witnessed an unprecedented surge in interregional or rural-urban migration as a result of imbalanced regional development (Fan, 2007). Themes associated with mobility and migration have drawn a large amount of research attention, creating a great entry point to the study of key issues of contemporary China such as urbanisation, regional/rural-urban inequality and social change.

In explorations of the uneven landscape of development in China, studies of massive rural to urban migration outnumber those examining reverse mobility and return migration. Taking studies of internal migrant workers, one of the most-researched social groups in China for the last two decades, as an example, research on 'going out' is exhaustive, while research on 'coming back' is just

gaining momentum (see for example Murphy, 2000; Wang & Fan, 2006; Demurger & Xu, 201; Chunyu, Liang & Wu, 2013; Yu, Yin, Zheng & Li, 2017).

Similarly, while the mobility of educated young adults has, overall, drawn much less attention for research compared to the mobility of migrant workers, their reverse migration has received even less scrutiny. The existing studies of university graduates and educated young adults still largely adopt a top-down approach, focusing on the macro-scale aggregated flows of human capital (see for example Liu & Shen, 2014a; Liu & Shen, 2014b; Liu, Shen, Xu & Wang, 2017; Fu & Gabriel, 2012; Fan, 2008). Not surprisingly, what these macro-level statistical analyses show is that regional income differences serve as a crucial factor in driving the migration of skilled and educated workers. Regions that are more economically well-off attract a larger incoming flow of university graduates (Liu, Shen, Xu & Wang, 2017; Liu & Shen, 2014a; Liu & Shen, 2014b). Although the schools university entrants enrol in tend to be dispersed geographically, the cities university graduates seek to live in, attracted by the higher wage level of the regions, are the highly concentrated metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong (Liu, Shen, Xu & Wang, 2017). In fact, the preference for central regions, in particular national economic centres, over peripheral regions among educated young adults is common in many countries, largely due to the career prospects, higher incomes and lifestyle that large urban centres provide (see for example Whisler, Waldorf, Mulligan & Plane, 2008 [US]; Corcoran, Faggian & Mccann, 2010 [Australia]; Fielding, 1992 [England]; Venhorst, Dijk & Wissen, 2010 [the Netherlands]).

However, although these macro-level analyses do offer an overview of the general mobility pattern of China's educated young adults, they inevitably homogenise migration processes and behaviours and do not serve to explain the reverse migration cases we see on the ground. If the economic rationale was indeed the deciding factor in the decision-making process around migration, then there would be neither the drive to 'escape *beishangguang*', as introduced in Chapter 1, nor the return of the 'small-town youth' participants of this study. Actually, as has been already shown by existing studies on migrant labour, there

is a complex decision-making process behind migration, often involving a wide range of factors that go well beyond concerns around income (Jacka, 2018; Fan & Liu, forthcoming; Piotrowski & Tong, 2013). For example, Fan and Liu (forthcoming) have found out that the reverse migration of labour migrants is driven by a complex set of factors concerning physical health, key family members and events that supercede economic reasons. ⌜SEP⌟

In fact, studies on not only migration and but also life course transition in general have been shifting towards taking a relational perspective to understand the processes involved (Horschelmann, 2011). In studies of life transitions, researchers have been paying more attention to the relationships between personal trajectories and 'linked lives' (Elder Jr., 1994) or to the 'tangled webs' of connections (Jarvis, 1999; 2005) situated in both temporal and spatial contingencies (Bailey, 2009; Teather, 2005). In the case of China's educated young adults, a good example of such an attempt is research by Huimin Du (2015; 2018) on a group of college graduates who grew up in a county-level city in the inland Anhui province and left for higher education. Looking at their mobility patterns after graduation and the motivation behind their movements, Du aims to highlight the complex and relational nature of the migration of educated young people. Through their responses to a survey, Du (2015) measures their feelings of attachment and belonging to both their native and destination places as well their 'life satisfaction', involving factors such as health, romance, friendships, relationship with parents, leisure time, economic situation and employment. Three returnee group types emerge from the statistical analysis of the survey results — the Rooted, the Bonded and the Trapped, among which the feelings of attachment and belonging to one's native place decreases, with the Rooted making up 37.1%, the Trapped 32.9% and the Bonded 30% of those surveyed. However, Du expresses surprise that there are no obvious differences in socio-demographic characteristics between the Trapped and the Rooted, even though the former express lower life satisfaction on all measured aspects. In other words, the survey analysis cannot explain the different life experiences of people

residing in the county-level city through socio-demographics, nor can it explain their decision to return.

In a subsequent paper, building on the survey results, (Du, 2018) looks further into the patterns and meaning of these subjects' migration by conducting follow-up interviews with selected survey respondents. What is most interesting is that Du's depiction of two cases of reverse migration both follow a similar narrative of feeling 'trapped', with one participant holding an 'aspiration for a "different" life elsewhere' (p. 45) and the other stating: 'I have no choice. I am forced' (p. 51). Despite the fact that Du's own previous study shows that the Rooted group not only makes up the majority of the return migrants but also reports higher life satisfaction on every single aspect compared with the Trapped group, it seems that the Trapped group was selected to represent reverse migrants in general. Where is the representation of the Rooted side of the story?

In fact, the underlying value-laden dichotomous 'success-failure' conceptualisation of China's migration studies has been gaining critical reflection (Wang & Fan, 2006; Zavoretti, 2017). This is particularly acute for educated young adults compared with migrant workers, as higher education was almost the exclusive path for upward social mobility, especially before education reform abolished the job assignment system (Hsu, 2007; Kipnis, 2007). As a result, the spatial mobility of reverse migration from metropolises and large urban centres to lower-tier places is often interpreted as downward social mobility — a story of failure. Such value judgement is deeply rooted in a belief, as evidenced by the shared urban aspiration, that large urban centres, metropolises and global cities are where a modern, exemplary, successful and desirable life can be lived, only to reinforce the 'small town -metropolis' binary. Indeed, Du's (2018) research confirms this alignment — while moving up the urban hierarchy is aligned with personal fulfilment, 'individualism' and 'a life of adventure', returning is associated with 'family' and 'settling down' (p. 52), which implies a certain level of compromise, if not defeat. Similarly, in the analysis of reverse migration back to the Republic of Ireland from the U.K and U.S., Laoire (2007) also not only highlights but challenges the normative association of returning with settling

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back into an imagined but in fact non-existent 'local' 'idyll' life, as a result of 'global mythic constructions of Ireland as some kind of pre-modern (rural) "other" to the modern world' (p. 338).

To conclude, the reverse mobility of 'small-town youth' troubles the current socio-spatial imagination as represented by the 'small town- metropolis' binary. Yet the limited amount of studies on the reverse mobility of educated youth largely fall within the success-failure dichotomy that studies on China's migration commonly see. Thus, it would be illuminating to conduct a more nuanced and relational examination of the relocation of 'small-town youth' back to the county town.

2.6. Conclusion

The notion of the 'small town' is conceptually muddled in China. Rather than being a strictly defined type of urban place by land size, population or official division, the term 'small town' refers to a collective imagination that is othered in China's 'small town-metropolis' binary urban imagination. This is a historical product of China's urban-centred development strategy which has heavily exploited the rural. Despite the state's increasing effort to narrow the rural-urban gap, the former still lags far behind the urban as evidenced by the well-researched migrant worker issue. In addition, a town like Wubu is even more peripheral in the sense that it also sits in the inland west, where the development lagged behind the coastal east as a consequence of state economic reform policy that prioritised the latter. Such socio-spatial hierarchy that has given birth to the urban aspiration shared by generation after generation is, however, challenged by the reverse mobility of 'small-town youth', which then provides an entry point to carefully examine such hierarchical socio-spatial imagination. In the next chapter, I will situate China's 'small town -metropolis' binary in the broader context of urban studies, and show that the hierarchy of places is fundamentally informed by the hegemony of Western urban modernity, which has recently been under scrutiny.

3. READING FOR DIFFERENCE: ORDINARY CITIES FROM A PLACE OF OPENNESS

3.1. Introduction

A binary urban imagination is by no means unique to China — in this chapter, I will situate China's urban binary in the broader context of urban study on a global scale and I argue that this dualism is the product of the hegemony of Western urban modernity. Behind the hierarchy of urban imagination is the hierarchy of knowledge, where our approach to cities, and knowledge in general, has been shaped and dominated by 'the West'. Firstly, drawing on Jennifer Robinson's concept of 'ordinary cities', I will discuss efforts in urban studies to reflect on and move beyond the binary West-centred discourse as an attempt to challenge the dominance of the singular Western modernity. Secondly, I will introduce reading for difference as the conceptual tool of this thesis, which I will first illustrate with the example of a film. I will then bring in Gibson-Graham's diverse economies project, arguing that conceptualising the urban world as a world of 'ordinary cities' is in fact also an attempt to go beyond hegemonic framings that could deliver performative effects in enacting a diverse urban world. I will also illustrate why 'knowing differently' matters, using the example of a study on migrant workers that shows how taking a different approach created possibilities. Finally, connecting back to the ordinary cities agenda, I argue that place as lived and performed in everyday life provide a fertile ground for reading for difference.

3.2. 'Ordinary cities' – urban studies beyond the West

For a good bit of human history, people spoke of 'the City'. They often meant a specific city or large town, like Rome, Mecca, Jerusalem, Constantinople or Paris. When they spoke of it, the city thus held in mind was imbued with a cosmic meaning — Rome, the eternal city; Paris, the city of lights. This practice of taking a local place of a certain demographic proportion as the centre of a global reality continued down into the late modern era. Thus, in the social sciences, in the century or more from the 1890s on, there was a field called 'urban studies', the subject of which more often than not was 'the City' — as in, the city as megalopolis or, more recently, the global city. Even the general idea of urbanisation was, for the longest while, understood as an unrelenting, uniform, global process that ate up the rural past and its allegedly less modern locales.(Lemert, 2010, p. ix)

The 'small town-metropolis' binary is in fact the product of the larger scale 'Third-World city — global city' binary taking on a contextualised shape and form in China. Within the field of urban studies, the call to reflect on and decentre from both these dominant binaries as well as Western and hierarchical urbanism in general has been gaining momentum. In her influential book, *Ordinary Cities*, Jennifer Robinson reviews the entire field of urban studies and finds a clear binary — conceptually, there are only two types of cities: 'global cities' and 'Third World cities'. The former serve as exemplars of urban modernity, of power, of cosmopolitanism and of sites of production where urban theory emerges and then is applied to the latter. 'Third-World cities' are, in the light of this theory, marked by poverty and developmental failure. As argued by Parnell and Robinson (2012), a great deal of urban theory has taken its primary inspiration from cities in the West and thus has privileged certain experiences of these places. They state:

We have a problem in urban theory. It does not require a careful empirical review to know that the cities and issues highly profiled in the canon of urban studies do not reflect the current dynamic centers of urbanization or the most critical contemporary urban problems. At the heart of this tension is

the fact that a relatively small group of highly visible theorists tend . . . to write about their own backyards. . . For urban theory, the consequence of this distortion is the prioritizing of ideas that speak to cities forged by the industrial revolution, the realities of the Anglophone parts of the world, and a related tendency to overlook the rapidly growing cities of the global South (pp. 595-596).

This problem persists today — Kong and Qian (2019) conducted a systematic analysis of papers published from 1990 to 2010 in the fields of geography and urban studies. Their findings suggest the dominant position of the Anglophone world in the production and circulation of urban knowledge. In addition, in the particular context of China, despite the growing body of urban China scholarship, their analysis suggests that there is relatively limited spillover of knowledge from the 'periphery' to the 'core'.

Such uneven power relations behind urban knowledge production thus shapes the imagination of what it means to be urban; this imagination has been 'bequeathed' with the numerous analyses of urban modernity that reinforce 'developmental hierarchies, a strong sense of teleology and expectation of innovation' (Robinson, 2013, p. 660). Indeed, the western tradition of urban thought and design tends to position cities hierarchically according to levels of development. Western cities are set as the standard, ideal cities, while other urban forms are othered into the needy backward periphery and are always seen as behind and lacking (Quijano, 2007; Robinson, 2004). Such a binary approach marginalises a vast array of potential different visions, understandings, and practices of contemporary urbanity that other urban places may possess (Edensor & Jayne, 2012).

On the practical level, a reconsideration of the Western-style global city as the blueprint of urban planning is in fact much needed and long overdue. Doreen Massey (2007) draws our attention to the changing world and national geography in which global cities are increasingly dominant in the world as a whole. With London as the example, Massey shows that state policy clearly feeds into the growth of London into a megacity that overshadows other cities. On a global

level, the World Bank has emphasised competitiveness; through its policies, it has been encouraging and facilitating city-led development that is arguably responsible for the massive inflow of people into cities (Kessides, 2000). One way for a country to boost its competitiveness is to have a city or cities that achieve 'global' or 'world' status. However, major global cities seldom top the rankings for city liveability — China's viral discussions of 'escaping *beishangguang*' introduced earlier proves this point — people are asking: 'Is this the life we want?'. Similarly, on a larger scale, considering the increasing dominance of big cities, Massey asks the question 'Is this the geography we want?' (p. 16)

Nevertheless, the notion of a city being 'global' is a problematic one. First of all, there is really no such thing as a 'non-global' city (Taylor, 2004, p. 42 as cited in Robinson 2005, p. 795) — in this day and age all cities have the capacity to link into the global network in one way or another. But more importantly, as Massey points out, while it is visible that the local is a product of the global, what is less recognised is that the global is also locally produced. The global is too often imagined and conceptualised 'as somehow always out there, or even up there', but in fact its origins lay somewhere (Massey, 2007, p. 16). And for our current urban theory, this 'somewhere', when we imagine a 'global' city, has its origin in the Western metropolis. Like Massey, Robinson (2006) also argues that we should step back and examine how our inherited urban knowledge is produced rather than simply assume it works. She points out that the way scholars and practitioners categorise and label cities as 'Western', 'Third World', or 'South-East Asian' or as 'global/world' is either divisive or hierarchical. These preconceived categories have privileged the West as the 'advanced' standard to which the non-West is catching up through normalisation and through which the non-West is always seen as behind and lacking. By nature, such a hegemonic framework obscures us from capturing the diversity and complexity of cities and urban experiences beyond the West.

Robinson thus calls for a 'ground-clearing exercise' (Robinson, 2006, p. 7) of preconfigured concepts and categories. Instead, all cities should be viewed as

'ordinary', being simultaneously sites of both suffering and novelty, as an effort to decolonise our understanding of the urban world. Seeing all cities as ordinary will lead us to a decentred understanding of the world we live in — from 'world cities' to 'a world of cities' (Robinson, 2005). Only by doing this can we widen the geographical scope of our research to encompass a greater diversity of urban experiences and think beyond pre-existing frameworks set by the Western academy (Edensor & Jayne, 2012). For example, such diversity is captured as 'cityness' in AbdouMaliq Simone's work on cities in the Global South (2010). Following a similar path to Robinson, Simone refuses to think of these cities as examples of the 'City' in order to leave behind the inherited framework and not assume prior knowledge of the object. This approach leads to an open-ended engagement with everyday lives in these cities that welcomes surprises, informalities, and contradictions. Instead of treating cities as 'outgrowths of specific histories' or 'organic or technical systems available to new levels of adaptation or change', Simone (2010) sees the cities as 'places and occasions for experimentation' from which various ways of living come into being when 'bodies, materials and affect intersect' (p. xiv). The subject he studies then is not the 'City' but 'cityness'; he seeks to capture those elements of city life that cannot be fit into the organising categories of modern social science that we often use to study the 'City' and thus broaden our understanding of what cities are and could be. Although his work mainly focuses on life in slums and in poverty, his approach is relevant in the sense that it shows that taking research and observation beyond pre-existing frameworks, as called for by Robinson, is indeed rewarding — if 'cityness' is what emerges when Simone forgoes an examination of the 'City', what will emerge out of my 'small town' site when I let go of the binaries and invite surprises and contradictions?

Coming back to Massey's question, 'Is this the geography we want?' (p. 16), the answer may seem to be a rather straightforward 'no', assuming that an urban geography centred around the 'global city' and the Western modernity behind it that others diverse forms of urban experiences is not a geography that we want nor a world we want to live in. However, does asking what we do want matter?

These questions underpin Massey's reflections: can we move towards a geography, or world in general, that we do want, and, if so, how? In what follows, I would like to introduce the performative nature of research and then discuss the conceptual tool of 'reading for difference' that I would like to connect with the ordinary cities agenda.

3.3. Reading for difference: from making sense to making possibilities

I sometimes think of social science as being a bit like coming up with constellations in the night sky. You step out under this vast sky and there are thousands of stars. The human brain picks out eight of them, and turns them into a stick figure, and calls it Orion. The issue is not only that some people get out there and say, 'Hey, that is not a mighty hunter, it's a saucepan!' It is also that once someone has taught you the constellations, each time you step under the night sky, you look for that constellation. There are millions and millions of stars. But our minds will gravitate to trying to find those eight stars and will focus on them, filtering everything else out. (Lindy Edwards at the Sydney Writer's Festival, 2007, as cited in Roelvink (2016) p. 1)

Like constellations, binaries, pre-existing categories, labels and hegemonic discourses are all so powerful. We are often too eager to pick up stars and line them up into Orion, in the same way that I was too eager to pin down the county town as either 'the backward old', or 'the modern new', in the same way that many Chinese are too eager to sweep 'not-so-metropolitan' urban places into the 'small town' category, and in the same way that many urban studies scholars are too eager to identify a city as either 'global' or 'Third World' ,so that the familiar tale of the other catching up with Western modernity can carry on. Familiar tales, like constellations, offer that often delusional sense of reassurance — so

comfortable that other diverse tales are repressed, like other stars whose shining lights reach our eyes, yet are dimmed by our mind.

By telling a tale of 'ordinary stars', stargazers will be able to draw a new map that allows those previously othered stars a place. By telling a tale of 'ordinary cities', urban studies scholars may be able to construct a new urban imagination that encompasses diverse, previously othered forms of urban being. Urban theories may have by and large sidestepped the 'progressive engagement' movement to challenge the dualism, the underlying Western modernity and the hegemonic Eurocentric knowledge hierarchy that assumes a universalist, scientific, rational and one-way flow of knowledge (Edensor & Jayne, 2012, p. 1), yet the call for a different approach to knowing in social sciences is nothing new. As said by the anarchist geographer Simon Springer, 'It is now commonplace, and even trite, to suggest that it is high time that we tried a radically different approach' (Springer, 2016, p. 22). But why does it matter to take a new approach to knowing, to undergo a new mapping of stars and to work towards a new construction of urban imaginations?

It matters because how we see, approach, represent and theorise the world has performative effects — we make and enact the world as we understand it (Butler, 1993; Gibson-Graham, 2020; Law & Urry, 2004). Contemporary understanding of the performative originates from J.L. Austin's work on utterance (1962). With the example of the words 'I do' spoken at a wedding, Austin shows that such types of utterance perform actions rather than simply describe them. "I promise" and "I dare you" are two further examples of such performative utterances (Sedgwick, 2003). By pointing out how language shapes and enacts rather than simply describes a reality that exists objectively outside the language, the performative thus explains how social phenomena, like subject identity, are constructed into being. Social realities are explained by discourses, and are thus constantly being performed. This further opens up a slippage for alteration, difference, the creation of the new (Butler, 1988), as well as the construction of alternative realities and, thus, social transformation. An outstanding example is the research that informs Gibson-Graham's book, *A*

Postcapitalist Politics, which performs a re-theorisation of the economy to bring into being different economic politics and subjects for social transformation:

> Successful theory 'performs' a world; categories, concepts, theorems, and other technologies of theory are inscribed in worlds they presuppose and help to bring into being... Thus the ability of theory to describe and predict is not an outcome of accurate observations/calculations, but a measure of the success of its 'performation'. With this understanding of the performativity of theory, we have engaged in theorizing and researching diverse and community economies, hoping to help bring these into being by providing technologies for their conceptualization and enactment. (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, pp. xx-xxi)

The performative thus gives representation and social science research important responsibility — how social scientists 'read' the world is responsible for making and reshaping the world we live in. This is particularly important as social scientists have a tendency to fix and 'format' rather than open up and reassemble (Latour, 2005, p. 226), and drop into the pitfall of strong theory. Thus, reading itself is a form of knowledge production and thus is never neutral (Althusser and Balibar, 1970). Reading for difference contributes to a differentiated world (Latour, 2004), where 'more unexpected innovations and unforeseen development' can then be fostered (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p.482). Reading for difference therefore requires scholars to take a deliberate stance with awareness of the way we actively approach, understand and theorise what we examine.

In what follows, I will further perform a reading for difference of a Jia Zhangke film, *Still Life,* showing how active reinterpretation could lead to a different understanding by making visible what is often neglected. I will then introduce Gibson-Graham's diverse economies project, which acknowledges and harnesses the performative effects of research in 'making possibilities'. Joining Jennifer Robinson's call for a world of 'ordinary cities', I argue that Robinson's project is a reframing of 'diverse urbanism', and Gibson-Graham's 'diverse economies' project is in fact aiming to represent 'ordinary economies', to borrow

Robinson's words. To make such performative effects of research more visible, I will then analyse Pun Ngai's work on migrant workers as a successful 'making possibilities' project on a smaller scale. Grounding back to the query on 'small towns', I argue for the possibility and necessity of approaching the study of the county town from the perspectives of everyday lives, which will allow us to go beyond the 'small town' framework that limits our understanding.

Reading *Still Life* for difference – critical dystopia

Precisely where in life and art to look for justice, goodness, and creativity, when in life one sees rampant unpunished evil, ecological catastrophe, ... unfortunate outcomes in the grand sweep of history ... is a question with no resolution on the horizon. Utopia lacks wonder; dystopia lacks justice. (Kinkley, 2014, p. 207)

Jia Zhangke, the Chinese movie director who is famous for his movies on 'small towns' and 'small-town youth', brought home a Golden Lion prize from the 2006 Venice Film Festival for the movie *Still Life* (*sanxia haoren*). Shot in 2006, *Still Life*, like many of Jia's films, is set against the backdrop of a small town —the Yangtze River town of Fengjie, which was actually in the process of being completely demolished to make way for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which would be the largest hydroelectric dam in the world and, as the Chinese state claimed, would generate socio-economic benefits from power generation to flood control. Once the dam project was completed, the entire county town would be submerged under water. The film follows Han Sanming, a coal mine worker from Shanxi who travels to Fengjie looking for his estranged wife and daughter. It is not necessary to go into the details of the storyline — put simply, Sanming, after enduring many difficulties, is able to find his wife, who had been waiting for him.

The town of Fengjie presents a landscape of debris — through Jia Zhangke's lens, Fengjie is nothing but a 'Chinese wasteland' (Kraicer, 2007). The place is presented as a dreadful world where local people's homes and lives are facing a

brutal onslaught of development. As often astutely pointed out by critics, debris, as seen in Figure 11, a frozen frame of the film's final scene below, is the real protagonist of this movie (Li et al., 2007). The debris is a symbol of the devastation endured by ordinary people in the Three Gorges relocation project and the broader modernisation that it represents. Scholars have pointed out that the infrastructure-driven water management regime that predominates China today is the result of the state's technocratic vision for national development and modernisation (see Crow-Miller, Mebber and Rogers, 2017). The film's landscape of debris and ruin is a powerful expression of dystopia:

> We see landscape defined by ruin, death, destruction. We see…derelict buildings, submerged monuments, decaying cities, wastelands, the rubble of collapsed civilisations. We see cataclysm, war, lawlessness, disorder, pain, and suffering. Mountains of uncollected rubbish tower over abandoned cars (Claeys, 2017, p. 3).

Such rhetoric of dystopia is in line with the dominant interpretation of the movie, that it exposes 'how globalisation makes a world through ruination, or better yet, makes a ruined world' (Cheah, 2013, p. 196).

Figure 11 A scene from *Still Life*

However, visions of dystopia centred around negativity often lead to pessimism and cynicism. I would like to perform a reading for difference of the film by intentionally highlighting two details. One key moment, as shown in Figure 12 below, is observed when Sanming and his wife are sharing a piece of candy, squatting in the debris of a building. As a building in the distance implodes, Sanming wraps his arms around his startled wife. Another moment occurs when Sanming, new to the town of Fengjie, quickly establishes a sense of brotherhood with a local man who introduces him to a job. Sanming honours their bond by eventually holding a ceremony according to the local tradition when the local man dies. Reading against the obvious dystopia of debris and desperation, these details provide a glimpse into the beauty of life in *Still Life* and make visible the resilience and hope lived by the people. Making visible details like these, a rereading of the film then leads to a critical dystopia that differentiates from a dystopia which is "consumed by negativity" (Zhang, 2019, p. 342). Unlike an anti-utopia, which 'explicitly or implicitly defines the status quo', a critical dystopia opens up the opportunity of imagining a hopeful alternative in an otherwise bad, undesirable and frightening world (Fitting, 2010, p. 141).

Figure 12 Sanming and his wife share candy in a scene from *Still Life*

Through reading for difference, I have shown that beyond the simplistic single tale of a place in the process of being eroded and destroyed by global capitalist modernisation, a closer look at moments of love and connection in Fengjie, as portrayed in *Still Life,* reveal a glimmer of hope. One may argue that a film, as an art production, is, by its nature, open to interpretation, so it can be easily read for difference. This raises the question: is reading for difference also applicable to real life in the real world? In following sections, I will present real-life examples of reading for difference: the diverse economies project as a reading for difference of the economic world, followed by another example on a smaller scale that reads for difference the experiences of migrant workers in factory dormitories.

Diverse economies – 'ordinary' economies

While the capitalist economy has grown exponentially over the last 200 years, the rate of increasing inequality and environmental degradation accompanying the related growth in commodity production, consumption, population and urbanisation is also alarming. The capitalist economy dominates our imagination of economies. It is so prevalent that the term 'Capitalocentrism' was coined by Gibson-Graham to describe how economic practices and relationships ascribed to capitalism are established as 'the dominant, most efficient, modern, innovative and dynamic forms of economic activity that have hitherto existed' while other diverse forms of economic activity are deemed 'subordinate, inefficient, pre- or non-modern, static or stagnant'(Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020, p. 8). Capitalocentrism is associated with a kind of 'strong theory' — power lies in the hegemony of capitalism and phenomena are lined up to consolidate power as the new is folded into the familiar. Our understanding and imagination of the economic world is reigned over by this powerful hegemony — all other ways of labouring, transacting, enterprising, owning and allocating investments are situated in relation to capitalism, being subordinate, complementary, oppositional, or outside. Capitalocentrism has a further conflation effect in that empirical observations are approached and interpreted in

relation to capitalism at the cost of the suppression of other possible connections (ibid). A simple example of this is the observation that alternatively paid labour is often seen as some kind of appearance of capitalism — it is pre-capitalist in the sense that it is yet to evolve into formal wage labour. It is therefore still understood in relation to capitalism, but on a temporal trajectory.

It is no easy task to detach from such powerful structures of thought and think otherwise, as capitalocentrism has been normalised and often shapes our so-called 'common sense' across scales — from assuming that holding a paid job is the better if not the only way to live, to taking capitalist growth as the ultimate, if not the only, way to develop. Often without much awareness, the rich empirical economic diversity that exists around us is cookie-cut into narratives that merely valorise a monolithic neoliberal capitalism. Other connections and possibilities are lost as economic differences are only conceptualised in relation to capitalism — as either alternatives to, transitioning to, or being surpassed by (Roelvink, 2020b). However, it is exactly the economic differences that differentiate real life in the world so that unexpected possibilities and innovation may emerge (Roelvink, 2020a, p. 428; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2009, p. 325; Latour, 2004).

Feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham proposes 'diverse economies' as a way of reading economic difference differently. A 'diverse economies' approach conceptualises economy as 'diverse and heterogenous' and 'mutable' rather than 'fixed in form' (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020, p. 1). By building a thick descriptive inventory of economic differences, the diverse economies framework mobilises 'weak theory' to destabilise the hegemonic discourse of capitalism. By documenting and proliferating heterogeneity, it establishes a discourse of economy that is open to multiplicity and possibility, within which capitalism is seen as one of the many modes of economy rather than as *the* economic system that is prioritised as the most efficient and advanced model.

As indicated in Figure 13 below, within the diverse economies framework, various activities are categorised into five columns: transactions, labour,

enterprise, property and finance. These key aspects of economy are further divided into three categories: capitalist, alternative and non-capitalist. This framework challenges the prevalent capitalocentric discourse in which the only visible economic activity is wage labour producing for a market in a capitalist enterprise. Instead, it puts an emphasis on an array of hidden economic activities that play significant yet often invisible roles in sustaining the economy and the well-being of communities. Through thoughtful placement of economic activities into appropriate categories, we can use this framework to both increase our awareness of the diversity of the existing economic activities and to pay attention to the value of each non-capitalist activity, instead of merely situating them 'in a teleology of capitalist becoming' (Morrow & Dombroski, 2015, p. 84).

TRANSACTIONS	LABOUR	ENTERPRISE	PROPERTY	FINANCE
Market	**Wage**	**Capitalist**	**Private**	**Mainstream market**
Alternative Market Sale of public goods Ethical 'fair-trade' markets Local trading systems Alternative currencies Underground market Co-op exchange Informal markets Barter	**Alternative Paid** Cooperative Self-employed Reciprocal labour In-kind Work for welfare Indentured	**Alternative Capitalist** Nonprofit State enterprise Green capitalist Socially responsible firm	**Alternative Private** State-owned Tenanted Ninety-nine-year lease Customary Community-managed Community trust	**Alternative Market** State banks Government-sponsored lenders Credit Unions Microfinance Friendly Societies Community-based financial institutions
Nonmarket Household flows Gift-giving State allocations State appropriations Gleaning Hunting fishing gathering Theft/poaching Indigenous exchange	**Unpaid** Housework Family care Neighbourhood work Self-provisioning Labour Volunteer Slave labour	**Non-capitalist** Communal Feudal Independent Slave	**Open Access** Atmosphere Water Open ocean Ecosystems services	**Nonmarket** Sweat equity Community-supported business Rotating credit funds Family lending Donations Interest-free loans

Figure 13 A diverse economies framework

(adapted from Gibson-Graham, Cameron & Healy, 2013)

Mapping a diverse economy goes beyond a discursive move focusing on representation and language. More importantly, doing so has actual material effects in enabling us to imagine and enact 'more than capitalist' economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008). This ability to do something with this knowledge is tied to the belief that research is performative, a notion held by Gibson-Graham along with many other social and feminist theorists. As argued by John Law (2004), multiple realities exist, and research makes some realities 'more real' than others

through its representations and theories, so that the role of research is not simply to describe or predict but to intervene, amplify and enact. The very act of focusing on certain objects or relations and building a language and method to free them from the discursive framings that fix them to hierarchies of meaning has the effect of demarcating what is possible, reasonable and valuable (Gibson-Graham, 2020). This is not to deny material realities, but to widen what we think of as 'real' and thus possible, which serves as the foundation that underpins, informs, determines and also constrains our action. Diverse economies approaches do not deny the material realities associated with capitalism, but by making visible the irreducible economic differences that were previously overshadowed by the hegemony of capitalism, these approaches help to end our way of imagining and acting in a world that was beholden to capitalism as the ultimate 'real' (Cameron and Wright, 2014). It creates new states of being and subjectivities, leading to different experiences and actions (Liu et al., 2020). As summarised by Gibson-Graham (2008, p. 618) herself — 'changing our understanding of the world is to change the world'.

Thus, the role of research actually goes beyond 'making sense' to 'making possibilities' (Gibson-Graham, 2020, p. 476). What we study and how we approach it both carry an ethical responsibility to enact a geography or world that we do want. What Gibson-Graham has done with the diverse economy project sheds light on not only why but also how to move forward to respond to Robinson's call to study 'ordinary cities'. In each other's words, in 'diverse economies', all economies are 'ordinary economies', and 'diverse cities' are made up of 'ordinary cities'. Fundamentally, both agendas aim to let possibilities emerge from the differences and multiplicities existing within the diversity of a space, a true diversity that is not constrained by preconceived hegemonic framings — which are often taken as the exemplary modes of being — capitalism for the economic world or global metropolis for the urban world, are no longer 'extraordinary' but just as 'ordinary'. However, revealing the possibilities of the urban or economic world may involve large-scale abstract theoretical projects that could be challenging to envision. In the coming section, I will draw on a

smaller-scale case to illustrate how empowerment is made possible by theorising the experiences of South Chinese migrant workers differently.

'Ordinary' workers in 'ordinary' dorms

> It's taken for granted that Chinese factories are oppressive…What persists is our tendency to see the workers as faceless masses, to imagine that we can know what they're really thinking…The things that you imagine, sitting in your office or in the library, are not how you find them when you actually go out into the world. *(*Chang, 2012*)*

Leslie Chang's TED talk, quoted here, received a standing ovation. Attracting millions of views, Chang's talk is based on her two years of research with young female migrant workers in manufacturing factories in Dongguan, China, research which became her bestselling book *Factory Girls, From Village to City in a Changing China* (Chang, 2008). During her time as a China correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, Chang could not help noticing the absence of the voices of workers themselves in the journalist coverage, which tends to portray workers only in relation to the products they make. Journalists like to play with numbers like how many months' wages an entry level worker would have to pay for an iPhone, which appeals to the burgeoning guilt over consumerism and materialism in American society. However, Chang noticed that workers barely spoke about the products they made. This could have been interpreted at first glance as the tragedy of capitalism and the alienation of the worker from the product of his labour. Yet once the ties between Chang and the workers started to change from abstract economic ties of these products they make to personal ties of everyday memories, Chang realised that when we only focus on the products they make, we render the people on the other end invisible. By establishing a long-term relationship with two key informants and following them back to their hometown, Chang was able to provide a detailed and thoughtful insight into their life trajectories, and reveal the courage and ambition that drives them to embrace challenges and changes at each crossroad in their

lives. As pointed out by Chang herself, the public (and even journalists and researchers) often fail to realise how self-driven, resourceful and motivated many migrant workers are, how hopeful and determined they are to improve their lives, and how, in many cases, they achieve their goals. They are the decision-makers behind their own lives, not the passive, faceless victims as they are often portrayed to be. When asked what they wanted most, migrants consistently answered: education, courses to learn a wide range of skills from English to typing. Not one mentioned better living conditions, despite living in spaces which resembled prison to Chang, where '10 or 15 workers [live] in one room, 50 people [share] a single bathroom,[workers spend] days and nights ruled by the factory clock' (Chang, 2012).

The harsh dormitory-style living conditions described in Chang's study are common for the workers in China's factories. Triggered by the opening up policy of post-reform China, the number of rural-to-urban migrant workers employed in the private sector in coastal areas including the Pearl River Delta also grew rapidly from the 1980s (Pun, 2008). Surplus rural labour has been channelled into the lowest-paid urban sectors, of which a major part is low-skill manufacturing work (Kuhn, 2008, Ren, 2011). Migrant workers working in the export-oriented manufacturing and assembly industries are typically accommodated in dormitories within or at least close to the factories. Often the dormitory buildings are multi-storey with rooms shared by 8 to 20 workers per room. Each building hosts several hundred workers. Large bathing and toilet facilities are shared by residents of the same floor or same building. Thus, the living space is largely collective and offers little private space (Lee, 1998; Pun 2005). Dormitory-style accommodation is readily available to both male and female migrant workers in most industries, regardless of factory conditions (Pun & Smith, 2007). It is noteworthy that migrant workers are generally young, single and disproportionately female (Pun, 2005). More specifically, based on her studies in garment and electronics factories in Shenzhen, Pun (2005) found that more than 90% of the total labour force in the light manufacturing industries was composed of young females under 25 years old.

Pun and Smith (2007) theorise this phenomenon as the 'dormitory labour regime'. The provision of dormitory-style accommodation for migrant workers is a systematic feature of factory production. It facilitates China's integration into the global capitalist economy by sustaining low-cost mass manufacturing and assembly services. By locating the collective living spaces within or close to production lines as well as directly linking accommodation to employment, the dormitory labour regime achieves control over both the working and non-working lives of migrant workers (Pun, 2005). More specifically, it facilitates a systematic control over the life outside work of labour force in food, accommodation, travel, and even social as well as leisure life within the production factories (Pun, 2012). Dormitory labour regimes thus achieve the absolute lengthening of working hours, the minimisation of disruption to production and the maximisation of labour utilisation. These regimes sustain a cheap, stable labour supply for China, and have attracted trans-national corporations to shift their production lines to China, giving China the well-known reputation as 'the world's factory' (Smith & Pun, 2006; Fan, 2004). This process of globalising China through the development of its export-processing industries also relies particularly heavily on female labour, as it is believed to be the 'cheapest and most compliant form of labour' (Andors, 1988; Lee, 1998, as cited in Pun, 2004). As introduced above, factories hire a disproportionate number of female migrant workers, and thus the dormitory labour system can be regarded as a gendered form of labour use for production in the global chain of capitalism (Pun, 2012). Due to their poor well-being and marginalised social status under the *hukou* system, migrant workers, especially females, are often seen as exploited victims in the global capitalist economy. According to the study of Gibson, Law and McKay (2001) on NGO work with Filipina contract migrants, labour export from less developed areas tends to be interpreted as exploitation due to the resulting new division of labour determined by global capital. Thus, contract migrant workers tend to be seen as exploited victims of the homogenising tendencies of globalisation. The same representations of the victimisation of migrant women appear widely in the agendas of many NGOs working on behalf of this group. Many studies have pointed out that one of the

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major limitations of NGOs in their work with migrants is the 'strong orientation toward service delivery' (Ren, 2011; Xu, 2013; He & Huang, 2015). The service-delivery centred approach of many of these NGOs may have greatly improved the working and living conditions of migrant workers by providing legal aid, medical care and other direct benefits (Ren, 2011), but they also reinforce an image and identity of the recipients as passive and needy beneficiaries. What if we free our thinking from such framings of the global production chain and its labour force, which is 'capitalocentric' in Gibson-Graham's language, and go beyond the dominant interpretation of dormitories being sites of exploitation with migrant workers as passive needy victims?

One project that offers us an insight into what could be made possible once we detach from this exploitation-victim narrative is Women Health Express (WHE). WHE was set up in 1996 as the featured project of a non-profit NGO, the Chinese Working Women's Network (CWWN). Situated in the industrial zones in South China, this project has been enthusiastically praised by academics, activists, social workers and labour organizers from both Hong Kong and mainland China (Pun, 2008). It is a mobile van project serving female migrant workers in the export-oriented manufacturing and assembly factories in the Pearl River Delta. The adapted WHE 17-seat minibus has run through industrial towns since March 2000 (Pun, 2005). The van contains a small medical clinic and a library holding around 300 books and magazines for borrowing which enrich the cultural lives of female migrant workers. The van, equipped with loudspeakers and a television, can also act as a cultural function centre for educational activities. Most importantly, the van functions as a mobile service centre, disseminating information via booklets, seminars and group discussions on labour rights, occupational health and safety as well as women's rights to independence and self-determination (Pun, 2008). In the process of running the van project, CWWN also aims to attract and train a group of active and enthusiastic female migrant workers as volunteers and local organizers for the future, particularly to run self-help groups (Pun, 2012). WHE demonstrated the

success of its initiative by reaching over 80,000 women workers within the first two years (Pun, 2005).

What distinguishes WHE most is that the existing confined dormitory living style was used to the project's and the participants' advantage. The highly concentrated living spaces serve as magnets for collective actions. Pun (2008) reports that during past campaigns and strikes, several worker-leaders drafted petition letters in their dormitories. These letters were passed from one dormitory to another, and hundreds of signatures were easily obtained overnight, enabling workers to pressure management to acknowledge demands for things such as: minimum wages and overtime wages consistent with China's labour laws; the provision of hot water for bathing; and drinking water facilities on each floor of the dormitory buildings (Pun, 2008). The cramped living arrangement also allows for the rapid and efficient spread of information. WHE staff would visit women's dormitories to organise group discussions and seminars on labour rights and document drafting (Pun, 2009), often late in the evening to coincide with the extended working hours of female migrant workers (Pun, 2005). Through these activities, WHE aims to build up the confidence of these women, enable them to face challenges and voice their own ideas, and help them to obtain new knowledge on various relevant issues (Pun, 2008). This led to another significant achievement of WHE's empowerment regime: the establishment of the Women Workers' Cooperative (the COOP) in September 2002. The COOP was led by several female migrant workers who were determined to gain economic autonomy and independence and thus left the factory production line. In March 2003, a COOP shop selling books and magazines was set up in the dormitory areas with the aim of promoting the knowledge of worker's rights among female migrant workers (Pun, 2005). The COOP also empowers the community by employing several injured workers who can no longer work in factories.

Conceptualising the dormitory as a site of social reproduction facilitating production on assembly lines is indeed a useful way of 'making sense' of the dormitory labour regime, but 'making possibilities' like the empowerment of female migrant workers only happens when we are freed from preconceived

framings and we let diversity emerge. Other diverse and ordinary activities that migrant women conduct in the dormitories, including exchanging information, caring and volunteering, are like those othered stars in the sky that are not part of known constellations — we can only acknowledge the presence and value of these activities — the stars — when we let go of the exploitation-victim constellation our mind is trained to see. Dormitories are also sites where strong sisterhood bonds and solidarity are generated, where intensive information exchange occurs (Pun, 2009), and thus where women's capacities are nurtured and eventually transformed. Factory dormitory sites, considered from a different perspective exhibit potentialities of being spaces of resistance, solidarity and empowerment rather than simply nodes in a global capitalist system (Gibson-Graham, 2005).

Indeed, it is true that female migrant workers mostly undertake poorly paid and exploited employment in a globalised capitalist economy, and the exploitation-victim constellation in certain ways does make sense. However, viewing the situation this way often obstructs us from 'making possibilities' as it overshadows other stars like the agencies, capacities and potentialities that migrant women possess. Pun (2008) pointed out that the WHE project acknowledged the fact that female migrant workers are often hesitant to take initiative to solve the problems they encountered, due to education that trained them to be passive and obedient. However, in contrast to the common assumption that migrant workers are repressed faceless victims of capitalism, most of them prove, in fact, to be self-driven and ambitious (Pun, 2005, also see Chang, 2008). Many studies often overlook the fact that female migrant workers usually make the decision to leave their rural homes themselves, with clear ideas of where they are going and what they are pursuing. Some of them hope to leave the patriarchal structure of rural Chinese families, some of them hope to explore an individual lifestyle, some of them hope to accumulate assets before they return to villages and get married, and some even hope to build their capabilities and eventually settle down in the city (Pun, 2005). Similar to the way the process of globalisation threatens as well as mobilises women (Gibson-Graham, 2005), the

dormitory labour regime both threatens and empowers female migrant workers thanks to the widespread availability and affordability of the accommodation it provides. Going beyond the simple narrative of these workers being exploited victims of the global capitalist system, the success of WHE has shown the possibilities that could emerge from seeing every female migrant worker with her specific identity and acknowledging her capacity and potential.

New life trajectories are brought into being, different realities are made more real, and the world that we do want is being enacted — WHE has made visible the performative power of knowing differently. The space of exploitation was also the space of transformation, people doomed as passive victims were also willing individuals of agency and potential. Places and people become anew without building new dormitories or employing new migrant workers. There is no need to do either, because 'to change the world' starts from 'changing our understanding of the world' (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 618). As argued by Gibson-Graham (2005), wherever they are, women are already 'engaged in constructing and revitalising places in response to the exigencies and possibilities of their everyday lives'. What we need to do is to let possibilities emerge by reading beyond hegemonic framings and harnessing the differences and diversities of everyday lives happening in places.

3.4. Openness of place lived in everyday lives

.   The call of the 'ordinary cities' agenda is certainly goes beyond empirical—the core challenge is conceptual and methodological and touches on the fundamental question of our ways of knowing. To move towards ordinary cities is to move towards a different way of knowing places beyond the enclosure of the dominant hegemonic top-down framework. This way of knowing, I argue, could benefit from the openness of place as lived and performed in everyday lives.

Geographers have long been interested in why and how we approach and imagine places and spaces. When it comes to cities, it is not simply referring to how, in the top-down urban planning process, a different thinking and imagination of urban planners and policy-makers could be directly consolidated

materially by changing the actual design. More importantly, it is increasingly recognised that the ways we imagine and conceptualise cities are not just 'matters of the mind', but that they manifest, express, reproduce and potentially alter and intervene in lived space (Lindner & Meissner, 2018, p. 1). 'Urban imaginary' traces back to Edward Said's notion of 'geographical imaginary' (Said, 1993, as cited in Edensor & Jayne, 2012) — it refers to the attribution of meaning to a space or place so that it is perceived, represented and interpreted in a particular way, reproducing knowledge and facilitating particular courses of action. Said's conception emphasises the imaginative processes that produce and reproduce discourses and representations of colonised spaces, through which colonialism is enacted and reinforced. In particular, Said's critique on Orientalism is about how 'the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient' are so powerful that the idea exists above if not outside the actual correspondence with the Orient itself — the obsession over this 'created consistency, that regular constellation of ideas as the pre-eminent thing about the Orient' then surpasses the 'mere being' of the Orient (Said, 1993, p.5).

The notion of the 'small town' is similar to Said's Orient as a collective imagination. Popular discourses on globalisation and development often fall into the trap of conceptualising 'geography into history, space into time' (Massey, 2005, p. 5). Places are organised into an imagined teleological queue: spatial differences are approached with temporal perspectives, that small towns are to become metropolises just like Third World cities are to become global cities, given time and effort to catch up. The erosion of differences in the process of normalisation deprives us of the opportunities to act on the existing possibilities of transformation as exemplified by the diverse economies project (Gibson-Graham, 2005, 2008) and the success of WHE's reconceptualisation of dormitories and workers (Pun, 2005, 2008). So, in order to better harness the differences, borrow from Said's words: how do we let go of such 'created consistency' and return to the 'mere being' when we study the county town (1993, p. 5)?

Since the so-called 'spatial turn' in humanities and social sciences, 'space' is increasingly conceptualised as simultaneously material, conceptual, experienced and practiced. Key thinkers are increasingly concerned about how to free ourselves from overarching, bulldozing, established, knowing regimes. For example, Massey (2005) cautions us against reading the geographical and spatial as historical and temporal. Soja (1989) also criticises the way spatial thinking is often subordinated to historical and sociological imagination, which results in the confinement of human geography within two modes of analysis: the configuration of material forms (things in space) and the mental/imagined representation of material forms (thoughts about space). In order to treat the spatiality of our lives and the geographies in which we live as having the same critical significance as the historical and social dimensions, Soja proposes we consider trialectics of being, in which the historical, social, and spatial are of vital equivalence and balance (Borch, 2002, p. 113). Soja approaches this spatiality through the concept of 'Thirdspace', which is concerned with how people actually experience living and thus gives meaning to the space. Soja's critique is built upon the work of Henri Lefebvre, who, as Soja suggests, developed a similar line of thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Lefebvre (1991) observed how our thinking is confined to perceived space (spatial practices) and conceived space (representations of space), so he argues for a shift of focus onto 'lived space' that brings to the fore the lived experiences of people when we approaching space. 'Lived space' suggests an all-embracing and never fully knowable spatiality that is as important as lived time (see Borch, 2002).

While the traditional value of place is built on an essentialist understanding of rootedness and authenticity, as exemplified by my 'imagined hometown', increasingly places are seen as radical heterotopia which are marked by heterogeneity and multiplicity (Cresswell, 2004). Place, as performed in everyday life, thus possesses the openness that allows difference and non-coherences that serve as the foundation of reading for difference and knowing differently. This is best put by Gibson-Graham as she articulates the politics of place in the diverse economies project:

Place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as places with highly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply nodes in a global capitalist system. In more broadly philosophical terms, place is that which is not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to a 'global' order; it is that aspect of every site that exists as potentiality. Place is the 'event in place', operating as a 'dislocation' with respect to familiar structures and narratives. It is the unmapped and unmoored that allows for new moorings and mappings. Place, like the subject, is the site and spur of becoming, the opening for politics. (Gibson-Graham, 2007, p. 38)

Connecting back to the ordinary cities agenda and my query on 'small towns', we can see that so-called 'small towns' are places that have been reduced to 'nodes' as described by Gibson-Graham above, and othered into a collective imagination. Approaching the county town as a 'small town' will likely reinforce the 'created consistency' that overshadows the 'mere beings' (Said, 1993, p. 5) — the notion of 'small town' is a constellation that obscures the noticing of the 'mere beings' of othered places like stars. And thus to move beyond this limiting notion, 'small towns' need to be read as ordinary places, because places, as lived in everyday life, with diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity, present an openness as a foundation for reading for difference.

3.5. Conclusion

Compared with those of literature and arts, the list of studies on towns and small to mid-size cities of China is almost blank. This lack of research is tied to China's 'small town-metropolis' binary which finds its roots in the urban studies 'Third World city-global city' binary. Scholars have pointed out the need to go beyond such hierarchies of knowledge centred on Western modernity, as exemplified by the ordinary cities agenda. With the examples of diverse economies and WHE projects, I have shown that research has performative effects — how we understand and theorise the world we live in could enact a world we desire through opening up new possibilities, widening the range of

what can be imagined and what is possible and thus leading to action. This further leads to the deliberate act of reading for difference that is central to this project. When it comes to places like a county town, often we are too preoccupied with preconceived imagination, which in this case, is the collective imagination of a 'small town', to get a clear sense of the actual lives on the ground. Thus, this thesis approaches the county town as an ordinary place where everyday lives are lived. This provides fertile ground for reading for difference. However, it is no easy task to detach from the overwhelmingly powerful hegemonic knowing discourse, because it is also internalised by us. With what methodology can we better approach that diversity and harness the differences? I call for one with openness.

4. A RESPONSIVE METHODOLOGY FOR OPENNESS

4.1. Introduction

I first set foot in Wubu county town in search of possible research topics in December 2015. I had just finished my study in Singapore and was yet to enrol in the PhD program — looking back, I was led by an almost instinctive yet utterly romantic curiosity to discover a general idea of one's 'long lost hometown'. In my most difficult days in Singapore, time and time again, I read Lu Yao's *Ordinary World*, an epic novel which portrays the lives and fates of generations of characters in northern Shaanxi. The truth is that northern Shaanxi is only my hometown by documentation because it is where my father lived until he left for university; growing up, I was only brought there for short visits during holidays. However, somehow Lu Yao's portrayal of his protagonists' grit in face of extreme poverty offered me a deep sense of reassurance — because I was, at least on paper, from there, there must be the same kind of grit in my blood that would keep me going. Certain ideas about that imagined place and those imagined people were so powerful that I felt a calling to deepen my understanding of the place. Little did I know that these powerful imaginations would be the source of most of my confusion as well as inspiration down my thesis journey.

I, or rather my concerned mother, who was worried I was going to 'eat bitterness' on this trip, made extensive preparations before my 2015 pilot trip. She packed a rice cooker with some rolled oats and canned food, and a portable toilet and wet tissues that took up all the space of the car boot. It all seemed to be a bit of a joke, but her preparations did reflect her deeply embedded memory of the place. Growing up in the relatively privileged community of a state-owned company in an eastern province, my mother was completely shocked by her first

trip back to my father's home county — the remote mountainous location that took days of travel to reach, the lack of basic supplies from toilet paper to meat, and not to mention the long-drop toilet. This first impression had such a profound impact on her that a portable toilet would be deemed to be as necessary in 2015 as it was in 1988. Even though she had made multiple visits back to the region throughout the years and witnessed its rapid development, she still associates northern Shaanxi with poverty, remoteness and backwardness. On the contrary, my father, the 'insider' who had grown up and had had more frequent subsequent visits to the region, simply laughed at what he saw as 'absolute absurdity and overreaction'. The decision about what to pack was then mine to make, but I had no idea. I had no recollection of Wubu county, although I might have travelled through it as I accompanied my family on one of my father's many homecoming visits to the neighbouring county. All I knew about Wubu were some hard facts— it had a small population, a low GDP and was an 'old revolutionary region. These facts, pieced together, conjured my imagination of a backward and marginalised small town. So, yes, I followed my mother's advice and the portable toilet stayed in my 'survival pack' — after all, I knew no one in the county.

Much has changed about my visits since then. In my last field trip in June 2019, arranged through WeChat, some of my 'small-town youth' participants who had also became friends were waiting to catch up with before I even arrived — they had booked the restaurant that was 'our old place'. All I had with me was a backpack, not even a big one. These changes reflect the changed and changing relationship between me and the place, the participants, the subject as well as myself. Each of the multiple field trips I took across the years brought unexpected findings, connections, feelings and reflections. I struggled to understand and balance the certainty of the known and the uncertainty of the unknown. This led to an epistemological reflection of methodology which finally taught me to let my findings take the lead over imagination, to not only accept but celebrate the messy unknown, and to embrace fieldwork as transformative rather than additive.

In previous chapters, I have shown the need for and possibility of envisioning realities beyond hegemonic and binary frameworks in order to move towards enacting a world we do desire. One way to transcend the current stigmatising and narrow pre-conceived understanding of the so-called 'small towns' and 'small-town youth' is through reconceptualising the differences and diversities existing in everyday lives. However, given that powerful overarching frameworks largely dominate and shape our ways of seeing and understanding, it is now crucial to discuss how to translate this desire for a bottom-up approach into a research methodology that enables me to harness that empirical richness of everyday lives — ultimately, I call for a methodology of 'openness'. In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of how the methods associated with this project developed over time. I will then further discuss how I acknowledge, accept and finally embrace my changing relationships with and understanding of the participants and the place, leading to a different understanding of 'data', resulting in a fundamental epistemological shift of methodology.

4.2. Methodology: overview and reflection

In December 2015, carrying my rice cooker and portable toilet, I conducted a month-long pilot trip in Wubu County that gave me a broad sense of people's lives there. I left for New Zealand in early 2016, carrying a lingering fascination with the distinct contrast of wealth and poverty I experienced in Yulin. After extensive reading on the subjects of China's migrant workers and the diverse economies framework, I decided to bridge the two— applying a different economic perspective to enrich the understanding of the relatively well researched migrant worker issue.

I conducted my first field trip from early February to the end of April 2017 after obtaining ethics approval. My research focus at the time was to map the diverse economic activities of migrant workers in Yulin. I chose to reside in the county town without knowing that doing so would play a key conceptual role; at the time, I thought it would simply be the most convenient base from which to visit Yulin City and its surrounding villages and gain a more comprehensive

ethnographic experience. I was permitted to stay in a dormitory room in a local bureau. As I had proposed, along with participant observation in the county town and rural villages, I conducted 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews, 5 focus group discussions and many informal conversations on livelihood and migration histories, with participants ranging from government officials to villagers recruited via the 'snowballing' method. However, although I could not pin down the reason at the time, I soon realised that these so-called hours-long 'in-depth' interviews did not provide me with an in-depth understanding of either the participants or the topic I had set out to research. Instead, as my relationship with some participants deepened, I found myself increasingly intrigued by their lives and interests.

The failure of the interview plans that I had made sitting in a library in New Zealand and the emergence of unexpected topics in the field led to a complete change of research interest. As will be further discussed later, I had to acknowledge my relative and changing position as an academic home-comer and see myself, the places and people I wanted to study, and the data I sought to collect differently. What happened and what I encountered on the ground steered my research and led me to value the discoveries I describe in the later chapters. After more extensive study of poststructuralist literature, I went back to Wubu and conducted my second field trip from May to June 2018. Again I lived in a dormitory in the bureau with a group of young people I had befriended on my first visit and gained more detailed insights into both their life histories and everyday lives. I had a broad but clear sense that their stories happening in the county town possessed great value in helping me understand the transformation going on at China's ground level. I then decided to shift my research to the life histories and life experiences of these young people. In response to the epistemological shift that I will further elaborate in what follows, the ways subjects were chosen went through an intentional and significant change. Instead of searching for a wide range of subjects to interview on the exact topic of migrant worker in relation to to diverse economies, I shifted towards a place-based, or in particular, dorm-based approach. I intentionally let go of the research

topic I had set out earlier and instead 'dived in'. I was allocated a bed in a dorm as well as a desk in one of the offices in the building, and so I had a great opportunity to 'hang out' with them on a daily basis. I lived and worked alongside this group of young people, most of whom I got to know in not only interviews but also participant observation. In this sense, subjects and research topic emerged rather than being chosen.

More specifically, during the 2018 fieldtrip, along with participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 participants on their life histories, focusing on their experiences of returning to the county town. In order to make sense of the data I collected in the interview and my own lived experiences in the county, I read more literature on modernity and spatial thinking, which finally gave shape to this thesis. Following the phenomenal rise of the term 'small-town youth', I then went back in June 2019 to further follow up with the participants, giving the rice cooker to a participant who had become a good friend and finally getting rid of that portable toilet that had never come to use. During the 2019 trip, as my thesis developed further and new interest emerged, in addition to participant observation, I conducted another round of semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, focusing on their experiences and perceptions of life in the county town. Out of the 12 interviewees, 8 had also been interviewed during the previous trip. I have also conducted intensive participant observation. It is worth mentioning that written consent was obtained during the 2017 trip; in subsequent field trips, I would always ask seriously for the participant's oral consent before starting interviews. I discussed my research development frequently with the participants. In addition, upon the completion of a preliminary draft, I contacted relevant participants and obtained their approval for the use of information. All names mentioned are pseudonyms and all identifying information has been obscured.

In addition, materials and data come from a variety of textual sources including but not limited to novels, films, WeChat combined with data from interviews and participant observation. Texts from novels, in particular *Ordinary World*, came in after the initial analysis of first-hand data is done from which the

themes have emerged. I then came up with my overall thesis structure based on these themes and organised materials into chapters accordingly — relevant texts were then selected to better connect and present the materials. During the process, I revisited my field notes to ensure the accuracy of my interpretation and presentation, and at times also checked with the participants when necessary, particularly for ongoing consent when non-interview materials were being incorporated.

The previous brief but honest recount of the changing nature of my research interest offers another example of how complicated and often personal any research journey can be, and reveals that the conducting of field work was not a predictable one-off event for me. The changes that happened along my journey were complex and multifaceted, involving my particular experience with the place, relationships with participants, expertise with the literature and the subject field of study, not to mention the ongoing change of individuals and places as time passed.

The ways that setbacks and failures in fieldwork can steer research into new directions has been discussed by many researchers (for example, see Dombroski & Do, 2018; Dombroski, 2016a, Carnegie, Gibson, & Rowland, 2016). Generally, surprises in fieldwork, especially those from social engagement, can often be productive in deepening researchers' understanding in a way that interviews and formal conversations cannot (Strathern, 2000, see also Trigger, 2012, Forsey & Meurk, 2012). In fact, anthropological-style ethnography has long been acknowledged for its ability to keep a certain degree of openness to 'the unpredictable or contingent' (Strathern, 2000: pp. 286–287). An outstanding example of the value of the unpredictable and unexpected results that arise from surprises or even failures would be Anna Tsing's influential book on the political ecology of forests in Indonesia, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Tsing, 2005), which was initially inspired by 'a curious misunderstanding' (p. x) that occurred in her 1994 fieldwork in Indonesia and set her off following cross-cultural ethnographic learning. Tsing repeatedly reminds us that the spontaneous and unexpected field events of 'friction' are the results of interaction and

engagement between different knowledge spheres. They play a crucial role in freeing the researcher from an accustomed way of knowing and an expectation that a priori knowledge will be revealed. Openness is an idea developed in opposition to closure — ironically, another binary that reminds us to let go of binaries when it comes to research. We must let go of the incessant drive to categorise and file everything, but sit with the emotions, with the field, with real people and their vulnerabilities, uncertainties and multiple changing subjectivities. As Davies (2016) points out, much can be lost if our ways of research only stick to a predefined research storyline.

Underpinning such revaluing of the unexpected, the uncertain and the contingent in research in the field is an epistemological shift of methodology. Methodology typically refers to the broader strategy, plan of action and the choices of certain methods for collecting and analysing data. However, it is most crucial to understand that methodology is shaped and informed by certain assumptions about the world and about research (Roelvink, 2020). In his book *After Method*, John Law (2004) points out that, driven by our desire for certainty, generality and stable conclusions, we often conceptualise methodology as what equips the researcher with a process that minimises the risks in discovering and detecting the reality of an issue. 'Reality' is often assumed to be singular, static, existing separate from our perception, and able to be adequately known and described by us (DeMartino, 2013). The problem of such epistemological realism is that method then tends to act as 'a set of short-circuits' that link us in the best possible and most efficient way with reality so that we could quickly return from that reality to our place of study with findings that are 'reasonably secure, at least for the time being' (Law, 2004, pp. 9-10). This further results in 'status quo' research projects (Harvey, 1973) that are incapable of generating findings outside of the circle of what is already assumed and desired and thus overlook the vast possibilities of the uncertain and unknown which exist outside of the circle.

However, what lies out of that circle tends to be deeply complicated, unstable and unclear. In order to engage with it, our understandings of methodology need to forgo the assumption of a stable, unchanging and clearly

identifiable world (Law, 2004; also see De Martino, 2013). Our methodological challenge then becomes how to manage such unknown complexities because 'simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent' (Law 2004, p. 2). As Klevan, Karlsson, & Grant (2019) suggest, understanding realities as made, multiple and becoming then leads to an understanding that the acquisition of knowledge needs to be becoming and multiple. To engage with such messy incoherence, we need to turn to 'messy' methods that allow experimentation and learning (Law and Urry, 2004). John Law proposes that new methods may involve 'embodiment, emotionality and situated inquiry' (Law, 2004, p. 3). Similarly, Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2010) acknowledge they do not have a concrete answer on how to move from 'an abstract ontological revisioning' to 'a glimmer or a whiff of what to do on the ground' but propose that we could start from 'spacious silence and a slowing down':

> Silence and slowness are openings, of course, opportunities for the body to shift its stance, to meld a little more with its surroundings; chances for the mind to mull over what floats by on the affective tide, or to swerve from its course as momentum decreases. Undoubtedly these are openings for learning. Not learning in the sense of increasing a store of knowledge but in the sense of becoming other, creating connections and encountering possibilities that render us newly constituted beings in a newly constituted world. (p. 322)

Indeed, this silence and slowness provide a space for mindfulness to emerge. They can allow the researcher to nurture awareness, to always 'look awry' (Zizek, 1991), asking questions that not only produce different knowledge but also produce knowledge differently. This approach is fundamentally tied to the mindfulness and awareness of the kind of reality we are contributing to performing with the questions we choose to ask, the subjects we choose to study and the methods we choose to use. As I discussed in the previous chapter, research itself is a performative ontological practice and thus we need to be mindful as researchers that we are enacting the world we live in. As Law

suggests, method goes with work and ways of working, which boil down to 'ways of being' — 'the kinds of social sciences we want to practice', 'the kinds of people that we want to be' and 'how we should live' require us to act as 'creatively and generously as possible' (Law, 2004, p. 10). If we are to bring to life new possibilities through ways of being outside what is known, the mindful practice of openness, generosity and creativity will open the door for us to engage with the messy and complicated unknown.

Yet, as with most learning experiences, learning to embrace such a methodology of mindfulness and openness can be challenging — it may take time to comprehend, take repeated failure to practice and take courage to progress. This was certainly true for me. Owning the failures of my chosen topic and research methods, I learned to allow myself some generosity in face of the frustration of not being able to quickly detect and sort out a clear reality. Instead, by diving into the unknown and allowing myself some 'slowness' (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010, p. 322) to 'stay with the trouble' Haraway (2016) in an 'open-ended field' (Healy, Özselçuk, & Madra, 2020, p. 390), I learned to accept and embrace the messy, changing and complicated nature of life and everyday lives in which the research methodology is then grounded. In what follows, I will relate brief vignettes from my field experience to explain how the epistemological shift in my methodology happened during the fieldwork and transformed my understanding of people — including myself — place and data.

4.3. Four stories

At the end of a dark hallway on the fourth floor in a bureau building were dormitory rooms adapted from vacant offices. All people working here are allowed a place to stay, but it was mostly young people, yet to be married or have their own places in the county, who lived here. At the other end of the hallway were the kitchen and dining room, where all three meals were prepared by a cook. A recreational room with a treadmill and a ping pong table was added on the fifth floor after my 2017 visit. The second and third floors hosted offices for work. In a sense this building was similar to the factory dorms that Pun Ngai (see

for example 1999, 2005) writes about — the place for work, although not the production line, sits closely to the place for life outside of work. Just as she points out how such a setting often quickly enables a sense of intimacy and solidarity, by living in a dorm with 'small-town youth', I soon found myself intrigued by my evolving and deepening relationships with them. I will briefly share memorable moments with four participants, Bingbing, Min, Lin and Bo, to provide a background for the upcoming analysis.

In my shared dormitory, two sets of desks and closets, together with other office supplies piling up in the room, left little space for our beds. My bed was laid next to Bingbing's bed, with the space in between so narrow that it was just wide enough to fit in our slippers; another girl's bed was squeezed into another corner of the room behind a closet. Although I was grateful to have a safe and reasonable place to stay, admittedly the loss of personal space brought great unease and discomfort in the beginning, though it soon turned out to be rewarding.

Unlike the other local girl, Bingbing is from another county. This means we spent a lot of time together, especially during the weekends when everybody else left for home, including the boys staying in a room across the corridor. I interviewed Bingbing on the second day after I arrived in 2017. Sitting in the Bureau's bright spacious office during the day, Bingbing offered me rather short and often generic answers in response to my prepared interview questions on 'family background', 'economic activities', 'values' and 'future plans'. The answers usually revealed a certain degree of reluctance, showing neither conformation nor denial —'Maybe, I'm not sure', 'I don't really know anything interesting', or 'There is nothing much to talk about, really'. If I insisted, Bingbing would give me a brief and still vague answer — 'Yeah, maybe', 'That's pretty much about it', or 'I don't know, maybe', which roughly translated into a culturally polite: 'No, you are wrong, but I'm too polite to tell you what I think'. It was a difficult and awkward process which we later jokingly described as 'squeezing toothpaste'.

Things slowly changed. Staying in the same dorm, we started to chat after switching off the light most nights. None of these conversations were intentionally orientated around my research topic at the time. Under cover of darkness, we seemed to become more open about our vulnerabilities and insecurities, and these chats soon became very personal and sometimes philosophical. For example, a conversation would start about the recent performance of a popular boyband, but would soon turn to an exchange of ideas around potential boyfriends and husbands and then to a serious reflection on patriarchy and social pressure to marry.

Not so surprisingly, what Bingbing revealed to me at night during these casual and unplanned chats was often different and sometimes directly contradictory to what she shared in formal interviews in the office. During one of the interviews, Bingbing told me that she was content in her current life because she believed in the virtue of hard work — she would be rewarded as long as she kept working hard. After weeks of hanging out together, she started to reveal some negative feelings about life and work. On a Sunday night, after we had spent the day together shopping and eating in a restaurant and at street vendors, we came back to the dormitory, got into bed, turned off the light and started to chat. From nowhere, Bingbing cursed and said:

> I just feel that I'm completely rubbish. There is no hope. Even if I get a permanent position, there is still no hope… What else can I do? Where else can I be? Nothing much is happening here. But everywhere is the same anyway... I'm sick of this job. I'm sick of this place. I'm sick of this kind of life. I'm just so sick of myself.

I responded by sharing my own stories and feelings. It was a defining moment of our relationship as well of as my research.

We carried on living our lives together — going out for mid-night BBQ and beer from street vendors, shopping online and offline, binge-watching TV series, eating noodles from the same bowl and meeting her visiting friends and family. She even saw me off at 4 am, after we had stayed awake the entire night talking about our childhoods and upbringing, to catch the train back home to attend the

funeral of my grandfather. New topics and my new understanding of her life as well as life in the county town in general would always emerge unexpectedly not only from the chats we had but also the life experiences I embodied. It was all intense — Not only did I feel I was gaining a view of an 'insider', but more importantly, I sensed how my life was starting to intertwine with these people and this place. People and life in Wubu began to genuinely interest me personally as well as academically. I started to accept that it was OK to fail to 'find out' what I had expected to 'find out': the diverse economic practices of migrant workers. As argued by Dombroski (2016b), 'multiplying possibility' only becomes possible with 'seeing diversity' by 'starting where you are'. I was there, in the field, living life with participants like Bingbing. Having embodied the fascinating everyday lives being lived where I was, I became aware of the embedded value of these everyday experiences, from which findings and knowledge would surely emerge.

Similar experiences in my subsequent fieldwork trips kept pushing me to rethink my methodology. In my last visit in 2019, Bingbing had already left, although we remained actively in contact on WeChat. I joined two other girls in a different dorm. I was left alone with Min in the first two weeks while the other girl was taking her annual leave. Again, I noticed the quick intimacy that grew between Min and me. Sitting in the same office where I had interviewed Bingbing, Min, just like Bingbing, replied to my questions with an overly polite tone and insisted that she didn't have anything interesting to tell, despite having worked in an international factory in Dongguan, one just like where Leslie Chang's factory girls worked (2008). Knowing this, I could not help but shower Min with questions and conduct a semi-structured interview with questions to encourage her to compare the two places, their work cultures and her reasons for coming back to her hometown. I should not have been surprised that her answers were short, reserved and generic.

Back in the dorm, Min's bed and mine were again side-by-side. After sleeping next to her for several days, I started to notice changes. She would talk to me at night with a casual tone, with some of the cursing that often signals

intimacy and friendship. As with Bingbing, she and I would chat every night and these unplanned conversations were casual and personal and covered topics ranging from political to relationship issues. After two weeks of living together, during our noon break, I unintentionally showed a certain level of vulnerability by venting about my own stress in doing a PhD. She paused from brushing her hair, turned around, and then all of a sudden told me that she was 'truly depressed' when she first came back. We did not take a nap that day as we usually did— she told me that her decision to return was made under the influence of her mother and sister, and caused conflict between her and her boyfriend at the time, which led the relationship to end. Min also started to fill in details of her life in Dongguan and her life before working here in the Bureau. Her reflection on her embodied living experience in a factory compound in a 'modern' city and life here in a 'backwards' county town turned out to be the missing puzzle piece for my thesis, as I suddenly began to understand and conceptualise life and place in a different way. In this sense, Min and Bingbing drove the development of this intellectual product as much as I did.

Male informants living in the dorm across the hall, especially one named Lin, played an important part in reshaping my thesis as well. I first interviewed and came to know Lin in my 2018 visit but the significant moment I am about to relate happened at the end of my June 2019 visit. One of the key topics that had emerged from previous trips was the securing of *bianzhi*, a permanent position in the official system obtained through a highly competitive test, which I will discuss in further detail in next chapter. What had struck me during conversations with these young people on *bianzhi* was their distinctively contrasting attitudes towards it. While some told me that studying to get *bianzhi* was the one and only goal at their current life stage, some played it light, saying: 'Oh, it doesn't matter much. Life won't be a lot different even if I get it'. Lin consistently expressed the latter attitude, even though I brought it up on different occasions with and without the presence of others.

A couple of days before I left, that year's test results were released. Lin posted the following on his WeChat status: a screenshot of a text exchange with a

friend who just found out he had passed the test. Lin wrote a brief and somewhat emotionless comment: 'Seems that I have to work harder'. He clearly had failed the test. The release of results did not seem to have an obvious impact on anyone though most of them failed the test — people joked and played ping pong the same way. Lin shrugged it off: 'I knew I wouldn't pass anyway, so no surprise at all'. Only one day later in the middle of the night, I noticed Lin sharing a song on his WeChat update without any description. This post was deleted earlier the next morning. The next weekend, the building was quiet, with most people having left for home. Waking up late in the opposite dorm, I heard the same song he had posted, coming from his room, playing on loop for hours, filling up the dark empty hallway. The song, *Listen, my nightmare,* had been written by friends and dedicated to a young artist who had taken his own life because of depression:

> After all, still can't make it through to dawn
>
> In this pale world, there exists no balance scale of justice
>
> ……
>
> I wipe away tears, letting hope and desperation battle free
>
> Choosing to give up
>
> Yet try to convince myself to march on
>
> I am tired to exhaustion
>
> I struggle to get out
>
> All the pain only hurts when one has lived it
>
> … …
>
> I leave all the sorrow and pain to the dark night
>
> Yet when I do get pushed to the edge of death
>
> Only then do I find out that the world will not change for me
>
> Just raise your head I hope you see the light
>
> In the sky shining bright

Giving you strength to stay alive

Erase the nightmares that you hide inside

You know it's not too late…

The song was abruptly turned off when my phone was heard ringing loudly. Maybe Lin was surprised to find out that someone was around. I became increasingly concerned about Lin and decided that I should reach out to him. The next day in the office, with other people present, I asked him about the song. He said '[I] played it just for fun'. Then, the other two boys left to smoke, and I kept sitting there, putting up with the awkward silence. Lin was still smiling, but soon looked down to the *bianzhi* textbook laying open on his desk. 'It's so damn true,' he muttered:'Every word of it is just how I feel'. I sensed his repressed anger, stress and frustration. Then he leaned towards the desk and flipped over a page of the textbook. I knew it was my hint to leave. Unlike the post that was quickly deleted on the night he received his test result, what has remained on Lin's WeChat since I met him is his signature: 'Even if the wings are broken, the heart still shall fly: Rabindranath Tagore.' Lin's background picture and profile picture also remain — an ultra-modern artwork of a turning staircase that seems to extend endlessly; a candy placed over the eyes of Van Gogh in his famous self-portrait, as if he is blinded by an eye mask. While I am cautious to not overanalyse these things and impose too much of my own interpretation, my understanding of Lin certainly deepened after this subtle incident, not merely because I purposely frequently invited Lin to exercise with me in an effort to lift his mood. I then realised the joke made by Peng, a friend of Lin, might have certain degree of truth – that Lin was a stress eater. He looked completely different from the fresh-looking university graduate I had met in 2018; I barely recognised him in 2019 thanks to the over 20 kilograms he had gained. Lin often joked with everyone about his weight in a sarcastic tone and blamed it on the fact that life in the Bureau was too comfortable. Peng told a different story when we

three were chatting together; he pointed to stress as the root cause of Lin's weight gain[13].

While Lin gained weight over the course of my fieldwork, another male friend, Bo, gained something else significant. Bo also looked completely different in 2019 compared with when I had first met him in 2018. In 2018, Bo was a tall skinny guy who did not smile much. He smoked all the time, and always wore the same grey windbreaker and sneakers that had originally been white. He was terribly short-sighted, and even after hitting a pole when riding his scooter at night, Bo refused to wear glasses — 'What damn difference will that make?', he asked me. During this period of my fieldwork, I followed several of the boys on a short trip during which the most common phrase I heard from Bo was '*mei yisi*'[14] — not interesting — his undergraduate time was *mei yisi*, his life is *mei yisi*, *bianzhi* is *mei yisi*, work is *mei yisi*, complicated professional and family relationships are *mei yisi*.

Interestingly, I never heard Bo refer to anything as *mei yisi* in my 2019 visit. I first saw him at a banquet with all the other small-town youth and I could not hold back my surprise — his vibe was a lot more positive and engaging, his hair was brushed back and styled with gel, he was wearing a pair of gold-rimmed glasses and he was nicely dressed. When I commented on his new look, everyone just shouted: 'It's because Bo has Teacher Li now!' Clearly, Bo had finally found some *yisi* in his life here. For him, even though a lot remained the same, such as his temporary work status and complicated family relationships, as he later told me, everything had changed. In 2018, he repeatedly told me this small town was 'an absolutely horrible place' and coming back was 'the absolutely wrong decision' and he 'absolutely couldn't wait to escape'. In 2019, he said, 'It's not

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[13] Lin's weight gain was a running joke in the group. It is worth pointing out that in Chinese culture, commenting on someone's appearance are more often considered appropriate than it is in Western culture.

[14] *Mei*, absent, lack of, not; *yisi*, fun, interest, but also: meaning, significance. To be further discussed in Chapter 5.

bad here', unable to hide the happiness and hope revealed by the shy grin on his face. In May 2020, I learnt about his upcoming marriage on WeChat.

These four stories of encounter were all of methodological significance to me. While my deep relationships with Bingbing and Min enabled a change in my positionality and subjectivity, they also served to ground my research in a focus on their complicated, always-happening everyday life experiences rather than a rush towards what I expected to find out. The unexpected moments of getting a glimpse of reserved if not hidden stories and emotions of Min and Lin also reminded me to always be mindful of the limits of knowing and the situatedness of knowledge, and taught me that I need to forgo the assumption of the existence of a certain reality that can be adequately known and described (DeMartino, 2013). Similarly, the changes I witnessed in Lin and Bo over time reminded me to be always aware of the nature of lived realities of everyday life: they are constantly changing rather than static. Ultimately, these unexpected moments that I did not and could not have set out to find, and that I initially ruled out as irrelevant, turned out to be extremely valuable data. There were so many other stories and moments like these that would be impossible to exhaustively include in this thesis, although I will selectively draw on them in the coming chapters. These moments made my fieldwork a transformative experience during which I gradually came to embrace a methodology of openness that transcends binary conceptualisations of knowing.

4.4. Openness beyond binaries

It is crucial to rethink how social science research could be 'better equipped to deal with mess, confusion and relative disorder' when too often the 'messiness' encountered in the field is 'tidied up' (Law, 2004, p. 2) and fieldwork remains considered as an additive rather than transformative experience. Feminist researchers have long pointed out how the dominant tradition of Western science suffers from its obsession with the false promise of absolute clarity, objectivity and generality (for example, see Harding, 2016a; Harding, 1987). Such obsession follows the Western philosophical tradition in which meaning tends to be

constructed around presence and essence to the exclusion of absence and difference — a binary structure based on opposition and exclusion (Derrida, 1976; Gibson-Graham, 2000). In this section, drawing on the above fieldwork encounters, I will further explain how a methodology of openness could be practiced by transcending the customary binary thinking on three aspects— relationships with the self and informants, the approach to place and everyday life, and the conceptualisation of data.

Beyond the researched and the researcher

> I spent basically two years hanging out in this city, Dongguan, and over that time, you could see immense change in every person's life: upward, downward, sideways, but generally upward. … It's just hard to see when you're suddenly sucked into the city. It looks like everyone's poor and desperate, but that's not really how it is. Certainly, the factory conditions are really tough, and it's nothing you or I would want to do, but from their perspective, where they're coming from is much worse, and where they're going is hopefully much better, and I just wanted to give that context of what's going on in their minds, is not what necessarily is going on in yours. (Chang, 2012)

What Leslie Chang shared in her talk once again demonstrates the transformative role that fieldwork can play — a deeper understanding of the participants' life decentred from the researcher's own perception can be enabled by the building of closer relationships over time. Such change is in fact a significant achievement, since the researcher's perception of participants is inevitably informed by existing frameworks which, as Gibson-Grahams argues, are often normalised and considered 'common sense' (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020, p. 8). In the case of previous studies of Chinese migrant workers, the subjects have too often been quickly confirmed to be 'poor and desperate' by researchers who just landed from the outside with the capitalocentric framework which seems to dominate our ideas of the economic

world. Chang made this realisation after she had ridden the train with her participant back to the home village to celebrate the Chinese New Year with the entire family (Chang, 2012). Similar to Chang, I observed that my deepened relationships with Bingbing and Min, in particular, not only made me aware of my relative and always-changing positionality, but also resulted in my changing subjectivity.

Positionality: always on the insider-outsider continuum

In the post-positivist research agenda, reflection on the positionality of the researcher in geographic research and writing has become more common. Feminist geographers have engaged in debates on positionality, difference, representation and reflexivity in research for decades (see Rose 1997; Linda McDowell 1997). It is now much more commonplace to acknowledge that the researcher's position mediates his/her knowledge production, based on the understanding that research is a co-constituted process in which both the participants and researcher construct meaning. It is tied to the fundamental understanding that knowledge is always situated and contingent rather than universal, omniscient, objective and value-free. The researcher's personal voice and subjective experience are increasingly important (see for example Klevan, Karlsson, & Grant, 2019; Dombroski, 2011; Chang, 2008), as qualitative research in particular is understood by many as an inherently social and political process, often opposing grand narratives and rejecting the 'God-trick' (Haraway, 1988).

Subjective experiences such as those described in the four aforementioned stories are related to my own relative positioning on the insider-outsider continuum as an 'academic homecomer', in the words of Oriola and Haggerty (2012). I arrived at an initial understanding of the relative and fluid nature of positionality when people outside China assumed I held a certain authority with regard to 'China'. As a Chinese PhD student studying in Aotearoa New Zealand, who had left for Singapore at the age of 18, I am not as familiar with 'China' as

many would expect. Yet 'China' is where people know I come from — few people outside China would understand the significance of my growing up in an eastern province or what it meant when I said that my paternal hometown was somewhere in northern Shaanxi. As I have explained, my father actually left the region for university in the early 1980s and resettled in the eastern province where I grew up. My connection with his hometown was limited to a short visit every couple of years. The county town and the greater region was by no means 'home' to me— my relatives there would never see me as an insider. What constitutes 'the field' versus 'home' was still problematic to me. However, when I returned to China from New Zealand, and made my way to Wubu, I was surprised to feel the comfort and easiness of 'home'. I felt that this ease had to do with the sudden shift from 'the West' back to 'the East', however problematic those descriptions may be. Having spent months struggling to adjust to life in New Zealand, I felt much more 'at home' in Wubu, despite how different it was, in ways ranging from dialect to diet, from my actual home region. Wubu was thus an unfamiliar home and a familiar field.

Many 'home-located' researchers before me have had similar experiences — finding themselves being simultaneously insider and outsider, both and neither (for example, see Gilbert, 1994; Mullings, 1999; Sultana, 2007; Zhao, 2017; Choi, 2006). Researching one's own culture and community has been celebrated in decolonising epistemologies. There is no doubt that my Chineseness enabled 'silent understandings [of] culture-bound phrases that did not need interpretation' (Johnson-Bailey, 1999, p. 996). Yet to assume that one possesses more authority or deeper understanding into 'his or her' society is to 'fall into the fallacy of Third Worldism' (Sideway, 1992, p. 405). Such assumption is not only is too simplistic to answer complex questions in relation to personal attributes (Kobayashi, 1994; also see Taggart & Sandstrom, 2011), but also suggests an underlying positivistic viewpoint that there is an objective truth of 'their world' waiting to be discovered. As Oriola and Haggerty (2012) pointed out, it should not be assumed that scholars originally from the Majority World who return back home to conduct research on 'their' people and society possess more authority,

nor should it be assumed that they would not encounter issues of power relations. In fact, 'homecomers' are often perceived as (or genuinely are) relatively privileged, and then are considered relative 'outsiders'. In addition, the ability of researchers to adjust along the insider-outsider continuum is highly personal and contingent and often has less to do with a sole characteristic like ethnicity or nationality. For example, Moser (2008) talks about how the personality of the individual researcher is crucial in the ethnography process and can often outweigh the established categories of positionality.

While the closer relationships built over time do facilitate certain 'insiderness', which grant access to information unavailable to a relative 'outsider' (for example see Zhao, 2017; Kusek & Smiley, 2014) as well as enabling a deeper and more meaningful interpretation of such information (Krisvik, 2012; Thoresen & Öhlén, 2015; Trigger et al., 2012), one's positionality is still always contingent and fluid rather than moving unidirectionally towards the position of a so-called 'insider'(see Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Choi, 2006). For example, although I have come to know Lin well through his answers to the detailed questions I raised in several interviews — the boys joked that I had more information on him than the police department — it was Peng who revealed to me the stress Lin had been through. Similarly, although I was there only for a relatively short period of time, I bonded with Bingbing, who entrusted me with certain exclusive information that I do not put in my thesis. My positionality is thus always relative and situational, depending on the context and the type of knowledge we are addressing.

Coming back to 'insiderness' — what does it mean? As I spent time and accumulated experiences with participants in the field, I came to know the best restaurants, the most fair-priced shops, the most popular basketball courts, and I also came to know everyone's hobbies, life plans, treasured stories and memorable life moments. I came to realise my 'insiderness' was not only about the information that I acquired, but also about the deep, emotional, and often empathetic bond formed in the process of acquiring such information. Such connections further led to my resubjectification of myself — from seeing myself

as a neutral, objective researcher to viewing myself as co-creating a shared understanding of how life unfolds with the participants, transcending the binary perspectives of the researcher and the researched, the observer and the observed, which will be discussed in the following section.

Resubjectification: stories are just data with a soul

> I am a storyteller. I'm a qualitative researcher. I collect stories…And maybe stories are just data with a soul. (Brown, 2010)

Social work professor Brené Brown, in her talk "The Power of Vulnerability" walks her listeners through her own difficult research journey, which eventually led to her acceptance of vulnerability. Brown explains that she was initially excited when, at the beginning of her doctoral study, her research professor said: 'if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist'; she had always felt 'life is messy, clean it up, organize it and put it into a bento box.' She was determined to deconstruct and measure shame, which was her research topic, only to find that what underpins shame was vulnerability. Brown saw this finding as a 'betrayal' to her 'pledged allegiance to research' of which the goal is to 'control and predict'. She 'hated' vulnerability and decided to 'beat it back with my measuring stick'. It did not work but instead led to a breakdown, followed by therapy sessions and what she called 'a year-long street fight' and a 'slugfight' with vulnerability, which she eventually lost. She came to learn that we tend become afraid when we feel vulnerable and then we try to 'make everything that's uncertain, certain', yet we 'cannot selectively numb emotion' and, if we try, we end up numbing everything. I, too, found that the acceptance of emotions and vulnerability is crucial not only to one's personal being but also to research.

Following the rising interest in the personal and experiential aspects of contemporary ethnographic research, many have recognised and written about the impact that emotions have on research (see for example Ellis, 1991; Perry, 2000; Beatty, 2005; Beatty, 2005; Davis & Breede, 2015; Ross, 2017). Given its

longitudinal and intersubjective nature, ethnographic fieldwork often leads to personal and often intimate spaces of the lives of both the researcher and their informants (Coffey, 1999, p. 55). Personal entanglements deepen when researchers experience 'revelatory moments' — moments of emotion, discomfort and surprise that lead to better understanding of the social and cultural context, and also to different understandings of the researcher's own subjectivities (Trigger, Forsey and Meurk, 2012, see also Tonnaer, 2012). Moments of intense emotional engagement can help in mediating the 'conceptual divide between meaning and feeling, observer and observed' as Henry (2012, p. 528) notes with reference to the emotion of grief in ethnography. Indeed, emotions, however vulnerable they may make us feel, are important in opening up opportunities for resubjectification. To borrow the quote from Brené Brown, we could argue that emotions, and the vulnerability behind them shared by us all, are what humanise and connect both the research and the researched, imbuing 'soul' into the data of stories.

Lin might have stopped the looping playback of his theme song upon realising my presence, but what he did not know was that the song he had posted and quickly deleted hit me as hard as it might have hit him. June 2019 was an extremely difficult time for me. On top of other challenging personal events going on in my life, revisiting the field was evoking strong emotions — melancholic nostalgia for Bingbing's companionship while getting to know Min, and, more significantly, the deep sense of intellectual crisis I felt upon witnessing the complete change of Bo's feelings about the county town, which had initially led to my interest in 'marginalised' lives and places. I was frustrated that Bo's story seemed to have deviated from the constellation I had in mind. That moment of connection in 2019 with Lin through his music reminded me of and further helped me to make sense of the revelatory moments of emotion and vulnerability I had experienced with the girls I slept next to. If, as Law (2004) suggests, our method goes with our work and is fundamentally tied to our 'ways of being'(p. 10), then we shall enact what we desire, a being that is 'quieter and more generous', unbound from 'definiteness, the last of the Euro-American versions of

out-thereness' (p. 82). My connections with the participants in my study, and my observations of the way these connections disrupted my study, led me to finally truly let go of binaries, resubjectify myself as also a participant in the study, and to research and think and write with the participants.

Given anthropology's colonial legacy, ethnography has a history of emphasising the ethnographer's responsibility in representing the Other, (Atkinson, 2011; Rainbow, 1986). As we in general have moved away from a colonial agenda, scholars have been increasingly interested in issues around the researcher's positionality and power relations in the research process. For example, anthropologists have long been aware of how they 'value studying what they like' and in general 'prefer the underdog' (Nader, 1972, p. 303). Also, in the field of development studies, researchers are often driven by a passion for enacting social transformation and improving people's lives, especially those of the poor and marginalised (Scheyvens & McLennan, 2014); research like this risks being overrun by 'strong theory', only serving to re-enforce a narrative of 'the poor and marginalised', and fall into the trap of what bell hooks (1989, p. 14) calls 'shallow feminist politics', which 'privileges acts of speaking over the content of speech'. Acknowledging that slight disappointment behind my surprise in Bo's change, I became aware of my underlying assumptions that 'small-town youth' were marginalised and underprivileged, as was the 'backward small town' of county Wubu. I found myself 'caught within and against the colonizing nature of ethnographic research' (Villenas, 2000, p. 76), not only perpetuating but also reifying my ideas of that imagined 'there' about which I had become obsessed as a young woman sitting in a library in Singapore. I found myself trying to explain the lives and places I was seeing 'here' in Wubu in ways that would fit the 'there' I had originally imagined, from a 'dominant' perspective (see Harding, 2016b; Spivak, 1988). When the 'stars' I spotted in the field did not line up with the normative 'small town' constellation I introduced in Chapter 1, I was overwhelmed with feelings of frustration and failure.

In fact, these emotions are crucial in humanising not only the people we study but also ourselves. Researchers are reminded that there are always more to

the lived lives of the people we perceive to be the 'underdogs'(Nader, 1972), just as Hastrup (1993, p. 181) argues that 'we can never "know" individuals as subjects; nor can we "understand" them, as if they were truly objects; what we, as ethnographers, can know, is the space which they are prepared to share with us.' While we consciously work to move away from the positivist research agenda that assumes the omniscient, omnipotent, invisible researcher, we need to practice mindfulness and generosity towards ourselves. We need to recognise that we, too, have emotions and vulnerabilities and we need time, patience, courage and embodied experiences to learn and to cultivate our 'judging mind' into a 'tasting mind' of learning and accepting (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxvii).

Resubjectification starts with an exploratory stance of openness. Had I chosen not to stay in the same dorm with my prospective participants in light of my initial discomfort, to not open up to them about my personal and emotional self, or to not dwell on shared moments of uneasiness and surprise, I would have closed the opportunities offered by fieldwork and research in general to 'muck in' (Wright, 2017) and embody 'new kinds of scholarship' (Dombroski & Do, 2018) through 'holistic ethnography' (Davis & Breede, 2015). Diving into the field and sensitising ourselves to embodied emotions, we open ourselves up to resubjectification through, in the words of Cindi Katz (1994, p. 72)a 'politics of engagement' — 'to see, be seen, speak, listen and be heard in the multiply determined field that we are everywhere, always in'. If, as Katz says, 'I am always, everywhere, in "the field", I then wonder, given that "I" — the researcher's self — is also a clear element in research, how should we approach "the field"?

Beyond the imagined 'there' and the lived 'here'

> I read [Western] reports on China— it feels like looking at an X-ray… The bones all seem to be in the right place, but what I have in my head with the flesh and the veins — all of that seem [missing even though] it all seem very accurate…' (Fan, 2015)

In response to the question, 'What does it feels like to read Western reporting as a native Chinese', Jiayang Fan, a staff writer at the New Yorker Magazine who migrated to the U.S after finishing her second year in a primary school in China offered this intriguing X-ray metaphor. In answering this question, she reminds us that China remains an othered entity, the representation of which may not necessarily be 'real', regardless of how 'accurate' it is. Indeed, in the case of my study, the hard facts listed are 'accurate' — Wubu's mountainous geographical condition, relatively low GDP and small population — these are the 'bones' of Fan's metaphor, which, pieced together, form the skeleton of an othered 'small town'. What about that holistic experience of living in Wubu? How do people there, who are living, moving and breathing, think, feel, connect, express and perform in their everyday lives? All this is what gives Wubu veins and flesh to make it alive.

Fan's flesh and bone metaphor reminds me of the ancient story of the blind men and the elephant — a group of blind men who have no prior knowledge of an elephant are learning about it through touching, and, too quickly, they jump to conclusions, claiming the elephant's complete shape is that of the particular part they are touching. The elephant, of course, symbolises the unknown. When we researchers accept that what we are trying to make sense of is truly unknown — multiple, fluid, changing, contingent and situated — then we also ought to accept that we are blind. The unknown, just like the elephant, is not simply the part you touch first, or its skeleton of bones, but also an assemblage of veins and flesh, some visible and touchable, some hidden under the skin. As blind as we are, we need to learn to be mindful and practice that 'silence and slowness' required (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010, p. 322) to stay with the elephant in the same way that we need to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) so that we will be able to sense as much as we can — the smell that hits your nose, still with a hint of warmth, the sound wave of blood pumping through veins that vibrates on your eardrum, the subtle motion of muscles contracting and relaxing that tickles your palm, and the list goes on. Now we are getting a thick description based on this elephant.

A place-based thick description is what we can arrive at after we have come to embrace the unknown and always-changing nature of what we study. The previous chapter has shown that to go beyond the powerful overarching hegemonic frameworks, researchers need to harness from an ordinary everyday life that is diverse and complicated in nature. A placed-based thick description allows us to capture the particularities and specificities of the place's flesh and veins without overshadowing them with a framework of its skeleton of bones. It allows us to see the 'ordinary' elephant rather our blindly imagined elephant. 'Imagined', as Said (1978) points out, rather than meaning false or made-up, refers to 'perceived'. Following this logic, a person's imagination of a place is based on the perception of it that is constructed from the imagery seen, the text read and the discourses heard about it. Following the value-laden line of narrative of my mother's memories, Lu Yao's *Ordinary World* and the established discourse around 'small towns' and 'small-town youth' discussed in Chapter 1, my imagination of Wubu was one of an othered small town — so backward, lacking and marginalised that I would require a portable toilet to survive there. Yet my embodied experiences in the county town — taking fast and convenient train rides to other places, listening to niche music genres with Lin, and hanging out with Bingbing, dining and shopping — as trivial as they may seem, are crucial in revealing to me a bottom-up grasp of this place and these people with unfiltered differences and complexity.

The place-based approach has its tradition in feminist study, but the notions of 'place' and 'place-based politics' have been increasingly disempowered and devalued under pervading 'globalocentric' mainstream discourses (Escobar & Harcourt, 2005). Such 'global imaginary' has been conceptualised as a subordinate other within the global order (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 50). The theoretical and political significance of particularities that existed at individual localities were 'purportedly subsumed, when not completely erased, by global forces' (Alvarez, 2005, p). Localities and thus individuals have been made victims of research, robbed of agency and self-determination. However, if we can accept the impossibility of subsuming every place, individual being and practice

under a universal law, then we cannot reduce the local to a mere node of the global, nor can the inventive potential of the local be captured by a singular imagining. And thus 'the impossibility of a global order must be affirmed as a truth' so that the local could be approached as a 'space of freedom and capacity' (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 50l).

Without denying that places and individuals are indeed constantly influenced by larger forces, a place-based approach enables us to treat places as situated, specific and historical and embrace a 'progressive sense of place' that allows the 'full layering effects of time' to shape places into what they are at present and to also change them in the future. Places, and thus the individuals who live in them, are irreducible crossroads of multiple temporal and spatial trajectories (Massey, 1994). In this way, place-based research is then granted with what I call for — 'openness' — where the field, the individuals and the research project itself transform from mere nodes of a narrative of the already known to sites and seeds of potential.

Similarly, learning from 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) allows us to unlearn the powerful discourse of 'strong theory', which organises events into 'seemingly predictable trajectories' (Gibson-Graham, 2014). When we pursue thick description, we intentionally refuse to represent a single coherent story and allow fragmentation, multiplicity and 'non-coherence' (Law, 2004, p. 85). This then leads to a rethinking about what we count as 'data'.

Beyond 'accident' and 'data'

There was once an entomologist who found a bug he couldn't classify — so he stepped on it. (Ernest R Hilgard)

By now it should be clear that a place-based thick description is necessary, so it is time to consider: a description of what? After accepting that new realisations and understandings can emerge from unexpected moments and encounters, we need to rethink what we count as 'data'. After all, fieldwork, as complicated as life and the everyday life in which it is situated, is full of numbers, events, encounters, conversations, stories, emotions, affects, memories

and many other things. What counts? In this section, I argue that we need to allow openness in what we consider to be 'data' that transcends a binary understanding of information being either relevant or irrelevant, either sought after or accidental.

The term 'accident' is adapted from the concept of 'accidental ethnography' first proposed by Fujii (2015) to describe a field research method that pays 'systematic attention to the unplanned moments' (p. 525) that occur outside a structured data collection process. Fujii argues that these unplanned moments play an important role in revealing the broader political and social context in which the researcher and their participants are both embedded. I would like take this idea of 'accidents' a bit further. The very fact that certain encounters or findings are regarded as 'accidents'— unexpected, irrelevant, trivial if not unwanted — suggests the underlying existence of certain 'non-accidental' findings — the expected results that are projected based on our pre-existing imagination. An unknown bug's presence disrupts our familiar, secure, organised field of the known. However, to eliminate the 'accidental' bug eliminates not only uncertainty and vulnerability, but also the new possibilities that examining it may lead to.

Embracing 'accidents' helps to destabilise pre-existing ideas of containment and fixity and construct research frameworks that 'go beyond modes of inquiry that are imbued with dominant cultural norms' (Basnet, Johnston & Longhurst, 2020, p. 3). Embracing 'accidents' leads to new ways of knowing that are 'constantly reinventing themselves in ways that desire difference' (Peake 2011, p. 757). Accidental 'frictions' led Anna Tsing (2005) to realise and eventually liberate her fieldwork and research from an over-dependence on an agenda that had her searching for the revelation of a priori knowledge; 'accidents' open up our production of knowledge rather than close it to methodologically foreshadowed and preordained 'truth'. The 'accidental' description of stars outside the established constellation gives us a sky full of stars.

A sky full of stars is a field that is 'anew', where 'matter and concept' come together 'yielding the differences in thought that augur possibility' (Sharpe, 2001

as cited by Gibson-Graham, 2004, p. 407). Thinking about the significant role played by those unexpected and seemingly trivial moments described earlier, my resubjectification of the self as well as the subsequent reconceptualisation of the 'small town youth' in this 'small town', we can see that treating what emerges from the field as 'ordinary' and thinking beyond 'relevant' data or 'irrelevant' accidents are the first steps to going beyond our ingrained alignment of power. After all, 'the size and topology of the domain it organises' is what characterises strong theory (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 13). If we can forego this, we will then arrive at an 'exotic field', in the words of Gibson-Graham (2004), that is:

a place of the encounter, not with the other but with the unconceptualized. What is unthought enacts its creativity, it passes our senses, it awakens our slumbering perceptivity, it participates actively in generating new thinking. In the process the field becomes exorcized in a different sense; exorcized not because it is other to ourselves, not because it is the 'real' or the 'third world' to our 'abstract' or 'first world' sensibilities, but because it cannot be subsumed to (capitalist) identity. (p. 417)

Indeed, with an approach that features an openness to going beyond the binary, fieldwork is not simply done to correct misperceptions or domesticate the unknown to enlarge the known, the field becomes a generative ground rather than a site of testing or correction, and our research process is one of transformation and creation rather than recognition and addition. Seeing happening and encountering as 'ordinary' helps us to see ordinary lives of ordinary people of an ordinary place beyond dominant frameworks. Doing this opens up space for surprises, differences, and endless possibilities — the seemingly mundane and quotidian field of everyday life is thus our exotic field, and our exotic field is everywhere.

4.5. Conclusion

A methodology of openness is thus called for if we are to attune to differences and harness possibilities from a study of everyday lives. Fieldwork played a transformative role in teaching me to dealign from the Eurocentric

binary thinking and to not only accept but also celebrate the overdetermined, messy and constant-changing nature of life. Like knowledge, our positionality is always situated and contingent. Apart from acknowledging my relative and changing positioning as an academic home-comer, I also further point out how opening to emotions and vulnerability could have a revelatory impact, leading to our much needed resubjectificaton by humanising both ourselves and the people we study. With openness, we allow ourselves to sensitise to, connect with and really experience and embody our entanglement with people and place. This further lets a 'lived here' emerge from a place-based description. When we construct a space of openness for non-coherences and differences, we can free ourselves from the assumptions of an 'imagined there' imprinted on our minds by bulldozing preconceived hegemonic frameworks. We then learn to let the happening and encountering on the ground of our field steer our research, allowing some openness to our findings. The unexpected 'accidents' can also turn out to be data that lead to our new field, constituted of the unknown, within which lie the possibilities we so desire.

5. FROM 'SMALL-TOWN YOUTH' TO ORDINARY YOUTH

5.1. Introduction

On a September night in Christchurch, New Zealand, 2018, I was scrolling on my phone and browsing my WeChat friends' status updates. Two photo posts, appearing one after the other, caught my attention. JJ, my old classmate from a so-called 'elite' high school, who was travelling in the U.K, posted a photo of himself next to an iconic red phone booth in London. JJ's post was followed by a photo of Tang, a friend from the Bureau in Wubu, taken in front of the giant mirror installed on the wall of the hallway in the dormitory building. Despite the distinctively different backgrounds, the photos were remarkably similar: JJ and Tang were dressed and posing almost identically. Following the hit show, *The Rap of China*, which first aired in 2017, there had been a new wave of hip-hop fashion that JJ and Tang obviously followed — they were both wearing a pair of Ray-Ban aviator-style sunglasses, an oversized jacket with an elaborate and colourful print and a pair of sneakers. They were even posed like rappers – arms in front of their chest with one hand doing some kind of hip-hop finger gesture.

I was first amazed by the coincidence — how odd it was that two people so far apart from each other in so many ways would post such similar posts, appearing at the same time on my timeline — the timeline of a friend in another faraway island country in the southern hemisphere. Mesmerised by such connectivity, transcending physical distance, thinking about JJ's and Tang's almost identical style, I then started to wonder if there was more to my initial amazement. JJ had been born and raised in the capital city, Xi'an, by middle-class professional parents while Tang, who has spent most of his life in the county, is what would typically be regarded as a 'small-town youth'. Noticing my surprise at their resemblance was a revelatory experience similar to those I

discussed in the previous chapter — I would not have expected that these two young men would have much, if anything, in common, because I had more or less assumed that JJ and Tang were two different kinds of youth: in hindsight, 'metropolis youth' and 'small-town youth'.

This social media moment made me reconsider my approach to these young people I was studying. I had been, almost inevitably, informed by the three main representations around 'small-town youth' that I introduced in Chapter 1 — they were the art realm's marginalised drifting souls, they were, in the eyes of commercial giants, passive consumers who had terrible taste, and they were passionate entrepreneurs as advocated by the state. As further analysed in Chapter 2, what had given birth to these bulldozing frameworks I had unconsciously adopted was the 'small-town-metropolis' binary that emerged as China adopted an urban-centred modernisation development path. 'Small towns' as well as 'small-town youth' had been rendered into a homogenous Other, eroded of their differences and agency. However, the uncanny resemblance between JJ and Tang made me realise the need to look beyond such structural binary definitions when we approach subjects in contemporary China.

In this chapter, I will first introduce who the so-called 'small-town youth' in my study are by providing detailed information of their backgrounds and life histories. In doing so, I aim to let heterogeneity emerge in order to contest the notion of the existence of a homogenous group of 'small-town youth'. I will then analyse their narratives on the subject of their relocations to the county town. On this subject, I will first show that *danwei*, the legacy of socialist China, emerged as a core theme around which they narrate the story of their return. However, with an openness to non-coherences and contradictions, I read for difference against the dominant framework of *danwei* and show that each subject's relocation is in fact more complicated and contingent — there are a wide range of reasons that are less-frequently mentioned and noticed. I argue that they consistently referred to *danwei* as a reason to justify their relocation to the 'backwardness' of a small town. I also argue that this is a consequence of the influence of a teleological socio-spatial understanding among the participants that

the superiority of *danwei* compensates for the small town's 'backwardness'. I will also revisit popular representations of 'small-town youth' to show how a dominant teleological trajectory sets evolution into 'true modern individuals' of desire and consumption as an ideal goal, and that this trajectory renders the so-called 'small-town youth' into impoverished Others. Reading for difference will serve as a foundation for the openness of this research, from which a more nuanced and differentiated approach can be taken to on-the-ground lives in 'small towns' in general.

5.2. Who are they? Introducing the 'small-town youth' informants

'Oh, Qiqi is different. She is an only child,' Min said to me. Xiaoya, the other girl in our dorm jumped in: 'But I have also felt like *you* [referring to Min] are the most different. You worked in Guangdong — so far away — and I think you are the most courageous.' Just another lunch break chat in our dorm. Among this group of young people, working and living closely together, a degree of comparison often naturally came up in our conversations. There were many other similar comments on how a certain individual was 'different' from others. 'Fang is different from us because she has *bianzhi*, [so she is] more superior' Zhong, jokingly said, making the contrast between Fang and himself and Hong, who was sitting next to him in the office. Fang, on another occasion, casually said: 'Oh, Zhong's situation is different, because he has more connections — both his parents work in the *danwei* here in the county.' Bingbing once referred to Hong when we were having one of our bed-time small talks: 'Hong ought to be the happiest one. She has such a handsome husband and their apartment is so nice. Look at us others, all lonely and single.' Hong seemed to think otherwise — she was borrowing my white shirt in preparation for the civil servant test, and as she was trying it on, I joked: 'You look so stressed. Just think about your handsome hubby — nothing else really matters!' Hong laughed: 'You people wouldn't understand!' 'Of course us sad single souls don't understand!' 'Oh. no — I mean you people who are always so good at studying and taking tests. I'm sure Xiang

and Huimei will have a better shot than me.' To Hong, Xiang, who had graduated from a first-tier university, and Huimei, who had just finished her master's degree, were the most different from the rest of the group.

As I was gaining more 'insiderness', as discussed in the previous chapter, I noticed myself becoming increasingly confused yet intrigued by the diversity of these young people. Conversations like these made me further question the validity of the notion of 'small-town youth', as I found it impossible to sketch a coherent group profile of them. The categories I had prepared based on my literature review— educational level, rural or urban *hukou* status, family background or previous work experiences — failed to classify even the mere dozen participants I was observing. However, as earlier chapters have laid out, accepting these irreducible differences and this diversity may be the key to an alternative understanding and to becoming able to envision and enact possibilities beyond the already known. Thus, I have purposely chosen to open the following section up to some 'messiness' — instead of presenting my participants by themes, I will briefly introduce the backgrounds and life histories of several key informants as independent cases to allow a space of openness to heterogeneity.

Life stories

Throughout the duration of my multiple visits spanning from 2015 to 2019, I lived and/or interacted closely with 17 young people — 8 males and 9 females. They were in their early or mid-twenties, with the eldest born in 1989 and the youngest born in 1996. While they come from different regions of Yulin and all had certain life experiences in cities outside Yulin, Wubu county town was their main place of residence at the time. I will only outline several key elements to introduce the cases in this section, while more relevant details will be given in coming discussions.

Bingbing, the girl I slept next to and bonded closely with, was born in 1990. She grew up a village of Wubu and finished her first year of junior middle school in the county town. She then transferred to a school located in the prefectural-

level city of Yulin, where she finished her high school. She went on to study applied chemistry in a university in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province. Upon graduation in 2013, she only considered jobs in the Yulin region and found a job in a factory located in a suburb of Yulin. Six months later, unhappy about her salary, which had been impacted by the poor performance of the factory, she found another temporary position with a state-owned company in Neimenggu. She quit this job to work in a temporary position in a local bureau in Wubu county in 2015. Bingbing's parents relocated to a nearby county to work as taxi and truck drivers. She was left with her grandmother in the home village. Bingbing has one elder and one younger brother; the former studied and then worked in the eastern province of Hebei while the latter finished his study in a polytechnic in Xi'an and found a job in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, in southwestern China , then later relocated to Gansu Province. In 2018, Bingbing got a permanent position through the civil servant test in the neighbouring prefectural city and left Wubu.

Min, the girl who has also been introduced in the previous chapter, was born in 1991 in Wubu, where she lived until the end of high school. She then studied marketing at a university in Xi'an, and later found a position in the purchasing department of an international manufacturing company in Dongguan, in the southeastern province of Guangdong. After working there for three years, she resigned and came back to Wubu. After taking a break and staying at home for several months, she first worked in a private preschool as an art tutor and later landed in a temporary position in the Bureau. She has an elder sister who holds a permanent position in Wubu, as well.

Qiqi was the only child that Min talked about. She was born in 1995 in a nearby county town. Upon finishing junior middle school, she went to Xi'an to study in a vocational school then further in a polytechnic, majoring in advertising design and new media. Although she is accustomed to and loved the bustling lifestyle offered by Xi'an, her parents both wanted her to come back to Yulin and get a stable job. She then signed up for the 'University Graduates Serving the West Volunteer Programme' and was posted to a position in the Bureau. Her

father is a relatively successful businessman while her mother has a permanent position in a *danwei* in her home county.

Zhong's parents also have permanent positions in a *danwei*. Zhong was born in 1991 and raised in Wubu; he left for high school in Yulin and later went to Xi'an for university. He came back right upon graduation, stayed home and prepared for the civil servant test. He first got a temporary position in the Bureau and two years later, in 2017, he got a permanent position in a township level government office in Wubu. He is also an only child like Qiqi.

Hong, who was sitting next to Zhong when he made the joke about Fang, was born in 1989 in a village in Wubu and went to the same university as Zhong, although, unlike him, Hong completed high school in Wubu. After studying industrial chemistry, she worked in a factory in the neighbouring province, Shaanxi, for three years. She then came back to Wubu to reunite with her boyfriend, with whom she had been in a relationship since high school, who had returned from military service and settled down with a permanent job in the county government. Hong has an older sister, a younger brother and younger sister; the latter studied in a polytechnic then worked as a baker in Changsha, the capital city of the inland province of Hunan. and later came back to Wubu and opened up a home appliance chain store. Hong's parents were farmers who ran a small restaurant in the county town from 2009 to 2014. They then closed the restaurant and worked as manual labourers in Yulin City and later returned to the village, where they are semi-retired and graze a small number of sheep, when Hong's elder sister got married.

Fang, the 'superior' girl with *bianzhi* that Zhong and Hong were joking about, was born in 1991. She is from a town near Yulin City which became a suburb of Yulin as the city grew. Fang made it into to a first-tier university in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province, to study accounting. Upon graduation, she failed her first try at the civil servant test and stayed in Wuhan for a short while before going home. She then took the next year's test and got a permanent position in Wubu. Fang was single when we first met in 2015. She was seeing a man working in the county government during my 2017 visit and they were

already married when I made my 2018 trip. The last time I visited in 2019, Fang had just given birth to a baby girl. The couple own an apartment in Yulin City and still chose to rent in Wubu, although they could easily afford to buy an apartment there. Both of them aim to transfer to Yulin even in the knowledge that such relocation within the system will be very difficult. Fang's parents had worked in casual roles, for example as a temporary cook, security guard or clerk, then retired when Fang settled down with a permanent job. Fang's older brother works in Yulin, and her older sister works in the coastal city of Qingdao.

Qingdao is also the city where Xiang attended university at a first-tier university just like Fang's. Xiang was born in 1994 and grew up in a village of another county of Yulin. Upon finishing high school with good grades in his home county, he had the ability and intention to choose a 'faraway city' on the China coast for, in his words, some 'freedom to fly as far as one could'. However, prior to graduation, he changed his mind and signed up for the volunteer program like Qiqi and made it specifically clear that he wanted to be posted close to home. Xiang's parents were farmers and, at that time, were working as migrant workers doing construction work in nearby cities. His father later became a street food vendor. Xiang has an elder sister who stayed in their home county mainly as a housewife who does temporary casual work from time to time. Xiang did not choose to renew his term; instead, the last I visited in 2019, he was about to move to Xi'an without a clear plan.

Bo, the guy who used to say '*mei yisi*' a lot, has the largest number of siblings among the group. Born in a village of Wubu in 1991, Bo is the youngest child and only son after seven sisters. He went to a polytechnic in Xi'an but later quit. After studying to revise in an educational institution operated by his relative in a neighbouring county, he took the college entrance exam again and this time he succeeded in enrolling in a college in Yulin. Upon graduation, he found a job in a factory near Xi'an, then a temporary position in a state-owned enterprise in Inner Mongalia, similar to Bingbing. Upon receiving a phone call asking if he would like to work in the county as part of the National Poverty Alleviation Campaign, he was 'forced by all family members' to come back to Wubu. As

mentioned earlier, Bo later got married and planned to stay in Wubu for the foreseeable future.

Peng, like Bo, also came to undertake a temporary position in the Bureau under the Poverty Alleviation Campaign. Born in 1995 in Wubu, Peng finished high school there, then received a diploma from a college in a southern city of Shaanxi. He then worked as a project manager for a short time on construction sites in southern Shaanxi. Also like Bo, Peng received a phone call asking if he wanted to work in the Bureau back in Wubu; he said he did not think much about it and just 'felt like going with it'. He resigned from his job on the construction site, completed the interview for the Bureau position and, while waiting for the result, he started to work as a salesperson for a law firm in Xi'an. He has a younger sister studying in a polytechnic in Xi'an, and his parents work as migrant workers there.

Defying structural categories

These casual conversations and case sketches already reveal the heterogeneity of the participants of this study. As discussed in Chapter 1, although the term 'small-town youth' is a fast-rising one that carries powerful discourses imbued with and also reinforcing our imagination, the notion itself proved very difficult to define. Now we can see that such conceptual ambiguity boils down to the heterogenous nature of the group the term is meant to encompass. Similar to the way that 'small town' is an othered collective imagination opposed to the metropolis, 'small-town youth' is also a collective imagination aggregating and othering individuals who are associated with these othered places — being from and/or living there. Such collective imagination of a homogenous group is the product of hegemonic discourses that cannot stand closer on-the-ground scrutiny. The differences between the participants and the differences within their individual life journeys made it difficult to place them into common categories such as educational level, *hukou* and family structure.

Firstly, to see how the participants confounded the education category, we must understand the role of education in Chinese society. Education has long been considered to be the only legitimate basis for upward mobility in contemporary China (Hsu, 2007; Kipnis, 2007). Prior to the educational reform, the government assigned graduates to jobs in *danwei*, or work units, based on multiple factors, the most important of which being one's origin, as stated on *hukou* (Freeman, 2015). I will further explain the concept of *danwei* and other related terms like *bianzhi* in the next section. Prior to the economic reforms, a job in a *danwei* ensured one with all-around privileges from general welfare and insurance to housing benefits. As explained in the first two chapters, the *hukou* system enabled a tight control over the society — rural and urban areas were strictly divided so that the former was exploited to support the development of the latter (Wen, 2001; Song, 2013). Entering university (based on achieving an appropriate result from the highly competitive national college entrance exam) and later being assigned to a job in the system was thus almost the only means for upward social mobility before the reform.

Educational level is, however, ineffective in attempts to define so-called 'small-town youth' into a single group; the participants had varied educational backgrounds. In fact, if we think carefully about the first two discourses around 'small-town youth' — that they are marginalised protagonists and consumers with poor taste— it is clear that 'small-town' youth are characterised as being somehow less educated and ill-informed. However, this is clearly not the case with the participants. For example, Qiqi, went to vocational school, Peng went to a polytech, and Fang and Xiang went to relatively prestigious first-tier universities. While most in the group hold a bachelor's degree, Hui Mei, the girl that Hong referred to, has a Master's degree in Science.

Secondly, in the study of Chinese people in general, and 'small-town youth' specifically, *hukou* is a natural aspect to consider, given its determining influence over their lives. It is worth noting that *hukou* status never spontaneously emerged out of any conversation I had with my participants. While *hukou*, as described in Chapter 2, has been the key system enacting systematic control over the Chinese

population, long gone are the days when people's identities are primarily determined by *hukou,* thanks to series of *hukou* policy reforms. In fact, there now seems to be little correlation between actual life experiences and *hukou* status — while some rural *hukou* holders report having had limited experience in rural villages, there are also urban *hukou* holders who have spent a significant amount of time living in villages. For example, Peng, whose *hukou* status is rural, spent most of his childhood with his parents in urban Xi'an, where they work as migrant workers, and only returned to the county town for middle school —why would he be categorised as a 'small-town youth' and not a 'city youth'? Bingbing was born with urban *hukou* registered in the county town, yet she was brought up by grandparents in the village while her parents worked in the nearby county. Is she a 'small-town youth'?

As Goodman (2018, p. 170) points out, in contemporary China, the majority of the population actually live in urban administrative jurisdictions, even though many of them are still designated by *hukou* as 'rural'. This is due to the fact that the major urbanisation process that China has witnessed in the last few decades saw cities expand into periurban rural areas. Indeed, Fang's family have lived through such change. The now-urban suburb of Yulin, where she comes from, was, in fact, a village a decade ago. It is clearly over-simplistic to approach her life experience through the lenses of either 'rural' or 'urban'. This also explains why *hukou* status is gradually fading out as a means to position subjects, including the so-called 'small-town youth', in today's China

Thirdly, it seems there are also no 'typical' family structures among the participants. For example, while Bo is one of eight children and some others have several siblings, there are also only children in the group such as Zhong and Qiqi. A closer look also reveals the diversity among their family members in terms of occupation, life experiences and geographical locations. For example, Zhong's parents spent most of their lives in the county town, holding permanent positions within the system, Bingbing's parents relocated to the neighbouring county while being self-employed, and Peng's parents have worked in the capital city Xi'an as migrant workers since he was a child.

Another category into which it is difficult to pigeon-hole 'small town youth' is 'life experience'. The experiences of the participants prior to returning to the county town varied greatly. Some, like Min, Peng, and others, had worked in other provinces and cities. Others, like Xiang and Zhong had no previous work experience at all though they were studying in universities in major cities. In addition, the fields in which they had work experience also varied. For example, Peng worked as a project manager in construction, Bo was an electronic technician in a factory, Bingbing worked as a chemical engineer and Min worked in the purchasing department in a manufacturing company.

However, one thing they all shared in common was that they had all had life experiences beyond the county town in bigger cities, including metropolises like Xi'an, Wuhan and Qingdao. This confirms the study done by Zhao and Sun (2019) from the China Youth & Child Research Center — nearly 80% of 'small-town youth' have life experience in big cities. Given that conventional categories were unable to define these so-called 'small-town youth', perhaps this shared city to 'small-town' life experience could offer an entry point for a better understanding of them. Why did they come back? As discussed in Chapter 2, one's path of personal development is often spatially translated into 'urban aspiration' — as summed up by A Yi, the way that young people 'cried and swore…to leave now, to the town, to the county… to the city, to the provincial capital, to the coast, to the municipality, to the national capital, to New York.'(Yi, 2012, p. 11), or, as my father recalls, thinking about how his hard work, night and day, studying in a cave dwelling under dimming candle light paid off so that he ended up in an city and successfully 'escaped the almost inevitable fate of poverty burdening every northwestern villager'. Why would any of these 'escapees' turn around and come back?

5.3. Why are they here? Analysing their relocation to the county town

> Pressured by the stress of life in the big cities and the limited job opportunities, on hearing the fast development of the hometown, Li Chao returned [to the county town]. (Yan, Song & Lei, 2019)

A news report entitled 'County town youth start to experience the taste of the metropolis' on *China Youth Daily* explained young people's return to the county town using a simple push-and-pull model (Yan, Song & Lei, 2019). The article suggests that pressures like the increasing living cost and work stress in big cities are pushing the young away, while county town 'upgrades', such as new lifestyles and job opportunities are pulling them. Also noteworthy is the fact that the quick infrastructure development has enabled diverse recreational activities such as yoga which were previously only accessible in big cities. It is clear that the underlying rationale behind these 'pull' factors is that county towns are now more desirable because they are catching up to and increasingly resembling metropolises. In other words, it is not the county town that young people decide to relocate to, it is in fact a 'less-than-perfect' metropolis that young people fall back to after deciding the 'push' factors are too much to handle.

There are two issues I would like to address regarding the approach to the return of young people to lower-tier urban places as represented by this news report. Firstly, conceptualising the county town as a place that is evolving towards the model metropolis falls into the same limiting hierarchical and teleological understanding of places in urban China as has been discussed in Chapter 2, which I will further support with reference to more contextualised details in the next chapter. Secondly, weighing up push and pull factors such as living cost and lifestyle oversimplifies the complicated decision-making and migration process that young people actually experience.

It is the stories of the migrants themselves that explain why many are returning to the small towns. By first presenting and then analysing their accounts of their relocation, I will show in the next section that, while *danwei* emerges as a

dominant tale, their return is a complicated and contingent process with multiple factors in play. This complexity will emerge from reading for difference against the dominant tale of *danwei*

Narratives of relocation

Again, in order to present the case with the openness of multiple answers rather than the closure of a single one, I choose to start with relevant return stories of the individuals introduced earlier rather than organising my discussion around themes. More details will be introduced later.

Xiang, unlike his younger 18-year old self who wanted to 'fly as far as one could' away from his home county, decided during his senior year at a university in a coastal city to come back to Yulin. After a badminton session, he insisted on bringing me to his favourite yogurt shop. He then shared his life story as we strolled along the Yellow River:

> I realised [the coastal city] was never my place. It was good but I never belonged and never would… some of my classmates ended up as salesmen because the job market there was competitive. After all, it is a beautiful city, but it is their place. Here, after all, is my place and I belong. Anyway, what's the meaning of being a salesman? … Also, at the time, my dad started working as a street food vendor because his body couldn't cope with the hard construction work. As the son, I felt of course I needed to be here to shoulder more family responsibilities. Then there happened to be this opportunity [the programme] …I don't think I'm a very ambitious person — I think a *danwei* job will allow me more time to spend with my future wife and kids.

After making this decision, Xiang signed up for the University Graduate Serving the West Volunteer Programme and requested to be posted back to Yulin region. Qiqi also signed up for the same programme while she was finishing her study in Xi'an:

I love the lifestyle of the city, but my parents wanted me to come home and be close to them. You know, they only have one child. Also they feel working in a *danwei* is very stable and less stressful… I didn't even know whether I wanted to come back. I didn't have a clear idea, so I didn't go against my parents even though I thought coming back would be boring… you know, *mei yisi*. But on the other hand, I feel everywhere is the same, and plus I would be working in a *danwei*. I'm even thinking about signing up for the test for the position as a jail worker. It's less popular and thus less competitive — I've heard the pay is really high and you get a long break with each shift, like working for 4 days in a row and then having 3 days off. I don't care about the long hours! They say you can play with your phone so really it doesn't matter. Also, my parents wouldn't care, as long as I have permanent position with *bianzhi*, their minds will be at ease.

Like Xiang and Qiqi, Zhong also came back straight after university:

I always knew I wanted to come back and work for the government… I grew up here and my parents are both here working in a *danwei*. And you know, people here are very traditional and conservative, you know, backward, unlike the southern people. And anyway I'm the only child and my parents want me nearby. So I came back right after university. There was nothing much to think about.

Zhong then stayed home and revised for the civil servant test full-time before starting to work as a temporary worker in the Bureau. Hong also undertook a temporary position at the same time as Zhong. She worked in a factory for a while and then came back:

I worked as a technician in a factory near Xi'an but I realised I really didn't like my major. Working there was really *mei yisi*. Then my boyfriend came back to the county town after his military service. So it was natural that I came back to get married and settled down.

Both single, Bingbing and Min have completely different stories of return. Bingbing worked near Xi'an, then in the neighbouring province, Neimenggu. She passed the test for the temporary position and relocated back to the county town:

I never wanted to go far. My sense of geography is centred around home— like a circle— you know— home is the centre of the circle from which the world extends. People here are very traditional, especially about girls. For girls there is no point going outside to other places. Also *bianzhi* is everything. With a *bianzhi* then you are of high value, and then you could marry a good guy and have children. Everyone thinks this is what life is all about…I felt a temporary position will get me some insight into working in the system and will prepare me for the *bianzhi* test.

Min, on the other hand, always wanted to go far away, so she purposely signed up for a job in the southern coastal city Dongguan upon graduating from university:

I was very ambitious in the beginning but I gradually realised that life (in Dongguan) was changing me. It was so super stressful. My personality changed completely — I became very intimidated. My manager was very strict because the whole structure of the cooperation is very scientific, you know, focusing on efficiency and profit that kind of stuff. Then my sister passed the test and worked in a danwei here [in the county town]. She started to tell me about how working in a danwei is less stressful than in a private company and also, she could take care of me better. She and my mom did often 'brainwash' me. So I thought, OK, it's about time anyway. I felt drifting in Dongguan was mei yisi — after all, I'm a girl.

Min then came back, worked in various jobs, then landed in a temporary position in the Bureau through a test.

Unlike most of the others, Fang had never set foot in Wubu until she reported for the job in the Bureau. After finishing her study in Wuhan, she applied for jobs but 'not in a serious way'. She then stayed in Wuhan for a while

before deciding to come home to Yulin. She studied full time then passed the competitive *bianzhi* test and got a permanent position in the Bureau:

> Wuhan's property prices are so high! I could never afford a place there. Anyway what's the point? Any place is the same, actually. My sister is already so far away [in a coastal city] so my parents want me back as well. I purposely chose the position here because Wubu is the poorest and most backward county, so the civil servant test for a position here is less competitive – I'd have a higher chance of working in a *danwei*.

Compared with Fang, coming back to the Wubu was less a strategic move than a coincidental one for Bo and Peng. Peng, judged local by *hukou*, in fact grew up with his migrant worker parents and younger sister in Xi'an. His only family member in Wubu is a maternal uncle who he hardly ever sees. Out of the blue, Bo and Peng both received a phone call from the Bureau, offering them jobs because their families qualified as beneficiaries of the National Poverty Alleviation Campaign. Both of them had not thought much about working in a *danwei* before, yet they had quite opposite reactions to the opportunity. Peng, when the opportunity arose, became very keen on coming back:

> I made good money as a construction manager, but I had had enough — it was too isolated on construction sites, deep in the mountain. Working in a *danwei* to me means an opportunity for a very different lifestyle, although this place is also mountainous, pretty remote and poor… My dad was very unhappy after knowing I would only make that little money. He didn't want me to come back. He thinks I should stay in the city to make more money.

Peng quit his job right after receiving the phone call and came back to Yulin to prepare for the interview. While waiting for the result, he went to Xi'an and worked as a salesperson. Bo, however, was very reluctant to quit his previous job:

> I was used to my previous job in Neimenggu. I got the call and just casually attended the interview when I was back in Yulin during a holiday… I didn't want to take the job — I was settling in well and had a good boss. Also, of

course, the salary here is so low! Only a third of what I made. But my parents and sisters kept nagging and nagging — that a job in the *danwei* is superior, stable and easy. They really forced me to come back. Their logic is that even though the position offered is temporary, it's still closer to the system because I as the only son must have a real job. They were wishfully thinking maybe having some experience working in the *danwei* would lead me to a permanent position one day, which I think is total nonsense.'

Danwei was drawn on by almost all participants in their stories about their return decision-making. Given *danwei* may be a rather unfamiliar concept to many of non-Chinese background, I will introduce the formation and significance of *danwei*.

The lure of the 'iron rice bowl': *danwei* as an overarching tale

He will soon have a permanent job. He'd do anything to get a permanent job, even jump into hell! (*Ordinary World*, Volume 2: Chapter 52).

Eating the coal mine bowl of rice is not ideal, but after all, it is a bowl of the public rice. Like everyone knows, the public rice bowl is iron. (Vol 3: Chapter 2)

"No! I'm not going back!" Shaoping yelled with tears in his eyes… "Doctor, please — you must help me. Don't send me back. My fate is in your hands. Generations of my family are farmers. I went through so much hardship to be here…" (Vol 3: Chapter 3)

In *Ordinary World*, protagonist Shaoping, with the help of a village mayor and his girlfriend, the daughter of a top provincial official, gets a rare opportunity for a permanent job in a *danwei* as a coal miner. It was such a critical, nervewracking turning point of Shaoping's life that his blood pressure shot dangerously high and he had to make the above plea to the doctor about his fate. Why did obtaining a permanent job equate to changing one's 'fate' such that even a 'jump into hell' was worthwhile?

Danwei, often translated as 'work unit', is 'a generic term denoting the Chinese socialist workplace and the specific range of practices that it embodies' (Bray, 2005, p. 3). While the term has been integrated into everyday vocabulary and occasionally may be used interchangeably with 'workplace', in most cases, it still refers to institutions that are, or at least were, owned and managed by the state, such as government departments, industrial factories, schools and hospitals. Arising in the 1950s, *danwei* was the basic unit of urban life under socialism and has been central to a distinctive form of governmentality. Under centralised economic planning, through a tightly nested multi-tiered hierarchy, the central government held strict control over the production and distribution of resources. Funds and resources for almost all aspects of urban economic and social infrastructure were distributed through *danwei*. To manage individual workers, *danwei* has a system of *dang'an* — internal personal files documenting detailed information about the employee, including education level, former places of registration, work history, social background and assessments of political attitudes and work capabilities (Yang, 2011). Managed according to standardised guidelines set by the central government, *dang'an*, in principle, is a secret file, the contents of which the individual documented does not have access to. Building on the *hukou* system, which documents relatively basic information, the *dang'an* system further granted *danwei* tight control over people's lives — one was not allowed to transfer to another *danwei* without the proper transfer of *dang'an*. A direct example is that the *dang'an* of those with a permanent position like Fang is properly transferred to and kept in the bureau while those holding a temporary position are required to keep their *dang'an* in the local Talent Exchange Centre – a government organization. In addition, prior to the reform, *danwei* also took on a wide range of political, judicial, civil and social functions and had absolute control over one's personal life. For example, permission from *danwei* was required before undertaking travel, marriage or childbirth though it is less the case today.

The permanent positions in the tightly-controlled *danwei* also came with a full set of welfare and benefits — the so-called 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fanwan*). On

top of the guarantee of stable and secure employment, *danwei* also provided 'cradle to grave' welfare services such as housing provision or subsidy, free medical care, child care centres, kindergartens, canteens, service companies, and even collective enterprises to employ the spouses and children of staff (Li, 1993, as cited in Bray, 2005, pp. 3-4; Cliff, 2015; Lu & Perry, 1997; Wang & Chai, 2009). For example, everyone in the bureau is entitled to heavily subsidised meals on workdays. During my stay, three meals were prepared and served always on time by a cook, and some employees occasionly brought their children to dine with them at no additional charge. A place in a *danwei* almost equated a 'good life' with provision and security, especially under the planned economy. Although the *danwei* system has undergone a series of reforms, as will be introduced in the coming section, working in a *danwei*, even without a permanent position, still has clear advantages. For example, these young people, like all other members of the *danwei*, were given free accommodation in dorm rooms adapted from vacant office rooms, had access to a recreational room in the *danwei* building, and not to mention the canteen heavily subsidized by the *danwei*.

The all-encompassing control as well as the welfare that characterised this system resulted in *danwei* becoming a principal source of identity — a person of a *danwei* became 'a knowable economic and political subject' (Bray, 2005, p.116; also see Dutton, 1998). Prior to the reform, any urban resident without a *danwei* was taken as 'suspicious' or even 'dangerous' (Bray, 2005, p. 5) – for instance, an introduction letter issued by the *danwei* was required as proof of one's identity before one could even be checked into a hotel. In other words, *danwei* served as the major if not the sole anchor point of one's identity, surpassing mere occupational identity in pre-reform China. It also held a significant role in the most private sphere of one's life:

> Jin Bo… has been working in the post office for three years… Unless his father retires early so that he could take over, Jin Bo has no hope of entering the door of the public. Looking at the surface, he seems to belong to this post office, but in fact he is a complete outsider. This soon to be 23-year-old lad

has been good-looking since he was little…many girls fell in love with him at first sight, but they ask around and figure out he is temporary, then all back off regretfully. To most women with a job in the city, of course the partner they look for has to have a job. In the city, being without a permanent job means having nothing…should there be any exception, that will be enough to be news in the local newspaper. (*Ordinary World*, Volume 2: Chapter 34)

Lu Yao's description of the tough realties faced by Jin Bo, Shaoping's best friend, is blunt yet accurate. Even in the realm of what is now regarded as most personal and private — romance— *danwei* was still overshadowing one's identity. To a certain extent, this is in line with my findings in the field — *danwei* was a recurring theme that emerged in the participants' narratives on personal life. As I followed up on Xiang's comment that working in a *danwei* would allow more family time, he said:

But these things [romantic relationships] have to come later. After all I'm only temporary [in danwei]. No one will consider you [for a boyfriend or husband if you are temporary]. Even if the girl does [choose you] because of love, her parents will have so much doubt — you are a young person. You are nothing. What do you have to promise anything? But it will all be different once [my position becomes] permanent.

Similar opinions were shared with me by many others. Interestingly, when Bo's girlfriend was first mentioned to me, someone said: 'Miss Li is a teacher in the school, [her position is] temporary, of course.' Not only had I not inquired into her employment status, our previous conversation had been also on a completely irrelevant topic. Here 'of course' suggests that one's status of employment in *danwei* serves as a major anchor point for one's identity, functioning as the major rubric used to evaluate whether two people's social statuses match. Fang also told me that shortly after she settled down into her permanent position in the *danwei*, people started to introduce her to available single men in the county town, all of whom 'for sure have *zhengshi* jobs' — *zhengshi* means formal, permanent.

The preference towards such formal employment with *danwei* is also proven by the fierce competition for the best results in the annual Civil Servant Exam, the main path toward getting a formal permanent position. According to *The Economist* (2012), the desire among Chinese people to work for the government has been constantly on the rise — in the case of Shaanxi Province, which neighbours Wubu county, in the year 2012, out of the 1.4 million that took the exam, 20,800 would be hired by the government of China — making the acceptance rate 1.48%. To get a more direct feeling of such fierce competition, I visited an exam location in Yulin city – the entire middle school was filled with examinees, and it was only one of the many exam locations. Various studies have examined the reason behind the so-called 'civil servant fever'; among the various reasons, job stability, sense of security, welfare and a less stressful work environment appear most significant in the findings of research conducted with university graduates in different regions (see Zhang & Tian, 2014; Zhong & Bao, 2019; Shen, 2006; Sun, 2011). *Danwei*, the foundation of urban China, the basic unit of social and political organisation and the key anchoring point of urban subjects' identity in China's socialist era, still carries weight today in the way many people, including my 'small-town youth' participants, live, understand and narrate their life stories. However, how has *danwei* changed after a series of reforms? What is life working in a *danwei* actually like?

Breaking the 'iron rice bowl': working in a post-reform *danwei*

What defines whether a position in the *danwei* is permanent or temporary? What is it like working in a *danwei*? By calling this section 'Breaking the "iron rice bowl"', I am referring to both the dismantling of the actual *danwei* system as well as the destabilising of the seemingly dominant tale of *danwei* at the centre of my participants' decision-making about whether to return. In what follows, I will first explain the *danwei* reform with reference to the *bianzhi* system. I will then look into the lives of my participants working in the *danwei*. I will show that the 'rice bowl' is not as 'iron' as it once was — life in *danwei*, especially without *bianzhi*, no longer distinguishes itself greatly from other means of livelihood.

More importantly, I will argue that less-than-ideal life in *danwei* is in fact not a surprise to my participants, even though *danwei* emerged as an overarching theme in their stories of return. I will also argue that the frequent mention of *mei yisi* opens a slippage to the pursuit of *danwei* and thus opens up the participants' relocation for further examination.

Since China's economic reform started in the late 1970s, the *danwei* system has been widely criticised for its redundancy and lack of efficiency (Lee, 2000). Reform of the *danwei* system began in the mid-1980s and gained momentum in the mid-1990s. *Danwei* began to embrace 'market-oriented' practices (Bray, 2005, p. 196) with the rise of 'bureaucratic capitalism' (Meisner, 1996, p. 300). The move to scientific management, bonus systems and labour contracts has stripped away many of the entitlements and benefits previously enjoyed by *danwei* employees. In particular, the socialist labour relations featuring permanent employment — what made the 'rice bowl' so 'iron' and unbreakable — have been gradually dismantled. One of the major signs of this was the mass lay-offs (*xiagang*) of workers in *danwei*— the 'rice bowl' became not only breakable but was indeed shattered in a relatively short period of time (Hung & Chiu, 2003; H. Y. Lee, 2000; Won, 2004). As part of the reform to regulate and control the size of the *danwei*, the *bianzhi* system was introduced (Brødsgaard, 2002; Burns, 2003). The *bianzhi* system specifies the maximum number of officially established positions in the *danwei*, on which the allocation of budgetary funds will be based (Ang, 2012, p. 683). The introduction of a labour contract system as part of this reform led to the creation of different types of employment status; those with *bianzhi* are considered to have a permanent position that is officially created and thus is considered as a part of the system (*tizhi*), while those without it are considered temporary and outside the system.

The actual experience of working in a *danwei* in the reform era, in the case of my participants, is perhaps best expressed in their own words — '*mei yisi*' — the most common phrase that emerged from my discussion with them about life in *danwei* as well as in the county town in general. As discussed previously, the rough literal translation of *mei yisi* is 'not having meaning/fun/significance'. It is

a highly versatile everyday expression the meaning of which can be vague and ambiguous and thus its interpretation is often highly contextual. Many of the participants, often with little hesitation, would first answer *'mei yisi'* when asked about life in a *danwei* and life in the county town, yet when I followed up by asking them to elaborate on what they meant in a more specific way, often they could not pin it down right away. Then during the following discussions, expressions of doubts or contradiction would often emerge. They'd say, I can't really say it clearly', or 'Actually, everywhere is the same'.

My analysis shows that working in a *danwei* is *mei yisi* mainly for three reasons: the boring job content, the poor career prospects and the low salary. While my participants often find the mundane administrative tasks they undertake every day uninspiring, the poor career prospects and low salary are what mainly contribute to their sense of *mei yisi.* This needs to be understood in the context of *bianzhi*, the permanent position. Without *bianzhi,* an employee is temporary and outside of the system — being outside of the established position quota means no opportunity for promotion as well as significantly lower salary prospects compared with the formal employee, those with *bianzhi*. During the time of my fieldwork, those without *bianzhi* had a monthly salary ranging from 1600 to 2600RMB, while an entry-level permanent employee earned over 4000RMB. Indeed, working in the reformed *danwei* systems without *bianzhi* does not have the prestige or the privilege previously associated with the 'iron rice bowl'.

This difference in treatment and the *mei yisi* experience was actually expected by all my participants. Actually, the fact that *bianzhi* serves as a stringent line between permanent and temporary employment was common knowledge to not only my participants but to people from all walks that I dealt with in the county town, from the restaurant owners to the supermarket cashiers. My observation that the significance of *bianzhi* was such common knowledgeis similar to the findings of research conducted in other places in China (see Cliff, 2015; Kipnis, 2016). However, what is more interesting to me is that when asked to think about life after getting *bianzhi*, many of the participants still expressed

the sense of *mei yisi*. For example, Bo, although he knew the position would be temporary and he believed his families' idea that it would get him closer to a *bianzhi* job was wishful 'nonsense', still agreed to return for the job because he felt: 'It's no big deal anyway. It's just another job and everywhere is the same.' Expressing a similar lack of concern, Peng said:

> Actually, even [if I get a *bianzhi* in the end], so what? Still the same *mei yisi* job and days go by. But I prefer office jobs anyway. I had to run around in my previous jobs, both as construction manager and salesman. I feel it suits me better — [I'm] an introvert and pretty quiet. So this is life. Anyway, just go along and see.

Similarly, Bingbing also said:

> I know *bianzhi* seems to be everything to me at present, and everyone thinks life will turn better once I get *bianzhi*. But I know, I will still be the same old me with the same old problems even with *bianzhi*. Even before I started working in this *danwei* I knew it would be *mei yisi*.

Indeed, a year later, after she had landed a permanent job in a different *danwei,* Bingbing still described her life, and especially work, as *'mei yisi'*. Such feeling peaked when Bingbing was minorly injured in the testing lab in 2019. She complained about the ill management of the lab and the lack of 'spirit' of co-workers, and mentioned that she did not have the courage to let go of *bianzhi* even though she felt 'everything was tedious and boring'. Similarly bored, Xiang left the Bureau. In fact, he chose to not renew his contract and left for Xi'an: 'I don't know [what to do next]. But life like this is really *mei yisi* — that stuff, *bianzhi* or not. [After quitting], I just want to go along and see'. His statement in fact rather contradicted his own previous clear aspiration for the balanced family life he expected would be enabled by the pursuit of a career with *bianzhi*. Now the question is, how do we make sense of such contradiction? Why is *danwei* said to be the main reason for their return when working in a *danwei* appears to be overwhelmingly and expectedly *mei yisi*?

'Go along and see' (*zou zhe kan* — literal translation: observe and see as one walks along), another expression commonly used by my participants, serves as a great entry point to understanding this apparent contradiction. In reflecting upon everyday mobility, Hughes and Mee (2018) challenge the common underlying assumption that the path of mobility is always 'known and intended', instead, they argue that it is a 'lost and found' process in time and space involving 'a complex tangle of performances, decisions, knowledge, relations and affects' (Hughes & Mee, 2018, p. 2). I argue that understanding mobility as a process of unknownness and overdetermination is fundamental in making sense of the mobility stories of my participants. Their 'go along and see' expression clearly indicates a process of 'wayfinding', a term Tim Ingold (2000) uses to conceptualise experiences of mobility as people 'feel their waythrough a world that is itself in motion, continually coming into being' (p.155). Ingold highlights how the holistic process of 'wayfinding' is often split by modern science into cartography and navigation — the latter suggests a journey of the 'known and intended', to borrow from Hughes and Mee's words, based on an underlying assumption of the existence of the former — a world of which 'the layout is fixed in advanced' (Ingold, 2000, p.155) and consists of a singular knowable reality (see Law, 2004; Law & Lin, 2017). Accepting this concept of 'wayfinding' allows us to approach the young people's seemingly contradictory narratives on relocation and danwei with openness.

Thus, to really make sense of the return of the so-called 'small-town youth', as noted in Chapter 4, we need to be aware of the fact that mobility, like life and the world itself, is in a state of constant change that is often uncertain. In addition, approaching the 'unknown' requires some mindfulness and 'slowness' (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010, p. 322) to become aware of and then detach ourselves as researchers from overshadowing frameworks, which in this case is the tale of *danwei*. Even though, to a great extent, *danwei* indeed appears to be the dominant structure in participants' narrations of their return, it is also destabilised by their very own narratives of *mei yisi*. Statements like 'Go along and see' on top of such non-coherences suggests tthat their mobility is a more

complicated and nuanced process, and further opens up a space inviting examination of their return beyond the framework of *danwei*. Indeed, following the breakdown of the actual *danwei* system, it is time to consciously break away from the dominant tale of *danwei* as we attempt to learn more about these 'small-town youth'. After all, when working in the *danwei* no longer offers the same prestige and benefits after a series of reforms and becomes 'just another job', as Bo suggested, what, then, brought these young people back to this county town? In what follows, I will show how a reading for difference of their narratives enables such detachment from *danwei*, and, as a result, broadens and deepens our understanding of the participants.

Reading for difference: going beyond the overarching *danwei* tale

Borrowing from the constellation metaphor in which the noticing of those stars that do not line up is obscured by the awareness of particular figures, the overarching tale of *danwei* is like a powerful constellation. In what follows, I will re-read their return against the dominant framework of *danwei* so that their mobility can be understood beyond the closure of a seemingly overarching framework. Following *danwei*, many other key themes also emerged from my previous case introductions in which I summarise the participants' narratives regarding their return, such as: the sense of belonging; personal beliefs and values; key personal and family events like marriage, childbirth and retirement; and employment opportunities. Indeed, the way that people's decision-making with regard to migration and relocation is an outcome influenced by a wide array of factors has been widely studied across groups and regions (see for example Murphy, 2002; Wang & Fan, 2006; Wu, Fu, Gu, & Shi, 2018; Aguilar Jr, 1999; Chakrabarti & Saha, 2019). Following a brief analysis of selected factors, I will further highlight how reading to look beyond the dominant *danwei* tale reveals the participants' mobility decision-making as contingent and situational at the personal level, and thus enables a deeper understanding of their lives. To demonstrate this, while drawing on other cases, I will focus on the cases of Xiang and Min. These two cases are representative in the fact that they appear to be

distinctively different from each other according to most criteria — their gender, places of origin, work experiences and return processes.

While both Xiang and Min said that the opportunity to work in a *danwei* was the main reason they had chosen to come back to the county town, their actual return processes tell a different story.

Xiang was assigned to a *danwei* job in the county town by the state-led voluntary program he had signed up for before his university graduation; he had requested to be posted near his home county, a neighbouring county of Wubu. Rereading his narratives for difference reveals that a complicated set of reasons were, in fact, driving his decision: his father's ageing and change of livelihood interplayed with Xiang's sense of family obligation 'as the only son'; his desire for a sense of belonging, to go back to 'my place'; his aspiration for a family-oriented life; his pursuit of a meaningful career in a competitive job market; and also the ready availability of the voluntary programme.

Unlike Xiang, who had not been employed before returning to Wubu, Min had had to quit her job in the coastal province, Guangdong, in order to return to her home county of Wubu. Yet we could also hear in her tale that what drove her to return was far more complicated than a story of 'homecoming' — her mother and sister's persuasion interplayed with gender-related social expectations, as, 'After all, I'm a girl'. She was also driven by her need for a sense of belonging to end a life of 'drifting', her sister's ability to 'take care of' her, enabled by the new job, her unpleasant previous work experience and, also, as mentioned in Chapter 4, her key personal event of ending a romantic relationship.

A reading for difference against the dominant tale of *danwei* reveals that the life decision to return from the city to the 'small town' is in fact an outcome of a complex interplay of a wide array of 'messy' reasons. This also applies to other participants. For example, motivations described by Xiang, including the competitive job market and the inability to otherwise secure a desirable job, also appear in the accounts of other participants. One participant holding Master's degree in Science, explained her return to the county town as being the result of having 'nowhere to go', partly due to the massification and marketisation of

higher education (Wei, 2000; Mok, 2016). Education expansion policy from the 1980s onward has greatly increased the probability that high school graduates will attend college, and it has also sharply increased the unemployment rate among college graduates[15] (Li, Morgan, & Ding, 2011; Li, Whalley, & Xing, 2014; Li, John Morgan, & Ding, 2008; Wu, 2012). Gender-related values also come into play. Similar to Min saying, 'After all, I'm a girl', Hong suggested that returning 'to get married and settled' was 'natural' and Bingbing stated that small-town people's values were 'traditional, especially for girls'. While women are expected to 'settle' into family-oriented roles, men are expected to shoulder more responsibilities by returning, particularly if they are 'the only son', as both Xiang and Bo mentioned being. Almost every narrative also featured the opinions of family members involved in the decisions. In fact, a recent study shows that parents have a significant influence on the life plans of Chinese university graduates — even though the majority of jobseekers reported having conflicts with parents over the type and location of the post-graduation job, more than half of the graduates, in the end, acquiesced to their parents' wishes (Deutsch, 2004). From this reading for difference, other shared themes also emerged — from the sense of belonging and attachment evidenced by Xiang's reference to 'my place' and Bingbing's comment that 'geography is centred around home' to the high cost of city properties noted by Fang (see Wang & Wu, 2019; Du, 2018 for more discussions).

However, it is not in the interest of this thesis to provide an exhaustive account of the set of reasons behind the participants' return, nor to go into detail to untangle the interplay of these 'messy' and diverse factors. Instead, while acknowledging the influence of the broader structural forces, what I aim to highlight is how one's mobility is often a contingent and situational 'wayfinding' (Ingold, 2000, p. 155) process rather than a forseeable, predictable, 'known and intended' (Hughes and Mee, 2018 p. 2) decision. For example, Min's return was directly related to a series of events involving the unpleasant experience with her

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[15] See Lian (2009) for a detailed ethnographic work on Nanning's college graduates, who are argued to be the new marginalised group like migrant workers

previous manager, her relationship with her ex-boyfriend and the change in her sister's circumstances, all of which she had little, if any, control over. The same applies to Xiang: the things out of his control were his father's change of livelihood due to declining health and the almost coincidental appearance of the opportunity offered by a state-led programme that he had been previously unaware of — 'there happened to be', as described in his own words. Bo and Peng both described how they 'had never given much thought' to relocating to the county town until they received phone calls offering them a job there as part of the National Poverty Alleviation Campaign; they simply decided to 'go along and see' (Peng) or 'just give it a try' (Bo).

To conclude, an intentional reading for difference against the dominant *danwei* tale opens up the mobility stories of the participants and makes visible the nuanced, messy, contingent and situated reasons that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, or been overshadowed. This allows us to forgo the assumption that mobility, life, people and the world in general are stable, unchanging, completely knowable and clearly identifiable (Law, 2004). This then raises the question: if *danwei* is only one of the many reasons behind their decisions to return, then why does *danwei* appear at the forefront of their personal narratives? Why are their other reasons far less frequently mentioned and poorly-articulated? In the next section, I will show how the participants' *danwei*-centred narratives are a result of a teleological socio-spatial imagination. Using the example of a discussion around *mei yisi*, I will reveal another benefit of reading for difference: it serves to defy this teleology, and further opens up possibilities,

5.4. Ordinary youth beyond teleology

A reading for difference against the seemingly dominant tale of *danwei* has revealed the diverse and complex set of reasons behind my participants' return. Instead of conforming to the participants' overarching tale that a stable job in the *danwei* is what drives the return of 'small-town youth' to the small towns, reading for difference opens their return to a reconsideration. If *danwei* is only one of the many reasons driving their return, why, when they are asked, is *danwei*

given in almost all cases? In this section, in addition to showing how a teleological socio-spatial imagination contributes to my participants' *danwei*-centred tale — the lure of danwei is used to justify and balance out the idea of returning to the perceived 'backwardness' of the 'small town'. I will then show how making the multiple reasons visible serves to defy a teleological logic that often underlines the understanding of transitional China, including the discourse around 'small-town youth'.

Danwei, 'small town', and a teleological socio-spatial imagination

> Yes, you opened the window, let me look out to the outside world. You used your rough hands and dusted off the yellow soil I brought from the rural village and imprinted me with your mark, full of the smell of coal. To be honest, you are still incapable of dusting clean all the yellow soil off me, but yet indeed imprinted your mark on my body. Maybe put in this way — I haven't yet been able to become a pure city person, but I am not a complete country bumpkin any longer (*Ordinary World*, Volume 1, Chapter 42).

This quote is Shaoping's farewell to the county town, as he is about to graduate from high school and move on. Little does he know that, years later, he will have a rare opportunity to transfer his *hukou* to the city that will get him even closer to becoming 'a pure city person' as he so desired to be. Shaoping is overwhelmed:

> No matter what, he has become a person of Huangyuan [the prefectural-level city]. This in itself has significant meaning. He imagines, among his ancestors, maybe none has left the home soil. Now, he has the guts to look for 'the New World' of life. This action is full of huge risk, yet also worthwhile (Vol 2: Chapter 21).

To Shaoping, a desirable life trajectory, or an ideal path of personal development was clear — to transit from life as a rural villager covered with 'yellow soil' into life as a 'pure city person' — and was achieved through not only his literal geographical journey from the village to county town and then to

the prefectural-level city, but also, more importantly, through his metaphorical journey of upwards social mobility marked by keystone events like obtaining an urban *hukou* and an 'iron rice bowl' job. Indeed, as laid out in Chapter 2, China's systematic rural-urban division, particularly during the pre-reform era, tightly restricted population mobility so that rural residents were bound to their 'home soil' with little chance for 'the New World' of life: an urban life, where the residents were exclusively eligible for commercial rations, *danwei* jobs and the all-encompassing benefits that came with them; and a 'good life' that was relatively privileged and desirable. This is, in fact, a more accurate description of the *danwei* life in the early reform era, as things have certainly changed. The diverse backgrounds, life stories and family relations of my participants fundamentally defy this neat rural-urban dichotomy. The most straightforward example of this change is the fact that a rural *hukou* holder like Peng grew up in the capital city Xi'an, and an urban *hukou* holder like Bingbing grew up in a rural village.

The socio-spatial imagination marked by the alignment of the commonly shared 'urban aspiration' — the unidirectional migration to leave the rural and move upward like Shaoping along the urban hierarchy to achieve upward social mobility and 'evolve' from a village boy to 'a pure city person' —tends to perpetuate a teleological logic that overshadows the understanding people and places today. A conceptualisation of outward migration as a 'baptism into civilisation' remains influential in China (Zavoretti, 2017, p. 79). As discussed in Chapter 2, reverse migration is often presumed to be undesirable if not an example of complete failure, a notion that often underlies studies of labour migrants (Wang & Fan, 2006). Socio-spatial imagination is underlined by a teleological logic – while places at the upper end of the urban hierarchy, like metropolises, represent being 'civilised', 'small towns' are described as 'backward', and thus any return needs to be justified by a compelling reason like the assumed superiority of *danwei*.

'I would never have come to this small shabby place. So poor and backward. I just came to work in *danwei*, and [to be with] Fang, of course!' Fang's

boyfriend, who also works in a *danwei* in the county town, jokingly made this comment when he was driving Fang and me down to a small restaurant to try the famous local snack — cold buckwheat noodles, 'But now I'm with Fang here, so, however backward it is, it's all worthwhile!' Fang sheepishly smiled and replied: 'Nonsense! *Bianzhi* made it worthwhile, not me! You only met me after you came here!'

This weighing-up of the pros and cons of *danwei* and those of the characteristics of the county town also comes through in Peng's narrative as introduced in 5.3 'Working in a *danwei* to me means an opportunity for a very different lifestyle, although this place is also mountainous, pretty remote and poor…' Similarly, Min also said:

> My roommate joked that I was coming back to raise sheep in the valley! She couldn't figure out why I made the decision [to leave Guangdong] to come here… you know, it's so backward compared with Gunagdong…But once she knew I was going to try to get in a *danwei*, she was like, oh, that explains it!

In other words, the assumed superiority associated with the idea of *danwei* is often used by my participants to justify their return to what they see as a 'backward' and 'small' place. This perception highlights the ingrained hierarchical and teleological socio-spatial imagination that regards the county town as 'backward'. In what follows, I will show how the diverse reasons behind their return, as exposed by a reading for difference, serve to defy this teleological logic.

Defying 'from *danwei* to desire' teleology

> We are not like the people in the south, they are more advanced in their thinking. We are more traditional and conservative. It is a small place, backward, so people are obsessed with danwei. (Zhong)

People's values are traditional here. An easy job in the danwei and a family should be what I settle down to. I feel I'm just not that capable to go [to a big citiy] and make my own way. I'm not good enough to live a free life like that. (Bingbing)

These comments from Zhong and Bingbing show that their preference for *danwei* is associated with them seeing themselves as 'traditional', 'conservative' or 'not capable', 'not good enough'. In this section, I will show how a teleological logic subconsciously often informs people's understanding as exemplified by a tale of '*danwei* to desire'. I will first explain what the '*danwei* to desire' tale is. I will then argue that such teleology shapes the popular representations of 'small-town youth'. I conclude that, in fact, the multiple co-existing reasons behind their return defies such teleology.

Danwei represents the State. Being in a *danwei*, and more specifically, having *bianzhi* in the post-reform context, is literally being 'part of the system' (*tizhi nei*), the system of the state. *Danwei,* and generally speaking the State, has long been the centre of identity from which a urban Chinese person's sense of being and belonging derived (Bray, 2005). For example, Farquhar (2002) points out how, in Maoist China, people had a collective identity focused on the ultimate goal of 'building Chinese socialism'. This goal, and in turn, the socialist identity, ruled all spheres of life (p. 3) to the extent that one's body was 'an inseparable part of the body of the state' (p. 170). In pre-reform China, one's self was anchored to the grand collective narrative of the state, which involved a 'future utopia ' and a present commitment to 'work, production and service', and in which individual 'appetites' and 'indulgence' were 'not acceptable' (p. 3). Thus the breaking of the 'iron rice bowl', as part of the massive reform that China went through, had far more significant repercussions than a mere change in or loss of livelihood. Instead, it disorientated and reorganised people's identity from 'the collective worker-subject of the socialist past' into 'the individualised worker within a highly volatile labour market' (Bray, 2005, p.196).

Post-reform China is arguably marked by the rise of desire, focused on consumption and individual interest. Alongside the dismantling of the *danwei*

system, China's 1978 reform also set in motion the unprecedented growth of the economy, the rise of the market and a significant increase in consumption. Many studies have shown how new Chinese imaginaries of 'the good life' are based upon consumption (for example, see Anagnost, 1997; Yang, 1997; Davis, 2000; Latham; 2002) rather than on obtaining an 'iron rice bowl' job like before. Lisa Rofel, in her book, *Desiring China* (2007), points out that as the state reconfigured and integrated itself into a cosmopolitan world, a neoliberal practice of governance was adopted, encouraging and promoting the discovery of desires, which became 'public narratives and the novel grounds' for 'knowing and speaking about a post-socialist reality' (p. 22). Through pursuing such desires, or, in Farquhar's words, the previously forbidden individual 'appetites' and 'indulgence' (Farquhar, 2002, p. 3), Chinese people are thus now able to establish a new concept of self in relation to global cosmopolitan neoliberalism and consumerism, and become what Rofel calls 'new desiring subjects'.

However, there is a pitfall in reading this change as a '*danwei* to desire' tale of teleology evidenced by the pervasive representations of 'small-town youth' introduced in Chapter 1. I argue that our conceptualisation of people should not simply fall into a teleological logic of the former — in this case, *danwei* — evolving into the latter —desire. The breaking of the 'iron rice bowl', the changing role of the state and the rise of the market and consumerism are just part of the sea of change that has swept through China since the reform. However, '*danwei* to desire' is such a powerful overarching logic that it has, in fact, given birth to the three popular aforementioned representations of 'small-town youth' — the marginalised protagonists, consumers with terrible taste, and entrepreneurial returnees become folded into the tale to create one coherent story of so-called 'small town youth' being trapped and marginalised subjects who have failed to evolve into 'real' 'ultimate' modern beings like their metropolis counterparts. The 'truth' of this story is evidenced by their inability to consume 'properly', and their association with a state-centred identity. One could argue that this story benefits this imagined group of people, as becoming the subjects of

a meta-narrative of national development is one way for 'small-town youth' to become subjects with meaning and value other than loss and marginalisation.

The notion of 'small-town youth', I argue, is another signifier of Otherness against which a dominant identity is constructed and reproduced under the influence of China's national project of modernity. Many China scholars have examined how an othering of certain groups as marginal, deviant, inferior and as outsiders in the dominant discourse on modernity is central to the construction of a dominant identity of a 'good', 'normal' and 'ideal' citizen (for example see Ngai, 1999; Jacka, 2006 for China's migrant workers; Cohen, 1993; Feuerwerker, 1998 for Chinese 'peasants'). A 'small-town youth', in this sense, serves the same purpose as Jacka's rural migrant woman (2006), representing: 'an object of pity, titillation and fascination' and 'a subject that must be put to work and worked upon, if the project of modernity is to succeed' (p. 31). Such logic of modernity suggests the existence of 'good' 'normal' 'ideal' modern urban beings against which 'small-town youth' are constructed and modelled and towards which 'small-town youth' are evolving — the ultimate goal being to become a 'pure city person', in Shaoping's words in *Ordinary World*, or to become people who are 'advanced' and 'live a free life' as suggested by Zhong and Bingbing.

Many have argued against the formula commonly adopted in attempts to understand the impacts of socio-economic change in contemporary China — a concomitant unidirectional teleological transition of all spheres along with the market-oriented reform. For example, while pointing out that rising individualism and consumerism are 'not at all socialist and are quite inimical to Maoism', Farquhar (2002) argues against the 'simplistic idea' often taken in approaching the transformation of cultural life and experiences in post-reform China — which is often seen as involving the 'liberation of "a natural individual with universal needs" from 'an oppressive collectivism' (p. 3). Instead, she suggests the new emerging forms of experiences and selfhood are not the indication or outcome of a withdrawal of the state from private life, but instead a reorganisation involving both the state and the emerging market regime.

The simplistic 'danwei to desire' idea, as pointed out by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010), often arise from a direct application of the European individualisation path to China. However, as they point out, the European path is situated in a discourse of civil society in which identity is generally seen as being created through individual agency within the social realm, unmediated by the constraints of any collective group. It does not take into consideration China's complicated multiple and intertwining processes of detachment from multiple collectives, such as kinship and socialism, which have been constructed and destructed as the state has undergone drastic ideological and policy shifts in a relatively short period of time since the 1940s (Yan, 2010). Based on my research, I would argue that a more contextualised approach is thus required to understand people and experiences in China.

By making visible the multiple and diverse reasons the participants in my study decided to return to the small town, reading their stories for difference served to defy the teleological logic that others 'small-town youth'. In other words, a teleological approach would interpret the participants' preference for *danwei* as a failure to achieve the 'liberation' required to become 'ideal modern citizens'. In fact, my reading for difference reveals that *danwei* is only one of the many reasons behind their return. The State did play a role in motivating the return of some of my participants: the National Poverty Alleviation Campaign encouraged the relocation of Bo and Peng, and the state-led volunteer programme that formed part of the Development of the West campaign channelled the reverse migrations of Xiang and Qiqi. However, in the cases of Xiang and Qiqi, while the campaign slogan of the Development of the West campaign was 'go to the West, go to the grassroots, go to where the motherland needs you the most' (*China Youth Daily*, 2018), it is clear from our conversations that this socialist rhetoric did not account for their on-the-ground decision making— by no means did they consider themselves subjects of sacrifice to the collective of the motherland. On the other hand, the fact that they chose a relatively lower-paid job and considered a wide range of concerns beyond mere personal interest also defies the idea that either of them exemplified a complete neoliberal subject.

These two cases in particular show that when we can accept the co-existence and juxtaposition of conflicting reasons for migration, we can move away from the teleology that others individuals into categories like 'small-town youth' and move towards a deeper understanding of ordinary youth.

As I have argued, a refusal of teleological logic opens space for co-existence, overlapping, intertwining and concurrence instead of closing it down such that, eventually, a singular mode of being rises to the demise of the other. In Xin Liu's words, instead of focusing on 'becoming', we need to pause and look closer into the 'the being of this becoming' in order to actually grasp 'what there *is*' (p. 186, emphasis original). For example, although state no longer imposes 'seamless and static' domination over an individual's life, leaving little or no space for agency (Zhang, 2001, p. 10), the socialist-era legacy *danwei* lives on in contemporary China and, while having undergone reform, shows no signs of being on the way to complete demise, (Cliff, 2015). Similar to my findings that a job in *danwei*, especially a permanent position with *bianzhi,* is sought after by my participants, Cliff (2015), through extensive ethnographic work in a state-owned enterprise, also discovers that many Chinese people still aspire to work in a *danwei* rather than in an environment where there is more potential for mobility and more capacity to shape one's own career and identity, because the certainty provided by *danwei* and the state it represents is a much-needed anchor for a stable sense of self and identity, particularly in face of uncertainties in the rapidly changing China. In other words, transcending from the teleological logic allows people to be studied as 'beings' in their own right, as they are, rather than as people 'becoming' along a teleological trajectory— allowing 'small-town youth' to be seen as ordinary youth.

5.5. Conclusion

By analysing the stories of the general backgrounds of as well as of the return of the participants of my study, I firstly contest the notion of the existence of a 'small-town youth' identity by presenting the heterogeneity they exhibit. Secondly, starting from *mei yisi*, by reading for difference to look beyond *danwei*

as keywords in their narratives around their return, I suggest that their mobility is a contingent and messy process influenced by diverse and complicated factors. I also argue that *danwei* is commonly drawn on by the participants in order to justify their return to the county town — a perceived 'backward' place, so defined as a consequence of a teleological socio-spatial imagination. Analysing the common '*danwei* to desire" tale, I then explain the modernist teleology that is often used when approaching the study of transitional China. Such teleology gives birth to the othered notion of 'small-town youth' which is, however, defied by a rereading of 'small-town youth'.

From participants' accounts of return, we can sense the emergence of a perception of the county town and of life there being '*mei yisi*', boring and 'backward'. As discussed, informed by China's state project of modernity, the 'small-town youth' identity is an othered notion constructed against a dominant identity of an 'ultimate modern being' in an 'ideal city'. In the next chapter, we will further examine the notion of 'small town' in relation to modernity by taking a closer look at the county town of Wubu.

6. FROM 'A *BUXING* SMALL TOWN' TO AN ORDINARY PLACE

6.1. Introduction

Several of us were invited by Hong and her husband to their new apartment for a hot pot lunch in April 2017. Located on the higher floors in the recently finished high-rise residential buildings near the Yellow River, their apartment has a magnificent river view from the French window of their living room. Fully decorated, the apartment could feature in any 'modern living' magazine — it was my first time seeing a hot/cold filtered water dispenser, which also functions as an instant ice-maker, embedded into a wall. Hong and her husband were preparing hot pot for us. A variety of fresh vegetables, meat items and noodles were all laid out on the dining table, surrounding an induction cooker in which bone broth was boiling. Hong's husband opened a pack of soup base from a famous chain brand and added it into the broth — the lunch was on. I passed a comment on how the soup base tasted much better than the ones I had, even though it was the same brand. Hong mentioned that the stock broth was made using fresh lamb bones from a village relative. 'No wonder it tastes better than the hot pot I normally have! I was wondering, since I usually buy that brand [soup base], too! Thank you! It tastes amazing!' Hong's husband said: 'No, no, no, I just casually made it. Just average.' He then asked: 'The hot pot you have abroad must be much better?' I laughed and said: 'No way! Overseas students have hot pot for all our gatherings, mainly because we are lazy and terrible at cooking! We use [soup base packets from] this brand, too — we just add water, sometimes even without leek or ginger because they are too expensive.' He said: 'No, no, hot pot of our here (*zanmen zhe*) is just *buxing*'. *Buxing*, an expression that combines *bu,* literally 'not' and *xing* meaning 'good' or 'approved', is

another commonly used general verbal expression I repeatedly heard from my informants.

Hong's husband's use of the expression *buxing* caught my attention. I sensed there was more to his response than him simply being polite and hospitable, but at the time I could not pin it down — It was a year later, when I noticed a WeChat status update from Tang, that I arrived at a beginning understanding of what he meant. Tang posted that he, along with several other 'small-town youth' friends I also knew, had taken a train to the capital city of the neighbouring province just to have hot pot in the chain restaurant of the same brand as the soup base, and had ridden the train back to the county town after dinner. I had been to one of these chain hot pot restaurants — they make soup base the same way we do, using the same packet dumped into water with additional common ingredients like leek or red dates. Maybe it does taste slightly different, or maybe they were there for the experience — the chain indeed has a reputation for extraordinary customer service — but a two and a half hour train ride each way for a dinner? It must have been more than the actual hot pot meal itself that motivated them to go to such lengths. What was it?

In the previous chapter, I argued for 'ordinary youth' to be seen and understood beyond any teleological conceptualisation. It is the teleological logic underlying China's project of modernity that gave birth to the notion of 'small-town youth', othered in opposition to ideal modern urban subjects who are constructed as desirable and 'normal'. But why is the term 'small-town' used to define and describe such a group? In this chapter, we will look further into the notion of the 'small town' which I argue is also othered as the opposite to a 'good', 'ideal', 'modern' elsewhere represented by the imaginary metropolis. In what follows, I will first analyse the recurring usage of *buxing* by my participants in describing the county town as well as the people and life associated and aligned with the county town. By pointing out how *buxing* is often used in a less specific and articulated way, I argue that *buxing* is an overarching perception that overshadows people's understanding of the alignment of place, people and life in the county town. Secondly, I will further investigate what *xing* is by examining

how it is spoken of and constructed. I argue that underlying the judgement of something as *xing* or *buxing* is the discourse of Western urban modernity that gives shape to China's hierarchical spatial imagination and thus the 'small town-metropolis' binary and the collective imagination of 'small towns'. Thirdly, by pointing out the non-coherence in my participants' speaking of the county town as well as their lived everyday lives in the county town, I read against the dominance of *buxing* in order to conceptually open up and free so-called 'small towns' from the hegemonic teleological logic and return to 'ordinary' places for possibilities.

6.2. Narratives of the 'small town' – *buxing* as the overarching tale

> He pointed to his face, joking to his sister: 'This look of mine, living here, indeed doesn't do justice to such a beautiful city! Beautiful places should be left for beautiful people to live in.'…Shaoping thought to himself: 'You should get the hell back to Dayawan, to the coal mine, to the pile of black coal! You only fit into that environment! (*Ordinary World*, Volume 3: Chapter 52)

Shaoping's younger sister and her university classmate boyfriend were offering to transfer Shaoping to the capital city to live and work with the relations of the boyfriend's father. Shaoping refused: 'They should realise his and their situation are different. People of different situations should look for their own place of belonging on their own' (Vol 3: Chapter 54).

Despite his earnest aspiration and determination to become a 'pure city person' for 'the New World of life' as mentioned in the previous chapter, at the end of *Ordinary World*, Shaoping decides to go back to the town because the capital city, the 'beautiful place', is a place where he did not see himself as being 'beautiful' enough to belong. A similar belief had also weakened his faith in his relationship with his girlfriend, who had been born and raised in the capital city:

Now I increasingly understand it is impossible for us to be together. No doubt, my entire life will be spent here. But you will forever be someone of the big city. It is definitely impossible for me to live in your world; yet how could you come to live in my world? Impossible!   (Vol 3: Chapter 8)

She comes from the bustling metropolis…giving off the smell of the superior modern life. He…(is) an extremely ordinary character in life.… They look so distinctively different. (Vol 3: Chapter 10)

Shaoping, Lu Yao's main character, is imbued with almost all the virtues a young man could possibility possess: courage, resilience, intelligence, honesty and, most importantly, the determination and ambition to 'jump into hell' to change his 'fate'. Yet in the end, he chooses to let go of an opportunity to move to the capital city that is dangling right in front of him. This unexpected twist is seen as a result of Lu Yao's internal dilemma between the idealistic and realistic self (Li, 2006) — the idealistic Lu Yao grew up in Maoist China, was a revolutionary subject, believed in an ultimate utopian equality through struggle, yet the realistic Lu Yao was born and raised in the extreme poverty of a mountainous northern Shaanxi village, went through a failed marriage with a girl from Beijing, and embodied the chasm between the different 'worlds' of life. Looking at the above quote from Shaoping, we can clearly sense the impossibility of bringing together the trajectories of these characters from two worlds — one from the 'bustling metropolis', who is 'forever someone of the city' where a 'beautiful' person 'belongs' and lives a 'superior modern life' that is destined to be beyond the reach of the other, a rural-born outsider like Shaoping,   an 'extremely ordinary character' who, in fact, has been portrayed as rather extraordinary throughout the entire novel.

Such a dilemma about where one belongs is by no means unique to Lu Yao — it in fact echoes the official Maoist view of migration, which assumed that people were supposed to remain in their place of origin unless the state decided differently (Zavoretti, 2017, p. 97). Aided by the *hukou* system, this view of migration gave birth to the discourse of the 'peasant worker', whose presence in the city is assumed to be only transient and temporary, as they are destined to

return to their rural places of origin. Being 'rural' is therefore an essentialist quality imprinted onto them and thus rural people are neither able to be considered 'fully urban' nor entitled to the rights and benefits enjoyed by the 'real' urban residents (see for example Fan, 2004; Ngai & Lu, 2010). This underlying assumption that people are bound to their origins and those who leave are 'mere sojourners expecting to return home' has been critiqued as 'ironic' for a Maoist revolutionary government (Lary, 1999, p. 97). What I would like to argue is that this alignment of people, place and life not only still persists in today's post-reform China, but also is positioned on a linear and teleological trajectory underlying modernity. This alignment connects to the hierarchical urban imagination discussed in Chapter 3: that the 'small town' is a lagging-behind place for the 'less ideal', 'less modern' and 'less urban' life and for people like 'small-town youth', as opposed to the metropolis, which is the spatial representation of the ultimate urban and modern location for the 'ideal' modern life and people.

This value-based alignment and positioning are best described by a recurring expression from my informants — *buxing*. *Buxing* is a casual, highly versatile expression that is used to describe a wide range of topics — from place, people, and life in general to particular things. Although its meaning is often less specific and articulated and thus the literal translation needs to be contextualised, overall, it carried a meaning of negativity and disapproval: 'not good or ideal'. Similar to *mei yisi*, the expression *buxing* is not only used in relation to a wide range of topics and situations but also often was the spontaneous and less-thought-through response, which was sometimes followed by an expression of contradiction and indifference such as 'everywhere is the same' — a contradiction to which we will return in following section. In what follows, I will show how, in their conversations, the participants attributed place, people and life to an overarching idea of *buxing*.

Not long after my arrival in June 2019 for my last field trip, Xiang hosted a farewell banquet before he left for Xi'an. Chinese banquets have been regarded as a socio-cultural tradition known for their extravagance (see Yang, 1994).

Xiang's banquet kept with tradition— I saw cartons of beer piled up in the corner when I walked into the banquet room, which was decorated in a golden tone, the colour of fortune and luxury. Xiang was ordering lavishly from a waitress, pointing to the menu: 'I'll have this, and that, and also that. OK…what do we have? Lamb, beef, pork, chicken… OK, then, get us a fish…a whole fish. [It] must be fresh…' Soon the lazy Susan was covered with beautifully presented dishes. 'This lamb is very good. Lamb stew is northern Shaanxi's traditional delicacy,' Kai said, turning to me while picking up a piece of stewed lamb. 'Other dishes are *buxing*. People in this small place (*xiao difang*) only know how to cook lamb and simple farmhouse dishes (*nongjia fan*)'. After quickly swallowing the lamb, Kai then sampled a piece of okra, a type of vegetable grown in warmer climates that only recently gained popularity in China and is often seen as 'exotic'. He said: 'Too dry, small place people just don't know how to handle these foreign things (*yang dongxi*).'

I was taken aback by such blatant and negative comments, especially when they did not come from the host, which would be interpreted as an attempt at humility, to show hospitality. But nobody seemed to mind at all — in fact, Peng and Min, sitting next to me, were both nodding in agreement. I tasted a piece of okra and there was nothing wrong with it. It was succulent, juicy and flavourful — as a matter of fact, it tasted even better than the okra I had eaten in Singapore, where I was first introduced to this tropical vegetable. Tang jumped in:'Our here is just *buxing*. There is nothing. Everything is *buxing*'. More people nodded, including the host, Xiang. Noticing how quickly Tang took on Kai's comments and escalated them to the level of making general negative comments on 'everything' of 'our here', I then realised no offence had been taken because no offence had been intended — there was a consensus that 'our here' and 'everything here' was *buxing*. Thus, comments referring to 'everything' being *buxing* are more like general and casual mutterings that seldom carry serious, targeted or specific meanings. *Buxing*, in these cases, does not even necessarily relate to any particular dissatisfaction nor to what actually is going on — *buxing* here has little to do with how everyone felt about the dishes, nor with how the

dishes actually tasted. It does not matter what 'it' is and whether it is actually not good — it is *just* 'not good'.

Like 'our here's' hot pot and dishes, what my participants also used *buxing* to talk about, is 'people of our here'. Zhong and I went for a hike in March 2017 to the nearby ancient stone city. While walking across the town, Zhong learned about my interest in *Ordinary World* and started to talk about his experience working as an extra when the TV series had been recently shot in a nearby village. All of a sudden he stopped as we walked past an exposed rubbish tank that was emitting an unpleasant smell — he gestured to direct me to walk around it and said: 'Our here's environment is not so good. Mainly because our here's people are just *buxing*. [Their] *suzhi* is too low.' Many things about his response to the rubbish caught my attention. Apart from the fact that Zhong had quickly and directly attributed the environmental problem to 'our here's people', he also made a general comment on all people here being *buxing*, even though he himself was born and raised and now works here. But more importantly, his comment suggests that people being *buxing* means they have low *suzhi*. Min also made a similar comment as we were discussing her work experience before the Bureau. She first described how her manager back in the international company was so 'unreasonably mean and strict' to her that her personality 'completely changed'; because she did not see the experience as 'worthwhile'. She later quit. She then talked about her experience working for a private educational institution when she first came back to the county town — the manager was also so 'mean and strict' that in the end she 'had enough' and left. What is interesting is that, even though her complaints about both jobs were similarly directed to the long hours, strict management and low salary, Min blamed the ill treatment she received in the international company in the city on the 'scientific management system' that prioritised efficiency and profit, but blamed her poor treatment at the local school on the 'low *suzhi* of the manager' who she described as '*buxing* as a person' (*ren buxing*). What is even more interesting is that Min then concluded: 'So I decided to work in a *danwei* [even though it pays less and is only temporary]. People of

our here's *suzhi* is too low, especially the bosses of private companies. It is a bit better in a *danwei*.'

Suzhi, I argue, provides an entry point for our understanding of *buxing*. *Suzhi* lies at the heart of the PRC's dynamics of governance and its state project of modernisation. Roughly translated into 'quality', *suzhi* refers to the innate and nurtured qualities human's have as well as to their conduct in all aspects, from physical, psychological and intellectual to moral and ideological (Jacka, 2009; Murphy, 2004; Sigley, 2009; Yan, 2003b). Underlying the discourse of *suzhi* is the belief that the modern claim of 'scientific truth' could serve to shape human conduct and thus 'quality' — a logic Sigley (2009) calls 'technoscientific reasoning'. A term that arose from discussions about population control and about shaping the young generation to develop a certain desired set of values, *suzhi* has been effective as a means for the modern nation-state regime to promulgate and inscribe normalising discourses of the citizen and the nation on the bodies and subjectivities of person-subjects (Yan, 2003a; 2003b). Thus, *suzhi* reifies hierarchical differences, because it is used to justify socio-political hierarchy of all kinds — citizens of 'high' quality are entitled to higher income, power and status compared with those of 'low' quality (Kipnis, 2006; 2007). In 2017, I accompanied a senior employee from the bureau to visit a village assigned to him as part of the National Poverty Alleviaton Campaign. On the way back to the county town he explained to me that villagers lacked 'scientific thoughts' and had lower *suzhi*, so 'naturally they are poor'.

More importantly, this socio-political hierarchy is also intertwined with and translated into a spatial hierarchy. In her work on Beijing's migrant workers from the inland province of Anhui, Sun (2007; 2009) has shown that *suzhi* is a highly mobile concept that can be often deployed in almost any context to compare and, in particular, to 'decry a range of deficiencies' (2009, p. 618). A lack of *suzhi* is commonly assumed to be an essence attributed to people from 'poorer, interior provinces', like, in Sun's case, Anhui Province, as opposed to 'metropolises and industrial centres on the coast'(ibid). This explains Min's different narratives of her unpleasant work experiences —*suzhi*, or the lack of it, was only referred to

when discussing the boss in Wubu — a '*buxing* person' from a '*buxing* our here'. Moreover, Min suggested that the assumed general lack of *suzhi* of 'people here', to a certain extent, excludes people from the *danwei*. Interestingly, Xiang claimed that, while graduating from a first-tier university and then coming back to a poor county town where 'the general *suzhi* of people is low' was a move that 'made a loss' (*kui le*), working in a *danwei* made up for the loss. Fang explained that she strategically chose a *danwei* in Wubu as the test is less competitive for a *bianzhi* in this less-desirable area — the higher likelihood of getting a *bianzhi* made up for the step down in the spatial hierarchy. This is also what Cliff (2015) found in a *danwei* in the remote inland province of Xinjiang: that people in a *danwei* are aware that they are on China's spatial periphery, but that this is compensated for by the value added to their status for being in a *danwei*. Thus we can see that the *buxing* of a place and its people is based on a hierarchical spatial imagination that follows the logic of *suzhi.*

The 'lower quality' of 'our here' not only refers to the '*buxing*' people, but also the '*buxing*' life —both described in the words of my participants as '*mei yisi*'. A good example of this comes from an experience I had on the first day I settled into the dorm. Several of my new 'small-town youth' friends were making an online order together so that they could meet the minimum spending threshold for free shipping. They showed me what they were ordering — chips, *Coke*, and other daily essentials like laundry powder. They told me: 'It's convenient to shop online.' I asked: 'Isn't there a supermarket?' 'Yeah, but it's too far and the products are *buxing*.'

I, too, then joined and ordered a pack of laundry powder and some snacks. However, two days later, not long after our package had arrived in the morning, I took my first walk around the town. I soon discovered, apart from in the main shopping mall at the centre of the town, there were two other large, well-stocked supermarkets on the short 15-minute walk to the town centre, not to mention the many convenience stores — I observed no notable difference between the items we had bought online in terms of not only price but also variety; the local shop shown in Figure 14 below, stocked everything we had ordered and more. Back in

the Bureau, I mentioned that what we ordered online could be easily purchased here, and one girl said: 'Yah I, know.' 'Then why not [shop locally]?' 'I don't know. I just like it that way.'

Figure 14 A typical local supermarket

(Source: author's own)

A year later, Qiqi, who had arrived a couple of months before, described her dissatisfaction with life in Wubu when I asked her how she felt about coming to the county town after finishing her study in Xi'an. Qiqi said: 'Here is *buxing*. Mainly because life here is too *mei yisi*!' 'In what way?' 'Just that the small place is boring. Also, you aren't able to get anything here!' I replied: 'You know there is a shopping centre?' She shrugged and said: 'Yah, but it is not very *xing*.' 'What do you mean?' 'They just don't have what I want.' 'Like what?' Qiqi said: 'Hmm… I don't know, [I] just feel [it is] not too *xing* [here]… Anyway, they don't even have many high-rise buildings here. How about *guowai* (overseas places)? Life must have more *yisi* there than here?'

It appears there is a consensus that it is *buxing* here, so the meaning behind her muttered word took little contextualisation. Yet, as these conversations above suggest, the reasons why and how the participants thought life in Wubu is *buxing* and what specific aspects are *xing* needed more consideration, which is what next section aims to do. Thinking about Qiqi's unjustified comment: 'You aren't able to get anything here', or Tang's statement that 'There is nothing', we can see that these are obviously generalisations and exaggerations. These comments, and given how quickly specific discussions about restaurant dishes, hot pot broth or a rubbish bin escalated to general criticism of 'our here', we can see how the overarching idea of *buxing* overshadows people's understanding of the county town. More specifically, by showing how *suzhi* is an integral part of the descriptions of people as *buxing*, I illustrate how China's modernisation gives shape to a hierarchical spatial imagination which encompasses and aligns the 'quality' of place, people and life. Now Hong's husband's and Tang's comments make sense — they were not criticising the hotpot itself, but had more to do with 'our here' being *buxing*. Even so, the idea that a hot pot is described as '*buxing*' because it is consumed at a '*buxing* here' rather than in a capital city, why, according to Kai, was the traditional and local lamb dish an exception to all the other '*buxing*' dishes? The next section will answer this question by investigating the idea of *xing* as opposite to *buxing* to further our understanding of China's urban imagination.

6.3. What is *xing*? – a good life anchored to an imagined elsewhere

Qiui was shocked: 'It's so unbelievable he is from Sichuan! The kind of pioneer music genre he performs and vibes he gives off…you just feel he has got to come from Shanghai!' I was intrigued to hear Qiqi express her amazement when she found out her favourite rap artist was from the inland province of Sichuan rather than the city of Shanghai as she had assumed. We were chatting over breakfast in the canteen — she had just come back from his live house performance in Xi'an, after which she had joined the rapper and other fans to

hang out in a bar. I asked: 'What kind of vibe?' 'You know, just that vibe!' Qiqi paused, 'That vibe, you know! So new and trendy, cutting-edge, pioneer…' Of course, I knew right away, just like so many Chinese would — I didn't really need any explanation to understand what she meant by stating a person appears to 'come from Shanghai'. That person would simply exude that 'smell of the superior modern life' that Shaoping sensed in his girlfriend, who 'comes from the bustling metropolis' (*Ordinary World,* Volume 3: Chapter 10).

Qiqi went on asking me: 'How about *guowai*? This kind of music must be very popular there?' Questions about life *guowai*, were often asked of me — I was often given certain authority to speak about *guowai* because I had first-hand experience of life outside China. What is interesting is that *guowai* is more of a generalised and all-encompassing entity — although I have only lived in Singapore and New Zealand, comments and questions most often directed to me were about *guowai*, literally translated as 'outside of China' — all foreign countries, rather than specific countries or regions:

> Our here's medical service is *buxing*. It's different from *guowai*. You must go up to Yulin at least. Don't [see a dentist] here. Traditional Chinese medicine, our here's hospital is *xing*. Western medicine? *Buxing*!

A local said this to me after finding out I was planning to have my wisdom teeth pulled in the county hospital. She became more concerned after noticing I was not changing my mind: 'Really, don't do it,' she urged. 'Our here is really *buxing*.' I thanked her, did an internet search and weighed up the 'worst complications from wisdom tooth removal', then decided to go ahead — apart from the throbbing toothache that I could not imagine enduring for the two and a half hour trip to Yulin, I was also increasingly curious to find out whether and how our here's 'Western medicine', or more precisely its dental service, is *buxing*. In the end, it turned out to be pretty *xing* — it went so well that I even had a cleaning and filling session after I recovered from the extraction. I also had a dentist taking a look at the filling during a teeth cleaning session in a hospital in Beijing, who assured me it was done very well. Back at the dorm, I showed Fang my wisdom tooth in a jar. She was surprised: 'You actually did it? You are so

bold! Maybe I should try next time. I just go up to Yulin when I need to go to the hospital.' I asked: 'You've never been to hospital here?' 'Never. I don't even get my glasses done here.' Apparently, Fang had assumed that hospitals in Wubu were simply *buxing* and not even worth a try. Similarlly, while Fang was preganant, she worked and lived in the county town yet still seldom visited the local hospital – her husband drove her to Yulin even for the most basic checks because they were worried that the hospitals might be *buxing*.

From these everyday conversations and practices, apart from noticing how *buxing* overshadows people's ideas associated with the county town, we can see how the sense of *xing* emerges in relation to keywords like Shanghai, metropolis, modern life, and *guowai*. How do we make sense of this? In the next section, I will follow up on these keywords and further examine the idea of *xing*. By both showing how *xing* is spoken of, understood and constructed, I identify China's hierarchical urban imagination in which 'small town' is rendered into an othered collective imagination underpinned by the pursuit of urban-centred modernity represented by the metropolis.

From *Yaodong* to Stadium – the urban pursuit

A county town as poor as Wubu sacrificed… farmland to build a stadium this grand. I really don't know what the policy decision-makers and government were thinking? Let's just say it is a project to benefit people, but the new stadium is built in a village 6 km from the county town and forcefully occupies farmland that villagers relied on for their livelihood… (Dangdai Net, 2017)

In a news report in 2017, a villager complains angrily about the new stadium project, and in the end asks 'what is the point in a National Poverty County spending nearly 100 million yuan to build a stadium 6 km away from the county town'(Dangdai Net, 2017).

By the time of my 2018 field trip, the stadium (pictured in Figure 15, below) was nearly finished. Chatting with my dormitory friends, I mentioned how I had

had a look at it on the way into the county town. Peng said with clear pride 'Not bad, hah? Wubu has gone through a lot of changes these several years. Its development is not bad!' I said: 'Yah, it's so new! And it is huge!' Min jumped in: 'Huge indeed! *Xing*, right? (*xing ba?*)' I replied: 'Not bad indeed, but it's so far away.' Min: 'Yah, we also don't know who is going to go that far and use it. Pretty useless, actually.' Min and Peng's thoughts about the stadium may partially answer the question raised by the news report — that a grand stadium was an attempt at as well as an exhibition of development which is associated with pride and a sense of *xing*. However, the problem is, like the villager, Min also has doubts about the value of the project, stating that the stadium is 'useless'. Then why is a 'useless' project still *xing*? How do we understand the investment in and construction of such arguably 'useless' urban projects? In this section, I will show how the pursuit of modernisation via urbanisation is not only part of the state's official agenda but also installed into common beliefs.

Figure 15 Stadium, May 2018

(Source: author' own)

What the 2017 news report did not cover was that the stadium was in fact part of the *Yangjiadian* New Area Keypoint Project of Wubu (Wang, 2016). According to the then-mayor of Yulin, the construction of the stadium as part of this New Area was a 'necessary choice' for 'Wubu county town's long-term development' as well as a 'major strategic decision' to 'enlarge city framework, expand city space, complete city function, improve city taste' and that Wubu county town must 'strive for the construction' of a 'modern city' (*Yulin Daily*, 2014). In other words, the construction of the stadium, and the New Area of which it is a part, is both the county's pursuit and exhibition of development towards becoming a modern city. In fact, Wubu county town has seen continuous urban construction beyond the proposed New Area. During my entire period of fieldwork across several years, there were always multiple construction projects underway across the town. I witnessed myself how the *yaodong* — the traditional cave dwelling — was being replaced by high-rise residential buildings. A taxi driver once noticed that I was taking photos of a construction site with demolished *yaodong,* as shown in Figure 16 below, while we were driving past the outskirts of the county on our way to the train station. He said:

> Soon these *yaodong* will be gone! This will be a new residential compound … high-rise buildings… not bad, hah? Finally our here is getting the proper look of a city (*xiang ge chengshi*)! Otherwise it would keep looking old (*lao*) and shabby (*po*).

In fact, *yaodong*, the disappearing traditional cave dwellings suited to the geology and climate of the Loess Plateaus, have been praised as examples of sustainable dwellings (see Zhu, Liu, Yang & Hu, 2014; Liu, Wang, Yoshino & Liu, 2011). Regardless of the actual functionality of different dwellings, I would like to highlight that the taxi driver's words reveal how the traditional *yaodong* dwelling is associated with words like 'old' and 'shabby', as opposed to being part of 'the proper look of a city' made up of 'high-rise buildings'. His comments express the perceived value of the pursuit of development towards a modern city outlined by the government official in addressing the New Area.
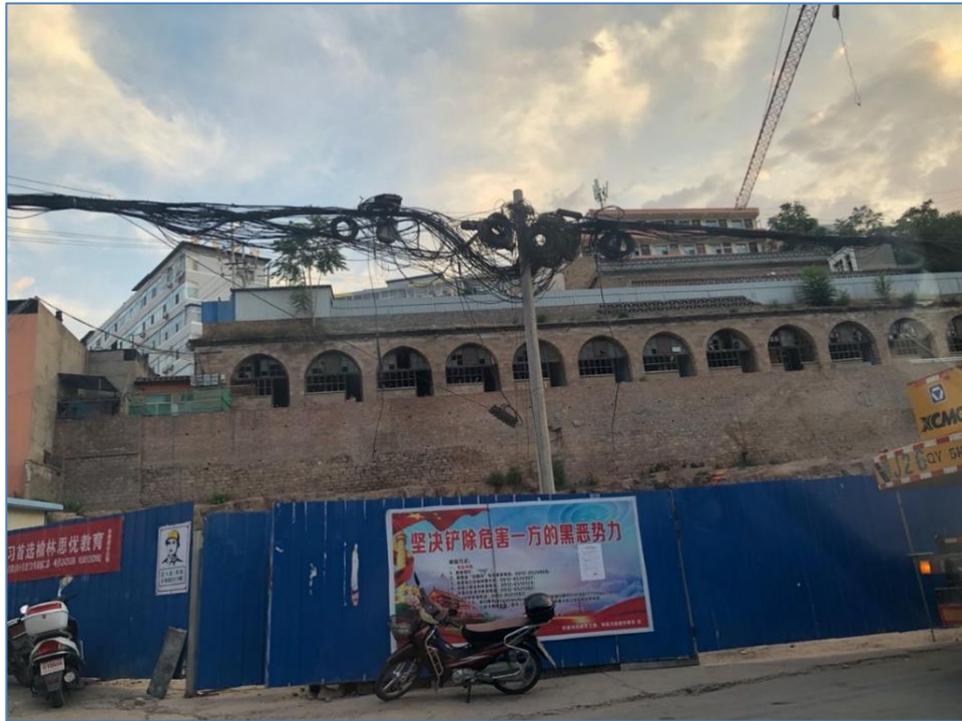
Figure 16 Yaodong soon to be demolished and replaced with high-rise buildings

(Source: author's own)

The development of Wubu county town only a tiny window into the ongoing massive and rapid urban construction China has witnessed and is still witnessing, and behind which is the dominant nationwide ideal of an urban Chinese modernity. From the perspective of the national government, continued urbanisation has been a top priority for not only China's economic development but also as 'a symbol of continuous human progress and the historical trend of the contemporary world'.[16] As 'urbanisation rate' is one of the key development indicators in the official agenda, it is also crucial in determining the performance and promotion of government officials. Given the state-led top-down nature of China's development, China's urban expansion sometimes becomes 'a means to an end' — instead of being driven by actual growth in the local economy or population, urban expansion itself is an agent for economic development (Han,

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[16] See World Bank (2000) for remarks by Zhao Baojiang, Vice Minister of China's Ministry of Construction, at Workshop on Urbanisation.

2010). More importantly, this pursuit of economic growth and urbanisation is tied to a fundamental belief in the integration of China into the contemporary world and in the achievement of 'human progress' through urbanisation.

What drives the material construction of infrastructure such as the new stadium and the New Area is the pursuit of 'the new city' which has a certain 'proper look', in the words of the taxi driver. 'The city' and its associated 'newness', as argued by Oakes (2019), is an integrated part of the party-state's governing ideology with its pursuit of 'a new, civilised, urban China' (p. 405). Oakes points out that 'the urban has colonised imagination' and 'dominates how people contemplate the future', of which the spatial manifestation is 'the new city', where 'the backwardness and poverty of the rural are substituted by the future and a middle-class lifestyle' (ibid). According to Nielson and Simone (2017, p. 129), the new city, the rationally planned New Area and the technocratic new stadium, are all forms of urban 'redemption': a second chance to fulfil the failed promises of urbanism. In other words, symbolism is more important than functionality. Whether it is useless or not, what defines the new stadium as *xing* is how it symbolises the county's development towards a future that is more 'urban' and 'modern'. In particular, the building of a stadium or other symbol of urban development demonstrates that peripheral places in the modern hierarchy can 'evolve' into 'proper' and new cities regardless of their 'lateness' (Zhang, 2006, p. 461 in the case of Kunming, Yunnan) and 'behindness' (Cliff, 2013, p. 13 in the case of Korla, Xinjiang). In other words, the underlying teleology of modernity values the pursuit of 'the urban' and, more particularly, 'the new city' as an important aspect of *xing*. Places deemed as 'not urban enough' and thus 'not urban enough', such as 'small towns' are rendered as always 'behind', lacking and *buxing*.

No.1 under heaven and *guowai* – West-centred modernity

'You have to have it! Our here's noodles are really *xing*!' Xiang insisted I keep eating when he noticed that I was trying to skip the last course. Like all

banquets I attended in Wubu, Xiang's banquet also ended with noodles — dried noodles boiled in water, seasoned with vinegar and chilli oil, usually served with an optional poached egg and choices of a basic garnish like spring onion and cilantro, as shown in Figure 17, below. It is such a simple dish, especially compared with other main dishes laid out on the lazy Susan that have been referred to as *buxing*. What was it about this noodle dish that made it *xing*? Apart from the urban projects like the grand stadium, what else in the county town was considered *xing*? This section will examine the description and construction of things in the county town as *xing*, from which I identify the underlying hegemony of West-centred modernity presented and practiced in the county town.

Figure 17 A bowl of cooked dried noodles

(Source: author's own)

These noodles, which the locals take great pride in, have the reputation of being 'The number one dried noodles under heaven' (*tianxia*[17] *diyi guamian*). In

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[17] *Tianxia,* literarily translated as 'under heaven', is an expression that roughly suggests 'of all places'.

fact, Wubu's fame for the dried noodles was only gained recently. Wubu came into the spotlight when the dried hand-pulled noodles became famous almost overnight with the broadcast of a phenomenal food documentary on CCTV in 2014. Although this type of noodle is actually a common food in the wider region,[18] a village in Wubu was chosen by the documentary crew to feature it. The resulting food documentary series, *A Bite of China*, became a hit shortly after it came out in 2012 and quickly became China's most viewed documentary series since the 1990s — immediately after each episode went on air, online sales of the featured dishes of the programme would surge. In addition to the noodle makers of Wubu, the local government was also determined to make as much as possible out of the publicity. County-level government officials established an association, set aside a budget and put forward a series of practices to promote the local dried noodles (Wubu Government, 2015).[19] Liu Wenxi, a prestigious artist who had established his status by painting revolutionary themes associated with northern Shaanxi in the 1960s, composed a piece of Chinese calligraphy for the noodles — 'Number one dried noodles under heaven' — which soon was imprinted everywhere in Wubu: in the park, on the noodle packets, on the wall of the best hotel in the county. This piece of calligraphy was, of course, also on the box of noodles given to me as a departure gift when I left. Examining how these common noodles have become part of the local identity and been promoted, I aim to reveal the underpinning West-centred modernist hierarchy,which is also behind the 'small town-metropolis' urban imaginary, where the latter is seen as a better place associated with more desirable things and with life that is 'authentically modern'.

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[18] See Jiang (2016) for an interview with the producer, who revealed that dried noodles are very common but the team had to search across four provinces to find a case that was 'touching' — the old noodle-maker living in a cave dwelling in a Wubu village fit the bill.

[19] Practices included an official county meeting marking the sixth anniversary of the broadcast of the documentary and the development of a county noodle industry attended by county's top officials (Wubu News, 2020)

Figure 18 'Number one dried noodles under heaven' engraved onto a park fence

(Source: author's own)

Although I did not particularly follow the news about these noodles, the publicity they received made it difficult to not hear noodle-themed news, given that I follow the local government's official WeChat account and website. The noodles' publicity peaked when the county media presented extensive coverage of the 'foreign' screening of its own movie — the Wubu government, in collaboration with film production teams, had invested in the production of a noodle-themed movie: *Fine Dried Noodles* (*yiba guamian*). The movie made the headlines when it was shown in an international movie festival, yet little legitimate information could be found online in English about this festival, and judging by the look of the limited amount of event coverage I was able to find, I would doubt the actual significance of the festival in the professional movie industry. However, the size or influence of the festival did not matter. What mattered was that the movie festival was international, it was foreign, and more precisely, it was in the West. Similarly, another foreign show featuring dried noodles made the headlines of the local news more than a handful of times. The newsworthy programme was a CCTV-4 show, *Foreigners in China*, which featured a French son-in-law who had married a local girl and brought their child back to the village to visit and to participate in various activities, including the

making of noodles. The show received extensive coverage, appearing in the news among the formal and serious coverage of official meetings and mayoral speeches.

This desire to be recognised by 'the foreign' is further demonstrated by Wubu's attempt to become 'international' by hosting international events. Similar to the effort put into developing the grand but 'useless' stadium, this National Poverty County also extended itself to host international events like the Yellow River International Rafting Open (Wubu Government, 2017) and the International Road Cycling Tournament (Wubu Government, 2019). During my 2017 visit, the Rafting Open, scheduled for months later, was brought up by many of my participants with great pride and anticipation. In my subsequent visit in 2018, Fang brought the Open up shortly after my arrival: 'Your New Zealand team won the gold medal in the Rafting Open!' She then went on to describe her experience of watching the event:

> It was a rainy day and the site [of the finish line] wasn't completely finished. The roads were not sealed properly, so it was really muddy… It made our here look even more backwards, especially in the eyes of foreigners!

What Fang's comments reveal is that what matters most in these attempts to be 'international' is to be recognised as 'less backwards'. Similarly, these noodles, despite being proudly proclaimed in China to be 'No.1 under heaven' and popularly received by Chinese consumers, as indicated by the boost in sales on e-commerce sites, are pushed hard into the global spotlight by locals and local government officials who are in desperate need of foreign recognition and approval.

In fact, 'the foreign', or more precisely 'the West', has been an integral part of China's development-via-modernisation narrative. It is fair to say that contemporary China's development vision has been modelled after the West. The Chinese government's overarching goal is for China to be recognized as a modern world power — the official expression of China's development discourse portrays China as a developing nation that aspires to follow the development path paved by the developed 'modern Western nations' (Barabantseva, 2012). This is

reflected in Mao's well-known slogan: 'catch up with the UK and surpass the U.S.' (*ganying chaomei*). 'The West' is conceived as a homogenous entity that is 'just a step ahead' of China on the linear, evolutionary and teleological path of progress (see Dirlik, 1996; Gillette, 2000). Along with the 'East-West' binary, Euro-American modernity also aligns with binaries of 'backwards-advanced', 'traditional-modern', 'uncivilised-civilised' and 'underdeveloped-developed'. As a result, 'the West' as a constructed collective is seen as representing the 'proper', the desirable, and the ultimate and 'authentic' modern towards which the 'rest' shall evolve (Barlow, 1997; Chen, 2010; Escobar, 2010).

The West, in the words of my participants, is '*guowai*' (outside of China), which, as my field experiences reveal, is an imagined homogenous collective entity of the '*xing* elsewhere' as contrasted against a '*buxing* here'. A revisitation of the stories mentioned earlier in this chapter will reveal that, in fact, the '*buxing* here' complaint is often associated with an underlying assumption that *guowai* is more *xing* — as Hong calls the guowai hot pot 'better' and Qiqi insists guowai life must be 'more yisi'. Similarly, Zavoretti (2017) describes how the West is assumed to be, in general, a better entity. Zavoretti's participants in Nanjing were surprised that medical services in Europe were increasingly being privatised and that in the United States the provision of healthcare services was not run by the state. When asked to explain this surprise, one participant replied as if stating the obvious: 'Western countries are rich. In rich countries, hospitals should be free.' (p. 128). This expectation is in line with what the local told me when she found out I was planning to have a dental procedure here: 'Our here's medical service is *buxing*. It's different from *guowai*.' Bingbing also once asked me about the medical service in *guowai*. I then asked whether she was referring to Singapore or New Zealand. She was obviously surprised – 'Their medical services are different? Aren't they the same and more advanced?' Yet among the many conversations I had that were based on the assumption that *guowai* things were better, the most interesting one was with another local who expressed surprise when I mentioned that the time where we were in China was the same as the time in Singapore: 'What? There is no time difference between China and Singapore?

What a shame! How about New Zealand?' I responded: 'The time difference is 4 or 5 hours, depending on the time of the year.' 'Oh, that's better!' I later understood what this local woman meant when she said 'What a shame,' and 'that's better'; she went on to talk about her meeting with a distant relative during Chinese New Year: 'She was so sleepy because of the jet lag, just flying back from *guowai*. Apparently, the night and day are the exact reverse in the U.S. compared with China!' What caught my attention was how her tone clearly indicated that adjusting to a jet lag is somehow admirable — that even a time difference, something *guowai* is supposed to have, offers superiority. Although this may be one extreme case, it does reveal the disciplinary power of modernity in shaping our understandings and narratives (see Nonini & Ong, 1997).

This hierarchy of modernity is also aligned with a spatial hierarchy. Looking at Kai's comments at Xiang's banquet, we can perceive his underlying assumption that in a peripheral 'small place' like the county town, 'foreign things' like okra simply could not be made properly, in the way that lamb, noodles and 'farmhouse dishes', which are seen as 'local' and 'traditional', can. This underlying assumption is also the reason why Western medical care in Wubu county town was judged to be *buxing*. In order to obtain proper and 'authentic' Western medical care, one has to travel up the urban hierarchy, from the county town to the capital city, if not the prefectural-level city. It all boils down to the belief that a 'small-town here' is the peripheral and 'backwards', and the better, the 'advanced' and more 'authentic' Western and foreign is located in some 'modern elsewhere', higher in the urban hierarchy. In the next section, we will look into this spatial hierarchy with the example of Shanghai as an imaginary of a 'modern elsewhere'.

Metropolis of *xing* life – the imagined 'modern elsewhere'

> Shanghai… going into the night became a world of lights. The dynamic unpredictable light is just like the life of this city. …this metropolis … makes people aspire to it yet feel intimidated by it… it is exclusive…yet also so

generous — sharing its enormous fortune and creativity with 56 ethnic groups and one billion people… Outsiders, in front of Shanghai, could not help feeling how shabby they are. (*Ordinary World,* Volume 3: Chapter 48)

This is the how metropolis of Shanghai appears in Lu Yao's writing. From this brief account, we can sense how Shanghai is seen as the embodiment of glamour and a source of fortune. Previous sections have illustrated that *xing* is associated with the urban, the modern and the West, which leads us to the imaginary of Shanghai, the city that is often seen as the birthplace of Chinese modernity (Lee, 2000). In this section, I will look closer into the spatiality of *xing* — that a better, desirable and authentically modern life is only lived in the 'modern elsewhere' of a metropolis as opposed to in a small town.

Why does Qiqi insist that her pioneer music artist 'has got to come from Shanghai'? What does Shanghai represent? Shanghai, as Rhoads Murphey (1953) famously phrased in the title of his book, has a long tradition of being seen as the 'key to modern China', thanks to its semi-colonial history. Shanghai was one of the first treaty ports set up when China was forced by the Western powers to open up for trade in 1843 (Bracken, 2019). With the foreign concessions and commercial functions, treaty ports emerged as a distinct urban form in twentieth-century China. The autonomy provided by the foreign consular jurisdiction attracted many modern industries, from financial (modern banks) to cultural (publishers, film studios). It was in Shanghai that the English and French words, *modern(e)*, were first transliterated into the Chinese term, *modeng*, meaning novel and fashionable (Lee, 1999, p. 5). As Western enclaves, treaty ports gradually distinguished themselves as being modern, while interior urban places were 'characterised as backward, dirty, unhealthy, conservative, and lacking the cultural and material marks of modernity' (Esherick, 2000, p. 5). The treaty port city of Shanghai soon became an accessible example that other places aimed to emulate: 'only Shanghai was a proper standard of modernity' (Esherick, 1999, p. 12). The significant role Shanghai played as the dominant and representative urban presence on the national landscape continued through the PRC era, and the 1992 designation of Shanghai Pudong New Area signalled the beginning of

China's era of pursuing urban modernity through 'top-down' and 'city-centered' urbanisation 'characterized by decisions to invest in major urban projects by bureaucratic elites from the central and municipal governments' (Ren 2013, p. 29). Indeed, as pointed out by Dikotter (2007), in the context of China, 'modernity' is often directly associated with 'Shanghai'.

What Shanghai represents thus extends far beyond the city itself — it is the imaginary of an exemplary modern city where the 'ultimate' and 'ideal' modern life is situated. Huang (2018), through a close reading of the trilogy *Tiny Times* by Guo Jingming, a small-town boy who grew up into a Shanghainese writer, presents a reproduction of the common and popular urban imaginary of development based on a fictional paradigm of the 'global city'. Shanghai functions as an irreplaceable symbol central to Guo's writings, the manifest feature of which is a hyperbolic modern spectacle of the metropolis. This modern spectacle represents the society's collective imagination of 'Chinese metropolitan middle-class life' — as represented by Guo's writing, Shanghai is the 'global' counterpart to cities all over the country' and 'there is no paradise superior to Shanghai' (Huang, 2018, p. 363). Indeed, as Donald & Zheng (2009) argue, class aspirants turn to the known, which are, in fact, often imagined cosmopolitan Western peers, in order to find 'authentic' structures of middle-class feelings and practice. They do so partially through the adoption and occupation of place imaginaries, most often conceived on a spatialised spectrum of Shanghai style and civility. Shanghai, through repeated narratives and recollection, has been recast as the cradle and embodiment of modern urban class identity and lifestyle.

Thus, Shanghai is to Qiqi what the Capital City is to Shaoping, and what New York is to A Yi — the longing for these places reflects an ingrained desire to better oneself into an 'ideal modern being' living an 'ideal modern life' that is assumed to be 'better' and *xing*. These 'dreamed-of places' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 103) are what I refer to as 'modern elsewheres', like the imaginary of Shanghai:

> Everyone imagines that things are happening in some place where they have never been…there's a kind of rumor in cities that produces fantasies, and

those rumors create delight. This delight is false, but it influences a lot of people (Yang, 2008, p. 175 as cited in Lin, 2018, p. 214).

Social imaginaries of China, as argued by Schein (2001), link urban landscapes to cultural ideals of civility, progress, and opportunity, culminating in the coastal centres. Hoffman (2001) labels such hierarchical socio-spatial imagination of China as a 'hierarchy of desire', which cuts the national space into 'places that were developed and undeveloped, modern and backward, convenient and bitter', aligned with hierarchies of opportunity and stagnation (p. 44). Such alignment traces back to how 'the concept of modernity…profoundly reinforces the work of developmentalism in urban studies, such that, as Jennifer Robinson (2006) points out, the 'modern' then is 'theoretically aligned primarily with Western cities, or with the export and proliferation of a supposedly "Western" modernity around the world' (p. 4). The metropolis, represented by Shanghai, is thus 'the West', imagined as the site of modernity, and 'small towns' are 'the rest', entrained as not/less-modern and never-modern-enough through the transformation of historical time into geographical difference. In conclusion, the '*buxing* small town' is a consequence of places being othered by the teleological logic of modernity. Is it possible to break free from the hegemony of modernity and the overshadowing tale of *buxing* so that an othered 'small town' can become, simply, an ordinary place with the potential to be *xing*?

6.4. Reading beyond *buxing*: 'everywhere is the same'

At the centre of the landscape painting, 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus' by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, is a farmer concentrating on ploughing his field with his head down, undistracted by the drowning Icarus, who occupies only a tiny corner of the painting. This era-defining moment, the fall of Icarus does not generate any splash in the on-the-ground day-to-day life of a farmer. As he did in my first human geography course. Professor Jonathan Rigg often uses this painting in his lectures, to get his audience to reflect on the relationship between meta-narratives and everyday life. Based on his years of study of everyday life in Southeast Asia, Rigg explains that the texture of livelihood and everyday life that

histories recount often tends to be linked to structural factors and national resonance, yet the on-the-ground, everyday, idiosyncratic events may often tell us more about the world we live in (see Rigg, Nguyen, & Luong, 2014). In the same way, the stories of my participants' return decisions were contingent and relational — the texture of their lives, is that of 'lumpiness, rather than smoothness' (Sewell, 1996, p. 843).

When I look back to the early stage of my project, I realise that, although my first human geography course with Rigg had sown these seeds of reflection, my understanding only bloomed when I was walking in Wubu county town towards and then past that grand highway bridge. I was dwelling on my confusion over this landscape in front of me — a landscape of infrastructure and everyday life that felt 'surreal'. What if the grand infrastructure and the project of modernisation it represents that is the dominant feature on the landscape tells the same story as the fall of Icarus landscape painting? Maybe instead of letting the grand tale of teleological progress dominate the way I read the 'small town' and 'small-town youth', I could try to bring to the fore the unperturbed ploughman in his field — I could try to see the ongoing everyday life of here in place as it is. In his book *An Everyday Geography of the Global South*, Rigg (2007, p. 68) uses a metaphor of a house to explain how the underlying teleological understanding of modernity often glosses over 'the reality that all ways of living are hybrid, and are indeterminate and temporary'. As he points out, people are continually redecorating or extending their homes, sometimes making less permanent changes, like painting the wall, and other times making more permanent alterations, such as adding an extension. In a housing estate, most houses may look the same from afar but in their details, especially their interiors, they are actually very different. These are not 'half-way houses on a transition to something else; nor are they an end product'. Rigg argues against the practice of scholars 'merely highlighting and emphasising' the present as 'always on the point of changing to something else' (p. 68). 'The house' in Rigg's metaphor is exactly like the county town I was in — it is neither transiting to a so-called 'ideal' modern metropolis nor is it an end of product of an essentialist *buxing*

'small town': it is the place lived and performed. What if I read against the dominance of *buxing*, the product of the modernist teleology, for difference? The 'beings' then emerge from the non-coherences, the contradictions and the nuance and diversity of everyday lives, which this section aimed to explore. I argue that by investigating the non-coherences and contradictions in the way representative 'small-town youth' speak of the county town and their lived everyday experiences, the prevailing notion of 'small town' is contested and defied, presenting an openness to move away from the alignment and closure of a modernist teleology in thinking about places and life in places.

The starting point, I argue, are seemingly incoherent and contradictory comments like 'our here is just *buxing*' and 'everywhere is the same'. While *buxing* is a word often used spontaneously to describe the county town and the life there, when the conversations went further with more thought and discussion on the why and how of the use of the word *buxing*, many of the informants, often more reluctantly and less assertively, started to suggest that 'everywhere is the same'. Qiqi said it after she came back from a weekend away in Xi'an: 'I can just hop on a train on Friday night and then come back to work on Monday morning — [it's a] very easy trip. Where I live doesn't make a big difference'; Fang mentioned it in the context of having a career: 'As long as I have a *bianzhi*, the exact location doesn't really matter'; Hong expressed it while proudly describing her comfortable married life: 'Such a spacious apartment is more affordable here. Having my own family and especially kids is all I want — everywhere is the same.' From these statements, we can sense that different anchor points of understanding life emerge. These descriptions, only revealed to explain the off-the-cuff statement that 'our here is *buxing*', open a slippage for the 'small town' to be read differently as an ordinary place. It is worth mentioning that compared with the overwhelmingly *buxing* comments, these alternative comments represented by 'everywhere is the same' are indeed glimmers. Such glimmers, on the one hand, prove the overarching hierarchical and teleological socio-spatial understanding with the lack of awareness and articulation outside '*buxing*', yet on the other hand, and more importantly, await amplification. If a *xing* life can only

be lived in some 'imagined there' or in 'the modern elsewhere', this reality means that, by contrast, life 'here' in a so-called 'small town' is *buxing*. If, instead, we can acknowledge that 'everywhere is the same', then every ordinary place holds the possibilities of a *xing* life.

Comments like 'everywhere is the same' seldom came up when participants were first asked to speak about how they feel about the county town. Their narratives on the county town overwhelmingly described it as *buxing*, which is not a surprise. Just as Rigg (2007) points out, when looking at the 'indeterminacy and contingency' of everyday life as opposed to a coherent overarching logic of modernity, the pressing challenge faced by scholars is 'realising that this is not often the way it is viewed by the participants themselves'(p. 68). This is why reading for difference matters: scholars can transcend the hegemony and engage with and make visible the diverse on-the-ground beings and happenings.

Noticing the repetition of expressions like 'everywhere is the same', I read my participants' experiences in the county town for difference against the dominant tale of *buxing*. For example, why was a 15-minute walk to the supermarket seen as less convenient than shopping online? Also, like Qiqi's easy trip to the Capital City for a live house performance, a hot pot experience for Tang's group to the neighbouring province is also only a mere train-ride away. Similarly, Zhong and his friends were able to a music festival during the weekend and came back to work in the township government office. Fang could fly directly from Yulin airport to Bangkok for her honeymoon. A doctor I went to see in the county hospital had just come back from a training session in Xi'an; the hospital had just received a new physical therapy machine that, according to him, is cutting edge 'But,' he said:

> people don't trust us — they think it is a small place so [the medical care] can't be good enough. They always go to Xi'an unnecessarily even for minor stuff. But to be honest, you are not likely to get as good care [there] as here.

Why couldn't these people see how *xing* their life in Wubu county town was?

These experiences described reflect the on-the-ground spatial reconfiguration where mobility, circulation, everyday experiences, identities, and the spatial interconnectedness are unconstrained by boundaries (see Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Jacka, 2018; Oakes & Schein, 2006). Such reconfiguration defies the socio-spatial fixity or the absolute alignment of people, places and life. The previous sections of this thesis have revealed that 'small town' is an othered periphery imagined as bounded and essentialist, 'backwards and remote', away from the centre of the 'modern metropolis'. Yet these lived everyday examples of the benefits of life in Wubu county town, never properly mentioned by the participants in their own narration about life in the county town, are made visible by reading against the dominant *buxing* tale. This 'small town' can, in fact, be considered an ordinary place where everyday lives are lived and opened up for the enactment of possibilities for a *xing* life of *yisi*.

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I started by analysing the frequent usage of *buxing* by the participants in commenting on the county town as well as people and life associated with the county town. Connecting this with an analysis of the discourse of *suzhi*, I argue that *buxing* overshadows people's understanding as a consequence of China's socio-spatial hierarchy that aligns place, place and life teleologically. The vague meaning and generalised usage of *buxing* invites further scrutiny of this overarching tale. I then analysed how *xing* is understood and constructed in the county town. By examining the pursuit of the urban, the West and the imagining of a *xing* life in a 'modern elsewhere', I identified the hierarchy of Western modernity that informs that understanding of *xing*. Finally, I read against the dominance of *buxing* by making visible the less articulated and mentioned lived experiences in everyday lives, represented by the expression 'everywhere is the same'. In doing so, I aim to conceptually open up the so-called 'small town' the hegemonic teleological logic that renders it *buxing* and re-label it as an 'ordinary place' offering possibilities of a *xing* life.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1. Towards an ordinary China

> It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories. (Haraway 2016, p. 35)

The ethos of this thesis is 'openness', practiced through disrupting overarching frameworks, pre-determined structural ways of knowing, and fixed imagination of people and places. This ethos arose from my recognition, after hearing my participants' stories, that what Donna Haraway says matters, matters (2016). An ordinary China is made up of ordinary people and places, and this thesis is an attempt to see beyond the closure of the prevailing representations of so-called 'small-town youth' and 'small towns'.

The notion of the 'small town' is introduced in Chapter 1, in relation to urban studies on China — urban places outside of metropolises are largely overlooked by these studies, despite the fact that the majority of China's urban population is and will continue to be living in these overlooked 'small-town' places. I then introduce the notion of 'small-town youth'. While it seems the buzzword is gaining an increasing amount of attention, my analysis shows that there are mainly three popular representations of these people — as marginalised protagonists like those represented by the Jia Zhangke's films; the consumers who are seen as having rising consumption power yet lacking 'proper' taste; or the entrepreneurial returnees advocated by the State to return to the countryside. The rising notion of 'small-town youth' and the experience of their lives in the overlooked 'small towns' thus invite study.

Followed by an overview of the site of this project, a county town in northwestern China, the notion of 'small town' is first destabilised for its rural-urban ambiguity in Chapter 2. I then relate to China's broader uneven post-reform landscape — the urban and the coast have been advantaged in China's urban-centred development. I then argue that similar to 'small-twon youth', 'small town' is also a collective imagination. Peripheral urban places are othered in China's binary urban imagination of 'small town-metropolis'. This othering is reinforced by the unevenness of rural-urban and regional development, and the 'urban aspirations' shared across generations which aligns upward social mobility to spatial mobility, driving people away from the rural and up an urban hierarchy. This social-spatial landscape feeds into a success-failure binary underlying mobility where reverse migration is often seen as a failure (Wang &Fan, 2006). Thus the reverse mobility of small-town youth invites query.

What underlies China's 'small town- metropolis' binary is the 'Third World city- global city' binary that exists at a broader level, as argued in Chapter 3. The dominance of Western urban modernity has led to the conceptualisation of global cities, or more precisely, cities of the West, as ideal cities the models which all urban places should follow. Such hierarchical and teleological understanding of 'ideal' cities leads to the othering and overlooking of diverse urban forms from which alternatives and possibilities could otherwise arise. Thus, in researching a county town in northwestern China, this thesis contributes to a sought-after and growing body of research on 'ordinary cities' (Robinson, 2006), required to diversify urban knowledge.

Such decentring of knowledge goes beyond the empirical — it matters how we read cities and how we read the world because research has a performative effect in that we make and enact the world as we understand it (Sedgwick, 2003; Butler, 1993; Law & Urry, 2004). The task of social science thus goes beyond 'making sense' to 'making possibilities' (Gibson-Graham, 2020). Reading for difference is done to enact a differentiated world of potential and possibilities (Latour, 2004). Chapter 3 then illustrates the practice and result of reading for difference with: firstly, an example of the analysis of the Jia Zhangke film, *Still*

Life as a critical dystopia of hope; and, secondly, the diverse economies project in rereading and enacting an economy beyond the hegemony of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2008); and, thirdly, a reflection on the empowerment of migrant women based on the conceptualisation of factory dormitory rooms as sites of solidarity rather than oppression (Ngai, 2005, 2012). These examples show how reading for difference and the hope and possibilities that can arise from doing so, promotes an approach to research that prioritises openness. Connecting back to the ordinary cities agenda, I argue that place as lived and performed in everyday life provides a fertile ground for reading for difference.

This pursuit of openness is then translated into a responsive methodology as discussed in Chapter 4. My experiences in the field led me to an epistemological revelation: Faced with inconsistencies, I chose to explore them and refused to see the world and realities as singular, stable, unchanging and clearly identifiable (Law, 2004). I needed 'messy methods' to engage with my multiple, instable, changing, and mysterious subject, so I had to develop a responsive methodology through transcending multiple binaries of positionality, the field and data.

Based on the results of my messy methods, I move on to a deeper discussion of 'small-town youth' in Chapter 5. Starting with a presentation of the background information of the so-called 'small-town youth' participants, I show that the diversity of their backgrounds, experiences, and return journeys to the county town not only challenges the notion of 'small-town youth' but also serves to defy the presumption that the structural categories often adopted in studies of people in post-reform China are relevant. Recognising this, I opened up my approach to my subjects to go beyond the commonly-used categories. By analysing the relocation narratives of the participants, I identify *danwei* as a recurring keyword. Yet the contradiction found between their statements that a *danwei* job was their main reason for return <u>and</u> that they expected *mei yisi* life in the *danwei* opens up a space for further scrutiny. A reading against the dominance of *danwei* reveals a diverse range of reasons behind their returns, the return being a contingent and complicated process. In light of this diversity, I explore further why danwei is featured in all of their return stories. I show that

danwei is mentioned for the superiority that is associated with it, as a legacy of the socialist era that can be used to justify their decision to come back to a place of 'backwardness'. This sheds further light on the hierarchical and teleological socio-spatial imagination of China. I extend the discussion to point out that, when approaching transitional China, researchers often fall into a teleological logic. I illustrate this with a '*danwei* to desire' tale that assumes that the demise of *danwei* and the rise of the market economy and consumption are connected in a line that othered 'small-town youth' walk along. By providing a fuller picture of the diversity of my participants, this study defies such teleology.

Chapter 6 focuses on a discussion of the county town in relation to the collective imagination of 'small town'. When my participants talked about their lives in the county town, they repeatedly used a particular word: *buxing*. With reference to the *suzhi* discourse, I argue that describing life and places as *buxing* is a reflection of post-reform China's hierarchical socio-spatial imagination resulting from China's state project of modernisation. Through an analysis on the understanding and constructing of *xing*, I argue that behind the discourse of *xing* and *buxing* is a teleological logic underpinned by the pursuit of Western urban modernity. Drawing on the contradictions in their narratives in which my participants say 'our here is *buxing*' and 'everywhere is the same', I read beyond what I originally identified as an overarching *buxing* tale — in doing so, I was able to conceptually open up the othered 'small town' to a place of openness lived in by everyday lives from which possibilities of a *xing* life could be amplified.

It would not be a surprise to many that this is not the thesis I set out to write. While I had originally sought to make sense of a 'hometown' as represented by *Ordinary World*, the process of conducting my research for this thesis defied my preexisiting imaginations. While my knowledge of China has been enriched, the research process took me from certainty to uncertainty and from the known to unknown. When the faraway hometown becomes a performed place from an imagination of abstractedness, when 'small-town youth' become people I sleep next to instead of profiles in a magazine, an ordinary China comes

alive, living and breathing. Ordinary is not the opposite of unordinary, instead, it is the openness from which the extraordinary could rise.

7.2. On a side note: a Taoist understanding

Somewhat ironically, even when it begins with an ethos of openness, a thesis needs closure. Among the very many things that I wish I could have included in this piece of work, there is one thing in particular that I think deserves a place in this final chapter. While I am aware that my knowledge of Chinese philosophy is limited and a great deal of study is needed to develop a proper argument, I would like to share two parables from traditional Chinese Taoist philosophy which I think could give us something to think about and have the potential to contribute to the agenda of 'knowing differently'. These parables illuminate two words – transformation and ambiguity.

A fundamental value of Tao is to appreciate heterogeneous hybridity and unpredictable ambivalences (Prasad & Anderson, 2017, p. 141). Western philosophical tradition is marked by a search for clarity and truth, and thus ambiguity, vagueness, indeterminacy, uncertainty, inconsistency and even multiplicities are often identified as confusion if not flaws (Coutinho, 2016). In contrast, the explicit ideal of theoretical clarity, which often comes at the cost of complete elimination of indeterminacy, is not seen in traditional Chinese philosophy including Taoism (ibid). The tolerance for, or rather, pursuit of ambiguity has a long history in Taoist philosophy. In what follows, I will use two famous Taoist parables to give a sense of Taoist understanding of transformation and ambiguity.

The first parable is called 'Chuang Chou Dreaming a Butterfly' ('*zhuangzhou meng die*'). Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly fitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He did not know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakably Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was the Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was

Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and the butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called: 'The Transformation of Things'.

The second parable is called 'Death of Emperor Hun-tun' ('*hundun zhi si'*). It is a story of how a mythological being named Hun-tun died after being given human bodily features. The Emperor of the South was called Shu. The Emperor of the North was called Hu. And the Emperor of the Centre was called Hun-tun. Shu and Hu at times mutually came together and met in Hun-tun's territory. Hun-tun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu, then, discussed how they could reciprocate Hun-tun's virtue saying: 'Men all have seven openings in order to see, hear, eat, and breathe. He alone does not have any. Let's try giving him some.' Each day they bored one hole, and on the seventh day Hun-tun died.

While both parables, of course, are open to interpretation, the first is about transformation while the second is about ambiguity. The first parable indicates the understanding that life and the universe are in constant transformation (Munro, 1969). Tao is equated to the 'Transformation of Things', which, with the metaphor of butterfly, could be imagined as the constant return of all life to and the emergence of all life from the enclosed condition of a cocoon in a constant cycle of transformation and metamorphosis. Thus Tao is a principle of endless change — endless 'transformation' that has been described as involving a constant return to a condition of 'chaos', which embraces both the 'seamless unity' as well as 'boundless multiplicity' of life itself (Girardot, 1978, p. 80). In the second parable, Hun-tun dies as a consequence of the pursuit of absolute clarity—if Tao is about constant and endless change, then the loss of ambiguity, represented by the attempt to give Hun-tun senses, also leads to the loss of Tao. The goal of Tao is not to return to the beginning of "nothingness" as a final end, but rather to reject any finality or absolute of either chaos or order (Huang, 2010). In order words, Tao is a philosophy of fundamental openness based on the recognition that the universe, world and life are always changing, transforming and thus refuse the closure of abstractness and fixty. Although my understanding of Taoism is shallow, to say the least, I would propose that Taoist thinking has great potential for exploring another way of knowing. The understanding of place

always being performed and becoming, of realities being multiple and not fully knowable, and the world as being constantly enacted seem to echo a Taoist philosophy. Thus for whatever it is worth, I present these two parables here in the hope that they may spark some thoughts and seed a glimmer of difference.

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX I INFORMATION SHEET

Department: Geography

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Email: anmeng.liu @pg.canterbury.ac.nz
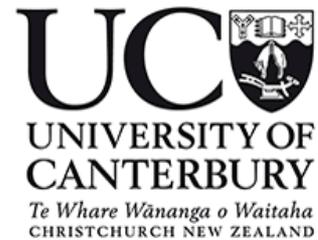
29 Nov 2016

Reconstructing diverse economies: constructing better lives for China's internal migrant workers – a case study in Yulin, Shaanxi, China

Information Sheet for interview participants

I am Anmeng Liu - a PhD student at the Department of Geography, University of Canterbury. I would like to invite you to participate in my present research. The research aims to explore and theorise the existing practices of people in Yulin, Shaanxi, China with the diverse economies framework. It will map and assess the existing practices with the diverse economies framework, and explore the connections between diverse economies and traditional Chinese values and practices. The outcome of this research may open up possibilities to construct better lives for migrant workers whose livelihoods may have been heavily impacted by China's slowing down economy. It also hopes to promote an alternative possibility on China's economic growth and betterment of the marginalized groups' lives outside of the prevailing capitalocentric development discourse.

Your participation in my semi-structured interviews is very important for me to gain insight into local residents' experience and activities. If you agree to take part you will be asked to answer some questions and share your life experiences related to this project. The interview will take around an hour.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. You have the right ask for your raw data to be returned to you or destroyed at any point. If you withdraw, I will remove all information that is related to you.

The results of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher will assign pseudonyms. The project is being carried out under the supervision of Dr. Kelly Dombroski, who can be contacted at kelly.dombroski@canterbury.ac.nz. Alternatively, you can contact Dr. Zhifang Song, who can speak Mandarin, at zhifang.song@canterbury.ac.nz. They will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics

Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics

Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (humanethics@ canterbury.ac.nz).

Thank you in advance for your contributions.

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2016 年 11 月 29 日

中国西北外出务工情况及经济情况调查－以中国陕西榆林为例

访问对象信息介绍

我是刘安盟，是新西兰坎特伯雷大学地理系的一名博士生。我想邀请您参与我的博士研究课题。此研究希望用多样经济的框架探索和调查陕西榆林的日常经济活动，研究其和中国传统价值之间的关系。研究的结果希望可以为在经济放缓的大背景下受影响的农民工探索构建更好的经济来源。另外研究也希望提升中国经济增长的另外可能，为资本主义为中心发展下的边缘人群所能更好的生活做出贡献。

您的参与访问对让我对当地人的生活和经历有一个相对深入的了解，对我的科研至关重要。如果您同意参与访问，我将会问您几个和与调研内容相关的问题。访问预计大约会占用您一个小时的时间。

您的参与完全是自愿的，并且您有权力在任何时候退出。您有权力在任何时候要求和您有关的原始数据返还给您或者被销毁。如果您退出，我会去掉任何和您有关的信息内容。

这个研究中所相关的信息可能会使用于英文或中文的报告、杂志或者书籍形式中。我会尽可能地保护您的隐私并将您给我的信息列为机密。除非您提出要求，否则我不会在文本文档或出版物中用你的真实姓名。我只会在您的批准下将我们的谈话录音。这些文件将被保存在一个有密码的电脑中。

如果你有任何问题或者要求，随时欢迎与我联系。如果你希望关于你的研究和其他人进行讨论，请联系我的导师 Kelly Dombroski 博士。她的邮箱是：kelly.dombroski@canterbury.ac.nz。您也可以联系我的第二导师 Zhifang Song 博士（他会中文），他的邮箱是: zhifang.song@canterbury.ac.nz。

APPENDIX II CONSENT FORM

I consent to participate in an interview for the research outlined in the information sheet.   Yes/No

I consent to the interview being recorded. Yes/No

I consent to Anmeng Liu directly quoting my comments in her thesis and any other publications resulting. Yes/No

(Please let me know if you tell me something that you want to keep off the record).

Please choose from the following:

☐ Please use my **first name** with reference to my comments. (I will notify you *by email* if this is the case and allow you to see the context in which I quote you, allowing you to withdraw consent, ask for a pseudonym, or ask for changes).

Name:_____

Email: _____

OR

☐ Please use the following pseudonym with reference to my comments.

_____ (Hanzi with pinyin, or English)

OR

☐ Please choose a pseudonym to use with reference to my comments.

I would like a digital copy of the audio-recording of my interview. Yes/no

I would like digital copies of any photos taken of me or my house. Yes/no

I would like to receive a digital copy of the thesis when completed (English only). Yes/no

If yes, then please write you permanent email address below:

_____

Oral Consent Script

1. I have read out the information sheet about the research project "Reconstructing diverse economies: constructing better lives for China's internal migrant workers – a case study in Yulin, Shaanxi, China". Did I make things clear? Do you want to ask any questions about the project?

2. I will keep all the information you give me in this interview confidential as far as the law allows. Any notes or recordings I make will be kept on a password protected computer. I will not share your personal details or personal views with anyone else. Is this OK?

3. Some of the information you give me may be published in English or Chinese. However, your real name will not be used in relation to any of the information you have provided me, unless you tell me clearly that you want me to use your real name. Is that OK? Do you want me to use a pseudonym or your real name?

4. You should know that even though I will avoid including any identifying information in any publication there is still a possibility that people will recognise you by the things you say, so you should avoid disclosing sensitive information or saying anything defamatory. Is that clear? Before I publish any of you statements or views, I will give you the chance to review what I have written.

5. You can stop this interview any time, without giving me a reason. And if you mention anything that you don't want me to publish, please say so and I will follow your request.

6. I would like to record this interview using a digital audio recorder. That way, I can listen to the recording afterwards and catch things you say that I might not fully understand during the interview, or might otherwise forget. I will not give access to the recording to anyone else. Do you give me permission to record?

7. Do you have any further questions? Can we start the interview now?

我同意参与以上信息单上介绍的研究的的访问。 是 / 否

我同意访问被录音。 是 / 否

我同意刘安盟在其论文和其他发表内容中直接引用我所说的话。是 / 否

（如果您希望部分访问内容不被录音，请告知我）

请选取以下选项：

□ 引用我说的话时请使用我的真实姓名。（如果我需要引用您的话，我会通过电子邮件告知您具体的引用内容。您可以拒绝或者要求更改我的引用，也可以要求使用化名） 姓名:_____

电子邮件: _____

或者

□ 引用我的话时请用以下化名：

_____ (汉字、拼音或者英文)

或者

□ 引用我的话是请用化名。

我需要一份访问录音的电子版。是 / 否

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如果您选择了'是'，请提供您的电子邮箱地址：

_____

口头访问同意：

1. 我已经读了这个关于中国西北农民工和经济现状的研究的信息页。我把有关信息都讲明白了吗？关于这个研究您还有什么问题吗？

2. 我会在法律允许的范围能尽最大可能保证您所提供的信息的保密性。任何笔记和录音都会被保存在一个由密码保护的电脑中。我不会把您的个人信息和您所表达的观点泄漏给任何其他人。这可以吗？

3. 您所提供的信息内容有可能用作英文和中文的刊物发表。但是，除非您有特别的指示，您的真实姓名不会被透。这可以吗？您希望我使用您的真实姓名还是化名？

4. 您有权知道，在发表任何文章的时候，即使我会尽最大努力避免使用任何能够确认您个人身份的信息，其他人仍旧有可能通过您说的话猜测您的身份。所以请您避免提供任何敏感或涉及诽谤的信息。这可以吗？

5. 您可以在任何时间终止访问，并且不需要提供任何理由。如果您提及任何您不希望我发表的信息，请让我知道，我会按照您的要求处理。

6. 我希望对访问进行录音。这样的话我可以在访问结束后听录音记录并确认访问的内容，确保不会遗漏或者误解您所提供的信息。录音不会被泄漏给其他任何人。请问您允许我这么做吗？

7. 您还有什么问题吗？我们现在能开始访问了吗？