

Suspension: Mobilities, Aspirations, and Sociopolitical Stagnation in China

17-18 September 2018

St Hugh's College, University of Oxford

Provisional Programme

Abstracts

Participant Biographies

[Version: 01 June 2018]

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Facing Migration in China: The Artists' Response

Chen Siyu, Jeroen de Kloet

Aspirations in Suspension – Autonomy and Precarity of Wall Painters in Dafen

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Ka-Kin Cheuk

Ethical dimensions of suspension among Indian migrant traders in southeast China

Miriam Driessen

Suspended by Hope

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Shuting Zhuang

Housed (Im)mobility: Eco-Migrants and Suspended Life in Concrete

Ralph Litzinger

“Low-End” Expulsions and Migrant Futures

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Charlotte Goodburn

Suspended animation: migrants “killing time” in Shenzhen’s vocational schools

Tzu-Chi Ou

Suspended Space, Extended Identities: An Emergent Social Class of Migrant Tenants?

Yang Wei

Transnational Labor Migration, Temporary Intimacy and Gender: A Case Study of Low-Wage Female Migrant Workers from China to Singapore

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Responses

Jiazhi Fengjiang

Coping with Suspension: Politics of Volunteering among Migrant Workers in Southeast China

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Model Minority and Suspended Citizenship: A Comparative Study of Chinese American Elite and Prisoner Activism

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Reflections

18:00 Dinner

Title: Facing Migration in China: The Artists' Response

Author(s): Sjoukje van der Meulen

Abstract: Due to the unprecedented urbanization in China since the Deng Xiaoping era, the Chinese migrant worker population will expectedly hit the 300 million in 2020. Migrant workers have clearly been the engine of China's economic boom, and yet they are often faced with poor labor conditions and the violation of human rights despite the Chinese government's efforts to improve their status and unfair treatment. Migration issues, challenges and concerns have triggered important and recurring topics in contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s. He Yunchang's performance *Talking with Water* (1999), for instance, intersects with the themes of 'migration' and 'suspension' that lie at the core of this workshop. The artist quite literally suspended his body up-side-down from a crane above a river during a visit to his home town in Yunnan province. According to art historian Gao Minglu, the artist used his body as a 'lived-through metaphor' for the harsh realities and sense of rootlessness of rural-to-urban migrant workers, who left the countryside for the city in the hope of better jobs and higher living standards.

There are many other Chinese artists who have produced art that responds to the burdens of this 'floating population' of migrant workers, the majority of which is still not recognized as urban resident due to the institutionalized inequality of the outdated Chinese Hukou system. Zhang Dali's *Chinese Offspring* (2003) criticizes this situation through his real-life casts of tortured human bodies, which are suspended from the ceiling to make palpable their existential vulnerability to capitalist exploitation in modern China, especially in the manufacturing and construction sectors. For similar reasons, Wang Yi asked migrant workers to stand on each other's shoulders and symbolically hold up a new, reinforced concrete traffic overpass for a photographed group portrait, thus acknowledging and representing the laborers' contribution to such grand infrastructural projects. Equally aware of capitalist labor issues related to migration is world renowned artist Xu Bing, who translates them to trans-historical and cross-cultural contexts. Xu's *Phoenix* (2012), for example, consists of two gigantic mythological birds fabricated from materials scraped together from construction sites in China, including demolition debris and remnants of the daily lives of migrant workers. Having been exposed in many locations, these birds - raising from the debris like a phoenix from its ashes - evoke exploited laborers throughout world history: whether it be China today, the US in the 20th century, or even Medieval Europe — when the Arsenal in Venice (where Xu's birds were shown during the Biennale of 2015) developed into the largest pre-industrial production complex in Europe, which employed up to two thousand workers a day. Mobilizing theoretical concepts from global migration studies and contemporary art theory, such as and G. Mathews' 'Low-End Globalization' and T.J. Demos' 'Migrant Image,' this paper aims to illuminate questions of suspension as a consequence of migration processes in China (including Hong Kong), through a critical analysis of socially-engaged Chinese art.

BIOGRAPHY

Sjoukje van der Meulen received her PhD from Columbia University in New York (2009). Originally from Netherlands, she lived in the United States for 15 years, where she taught at Columbia University, the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Oregon. She was a participant of De Appel curatorial program, editor of *Metropolis M*, and a lecturer in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She is specialized in contemporary Chinese Art in global context, and was an assistant curator for the exhibition *Heart of Darkness* at the Kröller-Müller Museum (1994-1995), which featured major artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Huang Yong Ping, Gu Wenda and Chen Zhen. Currently, she is Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at Utrecht University. She also works as a museum educator, lecturer, and professional guide at the Stedelijk Museum and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Images:

1



He Yunchang, Talking with Water (1999)

2



Xu Bing, Phoenix (1995)

Title: Aspirations in Suspension – Autonomy and Precarity of Wall Painters in Dafen

Author(s): Chen Siyu, Jeroen de Kloet

Abstract: In small alleys in Dafen oil painting village, located in Shenzhen, galleries stand next to each other with a void between every three or four of them. With wooden boards and roller shutters attached to the walls, ceilings and lightings installed overhead, these gaps become tunnel-like studios where many painters execute and display their works. Wall painters first emerged around 2008 when the global financial crisis stroke Dafen, the world's largest handmade oil painting production center which used to rely heavily on the foreign market. Due to a dramatically decreasing volume of overseas orders, many painters, or, more apt, migrant painter-workers (Wong 2014), could not afford the rent of the studio/galleries, and the voids between galleries became viable solutions to shelter their painting careers from the global economic storm.

At present, these wall studios have persisted and grown to over 500 (Peng and Zhang 2017). The migrant lives of these wall painters is suspended in different ways: first, their ad-hoc studio's are precarious and constant on the verge of disappearance; second, under the polices that aim to turn Dafen into an "original" art zone, their craftsmanship of producing replica's is less valued; and third, their status as migrant painter-worker suspends the possibility of creating a solid home.

Based on an eleven-month ethnographic study in Dafen, this study explores these lived experiences of suspension of the wall painters-what are their struggles and desires, how do they negotiate the class divisions that structure access to occupations, commerce and creativity, and what hidden transcripts are mobilized through which they articulate what can be termed a politics of suspension. As Appadurai's argues, "the capacity to aspire" is unequally distributed (2013: 289), but as we will show, the liminality of the wall painters' workspaces, as an epitome of their suspended lives as migrants in the city of Shenzhen, profoundly informs their subjectivities and aspirations as creative workers. The capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity, and as we will show, the life trajectories of the painter-workers are driven by a desire for a good life. Such aspirations have negotiated the tensions and disjunctures between creativity, precarity and autonomy. Aspirations may be suspended because of these forces, but we argue that they do not disappear, rather, they retreat to the realm of hope and imagination, which we read as crucial sites for political mobilization.

References

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BIOGRAPHY

Chen Siyu is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Media Studies at University of Amsterdam. As a member of the ERC project ChinaCreative, she works on creative city and conducts her field study in Shenzhen. Her research interests include gender, culture and creative industries in China.

Title: “Low-End” Expulsions and Migrant Futures

Authors: Litzinger, Ralph

On November 18, 2017, a fire breaks out in the village of Xinjian, in Daxing District, Beijing. 19 people are pronounced dead, countless others injured. Within days, the government begins to demolish make-shift living quarters, small factories, and other dwellings occupied by migrants from the countryside – construction workers, electricians, security guards, express mail and food carriers, janitors, nannies, street vendors, and many others, including middle-school student -- now crudely labeled the “low-end population.” Beijing’s migrants have experienced brutal cleansing campaigns before. This expulsion, however, was documented on smart phones, as photos and videos, criticism, and outrage and anger of all sorts circulated on online platforms, giving witness to the destruction of entire neighborhoods and the forms of life, love, and labour that once sustained them.

In this paper, I argue that the almost instantaneous online documentation and public denunciation of the city’s policy to cleanse the “low-end” migrant other failed to account for other forms of temporality in the moments of expulsion – the sorting through rubble, the collection of things deemed valuable, the business of packing, the removal of kids from schools, the slow movement of walking out of town. How do these activities give meaning to the experience of “being suspended from a city” (in the sense of the official prohibition to continue to exist as before)? What do they tell us about what is missed in recent writings on urban expulsions (Sassen, Harvey and others), or in writing on the affective dimensions of waiting in a state of uncertainty and hopelessness (Khosravi, Hage, Kwon, and others)? What, in short, do they tell us about the differential temporalities in any invocation of a migrant “future,” in Beijing, and elsewhere?

BIOGRAPHY

Ralph Litzinger is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University. He is the author of *Other China* (Duke University Press, 2001), and, with Carlos Rojas, *Ghost Protocol: Development and Displacement in Global China* (Duke University Press, 2016). In 2013, he edited the special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, “The Labor Question in China: Apple and Beyond.” From 2008-2016, he directed the Duke Engage Migrant Education Project in Beijing, and taught a seminar on Health and the Environment in India and China at Beijing University’s Health Sciences Center from 2010-2013.

Title: Ethical dimensions of suspension among Indian migrant traders in southeast China

Author(s): Ka-Kin CHEUK

Abstract: This paper explicates the ethical dimensions of suspension among Indian migrant traders in southeast China. Drawing on long-term and ongoing ethnographic observations since 2010, the paper seeks to capture the theme of suspension that has been significantly brought up in Indian traders' narratives of their lived experience in China and beyond. In particular, it focuses on those who are often faced with structural precarity as transient migrants and low-skilled merchants in exporting low-cost textiles from China. Always struggling to survive in a volatile market, they tend to prioritize business interests over their ethical selves. In this regard, a remarkable example is what can be called the ethical suspension of environmental concerns. An Indian trader, who is a devout follower of a Hindu river god called Jhule Lal, chose to disregard the discernible water pollution in the local area, which was partly caused by the production he and other traders have placed in the textile dyeing factories. Similar to other Indian interlocutors I have met, he came to terms with the industrial pollution as inevitable and morally defensible, regardless of his personal understanding that this mode of economy cannot be environmentally sustainable in a long-term future. As such, people like him consider that the disregard is not only a necessary condition to keep one's business alive, but also an essential cost in sustaining the development of this global industry in China. Individual precarity and (inter)national development—both of which are seen as out of their controls—justifies some of the ways my interlocutors suspend their ethical judgements.

Such ethical suspension may unfortunately perpetuate the stereotypes of Indian migrant traders in China, who are often sensationalized in the media as 'bad guys' in the trade. But, to think the suspension in another way, it allows us to critically question the discursive ethical regime in today's global trade economy. Considering that commodity producers and consumers have been the dominant moral(izing) force in mediating the 'Fair Trade' or global ethical notions alike on humans and environment, to what extent such mediation is inclusive to business intermediaries like Indian traders, who practically see an absolute sense of fairness is impossible as the trade goes on? Some popularizing ethical protocols, such as Corporate Social Responsibility and Green Economy, advocate people, especially consumers, to foster a more intimate attachment with commodities, societies, and environment. This is based on a rationale that a closer intimacy with everything would help make our world a more sustainable place to live. By contrast, ethical suspension among Indian traders creates a strong sense of detachment; it nonetheless sustains many of their precarious business survivals in defiance of the resulting bad reputation. How can we account for and articulate this work ethics of detachment among intermediary trade players, whose values and practices necessarily contradict the mainstream ethical discourses? By answering these questions ethnographically, the paper aims to explore the alternative ethical insights—as my interlocutors offer—that challenge the hegemonic moralities in the global textile trade and its related transnational mobilities.

BIOGRAPHY

Ka-Kin Cheuk is a Postdoctoral Fellow for Global Asia at the New York University, Shanghai. Trained as a social and cultural anthropologist, Ka-Kin has conducted long-term ethnographic research on the Sikh migrants in Hong Kong and the Indian textile traders in southeast China. His most recent research is a multi-sited ethnographic study of China-Europe flower trade connections and its everyday implications for environmental ethics. He has published articles in journals such as *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* and is currently co-editing a journal special issue for *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration*. He received a DPhil from the University of Oxford and his first postdoctoral fellowship from the Leiden University.

Title: Suspended by Hope

Author(s): Miriam Driessen

Abstract: This paper takes as its focus the life of a young man from Shandong who, after a stint in the Saudi Arabian oil industry, now lives and works in a shipping container on a Chinese-run construction site in Ethiopia. By tracing his movements and unravelling the deliberations and decisions that led him to these places, I explore the intersection of suspension and hope in the context of Chinese labour migration. I argue that hope, as the cherishing of a desire with anticipation, is the basis of the sense of suspension that is widely shared among Chinese labour migrants. Hope not only induces suspension, it also sustains it. Hope promotes a degree of resignation to a compelling external force, while postponing complete surrender. Indeed, the loss of hope would imply the end of a state of suspension.

For migrant men from mainland China, especially those who come from rural inland regions, hope lies primarily in the wish to fulfil filial obligations. Disadvantaged by China's demographic imbalance and marginalized by socio-economic inequality, these men face the challenge of achieving maturity and asserting respectable masculinity. They hope that a temporary move overseas for work will enable them to take up the roles of dutiful son, able husband, and responsible father. However, even if labour migration is an avenue to meet expectations of male adulthood, it simultaneously engenders a state of suspension that postpones its very achievement. As a result, migrant men find themselves in a double bind.

Drawing on field research among Chinese migrant men involved in road construction in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region of Ethiopia in 2017, and Addis Ababa and Tigray, northern Ethiopia, in 2011 and 2012, I examine the role of hope in respect to achieving manhood in both generating and sustaining a state and a sense of suspension.

BIOGRAPHY

Miriam Driessen a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies and Jesus College, University of Oxford. My background is in anthropology. Following young men from rural China to Ethiopia, my work attempts to link transformations in mainland China to overseas migration to Africa.

Title: Housed (Im)mobility: Eco-Migrants and Suspended Life in Concrete

Author(s): Shuting Zhuang

Abstract: In 2017 November, tens of thousands migrant workers in Beijing awakened from their dreams found themselves forced to vacate, with just a few hours' notice. Homes, shops and even factories were violently demolished, leaving what remained like a devastated war zone. While housing for migrant workers in cities has always been source of uncertainty and precarity, for the "ecological migrants" of Tibetan nomads it is the concretized form of the state's "care" to sedentarize and immobilize them. What lies behind the seemingly insensible governmental logic that destroys the houses of those who need and builds for those who don't need?

Ecological migration, or ecological resettlement (Chin: shengtai yimin) has been initiated by the Chinese state since 2003 to relocate hundreds of thousands population in western China with the aim to recover degraded environment and improve local livelihood. The resettlement of Tibetan nomads from Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve to urban areas of Qinghai has been part of this project. Based on my fieldwork in a Tibetan migrant village sitting on the suburbs of the city Golmud (Chin: Ge'eremu) in Qinghai, I argue in this paper that it is through the process of im/mobilization that lives of Tibetan nomadic migrants have been forcibly integrated into the modern urbanizing development yet endlessly suspended as frivolous and marginal. Contrary to the intentional suspension of Han Chinese migrant workers that lead to hypermobility, the Tibetan eco-migrants enticed by the state's promise of an "urban" life found themselves stuck in deep immobility. Particularly, through a close study of the spatial organization and material infrastructure of the standardized, concrete buildings in the Tibetan migrant village, I examine how suspension can be understood as an embodied experience of disoriented temporal-space. Moreover, in response to the common accusation of Tibetan migrants' own "inability" to intentionally suspend certain needs for future's sake that they end up in state of social and economic stagnation, I draw from Hannah Arendt's insights (1975) to argue that it is the very condition of mobility of the urban Golmud itself that renders the Tibetan migrants' improvisation efforts frivolous. In the end, proposing to rethink the idea of suspension in a reversed landscape of mobility and settlement, this paper attempts to ask: if suspension stands for the cruel promise of neo-liberal futurity (Berlant, 2011), what would a life even lacking such a hope look like?

BIOGRAPHY

Shuting Zhuang is currently a second-year doctoral student of the Anthropology Department at University of Chicago. My tentative dissertation research is on wildlife conservation, ecological governance and animal ethics in Tibet. I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork and traveling extensively in Tibet since 2013. My fieldwork involves participant-observation with grassroots Tibetan conservation groups situated within the context of China's building its first national park on the Tibetan Plateau, with particular attention paid to the trans-lingual and translational practices concerning the production of scientific knowledge in multi-species investigation. I also maintain a longstanding academic interest in roads, resettlement, mobility, and temporality. I am now part of a multi-media project on vehicles in China and interested in exploring visual practices as modes of local inquiry. I hold a bachelor degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Hong Kong and a Master degree in Regional Studies of East Asia from Harvard University.

Title: Suspended animation: migrants “killing time” in Shenzhen’s vocational schools

Author(s): Charlotte Goodburn

Abstract: Much research, including my 2008-09 study of primary school children in Shenzhen, has shown that children who migrate from rural to urban China face significant barriers to education, and often end up in poor quality, migrant-run private schools. However, there is less research into what happens after children leave lower levels of education. In 2015-16, I therefore returned to Shenzhen to conduct follow-up interviews with some of the same children, now aged 14-21 years old. Many were by then attending, or had graduated from, the city’s vocational and technical schools, into which they had been channelled in order to provide low-cost labour for urban industries.

In this paper, I present an in-depth study of migrant experiences of vocational education, analysing in particular the sense, common to many “1.5 generation” migrant youths, of being in a state of suspended animation – of simply “killing time” (混日子) in the classroom before being allowed to graduate and enter the world of work. I argue that migrants’ confinement in largely useless and irrelevant vocational training is shaped by, on the one hand, parental expectations, formal minimum ages for employment and an increasing sense that 16 is still a part of ‘childhood’ and thus too young to enter the manual labour force; and on the other, institutional exclusion of migrants from academic secondary education that would equip them to progress through the more typical urban transitional ritual of the university entrance examination and on to higher status careers.

However, despite the fact that three years of undesirable vocational education is imposed upon migrant youths by these external constraints, the state of “suspension” in which they find themselves also brings advantages. Since the hours of vocational classes are short, many used their extensive free time to develop a sophisticated array of street skills and urban social networks. By engaging in what appear to be merely leisure activities or at most temporary part-time employment in order to “kill time”, many 1.5 generation migrants were able to gain important knowledge and contacts they would need for their future employment and social integration in Shenzhen. Though they may have learnt few practical skills in the classroom, then, their period of suspended animation provides students with an opportunity to acquire essential skills outside the classroom for developing their own future lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Charlotte Goodburn is Lecturer in Chinese Politics and Development, and Deputy Director of the Lau China Institute at King’s College London. Before joining King’s, she was a post-doctoral fellow in the Centre of Development Studies at the University of Cambridge, where she also did her PhD. Her research centres on rural-urban migration in both China and India, and focuses on impacts for migrant families, children and household dynamics, as well as the institutional factors which shape migration processes and access to urban state services in the two countries. She is currently writing a book about the long-term impacts of rural-urban migration on Chinese and Indian children. She is also working on a new project on migration and registration, which compares the impacts of state “registration regimes” on migrants’ urban citizenship and access to resources in China and India.

Title: Suspended Space, Extended Identities: An Emergent Social Class of Migrant Tenants?

Author(s): Tzu-Chi Ou

Abstract: For decades, the mass media and researchers have seen China's urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) as migrant enclaves for menial workers from the countryside. This paper focuses on the lived experiences of suspension in urban villages in light of the tenants who are rather atypical. Workers in the service sector, white-collar workers, and "the uncategorizable"—such as a bankrupt IT worker, an idle actor, and a marginalized petitioner—all live together in an urban village with the typical migrant workers. Why do urban villages become homes for migrant tenants with various social backgrounds? How do we conceptualize the space of urban villages in terms that incorporate diverse trajectories of migration? What would the implications of such a suspended space be for the urban housing plight and class politics in contemporary China?

The existence of diverse migrant tenants demands an alternative interpretation of urban villages. I see urban village as a space of suspension, which is set in the craze for building, while at the same time is doomed to being demolished. This paper draws upon my two-year fieldwork in Hua Village, an urban village situated between the Fifth and Sixth Ring Road of Beijing, a representative migrant settlement with about 30,000 migrant tenants and 2,000 local peasant landlords. I engage with the concept of suspension by highlighting the practices of extension in the village. In a suspended space like Hua Village, the regulations on illegal construction have been a gray area. Migrant sellers utilized each opportunity to extend the territories of their restaurants, transportation businesses, shops, and stores. Also, migrant tenants build extensions to maximize their living space. Most important, the urban village symbolizes a buffer zone between mainstream urban and rural society. It is the space of extension that allows migrant tenants to explore identities and provides a shelter for "the uncategorizable."

The last part of the paper considers how the interplay between suspension and extension may condition a new social class of migrant tenants. Like migrant workers in urban villages, ant tribes, rat tribes, and the tenants of "group rental" (*qunzu*) occupy various suspended urban places. So far, little attention has been paid to examining the living and housing conditions that the above groups share. Would there be a collective identity based on the shared experiences of dwelling in the space of suspension? How do we theorize the common experiences of cheap housing, informality, and constant demolition and eviction? In light of the mass campaign to demolish migrant settlements in late 2017, I will consider the potential for new class politics and its constraints.

BIOGRAPHY

Tzu-Chi Ou focuses on the transformation of migration and the rural-urban divide, asking how the lived experience of place and space remakes the identity and existence of migrant workers in contemporary China. My dissertation, *Resigned Urbanization*, offers a dual perspective of dwelling and housing, in which rural migrants settle into the rental housing of Beijing's urban villages, on the one hand, but own empty houses in rural villages and counties, on the other. I am especially interested in how a dialectical relationship between freedom and resignation mirrors the tension between strong economic growth and tightening political control in China. My next project will trace a genealogy of urban planning and policies in North China.

Title: Transnational Labor Migration, Temporary Intimacy and Gender: A Case Study of Low-Wage Female Migrant Workers from China to Singapore

Author(s): Yang Wei

Abstract: This paper forms part of my ongoing PhD research which is focused on the experience of low-wage female migrant workers from China to Singapore. In Singapore, low-wage Chinese female migrant workers are mainly concentrated in manufacturing and service sectors. More than half of them are married women, many of whom migrated alone for work in Singapore. In this paper, I explore a phenomenon emerged from my fieldwork, which I call “temporary couples”. Reported repeatedly by my informants, many Chinese female migrant workers especially married women who came alone tend to engage in an intimate relationship with a male partner who is mostly a male Chinese migrant worker (sometimes a local Singaporean) for the purposes of “spend less and save more”. Most of these relationships will come to an end once they (or their partners) return home. Why does this phenomenon occur? What does it mean to establish and maintain such temporary intimate relationships for these migrant women workers? How do institutional factors (e.g. temporary migration scheme, labor control and management, and gender inequality in rural China) contribute to this phenomenon? What are the impacts on their left-behind families?

This paper is based on my fieldwork conducted in Singapore from September 2016 to February 2018. Until now, more than 65 in-depth interviews have been conducted with low-wage Chinese female migrant workers in manufacturing and service sectors in Singapore, and 31 in-depth interviews with their male counterparts. Interviews have also been conducted with their supervisors, employers as well as their left-behind husbands and children. Apart from in-depth interviews, I also conducted participation observation of their gatherings and daily activities in Singapore and China.

The preliminary findings suggest that “temporary couples” firstly is the consequence of government policies which prevent low-wage labor migrants from bringing their families with them and from settling and integrating in the host society. Secondly, the desire to maximize their income through transnational labor employment keeps migrant workers confined to their workplaces and dormitories. While setting up a temporary intimate relationship is part of their strategy for accumulating capital, it can also be seen as a reaction against the “bare life”, especially under the circumstances of being isolated and exploited. Last but not least, a closer examination of this phenomenon reveals that although they may experience other forms of oppression, transnational labor migration has the potential to provide female migrant workers with an avenue to reclaim their economic, social and sexual autonomy which were constrained by gender inequality and discrimination in rural China. By exploring the phenomenon of “temporary couples” among low-wage Chinese female migrant workers in Singapore, this paper aims to extend the existing literature and contribute to the discussion of the idea of suspension in the context of Chinese mobilities.

BIOGRAPHY

Yang Wei is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at Nanyang Technological University. Her current research focuses on low-skilled labor migration from China to Singapore, with a special focus on gender. Her research interests are in the areas of transnational labor migration, gender and family, women’s empowerment, and the impact of return migration on rural development in China. Before pursuing her PhD at NTU, she worked as a researcher in a Beijing-based Chinese think tank - the Centre for China and Globalization (CCG), where she conducted and coordinated much policy relevant research on highly-skilled migration from/to China. She also worked as an editor for a Chinese academic journal *Beijing Cultural Review* (Wen Hua Zong Heng), where she focused on a wide range of social and cultural issues in contemporary China. She received her master’s degree in Cultural Studies from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Title: Coping with Suspension: Politics of Volunteering among Migrant Workers in Southeast China

Author(s): Jiazhi Fengjiang

Abstract: In Wenzhou region of Southeast China, migrant workers not only are a major labour force in local economic production but also form significant volunteer groups for voluntary blood donations, as well as a variety of self-organised charitable projects. What are the new politics generated by volunteering work among migrant workers and how is volunteering related to their experiences of suspension? This paper investigates the possibilities and limits of such politics. Drawing upon my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Wenzhou region, this paper juxtaposes the experiences of three generations of migrant workers who have worked in Wenzhou region for over five to twenty years. It is illustrated with the following three episodes: (1) Mr. Song Jiang – a migrant taxi driver who was born in the 1970s – mobilised a volunteering team consisting of migrant taxi drivers and local volunteers in establishing a philanthropic organisation that aims at promoting new ethics of help through projects caring for migrant workers and local needy people. His dedication to volunteering work has won him many national and local moral exemplar awards, as well as an exceptional membership in the local Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. (2) Mr. Chen Mu – a waste recycling worker who was born in the 1980s – leads a Wenzhou-wide blood donation volunteering team primarily consisting of migrant workers who are regular blood donors that carries out projects caring for children with leukaemia. As many migrant workers left Wenzhou due to recent economic recession, the local blood bank has suffered from a growing blood shortage. The local government appointed Chen Mu and his teammates as the “industry inspectors” in combating against illicit blood dealers and promoting local citizens’ participation in voluntary blood donation. (3) Ms. Yu Yan – a Karaoke hostess who was born in the 1990s – regularly volunteers in a local philanthropic project paying household visits to left-behind children. While negotiating needs and desires of herself, her family members, and the children beneficiaries, Yu Yan juggles between being a mother and wife in her home village, and being a volunteer and mistress in Wenzhou. The three episodes demonstrate how the experiences of suspension varied across generations and gender. It argues that migrant workers’ heightened sense of suspension contributes to their aspirations and struggles in volunteering. On one hand, volunteering work provides an empowering tool for migrant workers in coping with suspension where they can build social ties and seek recognitions beyond the realm of economic production. On the other hand, their notions of nationalism and sacrifice, as well as their growing affinity with the local government impose varied restrictions on their political-social engagement in the local society.

BIOGRAPHY

Jiazhi Fengjiang is a PhD candidate in Anthropology at LSE. She completed an MPhil in Social Anthropology at University of Oxford. She is currently writing up her PhD thesis that examines the rise of grassroots philanthropy and volunteerism in relation to changing meaning of work in Post-Mao China. She has conducted ethnographic research on this topic in 2013, 2014, and a long-term fieldwork from 2015 to 2017 in central and Southeast China.

Title: Model Minority and Suspended Citizenship: A Comparative Study of Chinese American Elite and Prisoner Activism

Author: Shuxuan Zhou

Abstract: Based on an uncommon comparison between two groups of Chinese Americans-- highly-educated middle class and incarcerated inmates-- this research examines the suspended citizenship and ongoing resistance of the “model minority” in the US. The paper starts from contextualizing immigrant Chinese labor within the post-Cold War world order and neoliberal economic policies in both China and the US. Drawing on life stories told by several first-generation Chinese American elites and prisoners, I then analyze how they evaluate their own labor and understand their suspended political rights and social lives, and how both their own interpretations are informed by and yet differ from the mainstream expectations in unalike ways. The last portion of this article is mainly based on my participant observation in Chinese American grassroots activism over the past three years. I compare two political mobilizations respectively conducted by middle-class and incarcerated Chinese: one sought justice in pursuit of being equal to the Whites and gaining more political capital; the other wanted to be remembered and requested transformation of their whole community beyond the prison wall. The desire of being heard lies in the center of both of the two groups. I argue their dissimilar life experiences and contrasting reactions to suspended citizenship lead to their different needs and approaches to restore their political power and change their social roles. However, they both claim that their activisms, in spite of the often opposite political visions, aim to break the “model minority myth.”

BIOGRAPHY

Shuxuan Zhou is a postdoctoral researcher at Graduate School of East Asian Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research and teaching interests are in Gender and Sexuality Studies, Labor Studies, and Social Movements. Zhou writes about feminist and queer movements, workers’ activism, reproductive labor, and economic and environmental policy in China and the US. Many of these works are based on her years of participation in social activism and her oral history interviews with fellow activists. She is working on her first book, which examines the gendering of labor in Chinese forestry over the six decades and in forestry workers’ ongoing collective protests in the northern Fujian mountains. Zhou is also a cinematographer and producer of ethnographic documentaries.