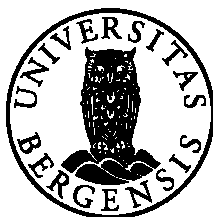


Solveig Stornes

# ‘I want to improve myself’

Underemployed rural graduates in urban areas of China

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the M.A. degree  
Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen  
June 2012





*'The Struggle of the Ants'*

To be forgotten in the corner of the world  
Not my fault  
Has been buried by no means wasted  
I live in the cave  
Busy back and forth every day  
Do not care about other people how to say  
Ant small but broad minded  
Insists on being self

Afraid of the wind I am not afraid of the wind  
Raindrops wet my dream  
Go ahead I go forward,  
The footprints me not ignorant

Against the wind I am against the wind  
Way forward, although heavy  
I will be propped up with tentacles  
Rain patch of the sky

Performed by: 'the Ant Brothers'  
Written by: Li Ligu and Bai Wanlong



## *Acknowledgements*

First and foremost I wish like to thank the people in Xiwang Cun who let me follow them in their daily lives and shared their experiences and life stories with me.

Professor Leif O. Manger has been my supervisor, and I am deeply grateful for our inspiring discussions, commitment to my project and his support in this process.

My respectful thanks go to Jon Pedersen at FAFO's Beijing Office, who provided me with thoughtful comments and interesting inputs in Beijing. His colleague at CASTED were also very helpful providing me with critical comments and forcing me to sharpen my arguments during my fieldwork. I would also like to thank them for introducing me to Professor Lian Si who provided me with interesting perspectives.

I am grateful to the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies (NIAS) for granting me a scholarship to Copenhagen for two weeks. The importance of the input and inspiration I got during my stay have been a driving force throughout this thesis

Other people who deserve special thanks are Henriette, Anne and Davis, Lili and Joon. I have benefited greatly from discussions with Ole Johannes Kalland and Thomas Sætre Jakobsen, who were my 'anthropological brother in arms' during fieldwork. Rebecca and James you also deserves a big thanks for frequently challenging my perspectives. Eoin Daffy and Howard Lopez deserves a special thanks for reading through parts of this thesis.

I also happy to have spent the last two year with my fellow students on the 8<sup>th</sup> Floor. I am grateful for their nuance and constructive critique and good times we had together.

Finally, I extend my most sincere gratitude to my parents, family and friends for supporting me and believing in me on another of my adventures. And last, but not least, I am forever grateful to Nikolai Rypdal Tallaksen for supporting me and not only putting up with it all, but also taking a genuine interest, reading and commenting upon numerous drafts.

Solveig Stornes, Bergen, Norway, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2012



## *Abstract*

The thesis presents an ethnographic study of a phenomenon that was unknown of and even unthinkable fifteen years ago in China, underemployed and unemployed rural graduates living on the fringes of both the city and society itself. Through the facet of one urban village on the outskirts of Beijing I uncover how the rural graduates' situation, often called 'the ant tribe, is a picture on what ambiguities lies within the Chinese society. Their position becomes problematic when they establishing themselves in informal settlements at the periphery of the city. Here the rural graduates live together with other migrants and in a sense bringing civilization to the uncivilized and illegible part of the city. Not only is their situation a crack in China's narratives of education and modernity, but it's also directing attention to the growing pressure on urban housing, need for change in household system and social inclusion for people that also want to take part in the economic development in China.

It is through analysing the rural graduates situation that we come to comprehend how the Chinese state manifest itself in the structures where the rural graduates live, but also how it is conceived and reflected upon in people`s everyday practise in creating a meaningful life. "Improve myself" have become the phrase among the youths in achieving this goal. During the course of this thesis I want to argue for a new rationality of governing and subject formation in China, where the subjects have become self-governing. Which has also lead to a change among young rural graduates towards a more individualistic lifestyle and perception of life in contrast to earlier collective communities. This can be observed in renewed focus on the self, the consumer patterns, but also how the individual is establishing networks founded in themselves in a new relation to the collective.





## Contents

<i>'The struggle of the ants'</i> .....	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	5
<i>Abstract</i> .....	7
<b>Theoretical and methodological perspectives</b> .....	11
Educational history of China.....	12
Rural graduates in urban areas .....	14
State and governmentality .....	18
Self-conduct and <i>suzhi</i> - human quality .....	19
The individualization thesis .....	21
A rising individual.....	23
Methodology .....	24
Limitations and advantages in the field.....	25
What follows .....	28
<b>1 Xiwang Cun – an urban village</b> .....	30
Conceptualisation of urban villages in China .....	31
Xiwang Cun.....	34
Structural organization and daily life .....	35
<i>Luan</i> and <i>Anjing</i> – the power of representation .....	38
Concluding remarks .....	40
<b>2 A quest for human quality</b> .....	42
Wenming, wenhua and <i>suzhi</i> with Confucian roots.....	42
Break and continuity- Wenhua <i>suzhi</i> under Mao .....	43
Reform and revival of the <i>suzhi</i> discourse .....	44
<i>Suzhi</i> facilitated by the party-state .....	44
'The ant tribe', what is in a name? .....	46
Unifying and homogenizing.....	47
Poor, struggling 'ants' .....	47
Abnormalising .....	49
The management of productive bodies .....	50
Concluding remarks .....	52
<b>3 'I want to improve myself'</b> .....	54
'Excessive population' and otherness: motivational drives .....	55
Being successful in the labour market.....	58
Negotiating an improved identity through consumption.....	61
Improve your abilities – improve yourself.....	65
Concluding remarks .....	66
<b>4 The symbolism of fast-food</b> .....	67
The emergence of a new consumption culture in China .....	68

KFC – meeting place and test ground .....	70
Tensions in new, appropriated social space .....	72
‘Being made’ and ‘self-made’, claiming urban membership through consumption.....	76
Consequences of consumption -changing social relations .....	78
Concluding remark .....	79
<b>5 Creating one`s own rice bowl .....</b>	<b>80</b>
Becoming an entrepreneur.....	81
Attempts at professionalization and new investments .....	83
Guanxi .....	85
Creating horizontal webs of security.....	86
A health inspector and a jade bracelet.....	89
Dage laoban (boss) .....	92
Changing relations.....	94
Concluding remarks .....	96
<b>6 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>97</b>
State governed self-government to ensure progress.....	97
Self-realization and a rising individual .....	99
Changing relations, changing society?.....	99
<i>Glossary</i> .....	101
<i>Table of figures</i> .....	103
<i>Table of website references</i> .....	103
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	105

# Theoretical and methodological perspectives

In the same year that the population of China<sup>1</sup> officially shifted from living mostly in rural areas to urban areas, Xiwang Cun, a small urban village on the outskirts of Beijing was swamped with rural graduates seeking work in the big city. The ethnographic study presented in this thesis shows a phenomenon that was unknown of and even unthinkable fifteen years ago in China. State-owned units no longer dominated urban economies and college graduates were free to look for employment on their own instead of direct job assignment through the state. However, it was not until the beginning of the 2000's that unemployment among rural graduates became an issue in China. Thus, little work has been done on this field and I believe this ethnographical account focusing on the underemployed<sup>2</sup> rural graduates living on the fringes both of the city and society itself can be in important contribution in understanding the changing dynamics of the Chinese society today.

Through studying the lived everyday life of the rural graduates in the urban village Xiwang Cun the aim of this thesis is to uncover cultural specific traits and articulations of governmentality to understand the changing dynamics of modern subject formation in China. I analyse this by looking at how the Chinese party-state communicate and related to the new situation of underemployed and unemployed rural graduates living on the outskirts of the big cities. Moreover, there is a need to understand how the rural graduates relate to their situation when their expectations of the city do not match reality. Accordingly, I discuss and analyse how rural graduates place themselves within the national discourse of *suzhi*- human quality, and *wenming*- civilization- in reaching modernity.

In order to understand the interconnected changes taking place between the rural and urban sphere in China, as well as the negotiation of the rural graduates social identity we must look at how the processes and discourses on modernity and human quality affect the rural graduates. This opens up for an analysis on how the diverse arenas expose various outlooks and strategies in coping with their life in the world. Furthermore, this also makes us aware of how these new outlooks are made relevant among the graduates and used to understand their choices and actions.

Through my analyses I argue that rural graduates by migrating to the cities have not only created new economic strategies for themselves but have also come to act as agents of

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<sup>1</sup> By China I mean the People's Republic of China (PRC), not to be confused with the Republic of China, also called Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup> By underemployment I mean: 'Dependency on involuntary part-time work, intermittent unemployment, and involvement in poorly remunerated labour'(Prause and Dooley in Jeffrey, 2010:287)

change producing new sociocultural realities that the Chinese state have to deal with. In order to avoid the ‘in-between-position’ rural graduates find themselves in when arriving in the city, they often try to find new social spaces where they can claim an urban affiliation. It is at the borders we find the dynamics of the increasingly complex interpretations of the relationships between rurality, urbanity and modernity. It is through analysing the rural graduates situation that we come to comprehend how the Chinese state manifest itself in the structures shaping the modern and urban subject, as well as how it is conceived and reflected upon in people`s everyday practise in creating a meaningful life and to secure upward social mobility. During the course of my thesis I argue for a new rationality of governing and subject formation in China, where the subjects have become self-governing. ‘Improve myself’ have become the phrase among the youths in achieving this goal. This has also lead to a change among young rural graduates towards a more individualistic lifestyle and perception of life in contrast to earlier collective communities.

To contextualize and make theoretical sense of the rural graduates’ narratives I first provide a brief overview of the educational history in China, before going into details about the rural graduates. Following this I present the theoretical framework for my analysis throughout this thesis. Then I present my methodology as well as limitations and advantages experienced in the field. Lastly I give an outline of the chapters in this thesis.

### **Educational history of China**

Unemployment or underemployment among university graduates is not a new phenomenon, nor is it restricted to China. As early as 1976 Dore argued for a ‘diploma disease’ (1976) in England, while Collins (1979) analysed what he labelled the ‘credential society’, where one used credentials from schools as a badge of ones abilities. Also in India there have been studies done on the growing unemployment rate among graduates (Jeffrey, 2010, Jeffrey et al., 2008). In this section I present a brief overview of the relationship between the role of education in China and the recent phenomenon of underemployment to grasp the implications for the rural graduates in Xiwang Cun.

Education has always played a central role in China where it has been seen as a method to change the inequalities between rural and urban areas (Hsu, 2008)<sup>3</sup>. In 1949 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Mao Zedong came to power which change the role of

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that I support the notion suggesting that ‘educational desire’ is something that comes from Confucian culture, thereby making Chinese culture more prone to succeed than others. Kipnis (2011) warns against this and gives an explanation to the conflict brought about with these two views in his book ‘Governing Educational Desire’ (2011).

education. Whereas in imperial times education was only assigned sons from a few, wealthy families, things changed during the first period of the CCP. Now it was a person's political status that decided whether or not one would get access to higher education. There were no school fees, but as jobs were assigned through the direct job assignment system, a part of the state-owned work units (*danwei*), there was no freedom to choose careers (Bai, 2006:137).

This continued until the beginning of the 'Cultural Revolution' (1966-1976)<sup>4</sup>, which required all students in the cities to go out to the countryside to learn from the 'true workers'. Socialist values could not be reached through books, only hard work. What followed was persecution of all perceived 'anti-revolutionary forces', and unknown numbers of academics were systematically executed or sent to labour camps to be 're-educated' (Spence, 1991). The radicalism of the revolution also temporarily ended formal education in China, by removing exams and devaluing higher education (Murphy, 2004:6). It was not until after 1976 that China began to restore its educational system under the parole: 'strengthening the country through the promotion of science, technology and education' (Bai, 2006:138).

As a part of president Deng Xiaoping's 'opening up and reform' - *gaige kaifang* - in the 1980's, several large societal reforms were implemented. In 1995 the *danwei* system shifted to a system where state-owned units no longer dominated urban economies due to the shutting down of non-profitable companies, migrants moved to cities in search of work, and college graduates looked for employment on their own instead of receiving state-directed job assignments<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, in 1999 the Chinese government decided to open up the educational system, increasing the enrolment by 40%, and making higher education more accessible through marketization (Bai, 2006:131). At the same time there was more focus on *suzhi jiaoyu* - education for quality - throughout the educational system. This was supposed to reflect old Confucian thoughts of the improvement of the human quality, and thereby the state, which will be discussed in chapter two.

As a result of the reforms in the 1990's there was once again a widespread belief in credentials as a means for social mobility in China. Both parents and the state were doing their best to cultivate their children to improve or maintain their social standing in what was

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<sup>4</sup> The majority of graduates today are children of the 'Cultural Revolution' generation and many argue that they have to make up for their parents lost dreams, hence the strong focus on education (Croll, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> This 'shattering of the iron rice bowl' also had consequences for the millions of workers who were thought to have secured 'cradle to grave' welfare, which now resulted in the first wave of unemployment in post-Mao China (Hughes, 1998).

becoming a gradually more competitive society<sup>6</sup> (Stockman, 2000, Kipnis, 2003, Fong, 2004). At the same time young people's attitudes toward education have changed along with the role of the universities and the market. The relatively few, hardworking students that made it to college in the 1990s knew they would not be assigned to a workplace for life. Instead they were armed with their diplomas and knowledge that they were the highest educated persons in China, supported by a country who relied on their knowledge to become modern (Hoffman, 2010). They had, and still have their own visions of success and expected some kind of capital remuneration from their educational credentials. Yet, this did not necessarily coincide with university or state policies 'encouraging graduates to return home or with employers' definitions of quality and assets' (Hoffman, 2010:47).

At the same time as education is viewed as a possible stepping stone up the social hierarchy, it has also been seen as a key factor to 'civilize' the rural areas. As we will get back to in chapter two there has for long been a division in the population where rural China has been the 'inappropriate other', which the modern, urban China mirrors itself against. A side effect of this dualism has been the favouring of cities as working places in what Hoffman (2001) labelled a 'hierarchy of desire', where 'the cities are, through social imaginaries linked to cultural ideals of civility, progress, and opportunity' (Hoffman, 2001:45). This might explain why rural graduates want to move to certain cities, get certain kinds of jobs, construct particular urban identities and consume things of the urban sphere as was the case of the rural graduates I met in Xiwang Cun outside Beijing. I now turn to describe some characteristics of this diverse group of rural graduates that are migrating to the cities hoping to find new opportunities and to improve themselves.

### **Rural graduates in urban areas**

‘宁要北京一张床，不要外地一套房’  
‘Rather have a bed in Beijing, than a suite in the outlands’  
Saying amongst rural graduates in Xiwang Cun

I started this introduction by saying that my focus for this thesis is rural graduates migrating to the cities, in particular to Xiwang Cun outside Beijing. It is very hard to find the exact sources of the unemployment rate for graduate students in China. However, estimates shows

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<sup>6</sup> Some have argued that education has become such an important part of the society, because: 'Confucian tradition that stresses child-centred values have promoted a sense that the family is the most reliable "welfare agency" for its members' (Rich and Tsui, 2002 in Liu, 2008a:194).

that there are approximately 1 million graduates living all over the country in urban villages<sup>7</sup>, 100.000 of these are in Beijing. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter rural graduates migrating to the cities and ending up underemployed is a recent phenomenon so little have been written about this issue yet. The only example of any academic work is to my knowledge the book 'The Ant Tribe' (Lian, 2009). 'The ant tribe' is a nature metaphor created by Lian to describe the many similarities between ants and the hardworking graduate, living in urban villages under poor living conditions and struggling to get by despite having an education. His description of the hardship that the students endure became a big hit in both national and international media in 2009. Likewise, it was also a reminder to the Chinese government on the growing unemployment challenge the country was facing. Even if it is a catchy metaphor, I will refrain from using it in this thesis as I argue in chapter two that this label makes it easier to connect the rural graduates with something that is 'out of control' and that need help to become 'civilized'. Furthermore, as migrants the rural graduates are not entitled to the same legal rights as permanent urban residents and they experience pervasive discrimination. Thus I believe to use the notion of an 'ant tribe' re-establishes the 'otherness' of people migrating to the city. Moreover, and maybe most important, is that neither my interlockers nor any of the people that I met during my fieldwork referred to themselves as 'ants' or considered any belonging to an 'ant tribe'.

Certain characteristics have been set by Lian (2009) for the group of rural graduates based on his survey from 2007-2009. First of all they have a full degree, either bachelor or masters, from college or university. Second of all they earn less than 2000 Yuan<sup>8</sup> a month, which is less than an average migrant wage. Thirdly, the average age is between 22-28 years old, of which 90% are of the 80's generation. Lastly, they often live in peri-urban areas in urban villages where the cost of living is low. These characteristics are useful to get an understanding of rural graduates. Nevertheless, I often found during my fieldwork that educational level and economic income did not always correspond to the extremely diverse categories that rural graduates in Beijing find themselves in. Some people had higher education from private institutions, while others had different vocational training, and they all considered themselves to be educated people. Also the division between someone who earned 2000 Yuan and someone who earned 3000 Yuan was small when taken in the context of their social standing. The fact that they lived in Xiwang Cun was maybe the biggest similarity

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<sup>7</sup> Urban village is a form of informal settlement, either in or on the fringe of the city, which I will come back to in chapter one.

<sup>8</sup> 2000 Yuan = ca 1870 NOK

between them. To sum up, my main objection to the characteristics set above is that rural graduates are a categorization of people with very diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds, who live and interact with non-educated migrants, making also them a natural part of my 'field', though not my main focus.

The family backgrounds of the rural graduates were often the same. Either they had parents who were farmers or migrants, or had parents that could be classified as below 'middle class', by this I mean neither farmer nor migrants. Initially education had been a way for their parents to invest in their future security, but also a way for the graduates themselves 'to get somewhere', and 'to improve themselves'. But as Bourdieu (1984) suggest in his work from France, sometimes there are no correlations between the different capitals, higher education does not necessarily lead to economic capital in terms of prestige and authority. This was also the case for my interlockers. As mentioned above, a university graduate's start-up salary is on average 2000 Yuan a month. A migrant worker without the same qualifications often earns the same and in some cases more, with an average of around 2500-3000 Yuan a month. This has made people ask themselves whether it was worth all that time at university when they were losing out on the labour market against migrant workers who have more work experience than them.

During my fieldwork I always asked people why they had decided to migrate to the city. Everyone replied that they came to find work, but also that it was important for them to experience the city<sup>9</sup>. Their urban desires could not be achieved from their rural villages therefore the possibility to migrate to the city was a chance they did not want to miss. Because of this it was not, at least in the beginning, so important what kind of job they got or how high their salary was. This is similar to what Hoffman (2001) describes from Dalian, where newly graduated students preferred being in the city where the opportunities were perceived to be plentiful and this also gave them a chance to be in an environment where one were more likely to succeed in the labour market.

While the initial perception of the city as being full of opportunities and the only place where rural graduates felt they could follow their dreams, this picture quickly lost its gloss. Many of my interlockers later confided in me that the jobs they had were both tiring and boring, and they often wanted to go back home to their places of origin. I argue that upon arriving in the city they would often be faced with what I call a 'double exclusion'. First of

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<sup>9</sup> Yan (2009) also makes similar observations in his work when he asked his informants, who were 'normal' migrants, what was the point of coming to the cities when they could barely make it? 'In their own words; it is to 'kan shijie', and 'zhang jianshi' (to see the world and to enrich one's knowledge and experience)' (ibid. , 2009: xxviii:)



all, many were told that their university degrees were not of the quality expected for the jobs they applied for. That is to say that the diploma from a provincial university did not possess the same status as for example a diploma from one of the more recognized universities in the big cities. Second of all, there remains a strong preconception of the influence your birth place has on your character in China. Strong stereotypes have developed based on where people are from, people of certain provinces are considered to be thieves or lazy, while others are looked upon as more bright and clever<sup>10</sup>. Often this is called *wenhua suzhi*- cultural quality, and can be compared to social capital described by Bourdieu (1984). The notion of *suzhi*- human quality- and its implication for China's modernization will be elaborated in chapter two, and this I shall also return to in a couple of pages.

The consequences of the two factors described above have led to a situation where rural graduates often end up at the bottom of the social hierarchy arriving in the cities. Without the right social capital they cannot get access to the white collar labour market and as more migrants arrive in the city the pressure on the job market increases. The result is that many of them end up with unstable short-term jobs, long working hours and low salaries. Therefore, working in cities does not necessarily bring much financial gain for the rural students. Moreover many of my interlockers seemed to consume almost all of their salary in an attempt to blend in with the urban lifestyle<sup>11</sup>. In addition the majority of the rural graduates that I met did not send money back to their parents, because they did not earn enough to support themselves, and some even received monetary support from their parents in the countryside. The consequence of the changing patterns of money remittance is something we will come back to in chapter five.

It is important to consider the historical background for the discourses on modernity and human quality in China to understand the present and the future expectations of the students. Thus, I now outline my theoretical framework based on the works of Foucault and his ideas on 'governmentality'(2003[1978]), before applying the complimentary position of the individualization thesis proposed by Beck (1992) and revised by Yan (2009) to fit Chinese conditions. These analytical perspectives will be useful tools in grasping why the graduates blame themselves for their failures and successes, instead of the party-state, and how new

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<sup>10</sup> Stereotypes like this can be found everywhere in the world, but in China there are very strong notions about the connection between place of birth and your character. Some informants of mine claimed that since they were born in the same place as Confucius this automatically had a positive impact on their nature. This was confirmed by other people present around the table that were envying her for her good background. Moreover, the perception of who could be identified as the 'bad wolf' also changed from province to province.

<sup>11</sup> This is also observed by Yan (2009) among young villagers migrating to the cities.

tools of government have been developed and how they have pushed modern subjects in China to realize individualistic qualities.

### **State and governmentality**

I argue that my ethnographic account of Chinese rural graduates challenge the frequently repeated mantra of Western discourses on post-socialist transition; with an opening of the market and a capitalistic market system people will be 'free' from the 'sticky chains' of the state. As recent studies on dwindling post-socialist states and daily news reports from former socialist satellites show it is necessary to question this linear transitional development story, as the complexities and uncertainties of culturally specific constellations and power organizations are surfacing in these transitional societies. Instead of taking for granted the above mentioned assumptions some are arguing that while the state retreat, it is being replaced by the market, and that we are in some areas witnessing emerging modes of social domination, strong political tensions, fragmenting national-states, and in the most extreme cases, ethnic cleansing<sup>12</sup>.

The previously mentioned reforms by Deng Xiaoping led Western countries both hoping and expecting that by raising the bamboo curtain increased individual freedom from the state would occur, which in turn could also mean democratic political reforms. A closer look at empirical works on China from the last 15-20 years reveals a different story. Since the 80's many scholars have analysed the symbolic processes and every day practises that attempt to bring the 'state' back in society, and arguing that the 'state' is still present through different levels in society despite the introduction of the market (Zhang, 2001b). Pieke (2004) have also states that the Chinese state should not be taken as something above society. It should be investigated as an actor of power and authority that is successful in creating unity or separateness, and is a practical reality in people`s everyday life (Pieke, 2004:518). However, he is also criticising scholars like Gupta (1995), Ferguson and Gupta (2002) and Trouillot (2001) for imagining the state as a loose system of bureaucratic rules that have been shaped through historical discourses (Pieke, 2004:518). I agree with Pieke and therefore ground my analysis on how the state is practised rather focusing on it as a set entity. This allows us to study the state at the intersections at places like Xiwang Cun where the state is seemingly not present, but where we still can analyse how it works through the individuals. This will be very important for me in this thesis as both Hoffman (2010) and Rofel (1999) points out that rather

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Burawoy and Verdery (1999), Soliman (2011), Hoffman (2010) and Sigley (2006).

than experiencing strong state-directed governance in the management of the population there is now an adoption of new tools of governance encouraging self-governance (Hoffman, 2010:9-10, Rofel, 1999). As a result of the theoretical quandaries above, I find it necessary to view the dialectic relationship between my interlockers in Xiwang Cun and the state as ‘a fluid process of discourse and practice’ (Yan, 2009:14).

Employing the concept of governmentality developed by Foucault (2003[1978]) will be a particularly useful approach as this will help to move beyond some of the traditional dichotomies of the state, and will also allow the discovery of forms of power that conventional state-centric approaches miss (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005:205). By governmentality I mean:

the conduct of conduct- that is, to all those more or less calculated and systematic ways of thinking and acting that aim to shape, regulate, or manage the comportment of others (...). Understood this way, “government” designates not just the activities of the state and its institutions but more broadly any rational effort to influence or guide the conduct of human beings through acting upon their hopes, desires, circumstances, or environment.

(Inda, 2005:2)

Even if Foucault as a philosopher based his notion of governmentality on the history of Europe many scholars have found it useful as an analytical tool in the case of China<sup>13</sup>. I argue in chapter two that the party-state has shifted its way of governing from direct intervention in the population to creating self-governed individuals. This has been made possible through the disintegration of the *danwei* system, mentioned earlier, where university graduates along with the rest of the work force were assigned jobs. Today on the other hand the students are encouraged to seek their own opportunities in the growing economy of China ‘creating their own rice bowls’ (Hoffman, 2010).

### **Self-conduct and *suzhi*- human quality**

In today’s China there is an expectation of the subject to focus on being the self-enterprising individual who is rational, autonomous and free to choose whatever he or she wants. Yet, the formation of this new, modern subject in post-Mao China does not signify the end of governmental concern. As we learnt earlier young educated people’s visions of success and what to do was not always the same as what the party-state wanted them to do. As the market

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Ong (1999), Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005), Hoffman (2010) and Jacka (2006).

opened up with the liberalization process in the 1980's it created a potential problem for the public morality as it could be degraded in the meeting with capitalism. The party-leaders worried that this could have a domino-effect on China's march towards progress and modernity, according to Bakken (2000:110-114). It therefore became important for the government to create new tools of government that could guide the graduates in internalizing the state demands for social stability to ensure economic growth, also called 'socialism from afar' (Zhang and Ong, 2008).

Now, a person with modern qualities should both embody the values of a free neoliberal subject; such as striving forwards, be competitive and independent, and at the same time possess the collectivistic values of socialism (Liu, 2008a:196-197). As have been noted by Hoffman (2010) this kind of regime presupposes an authority of the party-state to guide and help the individuals in their construction of a high quality self. This tool of governing by encouraging self-governance can be understood through another concept created by Foucault, namely 'technologies of the self'(2003[1978]). This concept refers to 'self-steering mechanisms, or the ways in which individual's experience, understand, judge and conduct themselves' (Rose, 1996:135). Yet, Rose (1996) points out that this should be interpreted in the direction that the subjects are caught up in an Foucaultian web, without any means to resist or react (1996:140). Liu (1998) expands on this and note that it rather 'opens up potential spaces for individuals, who are active agents, to reinterpret, play with, combine, resist or accept the multiple technologies of subjectification simultaneously directed to them' (2008:195). I argue that this concept of self-governance gives us an excellent opening to understand how young, rural graduates in Beijing experience, react, relate to and shape their choices and challenges in Xiwang Cun.

I argue in this thesis that self-governance have to be viewed in relation to the term *suzhi*. Hard to translate and its meaning differ according to the context it is applied to, but in its most crude translation it can be understood as human quality. According to Kipnis (2006) *suzhi* has both Confucian and Social Darwinist associations. Confucianism has from early on highlighted education as a tool to raise the moral quality of the individual, while in the other sense, as also Anagnost (1997) describes, there is the logic of China's population holding the party-state back from reaching modernity and it is therefore important to raise the populations quality, especially the younger generation (Kipnis, 2006:10). This has also made the individuals responsible for the future of the nation, and 'that a person lacks 'quality' is often connected to the respective background of the subjects as 'peasants' or other 'uncultured' people' (Kipnis, 2006:11). Hence, the individual has a personal responsibility to improve

itself to raise not only one's own quality, but also the nation's quality. This is something that we will get back to in chapter two when we analyse the discourses that have constructed these notions.

Today, the term *suzhi* is frequently used within the political and academic elite to evaluate individuals' attributes along a low and high-quality scale, which had implications for one's worth. The result is that *suzhi* is increasingly connected to the maximization of capabilities and values of the human body (Liu 2008:197), which then again are connected to academic-attributes (Bakken, 2000, Fong, 2004). Moreover, in line with the educational reforms that we looked into earlier, there has been a rush to attain diplomas from higher-education institutions in the reform era followed by high expectations of where their papers can lead them on the social ladder.

To sum up, the party-state is only providing tools for the individuals to reach their goals in becoming good neoliberal subjects. However, since the individual have been given the freedom of choice they are also solely responsible for both their successes and failures. As long as the party-state is improving the conditions for its population and providing the tools for further cultivation, the individual should have full faith in the state as well, because it is through the individuals' own cultivation that China can reach civilization and modernity. This creates two systems with conflicting values, which also embrace and frame the life situation of the rural graduates in Xiwang Cun. We learn more about the discourse of modernity and quality in China in chapter two, which lay the foundation for the rest of the thesis as we follow the rural graduates on different arenas.

With our now increased understanding of governmentality and human conduct in China I move on to outline the individualization thesis proposed by Beck (1992) and modified by Yan (2009, 2010). I argue that this is a fruitful approach in recognizing the implications of expectations of individual freedom, actions and choices made by rural graduates in negotiation with the state and the emergence of new collectives, as I show in chapter five.

### **The individualization thesis**

The typical picture of China for many people is a collectively, uniform mass of people governed with an iron fist; the opposite of that is defined as the free, individualistic Western individual. Traditionally, China has been theoretized as a collective society<sup>14</sup> where the interests of the collective were placed higher than the individuals. The individual was

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Hsu (1948)

considered to be a brick in the larger, collective puzzle ideologically supporting the family and thereby the state, not *visa versa* (Yan, 2009). Moreover, the individual have been understood as an extension of its family and kin-relations in a concentric network, not as a single social unit on its own (Fei et al., 1992). Much water has passed under the bridge since then and today the situation is different and what is considered to be close relations are changing, as I demonstrate in chapter five. The individual is now promoted as an independent social unit in China, but how are we to understand this apparent shift from the collective to the individual? I argue the individualization thesis can provide us with some analytical tools which are useful when considering this transformation.

A theoretical approach to the individualization process can be traced back to the end of the 1970`s in Europe where one tried to explain individualization as a result of the social processes taking place. People were pushing for social justice and rights for the individual protected by a democracy, and taken care of by the welfare state. Beck (1992) sees individualization as ‘the beginning of a *new mode of societalization*, a kind of “metamorphosis” or “categorical shift” in the relation between the individual and society’ (1992:127[original emphasis]), which have disembedded and liberated the individual from former traditional categories like family and kin-relations, class and gender. Expanding on this model of individualization Beck together with Beck-Gernsheim (2002) takes into account a structural aspect in which this process does not take place through the agency of the individual, hence arguing that; ‘One of the decisive features of the process of individualization is precisely that it not merely permits but demands an active contribution by individuals’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010:xi). This is also one of my main arguments throughout this thesis, as the rural graduates are participating in the urban society, caught up in discourses on modernity and population quality they are not only trying to disembed themselves from their rural roots but also trying to reembed into the urban and global culture.

According to Yan (2010) the individualization thesis can be summed up in four points; (1) a disembedding from cultural traditions like for example family, kinship and community, (2) compelling people to be proactive and self-determinate with full responsibility for themselves, paradoxically creating a deeper embedment into the overarching institutions, (3) individuals must construct a life though guidelines and regulations, hence a life of conformity, and lastly (4) ‘cultural democratization’ which means that democracy is accepted and practised in everyday relations (Yan, 2010:4). This said, how fitting is the European model in the case of China, where one has not experienced the same socio-political processes?

## A rising individual

Chinese individualization process has its own distinctive profile: it does not simply represent a copy of the European path of individualization but must be understood as Chinese-style individualization

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:xviii)

There is, in principle, a close connection between individualization and the state in both the European and the Chinese contexts. Though, unlike the West where the market functioned as the primary mover behind the rise of the individual and the transformation of the private sphere into a more intimate domain, in China it had been the party-state that created such changes by enforcing a number of top-down institutional changes to build the new socialist person and society. The role of the party-state in shaping the individual remained strong and consistent across the dividing year of 1978, albeit in different forms and in different directions before and after the post-Mao reforms. The individual arose by responding to these institutional changes rather than pursuing her or his inalienable right through a bottom-up approach. As a result, while taking advantage of the new laws, state policies and institutional changes, individuals have accepted that constraints imposed by the party-state and have internalized the party-state's proscribed directions for the development of the individual under state socialism. The entire process can be called 'managed individualization' (Yan, 2009:xxxix).

The individualization process in China is not occurring within an institutionally secured framework and based on the civil, political and basic social rights which were won through political struggles as happened in Europe. Instead the very thing which sets the Chinese process of individualization apart is the fact that these goals are still objects of struggles whose outcomes remain open. Furthermore, there is a difference between individualism and individualization in China. While individualization of the Chinese society is a process which forces a disembedding of the individuals into a new, self-reflexive, reembedded institutionalized reality, it does not necessarily mean that Chinese have become more individualized in the European sense. This sets the baseline for my thesis where I, through analysing my ethnographic material from Xiwang Cun, argue that while we can observe a rising individual it is not automatically followed by an individualization of Chinese society, creating a 'Chinese style of individualisation' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010:xviii). I outline and analyse these processes of a rising individual on several levels; the development and negotiation of the individual self in the meeting with the urban in chapter

three, the individual constructing and consuming a urban membership through new social spaces in chapter four, and lastly in *chapter five the disembodiment from external social constraints*.

## Methodology

This thesis is based on a six months anthropological fieldwork in Beijing, China. Having studied and worked in the country three years prior to starting my master`s program I had already built up a network before leaving Norway. One month was spent on preliminary research in Shanghai and Beijing, where I had worked and lived for one year and half a year respectively. This preliminary research was conducted to map out where I could get the best access, and what areas would answer my research questions in the best possible way. After deciding on Beijing due to its unique position in geopolitics in China, I spent the last five months in Xiwang Cun, an urban village of rural migrants and graduates on the fringe of the capital.

I hoped to get in contact with potential interlockers through applying the snowballing method using my existing network, but I soon realized that I additionally needed to seek other ways to establish contact. Almost everyone I knew, and their extended network, was aware of the phenomenon I was talking about, but nobody seemed to know any anything more about the rural graduates. The ‘invisible’ presence is a suitable picture of how the millions of migrants living in Beijing are thought of. Since it took some time before I ‘found my field’ I considered other alternatives for my research. There were many stories about ‘the rat tribe’, migrants living in basements and air-defence shelters under substandard living conditions, and I did undertake a couple of surveys, but after being refused to enter different basements by old women guarding the entrances I discarded the idea.

In order to get in contact with potential informants I eventually got a job through contacts in a Chinese research and development company which worked on outsourced projects from big international companies. It is outside the scope of this thesis to elaborate on the broader picture of the information acquired through this work, but it has still provided me with important information on the situation young migrants are facing in Beijing today, their motivation for coming and the nuances between my main informants in Xiwang Cun and the view on Xiwang Cun from the outside.

Moreover, I had several friends and contacts working in media related businesses. They provided me with interesting angles to the thesis and one of them also introduced me to Xiwang Cun. This person was doing research for a follow up on Tangjialing, the urban village



described in chapter one. By being ‘introduced’ to parts of Xiwang Cun through him I was able to establish some contacts that were later to become my interlockers.

In Xiwang Cun I conducted participant observation through following my interlockers on different arenas and places, joining them in their daily chores, sometimes helping out in the different shops, going out for dinners and so on. I quickly realised that I could obtain more information through engaging in conversations and chores with my interlockers, than through organizing interviews. However, since many looked at me as a teacher there were many situations that had the form like semi-structured interviews with open ended questions. I had a small black book which served as a note book where I occasionally wrote down keywords from conversations or got my interlockers to write down things when I did not understand them correctly. In addition to being useful notes when writing up my field notes in the evening, I would also argue that it created a more vertical relationship between me and them. This also means that since most of the quotations found in my thesis are based on these notes from semi-structured interviews and open-ended conversations they are not written down in the exact manner as they were uttered, but I would argue that they are still very close to the actual conversations. To protect my interlockers, their names and the names of places are changed throughout the thesis.

I also engaged passively in Chinese chat forums and web pages designed for, or created by rural graduates in China. This allowed me to gain a greater insight into topics that mattered for the rural graduates as well as to gain more information on the general situation of graduates in China. Later the chat forum also became a way for me to keep in contact with some of my interlockers.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with relevant actors within state institutions were conducted in Beijing. In addition I have also drawn on material such as written reports, documents, newspaper articles, and so on to gain a broader understanding of the public discourse and representation of migrants, and in particular rural graduates.

### **Limitations and advantages in the field**

The site of my fieldwork was an urban village which was viewed by the Chinese authorities as an unwanted product of the urbanization and market reforms. As a result, my study was considered something important to know more about, but it was also situated in the grey zone of what was politically acceptable and not. This was particularly the issue after Tangjialing<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A previous urban village of rural graduates that we will learn more about in chapter one.

was torn down and the Arabic spring movement evolved in the Middle East. The problematic situation of the graduates made my ethnographic account even more politicized. This became even clearer in conversations with representatives from the Chinese ministry who viewed my research with great interest, but considered my theme to balance on the edge of what was ok or not from an official point of view. Since I was not affiliated with any official Chinese institution or university this also proved to be a problem of accountability for them. As an outsider this could pose a potential threat if I found something that put the government in an unfavourable light. Halskov Hansen (2006) points out that there are many positive effects of having affiliations with local institutions, since it is easier to gain access to libraries, official archive material, possible support from local cadres and access to interviewing officials. This said, this kind of official approval, if I had gotten one, could have introduced me to the above mentioned spheres, but would not necessarily have opened any doors among my interlockers who almost exclusively were illegal subjects in the city and thereby might have been ‘scared off’ by official red stamps.

When entering the field several challenges arose. The rental market in Xiwang Cun was already saturated due to the continuous stream of rural graduates seeking cheap accommodation, but I was lucky to meet a landlord on my first day that agreed to rent me a room once he had something available. He almost bragged that he was one of the few that could rent out to foreigners since he had good connections-*guanxi*, with the local police. Two weeks later I moved in on the condition that I did not speak with or ask any questions to anyone in my building. Normally anyone moving around or visiting China should always register at the police in less than 24 hours upon arrival. This was not the practice in Xiwang Cun. I, for example, was only registered in the accounts of my landlord, which also was the case of other people I met. This arrangement made it easier for both the migrants to move on short notice without having to report to the police, and apparently the police would get reports from the landlords on how many people they rented out their rooms to, which resulted in less work for them. I also argue that this actually led me to a better understanding of my interlockers situation, since I was also ‘floating’ and got to experience how the informal arrangements were undertaken in Xiwang Cun. Since it took me almost a month to ‘find’ Xiwang Cun I had already established a base at the centre of Beijing where I was registered with the police, so all the official papers were in order. Moreover, this also provided me with a place of retreat as well as being a more practical base whenever I was meeting contacts from outside Xiwang Cun.

Once I had established my field, I realized the difficulty in creating and finding suitable ‘meeting places’ with potential informants. As a researcher without a locally recognized productive role, I felt awkward in the beginning approaching people on the street. Still, after hanging out in the same areas day after day trying to establish contact with people my efforts proved fruitful. People started to ask me questions on where I was from and what I was doing in the area. In this process I managed to establish a role for myself in the community and as I got included in my interlockers’ networks other people also accepted my presence. Moreover, I would sometimes look after my informants shops while they were away, or help out with the handling money for others and so on, which would also create interview settings that proved more rewarding than the more formal situations. For some people I was the first Westerner they had seen and many were completely dumb-struck when they also realized that I spoke Chinese. Many people I met, including many of my informants, commented on this when we got to know each other better. They were curious to know what was “normal” in the West, how do you this and how do you do that. This also gave some people the opportunity to show that they knew more than others and that I could either confirm or deny what they were saying. In many situations I became the one that gave face to my informants in the meeting with people above or amongst peers showing that they were knowledgeable people.

Depending on the context, I was sometimes a casual English teacher to some of the interlockers, which gave me an excellent opportunity to ask questions in a natural setting, while other times especially in the later part my fieldwork I would often be referred to as *lao pengyou*-old friend- by some informants, symbolizing a closer and older connection. Others, especially some of the boys I hung out with, would call me *jiejie*, older sister. This created roles that made our interaction more natural for third parties as well as justifying why I was associating with them. I believe that had I been younger, in most cases I was the same or a couple of year older than my informants, this would have posed a challenge for me hanging alone together with boys. Furthermore, there were incidents where my informants constructed a common history to validate and make our relationship more legit for other people that did not know us. In China the concept of *guanxi*, or networks, is something that stands strong (see for example Yang 1996, Kipnis 2003). And, as in most human relationships, reciprocity is important, meaning that they are all to a certain degree based on some kind of mutual understanding that both parties will benefit in some way. However, for my interlockers I soon proved to be ‘empty *guanxi*’ since I did not have any network they could use and I did not want to start business with them in Norway. What I could give them was language lessons

and the social status of having me (a Westerner) as a friend or in their network. I was still a symbol of the West and the modern, which sometimes put me in awkward positions where I felt I had to maintain the face of informants that stood in a horizontal relationship to each other.

On a couple of occasions I was also accused of having an agenda other than doing fieldwork. On some of these occasions it was because I had such a good understanding of local conditions and knew things that foreigners were not supposed to know about. This could be simple things like geographical knowledge, Chinese proverbs or awareness of local conditions in China that were due to my previous years of experience in China. But to some I was simply too knowledgeable and hence in several instances had to deflect accusations of being a spy.

One of the reasons I picked Beijing over Shanghai was the language. Even if I had worked in Shanghai a year earlier, I had only managed to pick up some phrases of the local dialect/language, and I was afraid that with migrants coming from the surrounding provinces language would be a barrier for me. Furthermore, I had worked in Beijing for half a year on an earlier occasion and therefore knew from experience that it was much easier to get around there with my mandarin- *Putonghua* (book language), than in Shanghai. Since I had studied in Yunnan for 1 ½ years I held a high level of Chinese, and therefore managed well without a translator, as people were also more than happy to explain words to me if I did not understand. Furthermore, some of my main informants happened to come from Yunnan where I had lived earlier, so I could understand and speak some of the local dialect from that area. This, combined with my local knowledge of their homes, created a stronger connection between us.

Finally, being a young, single woman alone in an urban village can bring about some challenges when ‘working the field’. Often, and especially in the beginning, since I was alone and eager to talk to people, men that I met often mistook me as coming on to them, since traditionally women in their perception were not supposed to interact or approach strangers. This could only mean one thing and that was, despite my continuous explanation that I was an anthropology student interested in the situation of rural graduates, that I was searching for romance. Zhang also notes this challenge from her fieldwork in Zhejiang Cun, an earlier migrant enclave in Beijing, and how; ‘Even as an ethnographer, I could not escape the local assumption about gendered boundaries and moral codes’ (Zhang, 2001b:216).

## What follows

My line of approach in the chapters to follow begins with an introduction of Xiwang Cun an urban village in chapter one, home for thousands of rural graduates in the peri-urban area of Beijing. The village characteristics and organizational structures are described, as well as the brief discussion on the spatial ambiguity that Xiwang Cun is seen as representing in relations to modern Beijing. In chapter 2 I focus on the state and look at how the two discourses civilization –*wenming*- modernity and human quality –*suzhi* have been constructed and understood by the party-state. I demonstrate how the media, who represent the state, then, communicate the situation with underemployed rural graduates in the city. In chapter three I change my perspective from a top-down to a bottom-up approach and focus on the individuals in Xiwang Cun. Here I analyse how state politics of human quality have been internalized by my interlockers and is reflected in their quest to ‘improve themselves’ and how their social identity is negotiated on different arenas. Chapter four shows how consumption of places has become an important marker of urban belonging. By focusing on the introduction of fast-food chains in China I analyse the negotiation of an urban and global identity which is ‘self-made’. From here, I change focus to the everyday realities on the ground for the rural graduates. We follow the process of establishing a business in Xiwang Cun and how the notion of becoming a successful ‘petty trader’, both embodies the rural graduates negotiations of ‘improving themselves’, as well as it reflects the changing the role of family and kin as providing and arranging for the self-realization of the individual. Finally, in the last I highlight some arguments and observations that have been central throughout this thesis.

# 1 Xiwang Cun – an urban village

Beijing, January 2011. It was still cold as I walked through the vast, apocalyptic landscape of the former urban village Tangjialing. The sound of scavengers hammering on piles of debris from the previous settlement could be heard from a distance. A stray dog barked at me as I passed a lonely, red banner hanging between two trees, promoting: ‘peaceful development and civilized society’.

Tangjialing had during the last five years grown from being a small village of 3000 locals, exploding into a bustling hive of more than 50.000 migrants in 2010 (Lian, 2009). The majority of the newcomers were rural graduate students who had moved to the city to seek new opportunities. In general, urban villages like Tangjialing are a growing phenomenon in large cities in China and they have created many controversies in city development projects over the last decade (Tian, 2008:283, Liu et al., 2010, Zhang et al., 2003). What was special with Tangjialing, however, was the media attention it got both from national and international media in the wake of the book ‘The Ant Tribe- a record of a village inhabited by university graduates’ (Lian, 2009). In 2010 the book topped the best-seller list in China. It described a reality that would have been unimaginable only a decade earlier; groups of rural university graduates flocked to the cities with their diplomas in search of a job and a better future. Unfortunately for most of them this meant living a life in the urban villages in the peri-urban areas of the city with unsanitary conditions and often with underpaid jobs or in the worst case –no jobs at all. Despite all this they kept on living in the city, struggling like ants to improve their lives, hence the label ‘The Ant Tribe’.

Local government officials soon understood the serious knock-on effects this could had on both their political reputation as well as the social stability of the society. In November 2010 two government officials visited Tangjialing and publicly cried with the graduate students over the struggles and hardships they were going through. They promised to help as best they could and showed them support in their quest for a better life and future (CCTV, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2010). December 2010 the local government stated that Tangjialing would be renovated due to substandard living conditions, citing the risk of fire and other unforeseen accidents (China Daily, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2011). In clear text this meant that the settlement would be demolished and the people living there would be forced to move. The potential threat of having a whole village of graduates, gathered in one place was seen as too urgent to leave ‘unattended’.

Through this chapter I give an overview of the emergence of urban villages in China, before describing Xiwang Cun, an urban village on the outskirts of Beijing and the destination for many previous residents of Tangjialing. Through the model of Xiwang Cun I outline the characteristics of what is defined as an urban village<sup>16</sup> and how daily life is lived there. I also discuss shortly how urban villages have come to be highly contested urban spaces of power and representation. This forms the backdrop for our understanding of the rural graduates' lives, choices and actions in the following chapters of this thesis.

### Conceptualisation of urban villages in China

As outlined in the introduction the evolving migration policies in China together with an opening up of the market made it easier for people to seek their fortune in the cities. The country's recent, rapid entry into the global system under its unique combination of socialism and a market economy have led to the growth of urban villages<sup>17</sup>. These villages are in Chinese called *chengzhongcun*, literally meaning 'village'<sup>18</sup> encircled by the city'. Qi et al. (2007:28) conceptualise the *chengzhongcun* 'urban village' in China as 'rural enclaves situated inside large cities or in their peri-urban areas characterized by high building densities, poor building quality, irregular streets and open sewage', while Zhang defines it as 'an informal settlement sheltering rural migrants, conceptualising them as a micro-sites of political and economic interactions where government and various social groups compete for their vested interests' (Zhang, 2011:475). In this thesis I employ 'urban village' as translation for *chengzhongcun*, to encompass the definitions of both Qi et al. (2007) and Zhang (2011) in the understanding of what an urban village is. Moreover, Qi et al.(2007) argue that since the word 'slum' is not used in China<sup>19</sup> it is replaced by the more politically correct term urban village, which 'does bear some truth, since the places are not strictly speaking slums' (Qi et al., 2007:28).

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<sup>16</sup> The concept of urban villages in China should not be confused with the western planning idea of 'urban villages', where one wishes to create a village feeling in the context of an urban city as see in Western countries(see for example Bell and Jayle (2004) or Magnaghi (2005). Nor are the urban village described here similar to the social model villages described by Chance (1991) .

<sup>17</sup> That is not too say that migrant enclaves are something new in Chinas's history as they did also exist in pre-1949 Chinese cities, but because of migration control, new migrant enclaves did not appear until after the first three decades of socialist rule in China, according to Ma and Xiang (1998:546)

<sup>18</sup> Li (2006) in Li (2008:28) claim that these places are only "villages' insofar that they are places where the title to the land still belongs to a collective'.

<sup>19</sup> Qi et al. (2007:28 ) also claim that the word slum does not exist in any official Chinese dictionary and that is another reason why it is not used.

In the UN-habitat report ‘The challenge of slums’ (2003), cited by Qi et al. (2007:24) and Davis (2006), it is said that China ‘has managed so far to urbanize rapidly without the creation of large slum areas or informal settlements’ (2003:126)<sup>20</sup>. Even if urban villages in China have developed under unique conditions, it still shares some similarities with other developing countries containing informal settlements, in that they are viewed as ‘backward places’ by the city government and as ‘hampering the process of modernization’ (Wu, 2009:887). Gilbert (2007) is also highly critical towards the term slum as he sees it as ‘an oblique invitation to governments to look for instant solutions to insoluble problems’ (2007:697). Besides, he argues, ‘governments have always shown a willingness to demolish slums despite the fact that experience has shown that policy to be ineffective’ (2007:697). In the case of Zhejiang Cun, described by Zhang (2001), it is possible to trace a connection between the labelling of ‘a place in need of renovation’ in providing the government with political incentives to tear down the area in question.

In the last decade the topic of urban villages in China has been described extensively



Figure 1. Urban villages in and around Beijing, capital of the People’s republic of China, 2010.

Source: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/2010-03/12/content\\_9579087.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/2010-03/12/content_9579087.htm)

from different perspectives. Already in 1998 Ma and Xiang (1998) argued that the villages created ‘new ‘urban spaces’ and ‘non-state spaces’ (...) producing a new urban mosaic that did not exist in Maoist China’ (1998:546). Some scholars have provided ethnographic investigations into the relational network between migrants, the government

and the villages in larger cities<sup>21</sup>, others have looked at property rights (Tian, 2008), the housing market, construction work and

sanitary conditions (Wang and Wang, 2009), while some try to show that the urban villages should be seen as a positive aspect of urbanisation in China and a solution rather than a problem (Wang et al., 2009, Ma and Xiang, 1998, Liu et al., 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Qi et al. (2007:30) also argue that urban villages share some important characteristics with informal settlements. ‘The term ‘informal settlement’ can refer to a slum, a squatter, or a shanty town. The criteria applied by the Chinese government define “settlement areas with informal housing”, although this definition does not satisfy all of UN-Habitat’s five indicators. The definition of ‘informal housing- used by the public authorities of the district of Yinzhou is, however, not subject to its physical, but to its legal status.’ Qi et al.(2007:38)

<sup>21</sup> See for example Zhang( 2001b), Ma and Xiang (1998) or Liu and Liang (1997) (1997)



Xiwang Cun and other urban villages are interesting fields of study because they provide us with a picture of some of the challenges China is facing. Since the migrants cannot find a place to stay when they move to the city, urban villages have tacitly been accepted as the solution (Smart, 2001, Zhang, 2011). Smart (2001) describe how ‘the toleration policy’ by the government in Hong Kong has created an ‘informal regulation’ which has led to a ‘vacuum of regulation’, and in turn has resulted in the emergence of an informal property market in the ‘squatter areas’ of Hong Kong (Smart, 2001:41)<sup>22</sup>. According to Liu et al. (2010) this can be seen as positive since; ‘the vacuum of state regulations in the urban villages provides a means of subsistence for landless villagers and low cost housing for migrants’ (Liu et al. 2010, 143.). Hence, instead of tearing down the urban villages to beautify the city and potentially trigger social unrest the areas are ignored and left inside or in the peri-urban areas of the city (Qi et al. 2007:29). This explains why there are still so many urban villages in China and that the government does not need to ‘involve panoptic strategies to know and control all (...), it became possible to ‘govern through rather than in spite of individual liberty’ (Osborne and Rose, 1999:740-741 in Smart, 2001:31).

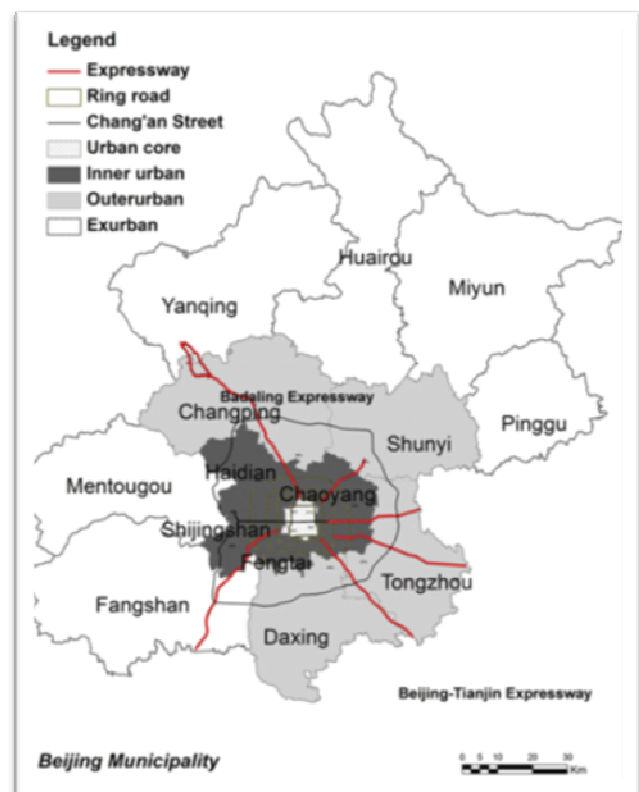


Figure 2. Basic spatial structure of Beijing. Modified from 'Beijing' (Yang et al., 2011)

‘The inner urban includes built-up areas and small non-built up areas. The outer urban is basically rural areas. The exurban is mainly areas far away from the urban core’ (Yang et al., 2011:2).

There is a strong perception of Beijing as the centre for political and cultural affairs, which has resulted in a much stronger over-all regulatory regime than in for example the economical centre of China, Shanghai. This is important to keep in mind since my observations have to be seen in relation to the larger geopolitics of the capital. This is among other things true for the opening up for migrants, where there is a general perception that getting a *hukou*<sup>23</sup>, household residential registration, in Beijing is almost impossible,

<sup>22</sup> Qi et al. (2009) also describes the development happening in the urban villages as ‘an informal element in Chinese urban growth regulation.’ (Qi et al. 2007:29).

<sup>23</sup> Households registration system.

while in Shanghai it is easier to obtain. Beijing is also supposed to be the role model for the rest of China, which is why policies and regulation are, at least on the surface, much better taken care of. In Beijing there are approximately 50 urban villages in and on the outskirts of the city (Figure 1). Due to the changing nature of these settlements, comprehensive studies and surveys of urban villages at a national level are unavailable (Zhang, 2003: 913). The more famous villages used to be Zhejiang Cun, Xinjiang Cun, Henan Cun and Tangjialing before they were demolished. Most of this happened before the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 in ‘the name of disciplining and beautifying urban spaces’ (Zhang, 2011:474). I now zoom in on one of the urban villages in Beijing; Xiwang Cun, the student village.

### **Xiwang Cun**

Xiwang Cun is situated in Changping district in the very north of Beijing. Positioned north of Haidian district, the ‘silicon valley’ of China<sup>24</sup>, Changping district is now striving to become the new innovative centre of Beijing and is trying to take advantage of the ‘spill-over’ effect from Haidian. At the same time offering cheaper locations and benefits for companies that want to establish themselves there.

Xiwang Cun is a collective term for three villages, which have grown together due to rapid urbanization, growing numbers of rural graduate students and the demolition of Tangjialing in December 2010. It is hard to give an exact account of number of people living in Xiwang Cun since few are registered at the police. Though some estimates show that from having almost no migrants before 2009 the population exploded in the following year leading up to the present situation with around 3900 local inhabitants with rural *hukou* registered in Xiwang Cun against approximately 45.000 migrants with *hukou* registered in other places. Hence, there are now 11 times more migrants living in Xiwang Cun than there are native inhabitants. The majority of the migrants are rural graduate students between the age of 18-30 years old, whereas only have a local *hukou* (China Daily, .

Xiwang Cun is an attractive village to settle down in for the rural graduates for many reasons. As mentioned in the beginning the village is close to the high-tech district in Beijing where many of the graduate jobs are found. Moreover, with the introduction of a new metro line last year the area became more accessible and it was easier to commute to other parts of the city. Many graduates that I met and talked to had jobs 1-1/2 hour away, therefore good access to public transportation was important for them. Furthermore, it only takes about 45-50

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<sup>24</sup> Where national and international technological companies from Huawei to Google have their headquarters and also where all the big universities are located.

minutes to get from Xiwang Cun to the Beijing city core with the metro. There is also a bus station close by with routes covering a large part of the city. However, with the increased traffic jams in Beijing the metro was often the preferred means of transportation for those commuting long distances, even if this meant going through the agony of squeezing and pushing in with literally thousands of other people during the rush hours.

The landscape around Xiwang Cun is completely different than what you find in downtown Beijing. It is flat and barren with large highways and the rail road tracks leading out from the capital to the surrounding areas going through?

In the vicinity of Xiwang Cun there is a newly constructed Japanese shopping mall, filled with shops featuring both Chinese and western brands as well as a food court. Most graduates used this place to just to hang out, since the mall was one of the few places for entertainment in the area. Most of the commodities were a little stiff for the wallets of the rural graduates but for the girls it was a popular place to go window-shopping. Next to the shopping mall was a huge construction site with posters covering the fences promoting with big, glossy pictures the new, high-class apartment complexes that were being built. On the opposite side lay the newly built Changping Life Science and Technology Park, which is a centre for newly established companies related to biological and technological research with focus on 'innovation', often reflected in the names of the companies. Many of the offices were still empty during my time there, but they were gradually filling up with new companies.

To get to Xiwang Cun from the metro one had to pass the shopping mall and continue along a mud trail crossing a small field. A large fence was put up between the village and the shopping mall, with two opening where people could go in and out. There was also a river running through the village dividing it in two, but it was only visible when you approached from the outside. Once on the other side of the fence the river had been walled off, though the foul smell it gave off revealed its existence and a constant stench hung over part of the village until it dried out during the summer.

### **Structural organization and daily life**

Xiwang Cun is very different from Beijing proper, mainly because of its lack of urban planning, with an organic and apparently chaotic structure. The whole city, which I never got to explore the full extent of, looked like a labyrinth and it was easy to get lost if you did not know the backstreets. There was trash lying around everywhere, and small garbage dumps were established close to the main intersections. During the period I was in Xiwang Cun there was constant construction, old one-story houses were torn down and new uniform looking

buildings were put up, but also already existing buildings were extended upwards. Most of the buildings had six to seven floors, some looking quite flimsy, while others had the appearance of being prisons from the outside. A completely smooth façade dressed with tiles and fenced windows bore words of the dangers that were perceived to be outside. In a way the housing structure was a form of ‘archisemiotics’ (Davis, 1992) where the landlords owning the houses were trying to protect themselves from the apparent chaos and uncivilized world outside, inscribed in the built environment. The small, dark alleyways were made of gravel, dirt and sand, with different small shops, bike repair services, markets, and so on. Everywhere notes were posted for jobs available or rooms for rent, and these jobs would typically be paid somewhere between 1300-2000 Yuan, that is the same or lower than what a typical migrant worker would receive in a month. You could not hear any cars as you walked through the backstreets, only the sound of people, dogs barking and children screaming. During the summer there would also be many swallows filling the air with their chirping. The common phenomena of ‘kissing buildings’, buildings standing close enough that people can kiss from opposite sides<sup>25</sup>, composed the majority of the building mass in Xiwang Cun. Since most of these buildings did not stringently follow, or in worst cases completely ignored the fire regulations during the construction there was a worry about the potential fire hazards. Moreover the alleyways were too narrow for any fire trucks to drive through<sup>26</sup>. Despite intense construction work there never seemed to be enough rooms to satisfy the growing demand, and a room was seldom empty for a long period of time. The fast growing population also lead to problems with access to water and electricity. High pressure on the existing system resulted in power shortages and water was cut off several times during the spring and summer months.

The tidal wave of people migrating to Xiwang Cun also changed the lifestyle of locals living there. One source stated that while in 2002 most people relied on farming and occasional odd jobs, the villagers today almost exclusively relied on so called ‘tiles-economy’, an economy based on the construction and renting out of rooms and apartments as their main source of income. A calculation of a typical monthly income can be done through taking the building I lived in as an example. The building was the consolidation of two

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<sup>25</sup> These buildings are often also called ‘hand shaking buildings’ (*wozhou*), since people can shake hands from facing buildings.

<sup>26</sup> While I was conducting fieldwork in Beijing another migrant enclave had a fire incident in the South of Beijing killing 18 and injuring another 24 people. The Town was shut down and 80.00 migrants were forced to move, leaving behind a mere 3000 locals with huge loans and empty factories. This also affected the regular Beijing inhabitants as these people were producing clothes for the big markets in Dahongmen near the Beijing Zoo. See: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/beijing/society/2011-05/658346.html> (Li, 2010).

buildings connected with staircases and long corridors of what seemed like endless rows of doors. The rooms varied in size and inhabitants. Some were small with space for one, while most had two people living in one room, and others had four to six people. I estimate there was around 200 people living in my building at the time I was there. The people living there were not registered in any place other than my landlord's books, so officially they did not live there but were still back in their village or where they had their *hukou* registration. According to the landlord rooms ranged from 100 Yuan (for a dorm room bed) a month to 600 Yuan, excluding electricity, water and internet fees. With approximately 110 rooms and 500 Yuan in average per room they were earning 55.000 Yuan a month (my estimates). Despite spending money renovating the building and keeping it in good shape, they earned a lot of money compared to an average Chinese person. During my time in Xiwang Cun I observed investors from outside buy up plots of land and build new houses in order to rent them out, thereby squeezing out the local inhabitants, a process that could be described as a professionalization of the market.

The inside of a typical building in Xiwang Cun was fenced up and had plenty of surveillance. In the building where I lived my landlord and his wife lived on the first floor where their living room functioned as their office, reception area and headquarters of the building. There were several TV-screens from their CCTV system showing people coming and leaving the building, as well as walking in the hall ways. The internet connection and modems were also in this area with a Gordian knot of wires stretching throughout the whole building. Few people I knew had exclusive use of a toilet, rather it was shared with the rest of the building, and facilities like proper heating systems, bathroom, kitchen and air-conditioning were luxuries few people had. If one had kitchen facilities cooking was done using large gas cylinders which were provided by certain distributors. Even though gas has become more and more common as fuel, coal was still the preferred method of heating, barbecuing, heating water and so on. The coal dust hung like clouds over the village during the winter and in the morning it was normal to wake up with a thin layer of coal dust on one's face. This observation from Xiwang Cun has also been described as characteristic of urban villages in Chongqing and Shenyang (Wang and Wang, 2009:146-147).

There were many small, one-floor shops along the road which sold cheap food, sex toys, 'massages' and there were also tarpaulins spread on the ground with vegetables and fruits for sale which were all part of the informal economy in the village. These products and services were targeted at the relatively poor population. Food was much cheaper in Xiwang Cun than in the city, and a decent dinner could be bought for 5-10 Yuan, while in Beijing city-

centre it was three to four times as expensive. With food prices increasing and wages static this provided another reason for living here, even if the restaurants' standards of hygiene were lower due to a more lenient control regime. Since the cost of living was lower in this area the small surplus the rural graduates had could be invested on leisure activities such as going out with friends, courting or taking trips into town to go window shopping. This said, people were very conscious about how they spent their money.

Now that we have examined the growth of urban villages in China and the structure and organization of in Xiwang Cun, I shall go on to examine the spatial dimension of the village and how it comes to be marked of as contested space.

### ***Luan and Anjing – the power of representation***

Space is fundamental in any form of communal life, space is fundamental in any exercise of power

Foucault (1989:252)

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter urban villages like Xiwang Cun are viewed as being outside the civilized city but at the same time a product of it, making it 'out of place' (Douglas, 1966). This begs a brief discussion on the spatial dimension of Xiwang Cun as it forms the frame for the rural graduates living there. Spatiality has largely been overlooked in anthropological studies earlier due to its conceived position as external and not taking into consideration the relationship space has to power in the larger political- economic context (Zhang, 2001a). Hence, we have to see beyond social space as simply 'containers' of social relations and activities<sup>27</sup> and rather view urban space as 'lived' sites for contesting relations of rights and power (Lefebvre, 1991).

A notion that is often used to describe the space in Xiwang Cun and other urban villages is *luan* meaning chaotic and is often associated with something dangerous. In opposition to the unmanaged space we have *anjing*- which is peaceful and harmonious- the civilized city. The *luan* spaces needs to be managed, because as we have learnt from the descriptions about on the structures of Xiwang Cun, it creates a problem of legitimacy. Moreover, it is an obstacle to Beijing's beautification and civilizing projects (Zhang, 2001b). The inhabitants become a blur in the chaotic structures and thus create a problem for the government on how to manage the population living there and the non-legible space (Scott, 1998). Furthermore, the perception of the urban villages as *luan* seen from the outside was a

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Massey, (1994), Harvey (1989) Smart (2001), Soja (1989), Rofel (1999)

result of these villages in the peri-urban areas being perceived as hotbeds of crime and disorder, which threatened public security. During my fieldwork I was, as mentioned in the introduction, working for a Chinese IT-company not too far from Xiwang Cun. When I told people where I lived, I was several times asked whether it was safe for me to live there as a single girl. Many of the people I met in that company were also rural graduates, but had managed to get a job and therefore did much better financially than the rural graduates I met in Xiwang Cun. Many of them also told me that they considered moving to a cheaper place like Xiwang Cun, but the conclusion was always the same; Xiwang Cun and other urban villages were too *luan* and unorganized so that it could not possibly be safe to live there.

My interlockers living in Xiwang Cun had a different view on the place. Yes, it was *luan* and dirty, but it was not dangerous in any way, they said. Still, on several occasions I noticed the strong stigma associated with migrant settlements such as Xiwang Cun. Once an interlocker of mine and I had talked to a young man that was working in an IT company in Haidian, later on the same evening, he had returned to the shop where he had met us and asked us urgently not to tell anyone that he lived in Xiwang Cun. It is important to add here that we had never met this man before that same day, and had no connections to his network. My interlocker also found this funny, since she could not understand what he was afraid of and thought that Xiwang Cun was a good place to live. In line with this, that same interlocker only a couple of weeks later clearly avoided to mention that she lived in Xiwang Cun when we met a friend of her's in down-town Beijing.

As urban villages are imagined and represented as places of disorder and crime, the spaces are also marked as unsafe and a threat towards 'order'. This is also the case of the people living there, as we will see in the next chapter. In the case of Tangjialing, which we started this chapter with, officials with the Beijing municipal government said that they hoped the renovation project could improve the integration between urban and rural areas, stimulating the low-end housing market and improve the living standards for rural workers (China Daily, June 2nd 2010). However, Yu Jianrong, sociologist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who was also interviewed in the same article argued that there were 'fears that a large concentration of disillusioned, educated youths - the ant tribe (...) - could pose a potential risk to social stability. As we learn from history, grassroot intellectuals are the most likely to cause social turbulence' (China Daily, June 2nd 2010). Tangjialing was thereby torn down, because it represented a contested space and threatened the image of the party-state as capable of managing its space and population. Thereby, demolition became a remedy to disorder, as Zhang (2001b) argues. I should also state that there are many urban villages left

alone in the peri-urban areas of Beijing, but they have not received the same kind of media attention from national and international media. Thus, nothing has been done in these cases to draw the attention to the ‘failure’ of the state to govern these areas and they are left alone. Moreover, this also reflects a tacit approval of these places, similar to the ones Smart (2001) describe in Hong Kong, since the government neither desires nor is able to do anything about the villages. It would consume too many resources and create new demands for the party-state to provide affordable housing options for the millions of migrants arriving in Beijing every year.

To sum up this section I would like to draw some parallels to an ethnographic account written by Zhang (2001b) which describes Zhejiang Cun, also an urban village but at the centre of Beijing. After a big and diverse migrant community from mainly Zhejiang had built up the area over almost a decade it was demolished. Zhang argue that even if the official campaigns stated that the demolishing had been done in the name of fighting illegal housing, the ultimate goal had been ‘to remove the spatial ground for the growth of an alternative social power outside state control’ (2001b:220). Through this chapter we have seen that there were strong indications that this was the same in the case of Tangjialing. A ‘slum of intellectuals’ in a *luan* and unmanaged space represented a potential threat towards a stable and ‘harmonious’ society. However, now it is Xiwang Cun that is marked of as a threat towards the civilized society.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the beginning of this chapter we were introduced to the story of Tangjialing, a former urban village for rural graduates on the outskirts in Beijing and its rise and fall. Tangjialing was one of many urban villages located in the peri-urban areas of the cities in China. They are characterised by high building density, poor sanitary condition, open sewage and are constituting ‘enclaves of informality in an otherwise highly regulated society’ (Qi et al. 2007:23). Due to this it is cheap to live in these urban villages and the reason why many rural graduates choose to live in Xiwang Cun. Places like Xiwang Cun are in most cases allowed to continue to exist in an tacit approval from the state (Smart, 2001), as the government is not able to provide enough affordable housing option for the rural graduates and other migrants arriving in Beijing every year. Xiwang Cun stood up like a phoenix from the ashes of Tangjialing and became the new home for thousands of young rural graduates hoping to fulfil their dreams in the big city. Through the descriptions of Xiwang Cun we learnt that the everyday lives of the rural graduates are shaped by informal arrangements and structures.



Viewing urban space as a 'lived' sites for contesting relations of rights and power in places like Xiwang Cun is useful to understand how they are marked and represented as spaces of disorder and *luan* –chaos, and therefore a potential threat towards order and civilization. This makes Xiwang Cun, not only a place, but also a space in need of improvement. I will now turn to the discourses on *wenming*- civilization- and *suzhi*- human quality- to understand what is shaping the modern subject in China.

## 2 A quest for human quality

While the situation of underemployed rural graduates in urban areas is by no means special to China, there is a particularity to the specific cultural and political associations attached to rural graduate students. In this chapter I analyse how the Chinese party-state is managing and shaping its subjects, more particular how the ambiguities the underemployed rural graduates are facing today are understood and handled, from the party-state's point of view. In the first half of this chapter I outline and discuss China's recent history in the light of *wenming* and *suzhi* in a pursuit to answer these questions. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, this process has been understood through a historical discourse of *suzhi*- quality- in the population, in need of improvement (Anagnost 1997). The thought that 'the people', or 'the masses', as containers for the nation's character and quality is further grounded in the modernity discourse of *wenming*- civilization- in China. Outside its historical context the *suzhi* and *wenming* discourse is difficult to grasp the overarching importance these have had not only to accommodate the party-states policies, but as a part of a discourse that is experienced, negotiated and shaped by different social actors (Jacka, 2006), in this case the and the rural graduates everyday life. Therefore I examine how these discourses have been molded and re-molded several times during the last decades, which help us to understand the cultural meanings of the relationship between the rural: urban, how this is connected to human quality, and in last instance to national development.

The second half of this chapter analyses how the rural graduates have come to be conceptualized in people's mind through media as an 'ant tribe'. I continue by looking at three techniques of representation that have been used in the media and how they can shed light on why the rural graduates have gotten so much attention. After that I turn to the specific arguments used by state official in the media and the problem with productive bodies not being located at the right place, thereby creating a problem with managing the subject.

### **Wenming, wenhua and suzhi with Confucian roots**

According to Anagnost(1997) *wenhua*- culture- is highly contested as it embodies the national culture and has been constituted and reconstituted by the ways and means through which the Chinese people has cultivated and embodied Confucian ideals since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, linking it to education and familiarity of the classics in Chinese literature. One would acquire this state of *wenhua*-education or culture - through sticking to core Confucian values, and thereby move toward *wenming*- civilization and modernity. This meant on an individual plan

to continue the process self-cultivating through lifelong learning (Yip, 2002). On a collective plan it meant submission to the hierarchy where no figure or institutions were valued higher than the nation, and later the party- state. This created a logic of China`s population holding back to reach modernity and it was therefore important to raise the populations quality, especially of the young generation who were directly responsible for the future of the nation (Kipnis, 2011:10, Anagnost, 1997, Yip, 2002). With this as the backdrop Anagnost(1997) argue that the *wenming* discourse is a discourse of lack, ‘referring to the failure of the Chinese people to embody international standards of modernity, civility and discipline’(Anagnost, 1997:76). All this translates to a construction of the Chinese people as being of ‘low quality’- *suzhi cha*, which adds strong social Darwinist associations to the *suzhi* notion, as there is a thought of development attached to it (Kipnis, 2006). Jacka (2009) does also describe this anxiety about modernity and Chinas constant fear of being weak and backward because of its peoples deficiency<sup>28</sup>. Together with the visionary image of a civilized and modern nation which was cultivated and conducted, grave concerns were given to the individual *suzhi* and *wenhua*.

### **Break and continuity- Wenhua suzhi under Mao**

In 1949 the People`s Republic of China was founded which resulted in a dramatically ideological turn as revolutionary propaganda promoted that the quality of the people could be found within the rural masses. As we already learnt in the introduction educational practices and objectives were still important, but only in promoting national development towards a socialist civilization. Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976) Mao ‘called for an end to any remnants of an 'old' civilization that obstructed China's path towards an enlightened Communist society. In order to cast off all remnants of an ‘old’ society, Confucius teachings were expressly targeted, for they epitomized as traditional Chinese culture and thought. As a result, Confucius teachings of traditional classics and rituals were openly denigrated. Education and *wenhua*- culture - was made the arena of struggle, while *wenming* was according to Anagnost used in a more socialist Darwinist approach where history of the country was downplayed and had to be changed in order to become the nationalistic ideal with a clear class approach (Kipnis 2001). The communist state re-molded the cultural thoughts of Confucius and the thoughts of *wenhua* and *suzhi* persisted.

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<sup>28</sup> Both Anagnost(1997) and Jacka(2009) subscribe this anxiety to the colonial past of China which reach its high point at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they lost the Opium Wars against the British Empire. This is still today a controversial topic.

By sending intellectuals and other urbanities to the West of China and the countryside to raise their quality, people were subjected to education (intellectual) and ideological indoctrination (moral) and this together with labor (physical) was aimed at strengthening the nation. Yip (2002) points out that the lesson from the ‘Cultural Revolution’ was that the belief and the internationalization of the *suzhi* discourse was not enough to maintain the strength of the regime, one also had to have the ability to speak to the political apparatus (Yip, 2002:13).

### **Reform and revival of the *suzhi* discourse**

With the opening up reform and open door policy introduced by Deng Xiao Ping China had to change its perspective on how to view development. In the post-Mao era one moved gradually from a class discourse, with the previously mentioned reforms of the *danwei* systems in the 1990s and the new organizing concept for the national imaginary was again focused on *wenming*; a picture that could, and still can, compromise both the past and the future. According to Anagnost(1997) this was important in order to maintain both a critical reflection on the national past with Mao and the ‘Cultural Revolution’, at the same time as it opened up for imagining the future China.

As in the Confucian and imperial times the reform period saw a process where the idea of improving the population again was a national strategy for social transformation (Anagnost, 1997). There were no other way to explain Chinas relation to the larger global community than the lack of *wenhua* and that had led China in the backwater both politically and economically (Jacka, 2009). Thorough the education system and the policy of ‘education for quality’- *suzhi jiaoyu* – the rural subjects were to be led out of backwardness(Kipnis, 2011). The result was a generation taught to focus on self-development and self-realization through education in order to reach their goals and thereby earn a high skilled, high salary job (Hoffman 2010). The implications of this was then, according to Ananost (1997) a ‘constructions of civility in the post-Mao society had come to signify the readiness of rural communities to become integrates into global flows of capital and labour’ (Anagnost, 1997:76). It was not only setting the site for production within the national borders but also in relation to a global site. In this the party also had to evolve in order to fit into the changing world picture.

### ***Suzhi* facilitated by the party-state**

In the post-Mao period, *wenming* is closely associated with the idea of modernization. But it is used officially to convey an idea of modernity that distinctly differs from that of the liberal

capitalist democracies in the West. The goal is to establish a ‘socialist spiritual civilization’ that offers not just an ‘alternative modernity’ but also one that will supersede the dubious claims of the Western liberal democracies to be ‘the end of history’ (Anagnost, 1997: 85). At the heart of the revival of the *suzhi* discourse we find the Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921 on the principles of Marxism, Socialism and egalitarian values. Together with the reforms in the 1980s one saw the proportional rise of the focus on *suzhi* again in party rhetoric’s and policies.

With the Chinese authority’s problematisation of human conduct as an indication of the population of having ‘low quality’, the one-child policy was deemed necessary to ensure a generation of high-quality people (Hairong, 2003, Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005, Woronov, 2009). However, as Bakken (2000) notes, the process does not stop at the birth of ‘fewer and better quality children’, it is also a case of cultivating and fostering high-quality human beings (Liu 2008:197). Making *suzhi* increasingly connected to maximization of the capabilities and value of the human body (Liu, 2008a:197, Anagnost, 1997, Fong, 2004). Despite the various meanings of the word, depending on the setting, having high-*suzhi* is still connected to academic-attributes (Bakken, 2000, Fong, 2004), and Liu (2009) notes that ‘in present-day china, education, *suzhi*, qualifications, social mobility, and ‘the good life’ have become inter-relational concepts’ (Liu, 2009:197).

As mention in the last section the remodeling of the Chinese people from being uncivilized to entering the global market was now the new goal. To constitute a modern nation the ‘people’, meaning the masses in the countryside, had to be subject to a pedagogical process. The party sees itself as filling in ‘what is missing’ to cover over the aprotic divides between China’s problematic past and its imagined future, but at the same time its rhetoric covers over the articulation between a socialist imaginary and its uncanny compatibility with global capitalism’ (Anagnost, 1997:79-80). Not only do the party-state legitimacy to rule rest on resolving, or at least managing these contradictions (Kristoffersen, 2005), but the CCP are also the ones facilitating the *suzhi* discourse and that supply the Chinese population with arenas to raise their *suzhi*. Hence, *suzhi* becomes central to the survival and legitimacy of the party-state in the post-Mao era (Yip, 2002:35).

Furthermore, the opening up of the market led to a new focus on the individual as a consuming subject that could improve the nation through its consumption<sup>29</sup>, and also resulted in reforms within the political, cultural, social and economic sphere. The establishment of

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<sup>29</sup> This is something that we will get back to in chapter four.

special economic zones in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> tier cities along the coast of China, enabled a head start for many Chinese coastal cities. This created a growth in the inequality between coast and inland areas, and a dependency on low-skilled, low demanding labor force from mostly the rural areas. Besides, a growing mass of rural subject started migrating to the civilized urban areas. Thereby the *wenhua suzhi* discourse that was revived in the 90's was now directed towards the newly mobile rural masses. The fear and anxiety of the country's massive rural population demanded improvement, and the 'other' that the nation reflected itself against in understanding progress and modernity (Hairong, 2003) But where does this leave the rural graduates migrating to the cities? Are they not already 'civilized'? I argue that this is the focal point of the ambiguity created by the rural migrant's situation, and which also creates a difficult situation for the party-state. Everyone acknowledge the tough situation the rural graduates are in, but at the same time the Beijing central government do not want them or other labour migrants living on their doorstep in urban villages. I now go on to analyze media and its role in making the situation of the rural graduates known. Here we will see how the discourses of *wenming* and *suzhi* are interrelated and influence the production and shaping of a modern subject in China and thereby also the rural graduates.

### **'The ant tribe', what is in a name?**

At the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 the label 'the ant tribe' went viral in national and international media<sup>30</sup>. It was created by Lian (2009) in his book with the same name to describe the rural graduates, their lives and their living conditions. Like the term 'floating population' used for the many millions of migrants in China, the notion of an 'ant tribe' is a socially constructed category infused with social and political meanings that was invented in a particular moment in China's history. In this section I will try to make sense of the term 'ant tribe', why it became such an important label and the implications it has for subject making in China. Further, I will look at how the government reacted to this new 'group' and how they rationalized the current situation. It is important to remember that naming and categorization should be understood as inseparable from social power. 'The labour of categorization, of making things explicit and classifying them' (Bourdieu 1991:236, in Zhang 2001b:24), are crucial mechanisms for defining the meaning and order of the social world. I now go on to

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<sup>30</sup> I will here only focus on national media in China due to the scope of the thesis, This is not the same as saying that international media did not have a major role in the creation of this phenomenon and the way the notion develop. The interaction between national and international clearly did trigger each other, but also argued for different things. Despite the media reform in the 1970's the state have found new tools to keep media as a mouthpiece the party-stat (Esarey, 2006).

describe three techniques of representation commonly used to construct images of the ‘ant tribe’ in Chinese media.

### *Unifying and homogenizing*

Through media the rural graduates have been portrayed and referred to as ‘the ant tribe’ since the phenomenon hit the news. Though, people I met during my fieldwork did not ascribe themselves as sharing any fundamental common traits or identity with other ‘ants’ based on their ‘common’ educational background or that they earned less than 2000 Yuan a month, which have been set at variables defining the ‘ants’. Rather the other ‘ants’ were like any other stranger that could represent a potential competition in the labour market. As we will see in chapter five people did instead creating new relations based on common geographical background or on a mutual dependency relation.

It is important to remember that change and development is not a uniform process and people act and is influenced in different manners. Instead of realizing the diversity of the group, if you can even call it a group, the rural graduates are portrayed through the media as a large, homogenous mass of people that are lured to the cities only to get their dreams broken. Failing to realize and portray the rural graduates as a group with diverse experiences and lifestyles, and acknowledge the diversity in work, education background, place of origin, etc. they are being classified through censuses and surveys to generate ‘scientific’ knowledge about this potential unknown. This results in a conceptualization of the rural graduates as a real social entity. For example; ‘About 50 percent of ant tribe members refuse to identify themselves as disadvantaged’ (People’s Daily Online, December 10<sup>th</sup> 2010).

Moreover through applying the word ‘tribe’- zu<sup>31</sup>- one is applying a kind of unified group or clan belonging, making up a unified entity. Hence, it is creating a group that stands both in opposition to the urban, modern subject, while at the same time they are people with high *suzhi*. This creates a situation which is full of ambiguities. In the next section I argue that the rural graduates are also portrayed as poor, struggling and even naive individuals that had their dreams broken, which again it also appealing for a larger public to read about, hence it is good for the sales numbers of the newspapers as ‘China’s ‘ant tribe’ searches for better future’ (People’s Daily, January 16<sup>th</sup> 2010).

### *Poor, struggling ‘ants’*

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<sup>31</sup>族:zú: clan, nationality or group. Is also used for minorities.

Like his fellow ‘ants’, the only qualities Chen hopes for in his new home is that it is cheap and safe. He cannot afford to worry about living standards 23 year-old cable factory worker Chen after moving from Tangjialing

23 year old Chen in Tangjialing  
(China Daily, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010).

There are countless stories of struggling ‘ants’ in the media. The story is almost always along the lines of: graduate from rural province have migrated to Beijing to find a job and more opportunities. Then he or she realized that life in the city was much tougher than expected, but that he or she is determined to keep on struggling. Leaving Beijing would be considered a loss of face for some a disappointment for their families.

One who can endure the toughest hardships can become the most successful person.’ (..)Yes, the metropolis is a tough place because you're competing with top talents. I just have to give myself some more time. I don't want to go home empty handed. I would lose face.

24 year old Xiao Cun in Tangjialing  
(China Daily, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010)

This struggle is something most Chinese people can identify with and thereby also creates an enormous attention nationwide, but at the same time it shapes the everyday actions of people. I remember sitting in the metro one day during my fieldwork. By that time I was already used to the sight of old women, women with children or blind couples dressed in Mao-dress rags begging for money. Most of the times they were either ignored or shuffled away and only sporadically given any money. This day, however, it was different. On one of the metro stops a young man in his 20ies, dressed in decent clothes entered with his guitar on the chest and started to singing about the hardship in the city. At once almost all the people that I observed from the place I sat gave money to him, when he came around collecting money. It was, as I saw it, something that stroke a nerve among the people sitting there. Everybody knew the hardship of being a parent or a grandparent in cultivating a child that would be the security for the family in the future, everyone knew what kind of expectations and pressure that laid on this young man`s shoulders.

This means that on one side the media are portraying a large, unified mass labeled ‘the ant tribe’, while also highlighting poor and struggling ‘ants’ with broken dreams, that can potentially represent a problem. This was also highlighted by Lian (2009) who stated that



Regarding the state of equality in China in the next five to 10 years, 60 percent of them hold a gloomy attitude. Through analysis, Lian and his team discovered that ant tribe members' sense of social fairness is closely correlated with their families' economic status and their personal monthly incomes.

(People`s Daily Online, January 21<sup>st</sup> 2011)

This was then taken by many as that the rural graduates held a potentially political problem. Moreover, the continuous use of the metaphor 'ant tribe' have, I argue, lead to a further abnormalising of the picture of the rural graduates when held up against the civilized, modern and urban permanent residents.

### *Abnormalising*

Lian vividly describes this group of unemployed youth as 'ants'. 'Ants are the smartest kind of insects; despite their size, they are diligent, hardworking, and if left ignored, can bring about serious problems,' explains Lian. 'Also they live in their own 'colonies 'as ants do,' he added.

(Global Times, November 2nd 2009)

Above is a quote from Lian and how he came to think of the nature metaphor of an 'ant tribe' to describe the rural graduates. As mentioned in the beginning, I argue this description of the students as something out of nature and 'out of place' (Douglas, 1966), which transfers them into objects in need of civilization. Instead of being of high quality the subject is made into a big mass which is not managed, and have to be cultivated in order to fit in with the urban and modern. Headlines like 'Ant tribe' crawling to new digs after demolitions'(China Daily,June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010) are also contributing to re-establishing the 'otherness' of people migrating to the city, and in particular the rural graduate students. What kind of civilized urban subject would 'crawl' to anything?

To sum up, through creating a media portray of a homogenous, unified mass 'crawling' into the city, there is a process of creating an abnormal, natural and uncivilized opposite to the urban, civilized, modern subject living in Beijing. Furthermore, the disciplining aspect comes into view, as there are individuals that should be civilized through their educational background. Instead they have turned into another challenge in the wake of the reform the 90s. In a way it can seem like the newspapers argument for a homogenous 'ant

tribe' to be a result of Mao nostalgia and a critique toward how China on the social level have failed to help its young and promising. This said, how are the party officials responding to this in the media? What is their position? How are they trying to manage the productive bodies to participate in the march towards *wenming*?

### **The management of productive bodies**

The disciplining aspect comes to show most clearly when the party seizes on the surplus values subjects as a measure in its civilizing project. The discussion below therefore examines in more detail how the party-state deploys its civilizing practices to awaken the Chinese graduates to a consciousness of their own productive powers. Hence, for the state, it becomes important to manage these productive bodies. The potential when it comes to labour and the discipline of its quality are present in many images of the consuming bodies, but here we will focus on the images of the producing bodies as embedded 'in state sponsored constitutions of modernity as 'civility' itself' (Anagnost, 1997:87).

While we saw in the end of last chapter the 'slum of intellectuals' could pose a threat for the party-state, however, that kind of statements are not heard from what Chinese party-officials say in the media. Rather one finds a strong support from the party-state for the rural graduates supporting them in their quest to make it in the city and a repeated promise to decrease the gap between rural and urban areas in developing 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> tier cities in China, improving the infrastructure in the city, offer more housing options and so on (China Daily, July 27<sup>th</sup> 2011). Hence, the party-officials realize this is part of larger structural problem, but are arguing for an 'excessive population', like we will also see in chapter three, which makes transition and reforms hard to implement at the speed it is needed. It is important to keep in mind that this situation breaks all the promises people feel that they have gotten through their education through the years. Still, through the media the party-state is also partly blaming the rural graduates for the situation they are in. These thoughts can be summed up in three main arguments.

First of all the students are highly encouraged to move to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> tier cities, instead of big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and so on, where their capacity is more needed. Second, the quality of their education is not good enough or they do not have the right qualifications to get the jobs they want. Thereby they must grab the possibilities they can to improve their qualities. Lastly, the rural graduates have too high expectations to what they can achieve with their education. I will not judge whether or not these are the correct measurements, rather I will try to analyse the arguments from the perspective of how to create

a good quality human and how to manage them to contribute to reach the stage of *wenming* in China.

The first argument can be analysed as an attempt from party-state to move the 'surplus labour' and 'productive bodies' from the cities where the pressure on the labour market is the greatest, to the rural provinces where there is a deficit of resources to push development. Hence, the rural graduates have a high quality through their education and are recognized for that, but in their present situation they become unmanageable subjects seen from the party-states point of view. Of course this is not something that is unique for China, as we can see in many countries struggling with the same urbanization problem in distributing the education resources geographically, but it is interesting to see the twist it takes in China. Some of the actual reforms, that I will only briefly mention here, are for example trying to send the students to the West of China and out in the countryside, tempting them with fast promotions and many benefits. An example is the article about 'graduates-turned- grass root officials in the counties' in China Daily. Here it says that by 'the end of 2011, the number of college graduates serving as grassroots village officials in China's rural areas topped 210,000'. However, the article ends with; 'the report also noted that some graduates turned young officials lacked a sound understanding of local conditions and an awareness of public sentiments' (China Daily, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2012). This might help us to understand how strong the 'hierarchy of desire' with regards to preferred cities is in China, and also the connotation people have to the rural versus the urban. I also have to add that this regulation echoes the policies from the 1960s and 1970s under the previous mention 'Cultural Revolution'. During that time, to bring cultural and political development to the frontier areas in the West of China graduates, skilled urban workers and professionals were relocated to the provinces and intellectuals and urban youth were sent to the countryside to be 'educated' (Zhang, 2001b:26)

The second and third argument are somewhat related. On one side the rural graduates are faced with more and more companies saying that their education is not of good enough quality, while at the same time arguing that they have too high expectation for what jobs they can get. There has been a growing discussion regarding the educational system in China both national and international with its apparent lack of innovative forces and 'talent' shortage. Moreover, as I have already been arguing for earlier there is a need to improve the individual and it is the lack of the individual that is hindering the rural students to find a job.

Furthermore, the rural graduates have too high expectations, and according to Kipnis (2011) this is a growing problem that the party-state did not see coming with the educational

reforms and the *suzhi jiaoyu* (Fong, 2004). Instead, a Chinese social scientist quoted by People`s Daily Online notes that

graduates should ignore lower salaries and accept that their long-term competitiveness is dependent on the training and experience they get and how fast they can learn and adapt.

(People`s Daily Online, December 8th 2011)

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that even if these official discourses that I have described and analyzed here are playing an important role in shaping the life of the rural graduates and the fact that the picture of them as an ‘ant tribe’ has been constructed, we must take into consideration the more mundane form of power and regulative forces that are influencing the everyday lives of the rural graduates in shaping this subject formation.

### Concluding remarks

The thought of ‘the rural masses’ as containers for China’s national character and *suzhi* is still an important in the linear development story towards modernity and *wenming* – civilization. Since this process has been understood through the historical discourses of *suzhi*- quality- and a lack of it in the larger population- the discourse has been an important part of the legitimizing the Chinese party-state politics in managing and shaping its population. It is difficult to grasp the overarching impact the *suzhi* and *wenming* discourse without taking into consideration its historical context. As these discourses have been molded and re-molded several times during the last decades to fit the political agenda of the CCP, it has also shaped and changed the cultural meaning of the rural: urban dualism, how this is linked to human quality and in last instance to the national progress of China. Education has been seen as the main tool to improve and overcome this lack of quality,

Media give us a fruitful approach in understanding how the party-state negotiate the ambiguities that the rural graduates represent to the *suzhi* and *wenming* discourse. Despite being of high-quality through taking higher education, they end up in uncivilized and low-quality areas. On one side they are breaking the ‘educational success story’, which equals higher education and success. While on the other side they are recognized as an important part of the *wenming* process in China they become a problem as they stay on in the city, ignoring the party-states recommendation to move to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> tier cities. This makes them unmanageable, productive bodies that need to be regulated.

However, turning these graduates into ‘poor and misplaced subjects’ is not a process that the state can control completely. As social agents with their own intention, desires and ideological histories, Chinese rural graduates do not simply take up or internalize the subject position offered to them by the state, but create their own ways being in and part of the world. As I will argue in the next chapters the rural graduates have internalized the government ideals of improvement, even though they never talked about *suzhi*, but constantly saying that coming to the city was a way of improving oneself. This will be the thematic structures for the next chapters as choices and actions of the rural graduates can be linked to new tools of governance used by the Chinese government in the post-Mao era.

### 3 ‘I want to improve myself’

‘Why did you come to Beijing?’ I ask in Chinese. ‘I want to start wine shop’, Meili replies in broken English. She is sitting in a small, cramped room, no more than six square meters, looking out on one of the half-paved dirt roads in Xiwang Cun while pushing the buttons on her Nokia cell phone. The room is a date cake shop she and two of her friends opened a week earlier. ‘I want to improve myself’ (sic.), she adds with a big smile as she pulls her winter coat tighter around herself while looking out the window.

For Meili, migrating to the city was not purely about economic achievements, but also a chance to ‘improve oneself’. The city represented an urban quality that could not be obtained in the rural areas where she and my other interlockers were from. The *suzhi* and *wenming* discourses have, as argued in previous chapter, been constructed through a historical precedence of the city as a place where ‘high quality individuals’ are cultivated, while the countryside have been understood as the opposite with its ‘low quality mass’ holding China back from progress towards modernization. This chapter demonstrate the form these discourses take in the everyday life of young rural graduates in Beijing, and how they are actively shaping the state notions in their view. Not only are the rural graduates trying to capture this urban quality by physically being in what is perceived to be urban areas (as seen in chapter one), they are also trying to show an improved, successful self which fits with a modern life in the city.

In order to understand the change taking place from rural to urban, I continue to carve out the implications of the shift from quantity to quality citizens as outlined in chapter two. This opens up for analysis how the diverse arenas they function in expose various outlooks and strategies in coping with their life in the world. We are also made aware of how new perspectives are made relevant among the graduates and can be used to understand their choices and actions. The argument of an ‘excessive, rural population’ holding China back is still present and internalized in people’s self-conception, motivating the drive for ‘improving oneself’. ‘Improving oneself’ referred among my interlockers to a process of social mobility through both conscious and unconscious efforts at self-improvement. We can observe this in instances of interaction by investigating how various signs are used to express such types of variation among the students. I therefore analyse the encounters where specific processes of social identification occur, as ‘identity is produced and reproduced in the course of social

interaction'(Jenkins, 2008a:5). Moreover, I investigate how the individual's effort to improve itself is a moral act responding to the socioeconomic division they experience, as well the *suzhi* discourse expressed by the state.

Some arenas stood out as especially important fields for the improvement process; being a successful businesswoman or businessman, consuming things considered to be of the urban sphere, and continuing to focus on education. It is important to note here that these fields are first and foremost analytical fields as they in everyday situations meet and interact. Through Goffman's analytical framework on 'impression management'(1959), I investigate the ways people negotiate their social identity in how they deal with others and the urban sphere as a whole. These at times conflicting roles are played out according to the situation they are expected to perform, but also creating dilemmas and non-realistic role distinctions. An important point made by Goffman (1959) and Barth (1969) is that 'the individual is consciously pursuing goals and interests. They seek to 'be'- 'something' or 'somebody', in order to successfully assume particular identities (Jenkins, 2008b:20) according to the situations they are faced with. However, one should avoid the trap of ascribing too much agency to the actors in choosing their identity and potentially leaving out the power aspect of this process like Barth (1969) have been criticised for doing. This is not to say that Barth's processual view on the creation of identity, and especially ethnic identity, is invalid, but it is important to take these criticisms into account; I still find his analytical tools valuable here. It is important to understand the stigma tied to the rural identity of the rural graduates, which they have to deal with before participating fully in the urban scene.

### **'Excessive population' and otherness: motivational drives**

It was a sunny day in Xiwang Cun. Due to the recent sand storms that had been haunting Beijing the last couple of weeks, people still wrapped scarfs around their face when walking down one of the half-paved dust roads. Now during rush hour waves of people returned from work, kindergarten children were being picked up by their grandparents and cars drove through the narrow street, giving the Chinese proverb '*renshan, renhai*'<sup>32</sup> - *a mountain of people and an ocean of people*- its true meaning. 'What consequences are all these people going to have', Huang complained as we sat inside his date cake shop looking out. 'They are spending their money on all kinds of items, and with the high energy consumption, who knows what is going to happen?' He continued by describing how he could not

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<sup>32</sup> Chinese four-character idiom. Directly translated it becomes 'people mountain, people seas', said in another way 'lots of people'.

compete against so many people both with regards to his own business and background as a country boy from Zhejiang<sup>33</sup>. ‘Because of all the people here there is not enough space for everyone. That is why places like Xiwang Cun have come into being, because there are so many people living in China and they cannot afford to live other places. Yes, it is cheap here [Xiwang Cun], but also *luan*[chaotic]’. I asked him about Tangjialing and whether he thought the same could happen to Xiwang Cun, he replied: ‘Well, to tear down Tangjialing did not solve the problem and all the people just came here instead, so now there are even more people here, what can we do?’ He shook his head and mumbled on about what could happen to China if the development continued in the same pace as now.

The notion of a rural, ‘excessive population’<sup>34</sup>, - *renkou guoduo*- in China has laid foundation for the discourse of *suzhi*. Due to the low quality of the larger, rural population, this has resulted in China’s failure to progress throughout history. As we can see from the empirical account above, this continues to be important in today’s post-Mao China in people’s understanding of themselves in relation to the surrounding world. The notion of the population as something that is in need of management has been actively constructed in China where the shift in focus towards quality of its population can be most clearly seen in the one-child policy (Anagnost, 1997). The target for improvement of the population has been the marginalized groups, like migrants, who have been defined as ‘the other’ in this discourse. This social stigma towards migrants, including the rural graduates as we saw in the last chapter, have ‘resulted in physical and social segregation of rural migrants from urban residents’, which strengthen the stigmatizing stereotypes of the rural subjects (Chen, 2001:27, Chen et al., 2011).

According to Barth (1969) and Jenkins (2008b), the way people construct their identity is through a complex and dynamic process consisting of self-ascription and others’ accepting or declining that image of the self. Subscribed identity from others, external categorization, can in varying degree be internalised and form the basis for the self-ascribed identity, through for example, stigmatized identity. I argue that we have to look at the process where external categorization comes to be internalized. In this case it’s the individuals who think that they have to improve themselves in order to fulfil their duties towards themselves, and the state, to be able to compete against the ‘excessive population’. This, as we saw in

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<sup>33</sup> Zhejiang is a province in the south of China, bordering Shanghai.

<sup>34</sup> I do not try to assert whether China is actually overpopulated, but rather that this has become actively constructed by the Chinese government and also taken into people’s conscious when reflecting on their situation and the choices and actions they meet in their everyday life.



chapter two, has been tied to the quality discourse which brings us to a labelling perspective where ‘the interaction between self-definition and definition by others as a process of internalization’(Jenkins, 2008b:20-21).

The model of internalisation ‘may occur if an individual is authoritatively labelled within an appropriate institutional setting. This model for internalization is not, however, sufficient. The capacity of authoritatively applied identification to constitute or influence individual experience affects whether or not individuals internalise the label(s)’(Jenkins, 2008b:20-21). This is what we can see in China, where labels of uncivilized rural subjects stick to the rural graduates even if they have gotten a degree. Where they are from still labels them as unfit for urban life since they are not fulfilling the criteria to be civilized urban subjects; this creates a continuous worry among the migrants and also triggers their need to improve themselves.

Finding a way out of the labelling and categorization is a constant process. While rural graduates and many semi-educated migrants are caught up in this ambiguous situation, they are also faced with the question of why they can’t get jobs when they possess the same qualities that others have, resulting in the process of improvement. As Jenkins argue ‘labelling may also, evoke resistance’(2008b:21). I contend that the actions taken by these youth can be viewed as resistance against the quality regime and at the same time argue that this is the reason they make a decision, consciously or not, to solve this apparent ambiguity by blaming themselves for not living up to the standards set by everyone else. The government claims an ‘excessive population’, while doing as much as they can in order to improve people’s life situations. In reality, the only thing the rural graduates can do is to improve themselves, because the state can only do so much. Ultimately, they are responsible for their own success and, in the big picture, the development of China.

Halskov Hansen and Peng (2010) have also observed this phenomenon among rural youths in Shaanxi and Fujian Province, registering a ‘remarkable sense of personal responsibility expressed by the young people in relation to their own future and development (Halskov Hansen and Pang, 2010:39). I recorded similar patterns during my research in Beijing, where most of the youths placed enormous emphasis on their choices as being theirs and no one else’s, making the quality discourse an aspect of moral self-improvement as well. When I asked my informants what their parents thought of them going to the city they replied; ‘this is my choice, not my parents!’ Some even got angry as they interpreted my question to be insulting toward their status as adults; ‘I am not a kid anymore, I can make my own choices and decisions!’, a young man replied, annoyed. This was something I often

encountered when talking to young people (18-20 years old), as they may have had a greater need to justify their choice due to critical, overbearing parents, to show that they could make it on their own. The focus on the individual's responsibility is seen once again; you have been given the freedom of choice, now it is up to you. Consequently, I argue that the state's policy on self-improvement have been internalized, as the rural mass also views itself as 'in need of development'.

We have already proved that the *suzhi* and *wenming* discourses are related to a more general change from rural-to-urban subjects in China. For that reason, I will now go on to explore real examples at the individual level and see how people manage their position in the urban sphere and how they try to get the upper hand. I will start by outlining a typical situation which shows both the ambiguities the students face and the ways they navigate them by playing on their different identities. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, some fields stand out in the social construction of identities, in how extensively they interact at and across the boundaries they share with other identities, as well as the labour market, consumption and education. It is important to bear in mind that these are analytical fields, which in everyday life cannot be studied in isolation, since they interact and react to each other in a perpetual game of chess, one move triggering another and creating at times conflicting role interpretations. Through this I want to argue in line with Barth (1969) that 'Identification is processual, part of the on-going organization of interaction and everyday life' (Jenkins, 2008a:106).

### **Being successful in the labour market**

According to Jenkins 'occupational identities are among the most important of social identities. For many people they provide the basis on which their livelihood is secured. They are also closely connected to social status' (2008:205). As I have implied above, the discourse of *suzhi* is a powerful motivation for graduate migrants to get ahead and realize their dreams and goals. Hence, I will now move on to analyse how successfully finding or creating a job is an important mechanism to improve the self.

'Do you want to do business together? I can help you in China and you can help me in Norway? Together we can be successful!' This was one of the first conversations I had with Xuemei, a 25 years old girl that had been living in Beijing for two years when I met her in Xiwang Cun. She had a degree from Yunnan University in public management and was the only one from her class that had left for Beijing. She had come by herself without knowing

anyone, which was a bit unusual because most people migrating do so through a network of either family or friends. Upon arriving in Beijing she had decided to get to know as many people as possible so she could establish a good network, as that was the only way to succeed in the city.

After arriving in Beijing she worked as an intern for a magazine. For many rural graduates this is a typical position to get when arriving in urban areas. This is becoming more and more typical a job for migrating graduates, and in most cases they are not being paid. This is also the case for many of the people I met in Xiwang Cun. For Xuemei, as for most people interning, the pay was very unstable and she was not hired as a full-time employee. She found this situation very stressful and therefore terminated her engagement after two years. Still, it had provided her with contacts and knowledge of how to ‘work’ the city; she knew how and with whom to build *guanxi* –networks. Several times later she said that she did not like Beijing, but it was the best place to do business and make *guanxi*.

‘I came to Beijing to find myself’. ‘Have you found yourself?’, I replied. ‘I’m still working on it’, she said. ‘I am happier in Yunnan, but will live a better life in Beijing. Here I get the chance to improve myself. I miss Yunnan a lot, but there are no opportunities to improve there. I also want to help others, but it is not that easy back home, then Beijing is more suitable’.

Daughter of an accountant father and an entrepreneuring mother that had been responsible for a small shop since Xuemei was a baby; she already knew many aspects of running a shop and took advantage of the opportunities that came by. As I got to experience from the first day, she was constantly trying to find new ways to increase revenue for the date cake shop she ran together with her boyfriend and best friend from college.

Xiwang Cun was, as mentioned in chapter one, filled with small shops offering cheap and fast food to the passing graduates and migrants. The competition was tough, so it was important to find ways to attract people who did not have much money to spare for leisure items like cake and snacks.

One day Xuemei had placed a vivid green mint plant on a table outside the food stall. This immediately drew customers and other curious people to the shop. ‘What kind of plant is that? I have never seen anything like this before! Why do you put a plant out (on the stall) like that?’ In the end she replied; ‘Do you not know what that is? It is a mint plant, you can find it everywhere in Yunnan where I am from!’ She then went on to tell them that the mint plant is much used in

Yunnanese food and that it is beneficial for your health. Furthermore, similar beneficial effects could be obtained through eating date cakes, which was also very good for your skin. People gave approving nods to what she was saying and some of them said that they had heard something similar before.

Through displaying what was seen as symbols of Xuemei's local identity, she managed to catch the attention of many people that strolled past the shop. This created a positive effect for her, and her local identity was something that people associate with the product they sold. Hence, self-image and public image, the internal-external dialectic position of individual identification (Jenkins, 2008b:51), are shown to both be at play here.

Although people have some control over the signals they send to others, we are all at a disadvantage in that we cannot know with certainty how they are received or interpreted. Hence the importance of what Goffman (1959) calls 'impression management strategies' in the construction of identity. These dramatize the interface between self-image and public image. Impression management draws to our attention the performative aspects of identity and the fact that identification is a routine aspect of everyday life (Jenkins, 2008b:20). This said, we have to look at the interaction, the boundaries if you will, to understand how these performative aspects of social identity are established. One of the main critiques against Goffman's framework is that it takes on the world as a play, acted out almost as if one had a script that stated the motivation of the almost hollow-shelled individual actor (Jenkins, 2008b:70). To overcome that barrier, we can examine Barth's model on ethnic and social identity, where the identities are 'fluid, situationally contingent, and the perpetual subject and object of negotiation' (Jenkins, 2008b). Barth (1969) holds that identification is something that is found and negotiated at the boundaries in the encounters between the internal and the external identification. This makes identities processual, relational and dynamic, ever-changing and ever-evolving depending on the context (Ferguson, 1999).

In the case of Xuemei we are not talking about an ethnic group, but rather a local identity with certain characteristics and exotic features. Xuemei often sang Yunnanese songs in the local dialect or played *pipa*<sup>35</sup>. By drawing out special provincial markers she was able to draw attention to certain features that were labelled as positive about her background and again made her a successful businesswoman. Xuemei herself was Han-Chinese with some of their ethnic features, which also drew attention in an area where there weren't many people from Yunnan province. Stereotypically, Yunnanese people are often of minority background,

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<sup>35</sup> A traditional Chinese string instrument

have certain 'southern' facial features often perceived as being pleasant-looking, while the province itself is seen as having good climate and spicy food. At the same time Yunnan is considered a backward province with a large rural population and therefore its inhabitants' suzhi is also considered to be low. Xuemei was asked if she too belonged to a minority and it was important to her to point out that she was a Han-Chinese, playing on their 'imagined' common history or relation between her and the majority of Chinese people. Thus, I argue that she displayed and used her local identity where she saw it fit and where it could result in some kind of advantages for her, thereby echoing both Goffman and Barth emphasis on the actor's agency in the negotiations of their identity. Through a successful negotiation of her identity she was also able to reflect a successful self that did well in business and thereby also established herself as 'improved'.

That being said, I did also observe how, when faced with others who did not know her background or that she lived in Xiwang Cun, she downplayed this role and highlighted her other strengths and resources, as this had implications for the quest to 'improving the self'. As we saw in chapter one, this is related to the stigma of urban villages like Xiwang Cun, but now I move on to another aspect of identity negotiation: how can we know with certainty that the signals that we are sending out are received and interpreted in the 'correct' way? That is to say 'the intent and meaning that we send out our signals with' (Jenkins, 2008b:22).

### **Negotiating an improved identity through consumption**

It is not enough to assert an identity. That identity must also be validated (or not) by those with whom we have dealings. *Identity is never unilateral.*

(Jenkins, 2008b:19)

In the processual dialectic performance that social identities are being shaped through, Goffman emphasise some characteristics for how this interactions game is played out. First of all the self-presentation is a matter of performance. Second of all, as we will come back to later, there is not a single, consistent self, but rather a variety of revelations of the self. Furthermore, creating a social identity depend on a constant negotiation between the desired presentation of self and other, where one's history and present situation is of particular importance. Lastly, and what we will now move on to, is the need of validation of the performance by others. Without their collaboration, the success of social selfhood is on stake (Jenkins, 1994:204). In this section I will also argue that the rural student try to undertake a

legal belonging in the urban areas through consumption. The degree to which the students are able to carry their urban identity with sufficient persuasion is, I argue, the same as to what degree their performance have been accepted and validated by others. As the opening quote of this paragraph state, identity is never unilateral, which is why I will now move to two episodes that disclose how social identity is processed/played out in real life and also point to some features that are critical in the negotiation of an improved identity. These at time conflicting roles are played out according to the situation they are expected to perform, but are also creating dilemmas and non-realistic role distinctions. First we will turn to an episode where Xuemei is accused of being something other than her ‘true self’.

‘You look like a Singaporean!’ Xiang commented to Xuemei. She was sitting on the back of the three wheel motorbike that her boyfriend Huang had rented. They were about to leave for the whole sale market to buy products for their store. Xiang, which often looked after their shop while they were away, continued to steer at Xuemei who pulled her ivory white silk gloves higher up her arms to avoid any sunlight to tan her skin. She was wearing big sunglasses and a long sleeved jacket, even it fit was hot outside, and an umbrella to fight of the rays of sun<sup>36</sup>. Xuemei looked at Xiang and replied; ‘You do not know what a Singaporean look like, this is the style now!’ Then she drove off with Huang to the market leaving Xiang and the shop behind.

A couple of months later I observed the following incident as Xuemei was getting ready for a concert she had been invited to;

There was Chinese pop music which was streaming out of the computer sang by a female sing. The romantic lyrics were performed in a very poetic-dramatic and suave way. Xuemei was busy getting ready for the Yunnan concert she was attending later the same afternoon. I had been invited too so I could ‘get the chance to listen to some to Yunnan music’ and where she ‘could meet friends and establish new contacts’ [guanxi]. It was early summer and the weather was getting warmer. Huang and Xiang were lying on the bamboo linen which was spread out on the bed underneath the air-con which they had just turned on. Huang and especially Xiang loved the music playing. Xiang often sang along with the song, as well as pulling of imitations of Peking Opera singers. The funny, often sarcastic lyrics and rhymes, and considered to be almost an art to perform. This

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<sup>36</sup> Having white, flawless skin is something that is almost looked up as a virtue in China and the rest of Asia as it demanded hard work to protect and nourish it. In China, like many other countries where agriculture is still form the backbone of the labour market, the associations people have with tanned or dark skin is that of a farmer working out on his or her plot of land in the sunshine. It is the very symbol of a rural, uncivilized subject which stands in opposition to the urban, modern subject.

would always get people to laugh, as his improvised text and movements were well performed.

While Xuemei was still hectically trying figuring out was she was going to wear that evening Xiang suddenly said: ‘You only listen to that kind of Western classical music’, referring to the concert she was going to. ‘You do not listen to Chinese music, thinking it is so much better!’ Xuemei looked at him and defensively replied: ‘You do not understand this kind of music [Western classical music]. And, I do listen to Chinese music!’ Then she started to sing a Chinese love song and both Xiang and Huang exclaiming praise for her lovely voice and she was again one of them.

In the examples above we can see that there is constant negotiation in the creation of an urban, improved identity with the desired presentation of the self on one side and the reciprocity needed from the other involved in this kind of presentation. In the first example Xuemei brushes aside the statement that she looks like a Singaporean; while in the other she try to show her loyalty to the ‘in-group’. What does this tell us about identity making? I argue that we have to see identity as something in the making and always under construction and depend on the context and situation. Hence, it is a constant process and something the individual is always faced with in the evaluation system on whether you are in our out, or in this case urban or rural.

While Xuemei in the first episode accused for being ‘Singaporean’, which does not necessarily automatically make sense? Without going too much into the history of China and Singapore, which is outside the scope of this thesis, I can say that the diplomatic ties between the two countries have improved the last decade. In addition there have been several cases where Chinese celebrities have taken up citizenship in Singapore<sup>37</sup>. Becoming a Singaporean gives you freer reins with no passport restricts, social welfare, no one child policy and a general higher standard of living. In order words, it means something different and in many cases the opposite of what China is.

In the second episode Xuemei is accused of putting Western music above Chinese music, ‘thinking it is so much better’. There is a difference in value between the two music preferences, like in the case of dressing, which is what Xiang points out in his statements. He is making an evaluation of the impression Xuemei made expression that she is different, or trying to be different, and at least something else than what he and the others were. It is not

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<sup>37</sup> Some of the more famous ones are Gong Li and Jet Li. Gong Li’s case is of particular interest as it received much attention in mainland China. She was voted the most beautiful woman in China in 2006, and most hated Chinese celebrity in 2008 when crossing over to Singapore ‘forgetting her roots and social responsibilities’ in China.

enough to 'dress up', literally, in an identity. It is under constant negotiation in a process of validating the self as performed in reference to the history which makes up life and the context frame it is presented and acted in. On the basis of this the surroundings can act and react upon the presentation given, either validating the performance given, or as is the cases here the lack of collaboration by the other actors sets the success of the social selfhood on stake. 'Not only do we identify ourselves in the internal-external dialectic between self-image and public image, but we identify others and are identified by them in turn' (Jenkins, 2008b:20).

Faced with the conflicting roles that were played out in these two situations Xuemei was faced with a dilemma, how to react to this threat towards her social identity? In both cases she claims that Xiang is wrong and that she is right. 'Identification by others has consequences. It is the capacity to generate those consequences and make them stick which matters' (Jenkins, 2008b:20-21). She was denying the ascribed identity of a Singaporean on the background of Xiang's ignorance in relation to fashion, placing the power of definition within a feminine sphere, hence out of his reach. Thereby minimalizing the effect Xiang's identification of her as a Singaporean had in relation to the social identity she was trying to construct.

In the second case music taste was contested as Xiang claimed that Xuemei preferred Western music, henceforth, not in touch with her Chinese roots. This is dismissed with her singing a Chinese song which act as a proof her affiliation with her Chinese background. Moreover, this can also be seen in a larger nationalistic discourse, but due to the scope of this thesis I will not go further into this here.

These two situations further show that identity is managed by the context or the situations that the interaction happens in and that the creation on a social identity is dynamic and improvised according to the situation. Neither is more or less real but exists at the same time complementing each other in the interpretation of a social identity. While Barth has been criticized for focusing too much on the free will and choice of the actors, and not on the aspects of power that the actors were caught in (Banks, 1996). This does not invalidate Barth original contribution with more stress on subjective view of identity as being exchanged in a free market-place of identity choice (Banks, 1996, Jenkins, 2008a). Like we just saw in the example with Xuemei and who got the power to define who is in and who is out, is an important aspect of the play that the process of social identity making is caught up in.

While have in this section see that the process of shaping a social identity is never unilinear, as it is not enough to assert an identity, but that it must also be validated by others.



In the two cases mentioned about the ‘significant other’ where Xiang did not validate the social identities that Xuemei were trying to negotiate, but also how she was the one with the defining power to whether or not the identification would stick or not, as she redefined the validation question into areas where she was in power. Hence, it is important to include a power aspect to these encounters of social identification. I will now return to Meili, whom we meet in the beginning of this chapter, and look at the dimension education keep playing in the rural graduates lives in their aim to improve their abilities and thereby their chances of social mobility.

### **Improve your abilities – improve yourself**

Becoming educated is what forms the backbone on the *suzhi* discourse as we have saw in chapter two. The thought that through the written word one can cultivate the self to a higher quality have become the mantra. As we remember from the beginning of this chapter Meili had come to the city to improve herself and explore new paths. An important step in this transformation was to learn English, since this would according to her be an important stepping stone in establish her own wine company<sup>38</sup>.

When I met Meili she was overenthusiastic to get a new foreign friend who spoke Chinese, because that meant I could help her with her English. She had moved to Beijing a month earlier against her parents will. Her mother had cried and her father had not been thrilled either. The thought of her, a single girl, going alone to the big city was not a happy one. A topic that came up several times during the time I knew her was that Yunnan was not the right place for her and that Beijing was much better. However, depending on the situation this did often change. When I asked if she had gotten used to Beijing and if she liked it she replied no, she liked Yunnan better. ‘Life in Beijing is tiring, and to get up early in the morning is not good for my health’. While at the same time as she was tired of the life in Beijing and missing Yunnan she did not want to go back. ‘There is nothing for me there [Yunnan]. I want to improve myself’. The solution was to stay in Beijing where she could learn English, and which she did through getting herself an English language exchange. This we will come back to in the next chapter.

While Meili came to the city to become educated and learn English the proper way, there was also still a thought among my interlockers that when going went tough education was the answer that could give them the little extra in competition again the others. An

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<sup>38</sup> As I will argue in chapter 4 some people like Meili use consumption to create a space for themselves in the urban spheres.

illustration of this was when the date cake shop of Xuemei, Huang and Meili started to do worse. One day I found Xuemei studying on her own in her apartment, reading books on law and consumer rights. When I asked why, she just said that it was interesting for her and that it was also very useful for her business plans. Moreover, she was trying to persuade Huang to start studying again. 'He should really develop his abilities', she said. 'Then we can start working with something else and start with another business. And he should try to learn something from his uncles back home.' I was asking if they wanted to leave Beijing and she said no, Beijing is where the opportunities are.

These are examples on how these fields of business, consumption, language are analytical terms which are good to think with, but far less easy to separate in the everyday chaos of signals and symbols that we all live in, both conscious and unconscious. Through the consumption of language, language is again used in business relations and situations, which again says something about how promising business woman or man you are and how far you can reach.

### **Concluding remarks**

Improving oneself is an urban, intangible quality that could only be obtained in urban areas and not where the rural graduates were from. This meant that they did not only migrate to the cities for economic gains, but also to catch the urban quality which could lead to improving the self. The individuals in Xiwang Cun are trying to make this as tangible as their can in their everyday interactions with others, either consciously or unconsciously.

They all felt a ambiguity towards the life in the city, still even when this were rough they did not want to move back because the city was perceived as being the only place of they could improve themselves. Seen in this light, it is still important to recognize that most people are ambivalent about staying in the city and the present situation, but my informants kept repeating that there were no other opportunities and that Beijing was the best place to be, despite the tough reality they faced in their everyday life. As we will see in chapter five a meaningful participation in the greater special environment requires that they present acceptable social identities. Since the identity of the students as well as of rural population in general is stigmatized by their status as rural people, this process of social adaption becomes particularly crucial. In the next chapter I change my approach a look at how the rural graduates try to claim an urban membership through consuming at fast-food chains, transforming eating places to social space.

## 4 The symbolism of fast-food

‘I like restaurants like this, they have a nice atmosphere. It makes me feel good. The food is better too, not like the food in Xiwang Cun, which does not taste good. That place [Xiwang Cun] is dirty and *luan!*<sup>39</sup>, Meili told me as we sat in a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurant in Wudaokou district waiting for her English language exchange to arrive. She, like most of my informants in Xiwang Cun, often chose fast-food places like KFC or Chinese fast-food restaurants when meeting up with friends. In the previous chapters I have already argued that improving oneself is not purely an economical achievement, it’s also about governance of Chinese moral experience and how this is expressed by the individuals in their everyday practices. I argue that these places were chosen for more reasons than just being a place to eat. Taking the ‘fast’ out of ‘fast-food’, the activities at these places were not centered around the actual consumption of food, but rather the consumption of an atmosphere that was ‘comfortable’ and ‘good’. In this chapter I will focus on the transformation of places of food consumption In China, fast-food places in particular, to social spaces where the graduates tries to construct a social space and identity for themselves in the urban sphere, while at the same time ‘improve themselves’ and supporting the state by being a good ‘consumer citizen’. In addition, the fast-food places stood in stark contrast to the cheap Chinese restaurant in Xiwang Cun. Questions on what you consumed and what that meant in correlation to what you identified with was therefore I argue a way to show off their loyalty a perceived urban lifestyle, but also a way of ‘feeling good’.

As I show through my empirical material this process we investigate in the last chapter, can sometimes create tensions when ‘the rules’ of the sphere they are trying to be a natural part of are ‘broken’. Consumption of eating places and things can be seen as critical way for the rural graduates in ‘defining their social status and changing power relation’(Yan, 2009:209) in an extension of the quality politics promoted by the Chinese state. Furthermore, the dual process where there rural graduates are being ‘untied’ through the market and institutional reforms (educational reforms, closure of the direct job assignment system, etc.), while on the other side the state is managing the individualization through drawing the boundaries and regulation directories (Yan, 2009: xviii). As the government have ‘forced’ people to become individualistic through the market, though only within the limits of the market, creating a new kind of social space. I want to argue in line with other scholars<sup>40</sup> that

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<sup>39</sup> Chaotic

<sup>40</sup> See for example Halskov Hansen and Svarverud (2010) and Hoffman (2010)

the emergence of a Chinese form of individualism combines global processes with local practices (Yan, 2009: xxi). To better understand the historical context the individuals in Xiwang Cun stand in today I start by offering an introduction into the emergence of a new consumption culture in China and that the new social space that opens up in the fast-food places are also facilitating a remaking of the Chinese individual.

### **The emergence of a new consumption culture in China**

Consumption as a phenomenon has in the last 10-15 years become a central aspect of rural and urban Chinese lives and has been actively supported and encouraged by the party-government (Fleischer, 2010, Schein, 2001). This new consumption where individual desires and pursuits of material comforts are freely celebrated in public spheres stands in stark contrast to earlier decades in China where Chairman Mao proclaimed *bu yao langfei*- [we] do not want to waste anything! There has been a shift from under-consumption during the Maoist period to mass-consumption in the post-Mao era, to a formation of consumerism as the new and dominant ideology in the late 1990's (Yan, 2009, Croll, 2006) has also changed the reality the students live in. From a party-state sponsored process of making a good socialist person, where the ethics were focused on self-sacrifice and hard work, it evolved into a moral process of making a new post-socialist consumer with focus on self-realization and pursuit of personal happiness in concrete materialistic terms. However, the various ways to keep the individual distinctiveness and maintain, or create, status ensured a perpetual momentum for the growing mass consumption. One of the most noticeable changes this brought on the former 'classless' socialist country was former Maoist dressed people that had the money could redefine their social status in terms of a new consumed lifestyle (Yan, 2009:224). You could now be what you purchased, which is the very essence of the symbolic social construction of consumption and the key to understand why fast-food places have become so popular in Beijing.

On the background of the brief outline of the political consumer history of China above one can understand that the emergence of fast-food<sup>41</sup> chains in the country is a recent phenomenon. American fast-food chains started to show interest in the huge potential the market China had in the 1980's, just as Deng Xiao Ping's opening up reforms started to attract the first foreign investors. When KFC opened its first store in Beijing in 1987, and

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<sup>41</sup> Kuaicai is the Chinese translation of fast-food, a term used only for Western-style fast-food or the new Chinese style imitations of fast-food in Beijing and not for traditional fast-food. Even if there are native forms of xiaochi and hefan which are much faster made and eaten they are not put in the same category (Yan 2009; 245-246)

McDonald's<sup>42</sup> right after in 1992, the customers were struck by their appearance. The new fast-food chains had seating areas that were well-lit, had air condition, quick service, a welcoming staff and room for more than 500 people. How great an impression this made on people can only be understood in relation to the socialist canteens that had been implemented after 1949. Now the private sphere of eating together with your family was gone and everyone should eat together in collective cantinas. Even if this was one the way out in the 1980`s when the first foreign fast food china arrived, the socialist canteens architectural and decoration 'had to match the rank of a restaurant in an officially prescribed hierarchy (...)' There were strict codes regarding what a restaurant should provide, at what price, and what kind of customers it should serve in accordance with its position in this hierarchy (Yan, 2009:246-247).

Shortly after the first introduction of KFC and McDonalds the success of Western fast-food was a fact. This led to hundreds of businesses copying the model of KFC and they mushroomed around China in what was named 'the war of fried chicken'. This said, simply imitating Western food soon proved to be a failed plan. Despite turning to Chinese cuisine and offering lower prices than the imported fast-food, the Chinese brands failed to satisfy the consumer expectations of 'the fast food experience'. While the Chinese fast-food chain had invented old news in a different wrapping, the 'Western fast-food restaurants offered local consumers a new cultural experience symbolized by foreign fast-food, enjoyable spatial arrangements of objects and people, and American-style service and social interactions'(Yan, 2009:246-252). They were not just selling fried chicken wings, but a new 'imagined cosmopolitanism'(Schein, 2001).

Even if McDonald`s have been successful in China, KFC have been one step ahead. Contrary to the situation in the rest of the world KFC have two stores to every McDonald`s store in China. This have proved an intriguing case for many brand researchers, and many argue that KFC have reached this special position not only because they were the first Western fast-food brand in China, but they have also been more successfully in adjusted their product to the local taste and changed from a purely American image to a modern Chinese image in the 2000`s. While McDonald are selling a US burger in China, KFC are selling 'dragon twisters', 'fried shrimps with Peking sauce' and other specialized Chinese traits (Liu, 2008b). This resulted in a shift towards McDonald`s and KFC no longer being as exotic and

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<sup>42</sup> McDonald's opened in Wangfujing, Beijing, the commercial center of Beijing. It quickly became an important landmark and as late as 2011 it was the set meeting palace of the jasmine revolution that never took-off in China.

foreign as before. Rather, they had slowly been assimilated into part of the local foodscape. Yan (2009) notes from his interviews with children at McDonald's Beijing in 2006 that they 'did not know about the US origins of the Big Mac, and many others simply did not care about the origins of any non-Chinese food' (Yan, 2009: xxxvii)<sup>43</sup>. The food no longer offered the same exotic and innovative experience, and almost all the people I have spoken to classify the food either as *ling chi*- zero food- or *chi bu bao*, it is not possible to get full from the food. Still, my interlockers and millions of other Chinese people continued to go to these restaurants, why is that?

In the next section I will turn to my own empirical material and argue for a new kind of sociality in the space provided by the fast-food places<sup>44</sup>, where people do not go to eat, but are allowed to negotiate an individual social identity which they can participate in a urban and global sphere. We will start by following Meili to her first among many meetings with her English language exchange at KFC.

### **KFC – meeting place and test ground**

I had met Meili the same day in Xiwang Cun when she asked me if I wanted to come with her to Wudaokou, the student district in Beijing. She was meeting her new English language exchange; an English girl named Guizhu, and was nervous about going alone. The meeting had been arranged through a contact from her English language course at Beijing University<sup>45</sup>. For the occasion Meili had dressed up in her finest clothes; a baby blue dress matching her fake gold accessories and big black glasses. The arrange place for the language exchange was KFC.

Once inside the restaurant we, Meili and I, sat down next to one of the big windows facing the street. This was convenient as we could easily spot Meili's language exchange arriving as the only description we had was 'red hair'. It was comfortable to sit down inside the air conditioned room after being out in the frying sun. The seats, tables, and walls were all

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<sup>43</sup> Yan also draw an interesting conclusion that both McDonald's and KFC emphasises the freshness, purity, and nutritional value of their foods (instead of their appealing tastes). According to a high-level manager of Beijing McDonald's the receipts for McDonald's foods were designed to meet modern scientific specification and thus differed from the recipes for Chinese foods, which were based on cultural expectations (...). This may help to explain that why few customers compared the taste of fast foods to that of traditional Chinese cuisine; instead customers focused on something other than the food' (Yan, 2009:252-253)

<sup>44</sup> Since food is more than just something you eat, but also a way to establish social relations it gives it an interesting double aspect. Sharing a meal with someone in China got a very strong symbolic meaning and facilitates the construction of new and strengthens relations and is used actively in people's network building. One dimension about this is what food you choose to eat; another is who you are eating with. However, this will not be the focus of this chapter.

<sup>45</sup> Meili never started the English course at Beijing University, which is considered to be one of the most prestigious universities in China.

painted in light colours; romantic pop music was playing in the background, which together with the milky white counters, stainless-steel kitchenware created a professional feeling. The menu was presented both above and on the counter with pictures, which made it easy for new customers to pick their own menu, adjusted to both their wallet and personal flavor. Employees wore uniforms that were in bright colours, while smiling at customers while working efficiently. All this created an ambience that was as crisp and fresh as you would expect the chicken to be at a fast-food place, and in sharp contrast to traditional Chinese restaurants found in Xiwang Cun. The other people present at the restaurant, were mostly youth around 18-25 years old and seemed to do nothing else but to hanging out. They were either reading books, studying or talking with their friends. I observed very few people actually eating anything while they were sitting there and most were only nibbling on some left-over French fries. Taking the 'fast' out of 'fast-food', the people there used the services provided by KFC, and did not seem to be there for a quick and cheap meal before running off to the next destination; KFC was the consumption destination.

While we were waiting for Meili's language exchange she discussed with me what to order. She made it clear to me from the start that she wanted to treat her language exchange for food at KFC and dinner later. 'I do not like going AA [go Dutch]', she said. 'That is the Western way of doing it. I prefer the Chinese way [treating your guest for food]. My teacher told me that is was not necessary, but I do not care, I still want to do it'. Not long after Guizhu arrived and Meili took the first chance she had, after making sure it was the right 'red hair girl', of explaining that she wanted to treat her for food. Seen from a Chinese point of view this is a very unusual and almost rude way of approaching your guests when you want to treat them for a meal. Normally the host would try to pay without the guest noticing it, and thereby saving the face of both parts. On beforehand Meili and I had practiced a sentence tried in English that we had been practicing before her language exchange arrived, she wanted to treat her for dinner. Unfortunately Meili did not remember the sentence so I had to step in and translate. Since I was not supposed to be there in the first place and that this was a language exchange, Meili's language exchange was rather taken aback. It soon became clear that Guizhu already had dinner plans that evening. Still, Meili ran away and bought us food for us after all; pommes frites, soda water and ice cream. Even if it is highly unusual to start a conversation like that in China, it pointed to something very important for Meili, she wanted to show that she was Guizhu's economical peer. Sharing the bill in China could in some cases mean the same as admitting that you do not have a lot of money, and normally the one inviting that is paying for the dinner.

The situation above does not explain why Meili did choose KFC as the place to meet her new language exchange? And why so many of my interlockers hung out at fast-food places? I believe an answer demands a multi-facet explanation. First of all, and maybe the most obvious one, there are few spaces available for leisure activities and meeting friends in areas like Xiwang Cun, unless you want to go internet café or a brothel. The structure of urban villages are as we discussed in chapter one a temporary and unplanned one, adjusted to the demand for cheap rental places, not leisure places. Therefore KFC and other fast-food places becomes a free space they can appropriate and use for whatever purpose they wish. This is made even clearer if we think back at the description of how people appropriated the space in KFC. Second of all, I believe KFC creates a framework for assimilation into an urban, or even a global sphere. In Meili's case it provided her with a possibility to show to her Western language exchange that she knew how to be a natural part the urban sphere. KFC represented something clean, 'developed' and modern. By consuming at a place like KFC she would through eating there embody modernity and in the very essence embody qualities she wanted to obtain in order to 'improve her'. Lastly, it was a place where consumption was no longer connected to 'being good' in the socialistic way, but rather focused towards 'feeling good'. Meili often repeated that she really like the ambience of places like KFC since it made her feel good and made her want to go back. Normally meals are looked upon as a very social thing in China, and if you are eating along you are almost looked upon as an outsider, and not a part of a social whole. Though, with the changing lifestyle in the cities this is, I argue, just another sign of a rising individual in China. The fast-food places catered to a consumer mass that wanted to appropriate a social space where they could feel well, even if that meant by themselves. Moreover, for many girls which traditionally should not be out alone, this created a space where they could be safe from social discrimination and free to create their own lifestyle. These restaurants provided an arena outside state control, where individual desires and aspirations where celebrated in public, as well as a public embrace of modernity (Yan, 2009:229).

However, as we saw in the last chapter, social identities are never unilateral, and must always be validated by others in order to pass successfully. As I argue in the next section, it's not enough 'dress up' in an identity, you have to be that identity and recognized by others, in this case, an imagined urban sphere.

### **Tensions in new, appropriated social space**



While the language exchange meeting between Meili and Guizhu was a weekly event where they met at KFC most of the times, she also arranged meetings at cafes that she said had a ‘comfortable atmosphere [*qifen*]’. These cafes, also relatively new to the consumer market in China, were like the KFC a mix between Chinese and Western or Asia style. At these places Meili was almost always trying to show her preference for urban thing, but did almost every time make ‘mistakes’ revealing her unfamiliarity with the unwritten rule of the new appropriated social space. She was lacking the cultural capital necessary to convince people that she was a part of the sphere that she tried to be a part of. I will now analyse two situations which describes how cafes and restaurants can be a window into understanding the cultural symbolism of food consumption and the many invisible social ‘traps’ waiting for the uninitiated rural subject when entering the urban sphere. I apply Goffmans’s analytical framework on the situational analysis in understanding the actions of the social interactors and how they their reactions can be understood specifically in accordance with the norms of interactions in the particular situation, and moreover in a more general interpretation of the consequences this have for the subject trying to appropriate these new social spaces, which is the focus on this chapter. First of is an incident that was played out in a café where Meili was meeting her language exchange.

Meili and I sat down on each our site of the table and sunk into the deep sofas. Around us there where shelves filled with books and magazines, as well as seating groups with both chair and couches. The café was almost filled with youths in their twenties from all nations, mainly Chinese and from other Asian countries, which was due to its location in the student district. A waitress came over to our table handed us the menu and left again. While I was taking advantage of the Wi-Fi there Meili tried to decide what she was going to have. After a long time she finally decided on a coffee, and not just a regular black coffee, but a double macchiato with a glass of vanilla essence on the side. When I asked her why she choose that specific coffee she replied that the name sounded funny and that she had never tried it before; quickly assuring me that she had drunken coffee before in Yunnan, but not so much in Beijing.

The waitress returned and took our orders. Then, Meili pulled out a 100 Yuan note and waved it in front insisting on paying for both her and me. The waitress got a bit embarrassed, looked at me like a big question mark, before turning to Meili again telling her that she could pay at the counter when she left. This time it was Meili’s turn to look confused. Not fully understanding what the waitress just had said to her, she waved the money in front of her

again. However, now the waitress just glanced at her and said sorry before she left the table with our orders. While Meili was left puzzled and did not understand why her money was valid, I tried to explain to her that in this café you ate first and paid upon leaving. This is not uncommon in Chinese restaurants in China, but you are not denied to pay upfront either if that is what you want. An arrangement like they had at this café is often used to avoid any unfaithful waitresses to be tempted to put money in their own pocket. Though, Meili's ability to recognize that she had made a 'mistake' and act accordingly did not happen. Instead she continued to insist on paying, which was met with a puzzled waitress that could not accept her money due to the rules of the restaurant.

As Goffman(1959) argue, miscommunication as the one described and analysed above often occur in intercultural encounters, where impression management becomes more challenging since the subjects have different social backgrounds, hence, different tools to interpret the situation presented to them. In the case of Meili above, her refusal to give in and resist the norms she was confronted with resulted in a break down in the communication where the only way to save some 'face' for both parts was that the waitress broke off the conversation and left the table. Meili could not buy her acceptance into a social sphere where she did not have the social capital<sup>46</sup> to go with the economic capital. This also mirrors what Bourdieu wrote about economic capital, that it cannot always be transferred to other kinds of capitals, and some things like for example social or cultural capital, which often overlap, can in many cases be habituated (Bourdieu, 1986). This said, the habituated knowledge is not always an advantage in the process of managing a desirable social identity that conform with the social space one wants to be a part of. Often these habituated proprieties are performed unconsciously, which challenge the management of the impression one wants to give.

A situation that spelled out this difficulty clearly occurred when I came with Meili one day to eat at the Japanese shopping mall next to Xiwang Cun. She had chosen a Japanese noodle restaurant for the occasion which both of us liked. The seating in the restaurant similar to KFC and other fast-food chains, but here the majority of the space was adjusted for single persons or couples with small tables paired with two chairs, while there was only a few tables with space for more than two people. I will come back to the implications these seating arrangements have in a larger setting in the next section, while here it is mentioned to point out

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<sup>46</sup> Social capital 'is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition- or in other words, to membership in a group-which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity – owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word' (Bourdieu, 1986:248-249).

that due to this arrangement of space there was little room between the tables, which meant that all your actions and remarks was making up the public space in the restaurant.

After sitting down at a small table we ordered two bowls of noodle soup and Meili also ordered a fried pork chop to eat on the side. There was a couple sitting two tables to the right of us eating and whispering in low voices to each other, while the rest of the restaurant was quite peaceful as we had managed to get there before the dinner rush. It did not take many minutes before we had dinner on the table and started to eat. Meili took a bit of her pork chop, gnawed off all the meat before spitting the left over bone on the floor next to our table. She continued eating her soup and occasionally spitting out the thing she did not like on the floor without realizing or registering the stunned faces of the couple sitting next to us steering at her.

Seen from an urban Chinese point of view or mine spitting bones and other things on the floor were not only unhygienic but also totally unacceptable table manners in a restaurant like we were in. If there was something you did not like the proper thing to do was to place it on a napkin and leave it on the table, so it was easy for the waitress to pick it up. However, in most street corner restaurants in Xiwang Cun and in Yunnan where she was from this was nothing to frown upon, rather it was the norm. Considered an easy way to get rid of things that were not wanted, not only bones and food stuff would be thrown on the floors in those restaurants, but also cigarette butts, bottles and even spitting was a common sight in many places. Judging from the shocked faces at the table next to us and this kind of behavior was clearly not reconcilable with the social space we were in. The kind of behavior above is often described as uncivilized *-bu wenming-* and a typical lack of quality – *suzhi-* common for people from rural areas.

As Meili did not realize that embodied ‘bad habits’ from Yunnan created a fuss as she continued in the same way, unconsciously exposing her lack of cultural capital to maintain and manage an impression of someone that belonged and was a natural part of the urban, modern sphere. An interesting parallel here is a description Yan did when interviewing young people at McDonalds about their consumer behavior in the fast-food restaurant and how ‘they had learned to clean up their tables by observing the foreigners behavior. Several informants told me that when they disposed of their own rubbish they felt more ‘civilized’ (*wenming*) than the other customers because they knew the proper behavior (Yan, 2009:257). Whereas in ‘normal’ restaurants and street corner restaurants in Xiwang Cun, one expects the waitresses to take care of the plates and garbage produced from the meal as a part of the packet you have paid for, in fast-food restaurants you have to clean up your own garbage. The individual have

to take responsibility for their own left overs and move it to the collection stations. Here this is a part of the deal of getting cheaper food than many other places.

To sum up, Meili's attempt to manage an impression of a valid urban and modern social identity in the sphere of a café and fast-food restaurants was made difficult due to two factors. First of all she lacked the right social and cultural capital to manage the social space she interacted with others in. Failure to manage and avoid the potential 'traps' laid out in this new social space, this led to miscommunication and confusion as the situational proprieties were not shared between her and the other social interactors. Moving on to the second factor, I argue the internalized habits and behavior was fatal in her attempt to consume and assimilate into a social space she wanted to be a part of and identified with. In addition missing to realize that she was stepping over to the wrong side, or realizing and choosing to ignore it, further deepened the impression of her as a rural subject misplaced in the modern and civilized restaurant in Beijing. In order to understand the deep and penetrating implications these new social spaces offered by fast-food places and cafes have for the rural graduates I will now move on to describe and analyse the space in a street corner restaurant in Xiwang Cun, before arguing for consumption as a way for the rural graduates to claim urban membership in a sphere where they are the outsiders.

### **'Being made' and 'self-made', claiming urban membership through consumption**

Different from the fast-food restaurants described above a street-corner restaurant in Xiwang Cun that opened when I was there during my fieldwork did not gain the same kind of attention as KFC down at Tiananmen Square. No news reporters were writing about the latest addition of hole in the wall restaurants, even if it served donkey meat which was previously only sold in the shopping across from Xiwang Cun. There was no crowd standing outside admiring the new red sign above the entrance proclaiming that donkey meat was heavenly and good for your health. As was the norm in Xiwang Cun, which we will get back to in the next chapter, restaurant opened and closed as the seasons changed, and it only took two days to turn a BBQ restaurant into a donkey meat restaurant. Next to the entrance there was oven heated with coal bricks to make bread for the meat. On the sliding doors hung the red Chinese character *fu* in red colour upside down. *Fu*, meaning happiness or fortune, placed like that would ensure that fortune came their way. Once inside the small room there were five tables inside with small portable chairs sat next to them. On the left hand side of the room a fridge and a small work bench was placed. Placed on the work bench was often a big bowl filled with donkey gelatin covered with a towel that was served together with the meat in small hamburgers. Above on

the wall there hung a poster 1x2 meter long with a list of the dishes they served, price per item, and some pictures illustrating some of the dishes. In the back of the room there was a sink where all the dishes were done and cutlery were stored. They also had an air-condition that was only turned on if it was really warm and had customers. Also the light was only turned on once it had gotten dark outside. This meant that during daytime the room was lit by dim light from outside.

Meili and some of my other interlockers often ate lunch there when they were working at their shop across the street. They would go there for the food and in the summer also for the air-condition. Leftover bones, cigarette butts and whatnot was thrown on the floor. Moreover, in contrast to the piece meal packages you got at KFC here one were sharing food from the plates placed on the table. While sociality in relation to the actual food consumption in the fast-food restaurant was being defined down to an individual serving unit, in Chinese restaurants food was being consumed collectively creating a social space focused on the unit of people being there. Moreover, some even go as far as to argue that to share food from the same pot can be understood as a way 'blurring class boundaries' (Yan, 2009: 244). Furthermore, people would go to these restaurants because they wanted to eat and get full, not because they wanted to enjoy the atmosphere. Even if a meal could last for hours, eating and drinking, once one had finished it was normal to leave. It was against the norm to hang around without consuming any food items, since that would mean that customers would take up space that could be used by other consuming customers. While in KFC we remember that people would stay on for hours, nibbling to a few French fries and enjoy the atmosphere.

Croll (2006) argues that consumption in its very essence is 'the inseparability of the material and the social processes involved in that just as persons choose goods so goods also play a part in the construction of personhood or identity. As persons become consumers, the meanings and messages attached to goods play a large part in defining who they are or wish to be and signal affiliation to a single or range of social categories and cultural value'(sic.)(ibid., 2006:21-22). This might help us to understand why the rural graduate kept going back to the fast-food chains even if they continued to complain about the bad food and that they did not feel full after eating there. As for the students I argue it was a negotiation between 'being made' and 'self-making'(Ong et al., 1996). By 'being made' I refer to the process of categorization and at times stigmatization that the rural graduates experience and that we examined in chapter two. I argue that a way of 'breaking out' of these categories as rural: urban or traditional: modern are given through the social spaces offered by the fast-food

places which opens up for an opportunity to negotiate a 'self-made' urban membership through consumption and invest in objects they saw as modern and developed. To disregard any of the two 'sides' mentioned above in this dual process, if not multidimensional process, would be to simplify the many configurations that social identity takes among the rural graduates.

Another reason for why consumption is so important in the establishment of an urban identity is that the rural graduate students are as we investigated in chapter one illegal subjects in the city. Hence, they seek alternative ways to negotiate their presence in the city and trying to obtain a 'consumer citizenship' (Zhang, 2001b). Nevertheless, as we saw in the case of Meili, often the rural graduates fail to comply with the norms and codes of the urban sphere and thereby continuously fail to get the recognitions they wish for. Let us now look at how the consumption of fast-food space links the rural graduates negotiation of social identity to a global sphere.

### **Consequences of consumption -changing social relations**

We started this chapter with a short historical overview to the introduction of fast-food chains to China. Through that we learnt that KFC went from being one of the first encounters the Chinese people had with American consumer culture, to becoming and almost symbolizing the new Chinese consumer culture where people could live out their personal lifestyle and embracing a new, global space<sup>47</sup>. This represented a potential acquisition of a higher status, the feeling of being civilized, and as we talked about in the last chapter becoming an 'improved self'. For the rural graduates going to fast-food places like KFC was an embodiment of a quality inaccessible for them in their native place. Upon arriving the city is was within reach, and outside state restrictions, and offered them an opening into an 'imagined cosmopolitanism' (Schein, 2001). This notion is tightly connected to the change in consumption pattern that we have observed in China the last decades, where an individual's social status have been tied to what it consumes to a larger and larger degree. It is defining not only who you are, but also who you want to be. Moreover, this new 'visibility' and availability of commodities and spaces for consumption have given the rural graduates and others a sense of participating in a global community culture (Schein, 2001:227). Whereas

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<sup>47</sup> In China the success of American fast-food chains have raised some nationalist concerns as local manufactures are not doing as well as their foreign competitors. Due to the scope of this thesis I will not have the case to go into this topic with the depth it deserves, so I will only state that also in my material there are strong indications that in the domestic market there is a strong nationalistic segment that does influence people's decision on where to consume, making it a highly politicized act.

selves are crafted out of aspirations matched with crispy chicken wings and a smile from Colonel Sanders at KFC, so are the hierarchized social distinctions tied to judgments of others on taste and inclusiveness in the urban, modern sphere the fast-food places. Nonetheless, I argue that this is not the only consequence we can see from the embracement of the fast-food places among rural graduates. While the consumption of new social spaces represent an outwards movement from the individual sphere towards an inclusion into a larger, global consumer culture, I argue in the next chapter that there is also a shift in how consumption change the relationship between the rural graduates and their family and kin as money and resources are invested in the urban sphere instead of sent home to the rural graduates native place.

### **Concluding remark**

This chapter started with a conversation I had with Meili were she said she liked KFC because of the atmosphere and it was the opposite of dirty, street-corner restaurants in Xiwang Cun. KFC represented something clean, developed and modern. By consuming at a place like KFC she would not only eat, but also embody modernity and thereby in the very essence embody the qualities she wanted to obtain in order to ‘improve her’ and becoming one of the urban sphere. However, as we have seen the negotiation of an urban quality are difficult to manage as the rural graduates are no able to show of a relaxed enough performance to be validated by others (Bourdieu, 1984). The rural graduates lack the proper capital to succeed in the city, unless they managed to put on display through playing convincing role. Money can help you to enter the urban scene, but it will not provide you with the knowledge on who to employ it on the social scene.

What I have argued in this chapter is that the appropriation of these new social spaces involves highly performative practices in the way people adopt to these places in an attempt to negotiate the dual process of ‘being made’ and ‘self-making’ in the Chinese social order that the rural graduates find themselves in. The fast-food restaurant stand in contrast to the earlier described socialist cantinas which tried to institutionalize the way people socialized in relation to food, as well as to control the meal times and taking away the private make demand for a new kind of sociality outside state control. That is, the public celebration of individual desires, life aspirations, and personal communications in a social context. As Fleischer notes, this new focus on spending and consumption ‘plays a crucial role in the reconfiguration of social space on present day urban China’ (Fleischer, 2010:109), and also on the individual.

## 5 Creating one`s own rice bowl

There are many challenges awaiting the rural graduates in the city as we have learnt from the previous chapter. As noted in the introduction of this thesis many rural graduates who come to Beijing end up underemployed or unemployed. Their prime motive for coming to the city is to find a good job and earn money, while at the same time also improve themselves according to what they look upon as urban and modern values. While the previous chapter discussed and analysed how the rural graduates explored their role in a global sphere, this chapter focus on local practices and processes of getting by in Xiwang Cun, more particular on how rural graduates became entrepreneurs, managed their business and established new social relations in an attempt to ‘create their own rice bowl’ (Hoffman, 2010). In order to become an entrepreneur there are certain assets that need to be in place; start-up capital, an organization to run the business and customers to buy the different products that are sold. As entrepreneurial activities ‘are themselves social and cultural forms that draw their efficiency partly from sociocultural resources’ (Smart, 1993:338), this chapter will be an attempt to overcome the old dichotomies between economic and noneconomic dimensions. Following Appadurai (1986) I try to highlight the calculative dimension present in both market and gift exchanges and show how there is also cultural dimension to market exchanges.

We saw in the first chapter of this thesis how Xiwang Cun had developed from a farmer’s village to an urban village through a process of informality. Without romanticizing the margins, as criticized by Das and Poole (2004), I argue that the spaces which opens up in Xiwang Cun creates possibilities which had been much harder for rural graduates and to obtain in a more ‘managed place’. Even if the state was not present as a regulative mechanism, there were different actors who acted as ‘the state’ in the meeting with the rural graduates and the businesses in Xiwang Cun. This developed into a complicated play for my interlockers as they had to juggle different social roles, between who they wanted to be, and who they were perceived as we saw in chapter three, and also navigating between different actors in their everyday struggle to manage their business to be successful in Beijing.

I will now go on to give an account of how three of my interlockers in Xiwang Cun came to be entrepreneurs, presented in the form of one case lasting for the 5 months I was in Xiwang Cun, which enables me to point at typical trends in the entrepreneurial activities in the village. I discuss what assets were involved, how an enterprise could be maintained and in the end discuss the need to reconsider the primordial distrust in the market as a place where relations are being built. I show that my interlockers are dependent on creating new relations



which comes out of their personal network, and not the family or kin network. Moreover, this creates new dynamics that one have to reconsider the current thinking about family as the only bastion for trust and relations in an ever changing world.

### Becoming an entrepreneur

There are certain features that need to be in place when establishing an enterprise. First there is the question of access to capital to cover start-up expenses. Secondly it is important to know how to run and manage the business and then thirdly how to attract customers (ref). During my time in Xiwang Cun I saw no less than seven businesses open and close within the close network of my interlockers. In some cases the shops or restaurants were not successful in attracting enough customers, either because of an unfavourable position in the city landscape, or they were in tough competition with other similar business. In other cases there was a lack of network and relations that could help them out. Typically many people chose the ‘traditional’ way through family and kin-relations in bringing together the capital needed, while in the case of my interlockers, and many other rural graduates I spoke to, the start-up capital was a mix of family money and pooling of resources among friends<sup>48</sup>. I will now outline how three of rural graduates who were my interlockers became entrepreneurs in Xiwang Cun.

It was the beginning of April not long after Chinese New Year’s when Huang, Xuemei and Meili opened their date cake shop. They had paid 60.000 Yuan for all the things needed for the shop and paid a monthly rent of 3000 Yuan<sup>49</sup>. Huang thought it was too expensive for a room which measured 3x3 m<sup>2</sup>, had wires hanging down and a water tap in the corner with only cold water, but, he pointed out, ‘it’s our only opportunity’.

The start-up capital had been brought together from Xuemei’s odd-jobs savings in Beijing, Huang’s savings from six years in the Chinese army, money given to Meili from her boyfriend, as well as help from the parents of the two girls. Neither of the girls came from well-off homes but for their parents this was also an investment, as they, according to Meili and Xuemei, considered this to be something that would profit them in the future.

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<sup>48</sup> In general few people started businesses on their own, but there are exceptions here as well. A growing trend was people starting internet companies, a new niche that have opened up in the recent years. People with limited recourses can set up their own company and trade with people on the basis of their background and how expensive the services are. This demands low capital investment and is also an opportunity to reach out to a larger market.

<sup>49</sup> Which is 1000 Yuan more than an average migrant worker’s monthly salary, which is 2,049 Yuan (1,939 NOK) (‘Chinese migrant workers’ wages up 21.2%’, Xinhua, April 27, 2012)

In the beginning they earned approximately 2000 Yuan on a good day, but as a newly established business they kept experiencing teething troubles; burning the cake, not using the correct measurements, starting the production too late and thereby missing the morning rush of people, and so on. This resulted in no or low income some days, which was a hard blow for their frail economy. In addition they had to buy fresh ingredients for the cakes; eggs, oil, dates, Chinese brandy, and other things which had to be purchased on an almost daily basis at the wholesale market close by.

Their customers were mostly girls concerned with their health, looks and ways to improve it, as well as grandparents who wanted to buy that little extra for their small 'princes' and 'princesses'. Xuemei and Meili also told me that the date fruit was good for the skin according to Chinese medicine, and could be bought cheaply through ordering large quantities at the wholesale market. Both of the girls were good looking which was not bad for advertising either. In addition the cake was cheap, which lowered the threshold of buying it.

By bringing together their resources and getting help from home Xuemei, Huang and Meili had been able to bring in sufficient economical capital to start their own business and attracting customers. There were also close ties between them as Huang was the boyfriend of Xuemei, and Xuemei and Meili had known each other since high school which cemented the organizational ties of the shop in relations of trust and reciprocity. Moreover Huang's second cousin Jiejie, had been living in Xiwang Cun the last two years with her husband, while working at a factory. Now Jiejie was responsible for re-investing their money in a milk tea shop, while her husband continued to work at the factory. For Huang, Xuemei and Meili this meant extra support in the beginning, since they could learn from each other's failures and success. Jiejie did not have any previous business experience and her husband was working long shifts, coming home late every night, so my interlockers also helped her out if there were any problems.

The establishment of a new business is a very competitive affair and there was a high bankruptcy rate among newly established businesses in Xiwang Cun. To avoid economic failure some people combined different lines of business, for example running a restaurant by day and gambling joint by night. The competition for whatever small change the graduates could spare was strong, and the results were observed in sudden disappearance of, replaced by a new business the following day. Since the majority of the shops were either family run or run by friends the stakes were higher, if they did not succeed it would also have consequences outside the immediate family. These processes reflected the transient cycle of life in the village and the insecurity related to starting a business. Especially in the beginning it was

important to have a steady income in order to cover the start-up expenses. Therefore, once a business had been established in Xiwang Cun there was a question of how to further manage the investments and create surplus.

### **Attempts at professionalization and new investments**

Once a shop had been established in Xiwang Cun they would often try to expand their business through attempts at professionalization and new investments. In the case of my interlockers professionalization meant mirroring what they saw as a modern and civilized shop setting up an area that was marked as the opposite, like we seen in chapter one. Such investments were however often the result of short-term thinking and the profit from new investments where often dependent on the marketing skills of the independent individuals. Their choices and intentions often changed over time and brought forth new niches of investments.

From the start especially Xuemei was eager to show that the date cake shop was a professional business with serious intentions. In the beginning they used their normal clothes when working, but one day Xuemei said that this was not a good idea after all. 'It does not look professional', she continued and pointed at Huang whose clothes were full of cake dough. The next day she returned with a white uniform for Huang, as well as disposable gloves for handling the cake and face masks to wear during the production process. Furthermore, they tried to be more careful with washing and clearing the utensils used for the cake production, but with only a cold water tap at the back of the room this proved very difficult. As we remember from chapter three, Xuemei had a father who was an accountant. Xuemei said that he had taught her how to keep a budget and that it was an important part of any serious business. She also started to write down all their expenses and revenues on a daily basis trying to keep the budget.

Their attempts to professionalize the business reflected the general attitude on how a clean and successful shop should be seen from a state point of view. Since the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 there had been a clear focus on cleaning up the street, getting rid of street food stalls and any other unwanted elements. One of the first things one notice when walking into a restaurant in more central parts of Beijing are the numerous certificates hanging on the walls showing that they have a license to run the business and that their health standards are satisfying<sup>50</sup>. Even if this does not exist in Xiwang Cun due to the absence of state regulations,

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<sup>50</sup> In Shanghai they even have a 'satisfaction scale' hanging at the entrances of the shops, showing either a happy face or a neutral face. If you get a sad face you are closed down. There are also rumours saying that you cannot get a happy face without a giving a bribe to the health inspectors.

it does not mean it is not important to give a ‘high-quality impression’, since that again reflected the standard of the people running the shop. If a shop was dirty and worn down many people would avoid it and go to a place that looked more pleasing and clean. This brings us back to the association between cleanness and civilized –*wenming*- behavior and modern things of the urban sphere which we have discussed and analysed in previous chapters. In chapter four Meili expressed several times her preference for ‘urban food’ and described food in Xiwang Cun as dirty and having ‘bad taste’. The maintenance and management of the shop in a civilized manner was not only important in presenting a well-functioning shop, but also to get validation from others of the quality and urban identity of the owners. However, in an urban village movements and actions are constantly monitored and reviewed by potential customers and competing business, which makes it demanding to always keep up a presentable image.

In less than two weeks Huang’s new uniform looked like it had been dragged through wet mud and the hygienic rules that Xuemei tried to establish gradually disappeared and gave way to more ‘practical’ arrangements. Exposable gloves were used over-and-over- again, and very soon there were no face masks left. This turned the daily routines of the shop into a performance of how a ‘civilized’ and clean business should be. All three of them rather sold cake out on the street to avoid people seeing the mess that was inside. The accounts went from being recorded on a daily basis to being jolted down sporadically. As the shop did worse economically, conflicts and accusations of who had taken money for private purposes grew. It was Huang in particular who was accused of using money on gambling which was not only a waste, but also bad for his ‘quality’.

In line with a capitalistic idealistic argument surplus money from the business was re-invested in the shop with the intention of creating an even larger surplus. It is important to remember that neither of them had any previous experience with running a business, assessing markets nor running promotional campaigns. This resulted in a trial and error method whenever they introduced a new product, which was not only time consuming but also wasted a lot of resources when making products that could not be sold due to failed products. In the following month after opening, they tried to break into new niches; milk tea, fruit juices and even popcorn. However, this did not only require capital, but also pushed for the need to buy new equipment, which further triggered the move to a larger apartment for Huang and Xuemei where they could store all the material.

All their new products had limited success, but still they kept looking for new ways to promote their items and increase their sales numbers. In order to survive in the tough

competition against other businesses a large network was necessary and could provide a web of security in case something happened, which it did quite often. This brings us over to how the rural graduates, traders and my interlockers had to engage in relational work called *guanxi*, loosely translated as ‘social relations’.

## Guanxi

*Guanxi* is a widely discussed term in studies of Chinese society and has for long been noted for its importance in Chinese life, both in urban and rural contexts<sup>51</sup>. I will here outline some characteristics of *guanxi*. First of all it can be ‘ascribed as primordial traits such as kinship, native place, and ethnicity’ (Gold et al., 2002:6). This has traditionally been the basis for ones *guanxi* in China, while extrafamilial relations have been an extension of this network. This is not to say that the extrafamilial ties are not important as we will see later in this chapter<sup>52</sup>. Further *guanxi* can be achieved through ‘characteristics such as (...), having shared experiences (..) and doing business together’ (Gold et al., 2002:6). Moreover, *guanxi* can also be created in interactions where ‘potential business partners may consciously establish or seek to manufacture *guanxi* when no prior basis exists, either by relying on intermediaries or establishing a relationship directly’ (Gold et al., 2002:6). This makes *guanxi* resemble Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of ‘social capital’<sup>53</sup> where the ability to convert one kind of capital to another is an important characteristic. I agree with Gold et.al (2002) when they state that ‘*guanxi* as social capital is accumulated with the intention of converting it into economic, political, or symbolic capital (Gold et al., 2002:7). However, as I will show through my own empirical observations briefly, there are important aspects separating *guanxi* from ‘social capital’.

Following Kipnis (1997) I will instead of going more into details and the debate about what *guanxi* is, look at how *guanxi* is produced in the process of interaction between people and analyse the context framing those actions. This, I argue, will give us a more fruitful approach to understand the rural graduates in their attempt to become successful with

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<sup>51</sup> According to Gold et.al. (2002), this has resulted in *guanxi* ‘becoming a ‘social fact’ in Durkheim’s terms. Its significance as a distinctive social phenomenon constraining individual behavior while also becoming internalized has resulted in scholars and lay persons utilizing the un-translated Chinese word’ (Gold et.al., 2002:5).

<sup>52</sup> As Kipnis notes from his ethnography in a village in North-China there is invested a lot effort in producing relationship outside the immediate family (Kipnis, 1997:5).

<sup>53</sup> Social capital ‘is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition- or in other words, to membership in a group-which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity –owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word’ (Bourdieu, 1986:248-249).

their business, while trying to improve themselves. In this game they do not only have to play on different social identities, but they also have to relate to different actors in order to stay on top of the game. This, however, is very demanding as these are also actors with different intentions, values and goals.

### **Creating horizontal webs of security**

Although the different shops were competitors in Xiwang Cun, there was also group solidarity between them. The uncertainty in their everyday business pushed forward the need to establish new relations, as many people in Xiwang Cun could not play on their primordial traits since many did not have family or kin there. There would be regular exchanges of food between the different shops, if someone tried to pay, the receiving part came running after her/him and literally threw the money back at them, saying it would offend them if they paid. Also when people needed favours or help it was advantageous to have a network to draw on in order to operate efficiently. In the case Huang and Xuemei they moved houses three times during my fieldwork in Xiwang Cun, much due to the earlier mentioned expansions of their business. Every time they moved they called on people to help them, and there was always new people showing up. Later when I asked them how they had got to know each other or where their contacts were from, the reply was that they had meet randomly and did not really know them. In more traditional businesses family would take care of these tasks, but as the rural graduates did not have the same kind of network they had to find new ways to construct relations with people, making social ties even more important. The actions described here are one of features that set *guanxi* apart from ‘social capital’ as Bourdieu(1986) defined it. *Guanxi* is ‘based implicitly (rather than explicitly) on mutual interest and benefit (Yang, 1994:1-2) and there is system of gift exchange and favours as we have seen above, which again creates obligations and indebtedness, and there is no set time frame for when this should be reciprocated (Gold et al., 2002:7, Yang, 1994).

The described solidarity did only exist as long as the different businesses’ niches did not interfere too much or there were no other personal conflicts. In a highly competitive environment there were constant rumors about different people and rivaling businesses; who could you trust or who could not be trusted, which people were involved in gambling and so on. One of the competing businesses that challenged my interlockers was a small BBQ stall, where the proprietor was accused of selling lamb meat instead of pork meat, which everyone could see by the darker colour. These rumors effectively made clear who was ‘in’ and who was ‘out’ in the network, or put another way who was close and who was further away in the

relational hierarchy. Moreover these distinctions also showed that ascribed or primordial traits of *guanxi* are not always markers of trust that ensures a relation, rather it can be judged the other way around. This can be described through an episode where a girl from Yunnan suddenly showed up in Xiwang Cun.

In general there were few Yunnanese people in Xiwang Cun which made Jingjing easy to pick out as a newcomer. She dressed in colourful shirts and clothes, and walked around in the village looking like a curious child. In addition she had a very strong local Yunnan dialect. As far as I understood she had contacted Xuemei and Meili, and not the other way around. She asked a lot of questions without being able to clarify what she was doing in the city apart from coming with her husband who was now working in Beijing as a migrant worker. In the week she was in Xiwang Cun Jingjing made typical Yunnanese native food, rice noodles, an attempt to activate and strengthen the ties to Yunnan, which was also Xuemei and Meili's native province. However, her way of behaving and by constant hanging around their shop made my interlockers uneasy. One night Wang told Xuemei over dinner; 'Do not trust her, you never know who you can trust!' 'You never know about these people and what their real agenda is', Xiang supplemented.<sup>54</sup>

Based on this I want to highlight that in places like Xiwang Cun knowledge and access is shared on a need to know basis and along lines of loyalty and sentiments. Jingjing tried to establish a relation through making traditional Yunnan dishes to my interlockers, were the food was supposed to resonate with their common primordial native place. Though, in this setting food was no guarantee for establishing and including Jingjing into my interlockers' closer relational network. This is another aspect that distinguish *guanxi* from Bourdieu's (1986) notion of 'social capital', the importance of sentiments- *ganqing*. Despite the fact that many people view *guanxi* as being something purely instrumentalistic, what is often stressed from Chinese side is the need for true *guanxi* to have 'an affective component' (Gold et al., 2002:7). In the competitive environment that my interlockers found themselves Jingjing's presence was viewed as a potential threat, rather than a potential relation. This might also be due to her rural and 'backward' style, which could possibly jeopardize my interlockers' project of improving themselves. Moreover, as Gold et. al. (2002) remarks, *guanxi* is something that needs to be cultivated and maintained over time, and like social identity it is not unilateral, but must be validated by the other part. I will now go one to analyse a situation

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<sup>54</sup> This incident also explains why it was so important for me to have a relation to the people in Xiwang Cun and not be considered to be a 'loose' connection as also mentioned in the introduction.

that could have been fatal for the shop of my interlockers as Meili suddenly disappeared, leaving Xuemei and Huang alone with the management of the shop.

Meili sometimes had responsibility for the shop in the morning, but often failed to show up. Thereby they missed out on selling cake to the rural graduates. She missed Yunnan but did not want to go back. 'There is nothing for me there. I want to improve myself.' At the same time she also said; 'Life in Beijing is tiring, and to get up early in the morning is not good for my health'.

One day Meili suddenly left for Chongqing with her boyfriend without any notice as to when she would come back- if she was coming back at all. This happened just after Xuemei had a confrontation with her regarding not doing her job properly or sacrificing as much as she or Huang did. Neither of them knew what to do, they did not want to exclude her as she was the third partner of the store, while at the same time they needed someone they could depend on. Xuemei called her parents in Yunnan to get help. Her mother said she would help them by finding a new person to send to Beijing. 'Why can you just get someone from here?', I asked. 'We want to get someone we can trust a 100%', Xuemei replied. At the same time they also let their network in Xiwang Cun know that they were looking for someone, in case they knew a person that might be interested.

A week later there were rumours that Meili would come back to Xiwang Cun. Xuemei had by then already arranged for the oldest boy of a noodle place across the street to start working in their shop by the end of the month. 'We can make it without her [Meili]', Xuemei said, and neither her nor Huang mentioned Meili for the next couple of weeks. However, the noodle place was unexpectedly gone one day and so was the boy who was supposed to help them. Instead a donkey meat restaurant had opened across the street.

After almost three weeks Meili returned. By then a young man named Xiang had gradually started to hang out in the shop, running small errands and becoming friends with Huang and Xuemei. Originally someone that Meili had gotten to know, he became a part of the business around the same time period as Meili disappeared. He participated in the daily management of the shop, but was never officially an owner or manager. According to himself he was 'just hanging around', but since he was there he could also be of assistance if they needed help at the shop. He was 25 years old and had been living in Beijing for the last six years and had been doing migrant work since then. I never saw him get any money from Xuemei, Huang or Meili, but he would eat every meal with them, which they paid. In the end Huang was also training Xiang to make the cake and thereby giving him a chance to either continue to run their shop, or start his own shop and earn money. The practice was similar to an apprenticeship-training place, creating bonds of trust and closeness.

At this point I will stop and summarize some of the important points that our case story have shown about establishing and manage a shop in Xiwang Cun so far. Until now we have only



focused on horizontal relations which I argue are important for rural graduates in building a network to manage the everyday challenges. This reflects how *guanxi* is instrumentalistic, but not exclusively so: ‘While the bases for *guanxi* may be naturally occurring or created, the important point is that *guanxi* must be consciously produced, cultivated, and maintained over time’ (Gold et al., 2002:6). Moreover, ‘instrumentalism and sentiment come together in *guanxi*, as cultivating *guanxi* successfully over time creates a basis of trust in a relationship’ (Smart, 1993:402).

Since the rural graduates in this case are not going through primordial relations they have to rely on other ways to establish relations to run their business. They had to juggle their connections and relations all the time, both from strategic reasons, but also emotional reasons, in managing the shop. As I have argued earlier, social identity have to be viewed as a processual dialectical relationship shaped in the interaction between people. This influence both the project of presenting an ‘improved self’, which was not always in correlation with the values and actions, executed to establishment a successful shop. First of all, the way people want to present themselves and the shop is not always an impression that is easy to manage; rather it can create a difficult situation where unrealistic role-distinctions are hard to avoid. This again means that they will either loose out in validating their wanted social identity in the processes of establishing a business. To enable this they were depended on dynamic solutions and larger networks based on new relations, which may be one of the reasons why there seemed to be so many short-term choices taken in the management of the shop.

### **A health inspector and a jade bracelet**

Since Xiwang Cun is considered to be informal space it makes the task of keeping up an impression of a ‘civilized and urban’ business harder. The date cake shop did not have any permits to run and operate which was normal for restaurants in down town Beijing. The place was not governed by state mechanisms; still, there were actors that my interlockers had to interact with, serving the role of the party-state. Some were officials, not performing their role as they should, and others were not officials, but had the official power in the interaction with my interlockers. They represented a vertical, asymmetrical power relation where the informal met the formal and where relations between different institutions and groups were handled through gifts and bribes, leaving the rural graduate students at the bottom, while landlords, investors and officials were on top.

I will now go on to describe two incidents of interaction between my interlocutors and men who commanded some local sovereign power. In this section the sovereign power comes to show through a man of the state, a health inspector, who acts as an intermediary between the formal and informal regulation. In the next section there is a local big man, who acts as a big man and intermediary between the state and the businesses in Xiwang Cun. Even if he does not hold any official power, he still has influence through his position as an investor in the area. These men are able to hold on to power since Xiwang Cun is 'not entirely 'penetrated' or governed by the state(..) nor by languages of legality' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001:30).

A small wagon had been purchased in the beginning of May and placed in front of the shop. The wagon had a traditional tiled roof and Xuemei had tried to make it nicer by putting up fake green vines, apples and grapes. It made it more comfortable to look at according to her and Meili. The wagon meant that they now could be out on the street in front of their shop and get in touch with their customers more easily. However, it did not take long before people came by saying; 'I do not think you can have that wagon out here on the street'. Xuemei replied; 'but all you other people have small stalls out on the street, why cannot we have this wagon here?' They just shook their heads and walked on. Some weeks later when I was in the shop the following episode happened.

A man passed by saying it was going to be health inspection soon. Suddenly the street started to pack down the things that were out on the street, remove their small stalls and exhibition windows from the street. Wang also asked me to help push the wagon into a back alley.

In less than an hour the whole street was more spacious than I had ever seen it. There was not a single food stall, tarp or peddler out on the street. Not long after some guys walked past, talking to people in the different shops. Only minutes after they had passed people started to take out their things again and by the evening everything was back to normal. When I asked Xuemei about the episode she just replied, 'Oh, that was nothing' and avoided the questions. Later I asked again; 'Who was the person that said it was going to be a health inspection?'. 'That was the health inspector', Xuemei answered without going further into details. 'Why would the guy that is responsible for the health inspection warn you about the inspection?', I said rather puzzled. Xuemei replied to my question by telling a story:

When she had worked in a magazine the previous year a politician had given her a beautiful jade bracelet. In return she wrote an article about him in the magazine which put him in a good light. Later she had given the bracelet to her mother in Yunnan. 'So, what did you think about the bracelet?', I asked. 'It was

ok and nothing more really. That is just the way things work', she said before leaving the topic and my initial question about the health inspector.<sup>55</sup>

I later talked to both Mr. Yang and Huang's cousin about this episode and they told me that they paid the health inspector around 100- 200 Yuan a month, depending on the size of your shop and how well you were doing, as a gift and in return he would let them know if there were any health inspections.

Through telling a story paralleling the incident I had witnessed with her own previous experience Xuemei was both trying to avoid a topic that was problematic for the social identity she tried to validate through improving herself, as we saw in chapter three, while at the same time handling what she considered a natural way of doing business and creating *guanxi*. Whereas 'money/bribery relations are the weakest in terms of emotional relations'(Yang, 1994:123) when creating *guanxi*, it does not make them insignificant in the everyday interactions of my informants, 'the gift exchange and the market exchange are rather looked upon as potentially complementary' (Smart, 1993:399). Henceforth, it draws attention to the problematic assumption that gift exchange and market exchanges are two completely different types of relationships. In the case above there are parallels to what Smart (1993) describes from his fieldwork in Hong Kong where 'the presentation of gifts and the payment of bribes are central components of the establishment of capitalist relations of production'(Smart, 1993:389). This also follows Appadurai's (1986) critique of the sharp distinction between gifts and other forms of exchange, and this it is more important to look at:

commodities as things in a certain situation, as situation that characterize many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives. This means looking at the commodity potential of all things(...)(Appadurai, 1986:13).

Moreover, the case above also counters Bourdieu's (1977) argument that in order for a gift to be successful it has to be followed by 'misrecognition'. Without that there cannot be a gift exchange and if the giver of the gift reveals its intentions the gift loses its original impression. Thus, both participants in the exchange need to play along, managing their impression and not revealing that they recognize the real motive behind the exchange (Bourdieu, 1977:5-6). Xuemei and the health inspector understood the implications the gift and exchange of favours had and I argue this could only have happened openly in a space like Xiwang Cun where 'the

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<sup>55</sup> This episode happened several times during my time in Xiwang Cun. Sometimes I would know that all the stalls would be gone long before I came into the main street. My home was maybe 10-15 minute walk away from the shop and all the stalls in the rest of the city would be gone as well, which left the place strangely empty and less crowded.

consolidation of social relationships built on gift exchange provides a substitute form of trust that can improve the profitability of investment and reduce the risk of arbitrary bureaucratic interference that is not in the interests of the investors' (Smart, 1993:398). I now move on to look at the second incident with a man that had no official position, but was still a man of considerable power in Xiwang Cun.

### **Dage laoban (boss)**

I still remember my first impression of Dage as he walked through Xiwang Cun always followed around by a crew of five-six men between 30-50 years old. Dage had migrated to Beijing when he was 15 years old from Inner Mongolia when he was 15 years old, and had started working odd-jobs. Gradually he had been able to build his own business and now had several big building projects in the loop; Xiwang Cun was one of them. He was well-off, married had two children, which of the oldest daughter would soon leave for university in England. He owned all the buildings opposite the shop of my interlockers. This meant that he rented out rooms to more than 20 shops, in addition to a kindergarten, shopping mall, brothel, photographer, dance school, restaurants and so on. Despite not having any official position in the village, at least not to my knowledge, he was a man in his 50ies of money, *guanxi* and power. Even if I never had direct observations of Dage's connection to the local government, I several times observed how he possessed powers few others in in the village had, which strengthen my impression of him as an typical intermediary between the villagers, the rural graduates and the local officials<sup>56</sup>. An example of this was when Dage blocked the main street so that only his cars could drive though the main street. He was constantly trying to invite me and my interlockers for dinner and there was no doubt that Xuemei also used me to get attention and a possible relation with him<sup>57</sup>. When he asked Xuemei how we had gotten to know each other she replied that we were *lao pengyou* –old friend- and knew each other from the time we were both studying in Yunnan. 'Right?' she said before turning to me for confirmation, knowing that we had gotten to know each other one month earlier in Xiwang Cun. However, this was a way of both creating a history with me as well as being able to show of her connections and *guanxi*. Dage invited Xuemei, Huang and me for dinner and karaoke the same evening.

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<sup>56</sup> Zhang (2001) and Smart (2009) does also mentioned these kind intermediate leaders in urban villages, which helps the state to govern the areas.

<sup>57</sup> Lin also argue for the importance of dyadic interaction and relations when creating *guanxi*(Lin 2002 in Gold 2002)

‘I have also invited some beautiful Mongolian girls to come with us to sing and keep us company’, he said, ‘and we will eat a real and big Mongolian Hot Pot!’ With my former knowledge of these kinds of events I guessed that these girls were escorts that would be there to entertain the men. That day I had already planned to meet some other informants, so this resulted in Xuemei going alone, which Huang did not approve of at all. A girl, his girlfriend, going alone to a dinner with the boss and his crew was not to his liking. Huang could not go because of the shop, as they had no one to take over. Still, in the end he recognized the importance of Xuemei going. It would be very rude to decline an invitation from someone like him who was above them in the social hierarchy and a potential door opener to important networks and favors.

After this episode Xuemei called Dage by his real name, trying to signal closeness in their *guanxi*. As this was around the same time as they were expanding their business she was also asking about the rent of his studios on the other side of the street and whether something maybe was available soon. However, Dage kept a distance and never answered directly to Xuemei’s requests, but kept inviting us for dinner which I tried to avoid, as there no such thing as a free meal. Still, one day I could not avoid the invitation, which further resulted in Dage inviting us out for dinner on my birthday.

Some weeks later Huang, Xuemei and I had dinner with Dage and his crew. On the way back from the restaurant, where there had been plenty of food and alcohol for the men, Xuemei and I drove in one car with Dage and his driver, while Huang drove in a small buss with the rest of the crew. This had also been the organization on the way to the restaurant. As Xuemei started to praise Dage for the fantastic food and how kind and generous he was, he started to make a move on her. Sitting in the front he leaned back and started to touch her leg while proposing how they could start an affair. ‘Huang does not need to know anything, it can be a secret just between you and me’, Dage said. Xuemei lifted away his hand and told his to stop joking. ‘Oh, Xuemei, do not act like that,’ he replied, while I was sitting next to Xuemei not knowing what to do, thinking about Huang who was in the other car. ‘You know, Dage’, Xuemei said again lifting away his hand; ‘I do not want you to think of me as just a cake shop girl. I want you to think of me as someone who can help you with marketing or anything else related to business.’ At that time Dage lost interest and turned around to face the front of the car again. Later when I confronted Xuemei with what had happen she said that we should only be grateful for the kindness he had showed us treating us for such an expensive dinner. The day after Xuemei and Huang gave Dage a gift to thank him, they said. The gift was a special kind of fish from Hunan<sup>58</sup>. Nevertheless, the relationship

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<sup>58</sup> In China fish is a symbol of prosperity and wealth, since pronounced it can sound like happiness

between my interlockers and Dage was never the same again and he would seldom be observed in the area around their shop.

Once again we realize the importance of analysing how networks are built and the importance relations play in the way people look at and understand others. The behaviour and impression of the individual is constantly monitored and evaluated in relation to those it relates and interact with. Furthermore the actions of the individual are constantly evaluated not only by what it, as a single unit, does but also the larger relational network it stands in relation to. This last case also supports the argument for ‘dissolving the distinctions in a unified theoretical practice of explaining all actions as the outcome of the strategic pursuit of the advantage of the agent’ (Smart, 1993:389) when understanding gift or market exchanges. This is, as we have seen, because the outcome of the prestations are and what the motivation for it may be should be retained as open questions’(Smart, 1993:397). Xuemei, despite her constant impression management and work to improve herself, was not recognized as the person she wanted to be as she was already judged and evaluated as being ‘just a cake shop girl’ by Dage. The implications of this interactional juggle game my interlockers found themselves in when establishing a business in Xiwang Cun is something that I will discuss the implications of in the next section.

### **Changing relations**

In this chapter we have followed three of my interlockers in their quest to start their own business in Xiwang Cun. Through that process we have learnt that except for having money, the organization and customers to be a successful business one is also dependent on *guanxi* of both horizontal and vertical ties. Furthermore we have seen how Xuemei, Huang and Meili exercised their agency in finding a flexible and dynamic way of exercising ‘practical kinship’. By ‘practical kinship’ I do not mean in the sense that Bourdieu(1977) described it, as individuals who exercised their agency and acted as best they can within the constraints of kinship. Rather I purpose that in the situation that the rural graduates find themselves in when migrating to the city, without family and kin, they invest heavily in creating ties of solidarity and emotions with close friend. This also mirrors Yan(2009:xxv) observation of individual villagers in his field ‘increasingly place more emphasis on relatives of the same generation or age group, a shift that parallels the increasing importance of the personal network, known as *guanxi* in Chinese’(Yan, 2009:xxv). That also means that relations of trust in an increasing degree come through the market as that is forming my interlockers’ networks. This also

contradicts and expand our understanding of primordial ties to be the ‘true’ relations and also the strongest and most important for individuals.

Family, which can on one side provide an extended network and some cases money, can on the other side be a strain keeping the rural graduates back in their perceived ‘traditional thinking’. An example of the influence family still have on the rural graduates despite being far away geographically was when Huang was angry at his second cousin because of the way her mom had treated his mom back in their home village. Thereby the relations there had implications for the organization in Xiwang Cun. Moreover this resulted in them not talking to each other nor trying to help each other for along time. I did not realize that there was a conflict before Xuemei once reacted that I had sat down to talk to Jiejie. Xuemei later told me that she saw rather that I did not talk Jiejie or her husband. When I asked why, she said that there was a conflict in Huang’s hometown and that his mother was not speaking to her mother any more. Apparently Jiejie’s family had been asking for more money and support from Huang’s family than what was acceptable.

This story fit in with the general picture I had of rural graduates after my fieldwork. In order to become a part of the urban sphere and create a social identity to go with the new social space one need economical capital. That is the entrance ticket so to say. However, this also changes the patterns of money remittances from the urban areas back to the countryside, which again affects the valuation of primordial ties as those that are the closes versus new friends and relations that can make a difference in the everyday of my interlockers. The majority of the rural graduates I spoke to rather spent the little surplus they had on themselves, or as we have seen in this chapter in professionalize and making new investments in their shop, hoping it would generate even bigger surplus. In some cases the parents in the countryside even had to send money to the rural graduates in the city so they could afford to live there. This meant that rural graduates were breaking the tacit pact of reciprocity between children and parents. I argue that the new patterns of money remittances among rural graduates are the result of new life expectation among the rural graduates as they see the city as a place to ‘improve oneself’ and for that they often need money.

It is also through the facet of consumption that we can understand another side of why the graduates choose not to move home again to their villages or home provinces. This enables us to see the graduates as more than just actors caught up in a Foucauldian web, but also someone finding holes to express their individuality and urban belonging and how social relations are changing as a consequence of the lives the rural graduates are living.

## Concluding remarks

In the meeting with the city many rural graduates tried to ‘create their own rice bowl’ in order to avoid being unemployed or underemployed. However, to become an entrepreneur there are certain assets that need to be in place; start-up capital, an organization to run the business and customers to buy the different products that are sold. In the successful management of a shop in Xiwang Cun entrepreneurial activities ‘are themselves social and cultural forms that draw their efficiency partly from sociocultural resources’ (Smart, 1993:338) which can be traced through the horizontal and vertical *guanxi* the rural graduates are creating. As the state is not presented as a regulative mechanism in Xiwang Cun it opens up space that had been unavailable to the rural graduate students in more managed areas. However, the rural graduates also have to relate to actors that take the role of the state the management of their business. Following Appadurai (1986) I try to highlight the calculative dimension present in both market and gift exchanges and show how there is also cultural dimension to market exchanges.

We need to reconsider the primordial distrust in the market as a place where relations are being built. I show that my interlockers are dependent on creating new relations which comes out of their personal network, and not the family or kin network. Moreover, this creates new dynamics that one have to reconsider the current thinking about family as the only bastion for trust and relations in an ever changing world.



## 6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to uncover cultural specific traits and articulations of governmentality and self-improvement in order to understand the changing dynamics of modern subject formation in China today. More specifically I have looked at how the Chinese party-state communicates the new situation of underemployed and unemployed rural graduates living on the outskirts of the big cities. Accordingly, I have focused on the ambiguity that the rural graduates in Xiwang Cun find themselves in when their expectations of life in the city does not match reality. Simultaneously I have analysed how the rural graduates are not only migrating to the cities to find a job, but also to get a chance of self-improvement and thereby self-realization. I now present some concluding remarks, and highlight some observations that have been central throughout this thesis. This analysis has been made possible by employing different approaches in each chapter ensuring a multi-faceted understanding of the everyday challenges for rural graduates in Xiwang Cun.

### State governed self-government to ensure progress

In this thesis we started by focusing on ‘the people’, or ‘the rural masses’, as imagined containers for the nation’s character and quality, and in need of improvement if the nation was to progress. Through chapter two we saw how this has been understood through the discourse of *suzhi*- human quality- and *wenming*- civilization. It was only through cultivation of the individuals’ *suzhi* that one could ensure the progress towards *wenming* for China. Education was seen a tool to cultivate and manage the quality of the population, which resulted in a strong ‘educational desire’ (Kipnis, 2011) especially among rural parents who saw this as an investment in social mobility for their children. However, in the 90’s during the reform period the realities changed for graduates in China as a result of factors like dissolvment of the direct job assignment system- *danwei*- and educational reforms which opened up higher education system to the ‘the masses’. In the beginning of the 2000’s there was a jump in the numbers of people graduating from university, and with a wave of rural graduates free to finding a job in the city it created a tough job market and many broken dreams.

As we saw in chapter one many of the rural graduates end up living in urban villages in peri-urban areas of Beijing, either unemployed or underemployed, and living under bad sanitary conditions. These areas are by the party-state marked and represented as spaces of disorder and *luan-chaos*, and therefore a potential threat towards order and civilization. Though this thesis I have shown that the rural graduates represent an ambiguity in the

unilinear development story. Although they are of high-quality the rural graduates represent a breach in the educational success story, ending up as ‘matter out of place’ in Xiwang Cun. In 2009 the rural graduates destiny went viral in both national and international media through the book ‘the Ant Tribe’(Lian, 2009). Here they are described as ‘ants’ scrambling to the cities with their university diplomas hoping to find a new life in the city. However, in my analyses of the national media coverage of the rural graduates I noticed how the term ‘ant tribe’ had a labelling effect conceptualizing this diverse group into a unified, abnormal and potentially dangerous crowd that could threaten the civilized society. I showed how rural graduates are viewed by the party-state as being ‘out of place’ and in need of management. However, they should not be considered a homogenous group acting together towards a common goal as such. This is undertaken both through every day regulative practices like the household registration system-hukou-, making the rural graduates illegal subject in the city, but also through internalizing the toughs of self- conduct and through making choice a new tool of governance.

When I spoke with my interlockers and asked them why they had come to the city, the answer was always that they wanted to find a job. Nevertheless, it was not purely an argument on economic achievements that made the rural graduates stay on in Xiwang Cun. ‘I want to improve myself’ was the reply I got to why they stayed on in the city, even when they could not find a job. ‘Improving oneself’ meant different things to different people, but generally referred to a process of social mobility through both conscious and unconscious efforts at self-improvement. This was an intangible quality that could only be obtained in the urban and modern city, and hindered a return to their rural province. As I showed in chapter two improving oneself had a clear moral connotation in that sense that specially the rural population was perceived to be of low quality- *suzhi cha*- holding China back on its way towards progress and modernity (Anagnost, 1997). Each single individual was responsible to improve itself and raise its quality, and only then would China be able to progress and become civilized-*wenming*. All of my interlockers were very clear on their own role as independent from their family and larger relational network, and emphasized that coming to the city and living in Xiwang Cun were choices taken by them, sometimes against their parents will, and that they held the sole responsibility for whatever outcome their choices would have. The party-state had given them the freedom of choice and autonomy, but this also meant that they had no responsibility in case the rural graduates chose to do something else than what the party-state recommended. The moral imperative was therefore I argued directed towards the graduates, and not towards the state.

### **Self-realization and a rising individual**

I followed Jacka (2006) and analysed how the discourses were experienced, negotiated and shaped by the rural graduates in Xiwang Cun. On an individual level it was argued that migrating to the city was not purely about economic achievements, but also gave the rural graduates a chance to self-improvement. The city represented an urban quality that could not be obtained in the rural areas. My empirical material show how the argument of an ‘excessive, rural population’ holding China back had been internalized in people’s self-conception which motivated the drive to ‘improving oneself’. ‘Improving oneself’, I argue, referred among my interlockers to a process of social mobility through both conscious and unconscious efforts at self-improvement. The analytical framework of Goffman (1959) on ‘impression management’ was useful in investigated different arenas where the rural graduates were negotiating their social identity in meeting with others and the urban sphere. I analysed the encounters where specific processes of social identification occurred, as ‘identity is produced and reproduced in the course of social interaction’(Jenkins, 2008a:5), and showed that at times conflicting roles were played out and performed, creating dilemmas and non-realistic role distinctions.

In chapter four the focus has been towards transformation of places of food consumption in China, fast-food places in particular, to social spaces where I argue the rural graduates tried to construct a new social space and identity for themselves in the urban sphere, while at the same time ‘improving themselves’. A brief overview of China’s consumption history with focus on fast-food places exposed how Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) was an arena for a new kind of sociality in the space provided by the fast-food places. The rural graduates did not go there to eat, but rather negotiated an individual social identity, which was highlighted by drawing on comparative empirical material from eating places in Xiwang Cun. Instead of ‘being made’ into a rural objects the rural graduates tried to ‘make themselves’<sup>59</sup> in fast-food places like KFC, claiming an urban membership and a place in an ‘imagined cosmopolitanism’(Schein, 2001).

### **Changing relations, changing society?**

While the rural graduates tied to negotiate their social identity on a global arena in chapter four, the focus shifted in chapter five to the local realities and choices that the rural graduates faced in ‘creating their own rice bowl’. I followed three of my interlockers as they established

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Being made’ and ‘self made’ are notions taken from Ong (1996)

a shop in Xiwang Cun, and argued that it is an informal space as there are no state mechanisms governing the area, which opens up new possibilities for the rural graduates. The maintenance and management of the shop, the establishment of new social relations-*guanxi*-with people they problematized the strong division between gift exchange and market exchange (Appadurai, 1986) as my interlockers created both horizontal and vertical relations in order to survive as a business. The management of the shop, first of all created unrealistic role distinctions and dilemmas for my interlockers in presenting a 'civilized' social identity which was considered urban and modern. Moreover my empirical material challenged the primordialistic ideas that family and kin relations are the closest relations for an individual in China. In a new environment and arena the rural graduates have to rely heavily on their new social connection in order to get by. This does not mean that the family loose its importance in relation to the individual, but get a new role in providing and arranging for the self-realization of the individual.

## Glossary

anjing	安静	quiet, peaceful
ayi	阿姨	aunt
beipiao	北漂	migrants to Beijing
bu yao langfei	不要浪费	do not want to waste
chengzhongcun	城中村	urban village
chi bu bao	吃不包	not full
dagong	打工	temporary work, often used for migrant work
danwei	单位	unit, often used for work unit
pipa	琵琶	chinese traditional string instru
fu	副	fortune, happniess
gaige kaifang	改革开放	opening up and reform politics
ganqing	感情	sentiments, affect
guanxi	关系	network
hukou	户口	househols registration system
jiejie	姐姐	older sister
jiwen	接吻	kissing, often used in the phrase 'kissing houses'
lao pengyou	老朋友	old friend
laoban	老板	boss
laobeixing	老白情	`commoner', to be one in a hundered
ling chi	另吃	trash food
liudong renkou	流动人口	floating population', the migrant population
luan	乱	chaotic, messy
pifashicheng	批发市场	whole sale market
pingpingjing cai	瓦片经财	tiles economy
podan	破蛋	broken egg, can also be used as an insult
putonghua	普通话	standard language, mandarin
qifen	气氛	atmosphere
renkou guoduo	人口过多	excessive population'
renshan, renhai	人山人海	alot of people
sanlun che	三轮车	three weeled bike
sha bu liao	拆不了	impossible to demolish
shushu	叔叔	uncle
suzhi	素质	quality, not material quality
suzhi cha	素质差	low quality
tigao	提高	improve

tigao ziji	提高 自己	improve oneself
wan	玩	play
wenhua	文化	culture, proper manners
wenhua suzhi	文化 素质	cultural quality
wenming	文明	civilized, proper, modern
woshou	握手	hand-shaking
yizu	蚁族	ant tribe', rural graduates moving to urban areas
youtiao	油条	fried dough, often eaten for breakfast

## *Table of figures*

**Figure 1.** Urban villages in and around Beijing, capital of the People`s republic of China, 2010. Source: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/2010-03/12/content\\_9579087.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/2010-03/12/content_9579087.htm)

**Figure 2.** Basic spatial structure of Beijing. Adapted from ‘Beijing’ (Yang et al., 2011)

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