

Urban Villages as Spaces of Cultural Identity: Urban Migrant Writers in the Pearl River Delta

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Abstract

Through an analysis of a case study of urban migrant writers and urban villages in the Pearl River Delta this article examines the relationship between migrants and urban spaces in contemporary China. Urban migrant writers record the cultural experience of rural-urban migration in contemporary China from the point of view of the urban migrants (*nongmingong*) themselves. The “urban villages” (*chengzhongcun*) are not only a residential place for these new urban migrant writers, but more importantly, as urban spaces they also play an important role in both reconstructing the cultural identities of the urban migrant writers and contributing to the cultural production and vitality of the Chinese metropolis. The article first outlines the urban migrant writers’ life and experiences in the urban villages and describes how urban villages have become urban migrant spaces. By analyzing the physical spaces and cultural conflicts in urban villages, the article then discusses how such spaces become spaces of cultural psychology and in turn influence the self-image and urban experiences of urban migrant writers. The article then analyzes the unique urbanization process and urban cultural construction movement in metropolitan China and suggests the construction of the city’s image and its power of aesthetics, that is, of the ability to determine what should be included and excluded from the urban landscape, further intensifies the self-identity of the new urban migrant writers. The article concludes by arguing that as spaces of cultural identity urban villages exhibit the cultural diversity of urban culture, where urban migrant writers participate in cultural and literary production. Demolishing urban villages means destroying the cultural cells of the organic city and excluding the cultural possibilities and diversity of life in the city that everyone can call “home”.

Keywords: *urban village, urban migrant writer, space, cultural identity, aesthetic power, city image, Pearl River Delta*

JEL classification: *J15, J61, O18, Z13*

1. Introduction

Since the start of China's economic reform and opening up three decades ago, about 230 million migrant workers have left their rural homes and traveled across the country in search of work.¹ Many of the new urban migrants² are traveling from inner rural provinces to the urban centres of coastal southeast China. Following the historic changes brought about by the implementation of the policies of "reform and openness" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) in 1978, the Pearl River Delta became one of the earliest regions in China to implement reforms that attracted workers from all over China. Thus the region is also the place where *dagong* literature (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学), or labour literature, was born. In the early 1990s there was a popular ditty in the inner provinces: "if you want to get rich, go south!" "South" here refers to the Pearl River Delta, or more accurately Guangdong Province. In search of their dreams, rural people came to cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen in pursuit of opportunities. Since as early as the mid-1980s migrant workers who are sensitive and talented in writing began to create literature about their own working lives in the Pearl River Delta. Those people are defined as urban migrant writers in this research. The works they created are defined as *dagong* literature.³

The rural-to-urban migration and social transition has been as profound and as traumatic as the 19th-century industrial revolutions in Western countries. Since the *hukou* 户口 system of household registration was established in 1958,⁴ rural and urban China has been divided into two different worlds. Under strict regulations which allocated every citizen a rural or urban household registration, a change to nonagricultural household status was, and remains, extremely difficult. A farmer wishing to visit the city during most of the Maoist China (1949-1976) would find the task extremely difficult. Firstly, in order to buy a train ticket or stay in a hotel, he needed a letter from his work unit or rural authorities. Secondly, he could not buy a meal in a restaurant in the city if he forgot to bring his ration tickets. With nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat few could survive for long in the cities. (Wong, 1994: 335-355) Consequently the *hukou* system restricted free mobility and formed the dual rural-urban system, which resulted in the cleavage of rural and urban society. (Sun, 2003) The different worlds of the *rural* and the *urban* have become the most significant symbols of social class and cultural identity in China. Therefore, the urban experience of migration is a journey through the rural-urban barrier, a journey between two different worlds. Urban migrant writers record the traumatic urban experience and cultural memories of the process of urbanization, industrialization and modernization in contemporary China. What is more, the transformation and perplexity of their own cultural identity is part of that process and reshapes the cultural map of urban space in the Pearl River Delta.

Since the 1980s, for urban migrant writers living in urban villages is a common cultural phenomenon and experience. They come from different provinces and gathered together in urban villages of Shenzhen, Guangzhou and other cities in the Pearl River Delta, just like the Bohemian intellectuals who gathered in Greenwich Village of New York in the early half of the 20th century. However unlike the writers in Greenwich Village, urban migrant writers in China were not originally writers. Most urban migrant writers were rural-urban migrants who worked, or are working, in workplaces in the Pearl River Delta. Yet they felt compelled to put their experience in writing and *dagong* literature was thus created.

What happens when people belonging to different cultural and regional groups live in the same space of the urban villages? In the process of conflict and compromise with the local culture (both that of the original villagers and of the surrounding urban areas), what kind of cultural identity of migrant writers has been established? What kind of new view and new cultural elements do the urban migrant writers bring to the cities? By answering those questions we will find the unique process of transition of rural people's cultural identities, and how urban cultures form and evolve in the process of China's urbanization, industrialization and modernization, all of which are important parts of the huge social change taking place in contemporary China.

The study of migrant workers in China has received a great deal of attention in recent years. The research straddles many disciplines including urban sociology, urban anthropology, and urban cultural studies. Researchers based outside China have paid attention to the politics of identity of urban migrants in China exploring the different aspects of gender and class (Ngai, 1999: 1-18; Feng, 1998; Jacka, 2006), consumption (Yu and Pan, 2008: 143-245) and policy (Wong, 1994: 335-355). The research shows much interest in the plight and identity of women migrant workers and issues of gender and labour. Mainland Chinese scholars, by contrast, mainly focus on economics, social institutions, government policies and psychological adaptation during the journey of rural-urban migration. The area of urban migrant writers' urban experiences and cultural identities has been less explored. Researchers in contemporary Chinese literature did not pay much attention to the *dagong* literature and urban migrant writers until 2004, and even in this case they are more concerned with the contribution their literary texts can make to the construction of the city image. (Yang, 2007: 3-18) In short, very little research has discussed the relationship between urban spaces and the new urban migrants in terms of their own cultural identity.

This paper examines the identities of urban migrants from a fresh angle, that of urban imagination of urban spaces. It first outlines the urban migrant writers' life and experiences in the urban villages and describes how urban villages have become urban migrant spaces. By analyzing the physical

spaces and cultural conflicts in urban villages, the paper then discusses how such spaces become spaces of cultural psychology and in turn influence the self-image and urban experiences of urban migrant writers. The paper then analyzes the unique urbanization process and urban cultural construction movement in metropolitan China and suggests that the construction of the city's image and its power of aesthetics, that is, of the ability to determine what should be included and excluded from the urban landscape, further intensifies the self-identity of the new urban migrant writers. The article concludes by arguing that as spaces of cultural identity urban villages exhibit the cultural diversity of urban culture, where urban migrant writers participate in cultural and literary production. Demolishing urban villages means destroying the cultural cells of the organic city and excluding the cultural possibilities and diversity of life in the city that everyone can call "home".

2. Theorizing Space and Identity in the Urban Village

It is an ironic twist of fate that urban villages should become the residential places for rural-urban migrants. Since the mid-1980s the flow of rural-urban labour has become more flexible⁵; in going to the city a farmer does not need a letter of approval or ration ticket anymore, but to settle down in cities and find affordable accommodation is still a big problem. Because of the state ownership of land and powerful programming regulation, it is impossible for urban migrants to occupy land and build a residential place just like rural-urban migrants in India do, for example. And for a long time both the central and local government did not supply accommodation to those urban migrants. It is a fantasy for early arrived urban migrants who come to the cities to buy commercial apartments in cities, but such property is extremely expensive and out of the reach of most migrants. So for urban migrants to settle down in urban spaces and to make a new life for themselves and their families is not an easy task. (Liu and He, 2008: 19-23)

If they cannot find a job in the factories, where dormitory accommodation is often supplied, they would sleep in the streets. However, doing so prior to 2003 was dangerous, if they did not have temporary resident permits, they could be rounded up and repatriated to their rural home.⁶ Except for the factory dormitories, the accommodation of lowest rent for new urban migrants is to be found in the urban villages. The "urban villages" are the once rural farmlands in the Pearl River Delta that as the cities expanded have developed into either factories or cheap residential areas. Most of these original villages are now surrounded by high modern buildings; some of them are even very near to the central districts of the cities. The local farmers, the original occupants of these villages, do not do farming any longer. As David Wang describes in this volume, they sell or lease their farmland to the city

Figure 1 Street and Daily Lives in Yangji Village

government or enterprises and use the money to create joint-stock companies and engage in business⁷, some of them doing so quite successfully. However, even though the farmland may have vanished the actual residential area of the village is retained and it is within this and the immediate spaces around it that the original inhabitants see economic opportunities and build apartments for rent to new urban migrants. As Figure 1 reveals, the building of these cheap apartments does not follow the city building codes and they are often crowded and ramshackle. For many ordinary urban residents and city planning officials they are an eyesore and symbol of backwardness. These villages are now defined as “urban villages” (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) by scholars and the term has entered everyday parlance and the media. (Lan, 2005: 433)

Michel Foucault noted that: “Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.” (Foucault, 2002: 349-364) In further narrowing the research question I ask, as a cultural locale where urban migrant writers reside, what is the role of urban villages in both reconstructing the cultural identity of urban migrant writers and the cultural production of cities? My core argument here is that urban villages have become “urban migrant cultural spaces” which represent the cultural identity of urban migrant writers. Moreover, urban migrant writers experience the reproduction process of urban spaces under the slogan of “urbanization”.

By constructing a utopian city image and cultural identity, the government uses its aesthetic power to reconstruct the spaces of urban villages, which further intensifies the self-identity of the new urban migrant writers. This process is a representation of how state power seeks to shape urban space and identity and how the “subalterns” seek to resist that power and assert their own identity.

Cultural identity is “not a theory of the knowing subject, but rather a theory of discursive practice”. (Hall, 1996: 1-17) It is constructed in and through difference and in relation to others, and is constantly destabilized by what it leaves out. (Hall, 1996: 1-17) According to Hall’s theory of “cultural identity”, the study of the cultural identity of urban migrant writers is in fact an exploration of their urban experience and the cultural conflict between the local inhabitants, the mainstream urbanites and the outsiders, that is, the new urban migrants. Identity is also, of course, constructed within discourse and power, and the power system decides who are included and who are excluded during the ongoing reconstruction of social relationships. One mode of existence of social relations of production is space and the process of producing space itself. (Lefebvre and Donald, 1991) In adding to Hall and Lefebvre, I hold that space is both a site of social production constructing social relations, and also the production of cultural identity. Urban villages which represent urban migrant spaces for urban migrant writers are such spaces that reveal cultural conflict and power in contemporary urban China.

To examine urban migrant writers in the entire range of urban villages in the Pearl River Delta would require a huge research effort and cannot be accomplished here. My method is to select migrant writers who live in, or used to live in, urban villages of Shenzhen and Guangzhou, the two typical cities that attract most of the urban migrant writers. My data is derived from in-depth interviews and analysis of the literary texts written by these writers.

3. Urban Migrant Spaces: Daily Life and Communication in Urban Villages

Not all urban migrant writers live in urban villages all the time, but most of them at least have the experience of living in urban villages for some time during their transition to the cities. They often gather together to form a cultural community and attract other new urban migrants with an interest in writing into the fold. Some of them may leave the urban village after living there for a period, but other urban migrant writers would usually come and replace them. Thus, urban villages have become comparatively stable cultural spaces for new urban migrant writers.

Dagong literature originates from Shenzhen, the large “special economic zone” in the Pearl River Delta on the border with Hong Kong. Its particular place of origin in Shenzhen is Baoan District, a district famous for its countless urban villages. Since the mid-1980s, with the reform and opening up of Shenzhen, Baoan District has become an industrial zone and attracted many urban migrant writers over time. The presence of urban migrant writers brings new meaning to the urban villages. Urban villages are not only places for residence, or places for local culture, but spaces where new urban migrant culture is born, and cultural spaces for urban migrant writers where they can share their spirit and literature.

The charm of the urban village comes from the residence of former urban migrant writers who have become well-known as successful writers. An Shiliu is one of them. He stayed in Shenzhen for more than ten years and published his book *My Shenzhen Geography*. When interviewed for this research he said, “I lived mainly in urban villages. How many urban villages have I lived in? I never counted them, at least more than ten.”

In 1993, An Shiliu traveled from Guangxi Autonomous Region (bordering Guangdong) to Shenzhen. His first job was working as a factory worker in a paper-making company with payment of 100 yuan a month. At that time he lived in the dormitory of the factory. Then he changed a lot of jobs and came to Shiyan, one of the urban villages in Baoan District. There he met Guo Haihong, another famous urban migrant writer who was working as temporary editor in the Shiyan Cultural Station (*wenhua zhan* 文化站).⁸ Guo was editing a newspaper called the *Dagong Village* and attracting a great many young migrants to contribute. An Shiliu, Guo Haihong and other migrant writers later themselves created one of the earliest and first literary newspapers published by urban migrants called *Overtime*. In the first publication they declared their slogan: “We have just finished working overtime for the boss, now we work overtime for our destiny.” This slogan influenced and encouraged a lot of migrant workers to get involved.

However, after two or three issues, Guo went to *Dapeng Bay*, the earliest and most well-known *dagong* magazine (labour magazine) in the Pearl River Delta. An moved to Longhua, another urban village in Baoan District. In order to keep in touch and continue the publication of *Overtime*, they founded *Overtime Literature Community* and met regularly in the rented premises of friends in the urban villages. On the Mid-Autumn Day of 1994, An Shiliu and his writer friends held a literature party in Shiyan, where they recited their poems and shared their homesickness. Such parties are held very often among urban migrant writers. Six years later, when An memorialized his life in Shiyan, he wrote: “Shiyan is the first place where my thoughts came into conflict [with the new environment], and the first place I met the questions of spirit, dream and reality.” (An, 2005: 15)

Longhua is one of the most famous urban villages with a flow population of one million in an area of seventy square kilometers. It has over time attracted nearly three hundred urban migrant writers. (Ma, Feng and Zou, 2009: 17) In 1994, An Shiliu came to Longhua and lived in an old abandoned cultural station. In the old, nearly collapsed two-storey apartment he met a group of freelance writers who wrote for newspapers and magazines all over the country. In the old street of Longhua, they edited the *Longhua* newspaper and published *dagong* (labour) poems. A journalist at the time reported that:

... Some of them didn't have desks, they wrote on the bed. It was so crowded in such a small room, they wrote, worked and slept in the same place. And there is no electric light, they just write under the dim light of candles. (Wen, 2006: 8)

In order to meet the deadline of one magazine, Yang Nutao, one urban migrant writer, worked in the workplace during the day and wrote novels at night. The passion of creating drove him. He finally worked it out, without sleeping for three days and nights. (Wen, 2006: 8) Things like this happen very often in urban migrant writers' lives, especially when they can receive payment for contributions. It is a great honour for them to get any such payment.

Although urban migrant writers are rich in spirits, their daily lives are always in poor condition, especially when they are out of work. An Shiliu remembered his hard times in the old street of Longhua, "I retreated to a dark broken room near the old cultural station, upset and bored, down and out. We (his migrant writer friends) chatted and drank wine together. At that time we were so poor that we didn't have rice to cook ... If one of us got payment for writing work, we would get together to celebrate. Life was hard and without hope, but our happiness and dreams never left us." (An, 2005: 18)

In An Shiliu's life in Shenzhen there are another two important urban villages. One is 74 District of Baoan where he lived for two years and where he christened his rented room "Marginal Hostel". Whilst there he and his friends founded a poetry newspaper and published a collection of poems entitled *Margin*. The other urban village in An's life at the time was Xiameilin, where in rented rooms An, along with his comrades, forwarded the concepts of the "1970ers [*qiling hou* 七零后] Generation Poem" and the "1970ers Generation Poet", which soon became a cultural phenomenon leading to the concepts of the "1980ers [*baling hou* 八零后] Generation" and the "1990ers [*jiuling hou* 九零后] Generation" in China.⁹

All those cultural events which influenced the poetry map of China, took place in a small rented room of Xiameilin Weimian village in Shenzhen. By the weak light in the lodgings An Shiliu wrote an essay "1970ers Generation: Retreat of Poet Identity and Presence of the Poem". After the essay was

published, “a great many letters found their way to this secluded corner of Xiameilin.” (An, 2005: 35)

In a way, urban migrant writers are truly cultural wanderers and troubadours in the Pearl River Delta. They come from different provinces, and some of them come from out-of-way villages in Guangdong province, all speaking different dialects. However, in the spaces of urban villages, those migrant writers formed a cultural community where they supported each other, shared lives and passion for literature. This is possible because they have established the same cultural identity. However, compared to official urban residents and the original villagers they are still outsiders.

Urban villages are temporary residences for urban migrant writers. As their conditions improve as they find jobs as editors for newspapers and magazines, or as civil servants working in a government office, they would leave the urban villages. That is their best result, to get a decent job working in the bright office and move to a “respectable neighbourhood”, instead of working overtime as migrant workers in a factory and living in a dark and dim room. But only very few people are lucky, most urban writers flow from one urban village to another; or from one city to another. If the cost of living in Shenzhen gets higher, or if they find a job as an editor in another city, the migrant writers move to urban villages in nearby Guangzhou or Dongguan.

In a word, the literary creation of urban migrant writers is simultaneous with their wandering lives and urban experience. Urban villages are important cultural locales of their survival, communication and writing. Chinese sociologists believe that floating population in big cities have formed a new kind of structured social space. (Xiang, 1996: 99-111) The birth of the cultural community of urban migrant writers is a concrete presence of that new social space. This new urban cultural community differs from the community of local urbanites (that is, those who possess urban household registration and typically do not live in urban villages but in standardized urban residential areas call “communities” – see Thao Nguyen’s article in this issue) in various ways including the means of surviving in such an environment, the social networks of communication, and the rules and values associated with daily life. It is the distinctive nature of life in urban villages and the status of the urban migrant that unites them as a community. What is most significant, however, is that the urban migrants come from many different parts of China and have different customs and languages and dialects. In times past when Chinese from one village, town or region traveled to distant places (either in China or abroad) they often created “native village associations” (*tongxianghui* 同乡会). But the experience of urban migrant writers is breaking with this long-held tradition. That is, the sharing of identity and experience in close proximity, and of the shared “literature” of the migrant writers, displaces regional identity and gathers urban migrant writers under a common banner.

For urban migrant writers, their writing and lives are mixed together with the spaces of urban villages. Urban villages are spaces connecting urban migrants and cities, creating a new relationship and new urban experience between people and cities. Urban migrant writers are the most sensitive people among new urban migrants, and urban villages are the best cultural spaces which stimulate their imagination about the city and themselves. In the eyes of urban migrant writers, urban villages are places full of poetry and inspiration for their writing. It does not mean lives in urban villages are pleasant. Guo Haihong said in his interview, “Poetry here does not mean red flowers and green trees, or beautiful scenes. It is poetry made by people, the atmosphere of life, and it is even broader than the city itself. Urban villages are museums and monuments of Shenzhen’s development.” Urban villages have become “urban migrant cultural spaces” for urban migrant writers. What is more, their lives and experiences in urban villages are producing the birth pangs of new identities.

4. Physical Spaces as Spaces of Cultural Imagination

There are two meanings of urban villages as “urban migrant cultural spaces”. Firstly, urban villages are physical spaces where urban migrant writers reside, write and communicate. Secondly, the cultural spaces are “spaces of identity” composed of different kinds of relations. Generally, urban migrant spaces are not just the places of buildings or habitation; they are also symbolic spaces for cultural communities. (Zhao, 2007: 186-188) To what extent do urban villages in this regard represent, construct and intensify the cultural identity of urban migrant writers?

Firstly, the location and physical spaces of urban villages influences the relationship between urban migrant writers and the city. The physical nature of urban villages and communication with the local community influence the urban experience of urban migrant writers, their cultural psychology and the way they look at themselves. Urban villages are surrounded by high modern buildings and, as far as they are seldom visited by local urban residents, are isolated communities. This physical location separates the new urban migrants and the modern cities outside. This separation upsets the migrants who used to believe that the city is a huge dream-factory where they can enjoy all the city has to offer. However, the only places they can afford to stay in the cities are factory dormitories or urban villages. After all that effort to move from village to city they still live in “villages”.

Just as Baoan District in Shenzhen gathers urban migrant writers, so too do urban villages in Guangzhou. One example is Liede, near the centre of the new Pearl River City District in Guangzhou. Another example is Yangji, near the centre of Tianhe, another important district in Guangzhou.

These two urban villages are very typical. Firstly, they preserve hundreds of years of local Cantonese culture. There are small rivers and canals crisscrossing the villages. At Dragon Boat Festival every year the local people hold dragon boat race competitions as they have been doing for hundreds of years.

Secondly, both of the urban villages are totally surrounded by modern high buildings. If you stand on the overpass on the Guangzhou Expressway you may see the most modern face of Guangzhou, but if you dare to go through the gate of Yangji Village, you may see another face, the preexistence of Guangzhou itself.

In the early 1990s Guangzhou started its process of urbanization and developed towards the east, occupying large areas of farmland. In the mid-1990s, these traditional villages became urban villages. Meanwhile, millions of new urban migrants swarmed into the urban villages. As David Wang describes in this collection, the original inhabitants of the villages saw the opportunity to make money. They built tall apartment buildings side by side and rented them to the new urban migrants, including of course many urban migrant writers. In order to earn more rent, the locals built as many apartments in every space as possible. Thus was created the “handshake building” (because you can literally reach out from the window and shake hands with the person in the opposite building) and “a gleam of sky” (because

Figure 2 A “Gleam of Sky” in Yangji Urban Village on a Sunny Day



the alleyways are the floors of deep canyons). Indeed, living in the urban village it is hard to get much sunshine. Inside some of the rooms in urban villages it is dark the whole year round.

One migrant writer described Liede village in his novel as such:

Buildings are built in disorder, without design. Thousands of curving alleyways, it is much harder to find your bearings here than in the mountains ... It is like a big [chicken] coop. The buildings are crowded together without following any plans which makes the residents particularly worried about safety and sanitation. (Dai, 2003: 161)

The use of “coop” to describe the living quarters is apt as the rented rooms are usually very small, sometimes bedroom, kitchen and bathroom are in the same space.

However, urban migrant writers still choose to live in urban villages. The reason is simple: the rent is low. Urban villages separated and surrounded by high buildings are the most affordable doors open to them, and simultaneously, they make a distinction between urban migrant space and other urban spaces. In living in the crowded spaces of the urban villages, both space and life are closed off. Urban migrant writers always have to look up and out if they want to view the cities. An Shiliu in describing Shenzhen from the window of his rented room writes that, “It seems like looking outside from a prison cell ... Outside the window is a colourful city, like paradise far away.” (An, 2005) Although they live near the central districts of the city, because of the closed space and poor living conditions in urban villages, they feel the long distance between cities and themselves. That is why An Shiliu christened his rented rooms “Marginal Hostel”. The marginalization is not only the description of their living spaces, but also the representation of their self-location in the city and their own cultural identity.

The feeling of marginalization even exists when frequenting public spaces outside of the urban villages. A female worker (*dagongmei* 打工妹) remembered her first experience to go shopping in Shenzhen. When they saw the price tag for an exquisite looking pen, “We were dumbfounded!” One thousand yuan is equivalent to ten times their monthly wages. “We knew then that we had come to a place we didn’t belong. The shop shocked us. We were then afraid of going to the next shop.” (Fuping 1991, 2008) A migrant worker related to me his first shopping experience in Dongguan. Wandering past the front of the Walmart supermarket, he was too timid to enter, and just looked in a daze at goods behind the glass window. His friends thereafter often teased him for his experience of Walmart window shopping. Although rural migrants to the cities will invariably overcome their fear of the urban shopping centre, many of them nonetheless have to overcome the initial obstacle of entering such urban spaces.

The circumstance of isolation, marginalization and disorder of space in urban villages brings horrible and unsafe feelings to new urban migrants, and reconstructs their sense of “urban feeling structure”. “Feeling structure” is a recognition and way of life, constructed by internal individual experience according to time and space. It is a product of special history, space, social relations and natural circumstances, and it also reproduces the imaginative relations between “people and city”. (Luo, 2006: 94) “Urban feeling structure” of urban migrant writers, produced by the imaginative relations of spatial experience, exists often in the metaphor between city and themselves. From their writings on self-image and social relations between self and urban spaces, we can see the influence of physical features and ecological systems of urban villages in creating cultural imagination.

Enduring the severe impact of urban spaces, both in body and spirit, urban migrant writers are “body narratives” in the transition from rural to urban China. The self-images they create in their writing are of low-down animals, such as cockroaches, worms, and mice. Or sometimes they compare themselves to injured birds, fish, fallen leaves, iron, dust and so on. These self-images represent their self-identities and their relationship with the city. To quote some examples:

“In the colourful city, I am as mean as dust.” (Lu Chuansheng: *People in an Alien Land*)

“I was in the hardware factory, as lonely as a piece of iron.” (Zheng Xiaoqiong: *Stream*)

“Oh cockroach, you are my illness, you are my food chain, you are my relatives from rural to urban places. The Spring Festival is coming, but you never jump down the building and threaten me¹⁰ ... You never share the rent with me ... on this little planet we live in sin. I never hate you, because sometimes I like darkness just like you.” (Xie Xiangnan: *Cockroach*)

These images describe the living conditions of writers. The physical spaces of cities and urban villages are very different from their homes in the countryside. In the dark rooms in urban villages the cockroach is the usual cohabitant. They compare the city to a “stone forest” and themselves to mean animals. The feeling of segregation and marginalization is thus often based on physical spaces and reflects the cultural identity embedded in such spaces. These images visually represent the relations between urban spaces and migrants themselves, and reveal their subjective positions in cities. Thus, the huge differences between spaces of the modern city and the urban village makes urban migrant writers feel that cities belong to the local urban residents and elites, whereas as migrants and residents of the urban village they are just outsiders who do not belong. In the mid-1980s an urban migrant writer

Lin Jian wrote a novel titled *The Other People's City*. The novel touched the hearts of migrant workers and the author soon became well known.

When space and people integrate closely, people can switch the subject position of “I am here” to “I am”. (Lynch, 1960) The cultural identity of subjectivity plays an important role here. Different identities produce different urban experiences and images. Urban citizens who live in more respectable “communities” (*shequ* 社区) have different urban experience, and their cultural images and identities cannot be the same as urban migrant writers. This happens even in the same spaces. Spaces of urban villages, like all other representative symbols, are symbols of social relations and cultural identities, and reproduce the relations between different cultural groups.

5. Cultural Conflict between the Original Villagers and the Urban New Migrants

Besides the location and physical spaces of urban villages, the communication and cultural conflict with the local people also influence the cultural identity of migrant writers. There are two different systems in terms of distribution of occupation, entertainment, residential ways and social psychology in the “dual community” of urban villages belonging respectively to the migrants on the one hand, and the original villagers on the other. (Zhou, 2000: 107-112)

Hall believes that identities are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, and “are constructed through, not outside, difference”. (Hall, 1996: 1-17) When villagers live in villages for generations they do not have the confusion of self-identity, because the society they live in is relatively homogeneous. When boundary of rural-urban society fractures and society experiences the tumult of modernization, industrialization and urbanization, identity then becomes a problem for all concerned. Thus, cultural identity always happens in crossing boundaries of time, space and communities. Living in the same spaces of urban villages, the local people and new urban migrants respectively construct “the image of the other”, which clearly demonstrates the symbolic meaning of “urban migrant cultural space” of urban villages.

Although the migrant people and the locals live in the same spaces, they seldom communicate with each other. In interviews I asked urban migrant writers the following two questions: “Do you often affiliate with the urban locals? Have you ever quarreled or conflicted with them?” An Shiliu answered: “Seldom. I seldom make friends with local people. [As for the second question] I don't know whether the rise of rent is a type of conflict.” Dai Shaniu, another migrant writer who has lived in more than five urban villages in Guangzhou, said: “No communication with the locals. Sometimes I quarreled with the local landlord, mostly over the rent. Generally speaking,

we get along with each other, and live our own lives. Yet it seems that we and the locals live in two different spaces.”

Urban villages are spaces where the locals live from generation to generation. As Lan Yuyun notes, urban villages:

... are strictly organized, and are social locales which have a stable operating system and logic. Many social features of these social locales, such as nativism, stabilization, strong homogeneity and unique system of survival and development integrated by history and reality, have huge differences with [the experience of the] floating population. (Lan, 2005: 363)

Whether in terms of politics, economics, or social customs and cultural values, the impenetrable fortress constructed by local people separates them from new urban migrants. Accordingly, there is no need and desire for communication between the two groups. In Lan Yuyun's research on Zhujiang Village of Guangzhou, one old village man said:

Those outsiders feed us. Without them, we cannot possibly survive. However, after their coming, circumstances in the village changed a lot. The feeling of safety is reduced. We dare not go out at night. Those outsiders rush and go on the rampage. We are not able to walk. If we are run down by them, there is nowhere to find them. Besides, those northern people¹¹ like eating chilli. Once they start cooking, we have to close all the windows. So we usually cover our noses, wipe away tears, and curse those outsiders when dinner time comes. (Lan, 2005: 366-367)

The local people have conflicting attitudes toward new urban migrants. On the one hand new urban migrants contribute to the rental economy. On the other they believe that these “outsiders” disturb their traditional life system, customs and public security. In order to protect themselves, they keep on guard toward urban migrants and avoid communicating with them. Thus, it is very hard for new urban migrants to integrate with local people. The two groups are wary of each other, yet somehow form relatively stable and harmonious cultural communities.

The apparent harmony does not mean, however, that there is no conflict in urban villages. In fact “no communication” just means a deeper rift between urban migrants and the locals. Firstly the design of space in urban villages isolates the urban migrants from cities and local urban people, the two groups seldom communicate. When they communicate it is invariably to “pay the rent”. “Money” is the only connection. The situation is the result and representation of the huge gaps between the two groups. By excluding others, they form their own cultural communities and cultural identities.

Secondly the two groups look down upon on each other. The local people impute the disorder and public security to urban migrants, which is in fact a

result of misgovernment. In the eyes of local people, “outsiders” are always “poor” and “dirty”. But in the eyes of urban migrant writers, the local people are lazy and parasitic. Dai Shaniu said: “No communication is not because *couldn't*, but *wouldn't*. It is not worthwhile communicating with them.” This attitude captures most of the migrant writers’ attitudes toward the locals. “You can see the lives in urban villages. The local people reap profits through rent. They do not work and just drink tea [*yumcha* 饮茶] in the restaurants from morning to afternoon. The local youth do not get much education and reap what one has not sown. They contribute nothing to the city. It’s us alien people who contribute to the prosperity around us. But we are excluded from sharing the development.” From the representations the two groups have of each other, we can see the system of reconstructing cultural identity. The two groups’ reaction is like the reaction of the West to the Other which Edward Said described in *Orientalism*. The images they create and the ways they see others are not to understand “who they are”, as they are not willing to understand the truth of “who they are”, but to reconstruct “who we are”. Although they seldom communicate, they can still create ugly and negative images to describe each other.

The identity constructed by the structure of the urban village deeply influences the relationship between migrants and locals, and it reflects the discourse in daily communication. The locals in urban villages are rural people as most new migrants used to be, but they do not have any common class consciousness. The locals called the migrant workers “*laozai* 捞仔” or “*laomei* 捞妹”, meaning men or women from northern China who come to Guangdong to make money. They abuse the migrant workers with such words. The words of discrimination in daily life constitute a discourse which represents how the locals see the migrants, and it also impacts on the way urban migrant writers see themselves. In their writings, they admit in a form of self-mockery that they are “*laozai*”: “We are *laozai*. So what? We are more noble people than those parasitical locals. We feed ourselves by hard work.”¹²

It has been three decades since rural-urban migration began. Urban migrant writers I interviewed mostly think that local people treat them better than before, but most of them do not consider themselves as residents of cities in the Pearl River Delta. At the same time, the local people insist on maintaining the boundary of their cultural identity. In interviews or in the mass media, most locals think that the new urban migrants are colonizing their community and bringing impurity to their local culture. A local PhD student who researched industrial restructuring in the Pearl River Delta told me, “Of course these alien people should be excluded from sharing the GDP of Guangdong.”¹³ In Dayoo Club, one of the local online communities in Guangzhou, the locals and the new urban migrants often quarrel about the cultural identity of Guangzhou people. Most of the locals claim that only

people who are born in Guangzhou and who speak Cantonese are Guangzhou people, and there should be strict distinctions between Guangzhou people and outsiders. By contrast, the new migrants argue that migrant people contribute to the development of Guangzhou. There is not a modern high building, they argue, which is not built by alien migrant workers. (Yarong, 2008) One urban migrant writer thinks that Cantonese is the most unpleasant dialect in the world. However, in order to reduce the conflict and get along with the locals, some migrants learn to speak Cantonese. It is a way to get better jobs and integrate. Nonetheless, many migrants prefer little communication with the locals in the urban villages as they figure that the best way to avoid conflict is not to communicate with each other very often.

To sum up, the physical distinction between spaces of urban villages and that of spaces outside urban villages constructs the psychological distinction of urban migrant writers. What is more, living in the same spaces, the urban migrant writers seldom communicate with the local Cantonese, which represents the deep cultural divide between people of different cultural groups. The physical spaces and conflict with local culture make urban villages a cultural locale for the production of new urban experience and self-identity.

6. Image Production, Aesthetic Power and Self-identity

It is not only the physical spaces or cultural conflicts which make urban villages spaces of cultural identity, but also the city images produced by the city government or mass media (which in China are owned and operated by government entities). The catchword of the 2010 Shanghai Expo was “Better City, Better Life” (see Thao Nguyen’s article in this issue). This better life is a modern city image imagined by the city government. It has become a goal of urbanization and guided city planning since 2003. In the eyes of official urban designers, the image of a modern city should be represented by high modern buildings, huge shopping malls, broad squares, artificial grassplots, shining neon lights and so on. This city image is the aesthetic taste of the leisure class and the middle class and transmitted by the mass media. In order to construct the cultural soft power of cities, local mass media start the movement of establishing new cultural images of cities. Such a movement is a project half assigned by city governments and half by the media elites themselves.

For example, Yuan Jin studied the city imagination created by mass media in Guangzhou from 2002 to 2006, and found that, in city images:

... we can see scholars, officers, teachers, students, civil servants, white collar workers, managers, businessmen, retired workers and so on, people from different groups and classes, but we can never see the migrant workers. It means that a large population of millions of migrants is overlooked. They

are not considered as part of the city image, nor the discussion about city images in the public area, because they have no discourse of power. (Yuan, 2006)

In theory, the aesthetic power is operated by the mass media, by creating city images, by practice, and by production of urban spaces. Thus, urban spaces, no matter whether physical spaces, social spaces or cultural spaces, become the locale of struggle of all kinds of power. Urban villages near the CBD (central business district) of cities are the focus of “the struggle over space”. For example, in order to beautify the city, the crowded urban villages seem ugly in the eyes of the city government and should be demolished. The elites and the public establish their imaginings of urban villages from media representations. One professor in a local university told me that the urban village is a horrible place. “My legs would shake once I stand by the gate to Shipai village.”¹⁴ But in fact, he had never entered an urban village. A government officer and doctor of anthropology said to me in surprise when told of my research interests, “There is no culture in urban villages, how can you research urban villages?” Such understandings of urban villages influence the attitude that the public has toward urban villages, that is, as a dirty place and den of iniquity, which destroys the beauty and security of the city, and should be razed and demolished. (Guo, 2006: 10-12)

Meanwhile, urban villages and the valuable land they occupy are lusted after by real estate developers. City planning in urban China is essentially driven by real estate development. The city government sells lands to real estate companies, and real estate companies build high-rise apartments to sell to residents and investors, and in turn gain huge profits. Both real estate companies and the city government benefit from the demolition of urban villages. They compensate for the land of the locals and build new apartments for them somewhere else. For local people, the most important thing they care about is whether they can get adequate compensation based on market rates and a new place to reside. In 2007, by demolishing Liede village, the government of Guangzhou started the movement of “rebuilding” urban villages. As Liede village is near the centre of Pearl River New Town, the compensation was very high. Some of the locals even became billionaires after redeveloping the urban villages. As for the cultural tradition, the city image of Guangzhou established by the mass media is the local Cantonese culture. It is beneficial to the local people. However, because these new urban migrants are not considered part of the city image, the city government currently takes no measure to supply accommodation to new urban migrants. The prevailing logic is that their cultural identity is alien and should be excluded from sharing the urban spaces just like the situation in sharing the GDP of the city.

Figure 3 The Demolished Liede Village after 2007

In the struggle over space, the new urban migrants are the weak group. They are isolated and marginalized in the urban villages. Over time the physical spaces they can occupy are now becoming smaller and smaller. They have to move to rural areas further and further from the city, or go back to their rural hometowns. From “the place of dreams” to a “paradise far away”, the city imagining is transformed with the experience of urban migrant writers. Their voice is daunted by the hegemonic utopian city image in which their cultural spaces “do not exist”. In the course of the process of ongoing urbanization the cultural identity of marginalization thus becomes even stronger:

By her body, she expresses her feeling. By silence, expresses disagreement. By outspread trace, expresses the being of a fact. (Shan Xuehu: *Rainworm*)

As urban migrant spaces, urban villages have become the symbols of identity. Just like the identity of exclusion and marginalization for urban migrant writers, the urban villages are also excluded from the city images of a “better life”.

7. Conclusion

For the rural-urban migrant urban villages are special spaces, they are not only the environments and cultural locales for urban migrant writers to reside, but also spaces of cultural identity. As important urban migrant cultural spaces, urban villages exhibit the cultural diversity of urban culture, where urban migrant writers participate in cultural and literary production. In some respects it should be noted, because of urban villages, urban cultures in the Pearl River Delta are more tolerant to migrant people, compared to other big cities like Beijing and Shanghai.

Urban villages are representations of power and cultural conflict in the urbanization process in contemporary China. Generally speaking, urban spaces are “identified spaces”. Spaces are identified for people who occupy them. Different urban spaces may be occupied by people with different identities. People belonging to different groups of cultural identity have different feelings about the same spaces. In contrast, urban villages reconstruct the cultural identity of urban migrant writers through the struggles and conflicts for urban spaces, among the different groups in cities. Behind these conflicts are questions such as: whose cities? What should a better life be in the cities? What should images of urban spaces look like? The officials, real estate companies, the locals and the new urban migrants have different answers.

The city image is established through power struggles in which one group dominates another. However, a more comprehensive city and urban space can contain spaces for different groups of people, and accommodate the multicultural experience. Yet the local city government has the absolute power to reconstruct spaces in urban villages, and to design city planning by imagination created by the government and the elites. By destroying cultural spaces of the organic city, the aesthetic hegemonic power excludes the cultural possibilities and diversity of life in the metropolis. The reproduction of urban villages in the Pearl River Delta is a micro-representation of how the government uses its aesthetic power to design a better city, and reproduce identified spaces to include and exclude people, both physically and culturally. Although urban migrant writers contribute to the GDP of the city and cultural production in the Pearl River Delta, it is hard for them to gain the urban citizenship. To drive out the urban migrant writers may lead to the monotony and desolation of urban culture. As time passes by it will influence the health of public culture.

Notes

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1. A report from the National Bureau of Statistics of China indicates that the total population of migrant workers in 2009 was 229.78 million. The number has increased by 1.9 per cent compared to 2008. See <http://news.dayoo.com/china/201003/23/53868_12326312.htm>, 2010-03-23.
2. Migrant workers, white-collar workers, migrant writers and so on, who have come to the cities in search of work are categorized as new urban migrants for the purposes of this research.
3. In Chinese *dagong* means “to engage in manual labour” and by extension it has come to refer to those migrants in search of labour in the factories and constructions sites all across the eastern seaboard.
4. The *hukou* system of household registration is a law passed by the National People’s Congress, the equivalent of China’s parliament, which in the past, through a system of rationing and entitlements, restricted the free flow of people from the countryside to the city. Although no longer an impediment to movement, rural migrants to the cities are still not entitled to all the benefits which the urban holders of *hukou* are able to derive. It is extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, to change from a rural to urban *hukou*.
5. In 1984, the central government indicated that “rural people are permitted to work and do business in cities by feeding themselves”. Thus the massive wave of rural-urban migration began.
6. In 2003, a college student Sun Zhigang was nabbed by police when he walked along the street in Guangzhou. As he did not carry any identification certificate to prove his identity, the police judged him as *nongmingong* 农民工. Sun died in custody after mistreatment. This incident was published in newspapers and soon triggered the discussion against the system of administrative detention. It caused such a stir that a number of legal scholars declared the administrative rules to be unconstitutional. The authorities acknowledged the injustice and the measures were abolished.
7. They could do so because the rural farmland is collectively owned (even though it was allocated to different households). This is quite different from the system of state ownership of urban residential land.
8. A “cultural station” is a government-sponsored organization promoting various cultural and literary pursuits in the local community.
9. “1970ers” originally means poets and writers born in the 1970s. Later it became a term to identify all the Chinese people born in this decade. The same applies for the terms “1980ers” and “1990ers”. This is a set of terms used to divide different cultural groups and age cohorts in China, because people belonging to different generations vary greatly in the way of life, behaviour, value and so on.
10. Many migrant workers climb to high buildings and threaten the boss with jumping if they have wages owing to them.
11. Local Cantonese call provinces north of the Nanling mountains “north”, and call people from those provinces “northern people”.

12. What is interesting is that, the word “*lao*”, meaning “making money” in Cantonese, is originally a neutral word, but when it is used with regard to new urban migrants, the term becomes derogatory. The misunderstanding is firstly produced by the cultural gap. Cantonese culture is very different from the cultural tradition of other provinces in China. In early July 2010, in order to welcome the Asian Games, the Guangzhou Political Consultative Conference, a kind of representative body, proposed that the local television station should extend the Mandarin airtime instead of Cantonese, which led to protests of local people in support of the Cantonese language. The local Cantonese believe that such measures will demolish their local culture, which reflects cultural conflicts and worries of cultural identity of the local Cantonese in the rural-urban migration and urbanization period.
13. Economic development in contemporary China, as in many other countries, is measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP is also the most important criterion to judge the achievement of officials at all levels. Urban migrants contribute to the GDP of urban cities; they pay taxes and insurance. But they are not included in the calculation of the average GDP as they do not possess local residence. The way of numerating the average GDP is to divide gross GDP of the local city, including the shares contributed by urban new migrants, by the numbers of registered permanent residents. The contributions of the urban migrants are those not considered in this equation.
14. One of the famous urban villages in Guangzhou.

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